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RUSSIAN PROPAGANDA, MANIPULATION AND DISINFORMATION IN THE CONTEXT OF THE RUSSIAN-GEORGIAN CONFLICT IN 2008

***Abstract:** Propaganda and disinformation have a long history, serving as tools for manipulating public consciousness. This phenomenon is characteristic primarily of authoritarian and totalitarian states, such as the Russian Federation (RF), which is attempting to rebuild its superpower status, especially in the territories of the former Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (USSR). One of the contemporary tasks of Russian propaganda and disinformation is primarily to undermine public trust in Western countries and Western institutions and organizations, using a wide range of techniques and tools of influence. An example of this type of activity, described in this article, is the Russian disinformation campaign and cyberwarfare against Georgia, which lasted for many years and culminated in a five-day war that resulted in the loss of the country's two autonomous republics – South Ossetia and Abkhazia. Russia employed an identical scenario in Ukraine, where a full-scale war continues. The aim of the analyses presented in this article is to draw attention to the effective use of the constantly improved Kremlin propaganda machine, both against its own citizens and against other countries, especially the former Soviet republics and the countries of the former Eastern Bloc.*

Keywords: propaganda, disinformation, Georgia, Russia, conflict.

Introduction

Propaganda, information manipulation, and disinformation have always accompanied people and societies. However, their current intensification poses

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a serious threat to the broadly understood security of both states and Western institutions and international organizations. It leads to growing misunderstandings and social tensions, which can result in armed conflicts of varying intensity, as evidenced by the Russo-Georgian War (2008), the Russian annexation of Crimea and the War in Donbas (2014), and now – since 2022 – the full-scale Russian-Ukrainian war.

All these events were preceded by a large-scale, intensive propaganda and disinformation campaign, with which the Russian Federation prepared the social ground for the invasion, utilizing information tools and methods of manipulating public opinion, developed and refined over decades, in the form of false, carefully crafted information that recipients were supposed to consider credible. Former Soviet republics and the former Eastern Bloc countries were and still are most vulnerable to Russian propaganda, information manipulation, and disinformation, but also Western countries, where interference in elections and referenda and open support for parties and individuals favoring the Kremlin's policies are common.

The purpose of this article is to present the origins and course of the Russian-Georgian conflict in 2008. However, this analysis must be preceded by a brief definition of the phenomena discussed. The term „propaganda” gained popularity in the 17th century, with the establishment by Pope Gregory XV of the Sacred Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith (*Sacra Congregatio de Propaganda Fide*) – the first organized propaganda institution entrusted with encouraging people to accept the Christian faith and the doctrine of the Church². Propaganda appeared on a broader scale during World War I, when it was directed at both enemies and their own societies, and over the next few decades it became a distinguishing feature of authoritarian and totalitarian regimes³. This phenomenon is defined as a form of communication with a long-term, targeted and controlled flow of information disseminating ideas and doctrines, where the aim is to persuade recipients to change attitudes and take specific actions in the interest of the sender⁴. In another sense, propaganda is the deliberate and systematic shaping of perceptions and manipulation of knowledge and behavior of people in order to make them react in accordance with the intentions of the sender⁵.

² B. Dobek-Ostrowska, *Porozumienie czy konflikt? Politycy, media i obywatele w komunikowaniu politycznym*, Warszawa-Bielsko-Biała 2009, p. 99; Z. Modrzejewski, *Działania psychologiczno-propagandowe w konfliktach zbrojnych*, „Kwartalnik Bellona” 2017, No 1, p. 130.

³ P. Dela, *Elementy propagandy w życiu publicznym*, „Studia Politologiczne” 2019, No 4, pp. 81-82; Z. Modrzejewski, *op. cit.*, pp. 130-131.

⁴ I. Kamińska-Szmaj, *Propaganda, perswazja, manipulacja – próba uporządkowania pojęć*, [in:] *Manipulacje w języku*, ed. P. Krzyżanowski, P. Nowak, Lublin 2004, pp. 17-18.

⁵ G.S. Jowett, V. O'Donnell, *Propaganda as a Form of Communication*, [in:] *Propaganda: A Pluralistic Perspective*, ed. T.J. Smith, New York-London 1989, p. 53.

Manipulation is similarly defined as a method of influencing recipients through suggestion, persuasion, inducement, and influence, commonly referred to as brainwashing. It is therefore a strategy of influencing people's behavior by shaping their knowledge and will in order to achieve the greatest possible personal gain⁶. In a similar approach, manipulation is defined as intentional actions aimed at controlling human emotions and persuading them to take actions consistent with the interests of the manipulator, while the manipulated people are unaware of this fact⁷. The deliberate manipulation of society is also referred to as social engineering, where true information is transformed and selected in such a way as to evoke false associations, for example by omitting elements that are inconvenient for the sender of the message⁸.

Disinformation is generally defined as information that is fundamentally false, fake or illusory, and therefore devoid of the characteristics of true information that is intended to increase the recipient's knowledge⁹. In the Polish Information Security Doctrine, it is defined as „the dissemination of manipulated or fabricated information (or a combination of both) in order to induce recipients to certain behaviors that are beneficial to the disinformant” or „in order to divert their attention from actually occurring events”¹⁰. Vladimir Volkoff views disinformation in two aspects. In a narrow sense, he places it between simple, one-time misleading and influence, as a quantitative and seemingly unorganized activity. Broadly speaking, however, he understands disinformation as professional, continuous activities aimed at the general public, usually conducted through mass media. In Volkoff's view, misleading is a technique, while disinformation is a doctrine, the implementation of which boils down to developing subconscious views that align with the disinformant's interests. Disinformation techniques primarily include mixing truth and lies, inverting and denying facts, interpretation and generalization, and equal and unequal representation¹¹.

In the tactical dimension, disinformation is a short-term process, usually lasting several months, aimed at misleading by modifying information, providing false data, or publishing completely fabricated reports. In the strategic dimension, however, it is a long-term process, with the systematic dissemination of false information, resulting in an incorrect assessment of the situation and the creation of a distorted image of reality¹². The difference between propaganda and

⁶ M. Konieczny, *Demaskuok – The lithuanian system to counter disinformation*, „De Securitate et Defensione. O Bezpieczeństwie i Obronności” 2022, No 1(8), pp. 153, 174.

⁷ Witkowski T., *Psycho-manipulacje*, Taszów 2006, p. 25.

⁸ *Doktryna Bezpieczeństwa Informacyjnego RP, Projekt*, Warszawa 2015, p. 4.

⁹ Z. Modrzejewski, *op. cit.*, p. 136.

¹⁰ *Doktryna Bezpieczeństwa ...*, *op. cit.*, p. 4.

¹¹ V. Volkoff, *Psychosocjotechnika, dezinformacja – oręż wojny*, Warszawa 1999, pp. 8, 157-172.

¹² R. Brzeski, *Dezinformacja (skrypt)*, Warszawa 2011, p. 3; M.J. Wachowicz, *Ujęcie teoretyczne pojęcia dezinformacji*, „Wiedza Obronna” 2019, Vol. 1-2, p. 236.

disinformation is that the end result of the former is to change the attitudes, views and way of thinking of the recipient, while the latter is to lead to a specific action or omission, corresponding to the assumptions and interests of the disinformant¹³.

Disinformation is therefore a process of influencing people's behavior by distorting their perception of reality, generating actions consistent with this image. It is also a process planned and conducted by specialized entities, utilizing information channels available to the victims of these activities. Every attempt to reach credible sources to confirm information always leads to subsequent sources, different from the previous ones and seemingly debunking the disinformation content, but in reality conveying it in a modified form, always consistent with the disinformant's assumptions. This method, which involves multiplying seemingly credible but fictitious sources of information, is referred to as the „matryoshka system,” and is a model characteristic of the actions of Soviet and Russian intelligence services, perfected over decades¹⁴, for which disinformation has become a tool used in political warfare, as so-called active measures, including intelligence activities, media manipulation and falsifications¹⁵.

The 21st century is a time of increasing activity of the Russian Federation in the form of hybrid warfare, encompassing a policy of military expansion, preceded and supported by many means and tools of information warfare.

A Brief History of Russian Propaganda, Manipulation, and Disinformation

Propaganda, manipulation, and disinformation have for decades been tools used to implement Russian policy, aimed at misleading societies and political opponents while concealing their true intentions, both non-military and military. Regardless of the means, techniques, and media used, one goal remains: influencing the conscious and subconscious minds of their audiences. A classic example of Russian propaganda and manipulation dating back to the late 18th century are the so-called „Potemkin villages,” which were artificially created and populated settlements on the Dniester River at the initiative of Prince Grigory Potemkin, intended to impress Empress Catherine II, who was sailing along the river¹⁶. The following decades saw the refinement of Russia's propaganda, manipulation, and disinformation tools, augmented by techniques developed by the Tsarist Okhrana, and later by the Bolshevik and Soviet security services. These methods were used internally primarily to combat political opponents and

¹³ M.J. Wachowicz, *op. cit.*, p. 241.

¹⁴ M. Świerczek, „System matryoszek”, czyli dezinformacja doskonała. *Wstęp do zagadnienia*, „Przegląd Bezpieczeństwa Wewnętrznego” 2018, No 19, pp. 213-215, 222.

¹⁵ M.J. Wachowicz, *op. cit.*, p. 227.

¹⁶ S. Helma, *Dezinformacja i wojna psychologiczna jako element polityki Związku Sowieckiego i Federacji Rosyjskiej*, „Zeszyty Naukowe Towarzystwa Doktorantów UJ. Nauki Społeczne” 2018, No 22(3), pp. 79-81.

suppress rebellions against the government, while in foreign policy, they were used for intelligence games with the services of other countries¹⁷.

The interwar period saw continued refinement of disinformation methods, which became an integral part of Soviet domestic and foreign policy. One characteristic example of this is Operation Trust, the largest secret service operation in history, described by Anatoly Golitsyn, an officer of the Committee for State Security (KGB) who defected to the West (1961). The operation's premise and the task of Soviet agents of influence were to convince the West of a radical change in the country's system, with the fall of communism and the return of a strong monarchist anti-Soviet movement. The primary goal of these operations was to persuade European governments to change their attitudes, from hostility toward the USSR to at least passive acceptance, recognizing its statehood and increasing trade cooperation. A secondary goal, however, was to persuade opposition Russian leaders in exile to return to their homeland. The belief of Western countries in the presented vision of Russia, which had nothing to do with the actual situation in the country, compromised the intelligence services of many countries, including Poland, and was interrupted in 1927 by the Soviet services, which were satisfied with its results¹⁸.

The following years saw further refinement of Bolshevik propaganda and disinformation tools, both in non-military and military spheres. In the latter, they were transformed into a doctrine known as camouflage (maskirovka), the aim of which was to conceal one's own military units and intentions, including arranging false positions with mannequins and props, issuing false orders, and creating false maps, with the goal of causing the enemy to make erroneous decisions. These camouflage operations were aimed at both enemy and friendly forces, as well as the civilian population¹⁹.

Soviet strategic disinformation after 1958 was perfectly characterized by Golitsyn, who defined it as „systematic efforts to spread false information and to falsify or block information concerning the actual situation and policies of the communist world”, where the main goal of disinformation practices was to mislead and bias the non-communist world and to induce „the Western adversary to unconsciously contribute to the realization of communist goals”²⁰.

During the Cold War, Soviet disinformation served as a tool in the ideological struggle between the communist world and the democratic Western world. History shows that this assumption remains true today, and the goal of Russian operations remains to destabilize the internal situation in states, undermine the credibility of the authorities, sow unrest among societies, and divide

¹⁷ P. Jeż, *Współczesna aktywność dezinformacyjna Federacji Rosyjskiej i przykłady jej neutralizacji*, „Res Polticae” 2023, Vol. 15, p. 88.

¹⁸ A. Golicyn, *op. cit.*, pp. 17-18.

¹⁹ S. Helma, *op. cit.*, pp. 81-82.

²⁰ A. Golicyn, *Nowe kłamstwa w miejsce starych, komunistyczna strategia podstępów i dezinformacji*, Vol. 1, Warszawa 2007, p. 6.

them. Only the means and tools of ideological confrontation have changed, as they have been joined by a crucial element: cyberspace, enabling not only widespread propaganda and disinformation operations but also hacker attacks on enemy infrastructure²¹.

The issues of Russian ideological subversion and ideological subversion were best characterized by Yuri Bezmenov, a former Soviet intelligence officer from the 1960s, known in the West as Thomas D. Schuman. After defecting to Canada and then the United States in 1970, he exposed Soviet disinformation techniques and intelligence methods, warning the world of their consequences. According to Bezmenov, carrying out an ideological subversion in a state is a multi-year process, composed of four stages. The first is demoralization, where the goal is to fragment and divide society into smaller, easily manipulated groups, undermining the stability of the state's social and political organization and weakening the authority of state authorities and the military. The second stage is destabilization, with the radicalization of conflicts and even violence in key areas of life, including family relations, the economy, public order, and the media, as well as the activation of agents of influence—gaining political positions—who have a real impact on the functioning of the state. The third stage is crisis, with a sharp economic collapse and growing social discontent, including riots and acts of terror, and the threat of civil war or a coup. In the Soviet model of ideological upheaval, achieving this stage authorized the Kremlin to resort to armed intervention or fraternal assistance, under the guise of restoring peace and social order, with a responsive government and an obedient society. The fourth stage is normalization, when a „new order” is introduced, with all areas of political, social, and cultural life subordinated to it²².

The Soviet method of ideological subversion and ideological subversion, characterized by Bezmenov, remains relevant and is used by the Russian Federation against both former Soviet republics – especially Lithuania, Latvia, Estonia, Georgia, and Ukraine – and the countries of the former Eastern Bloc, including Poland. The theoretical foundations of the state disintegration process have not changed much, with ethnic, economic, political, social, and psychological factors still being primarily used, along with propaganda, disinformation, and subversive activities²³. Only the tools have changed. Modern technologies serve both to streamline broadly understood communication in both non-military and

²¹ P. Jeż, *op. cit.*, p. 88.

²² After: M. Wojnowski, *Koncepcja „wojny nowej generacji” w ujęciu strategów Sztabu Generalnego Sił Zbrojnych Federacji Rosyjskiej*, „Przegląd Bezpieczeństwa Wewnętrznego” 2015, No 13, pp. 21-23; W.J. Wilczyński, *Sowieckie źródła współczesnej wojny kulturowej*, „Przegląd Geopolityczny” 2020, No 33, pp. 175-184; D. Kaźmierczak, *Walka informacyjna we współczesnych konfliktach i jej społeczne konsekwencje*, „Annales Universitatis Paedagogicae Cracoviensis. Studia de Securitate et Educatione Civili” 2017, No 7, pp. 120-121.

²³ M. Wojnowski, *op. cit.*, p. 23.

military spheres, as well as to facilitate multi-directional activities in cyberspace. Cross-border virtual space allows not only for the rapid exchange of information but also for offensive operations by secret services, trolls, and hackers²⁴.

The Russian Armed Forces have developed a concept for an information-strike operation, which is a set of actions conducted using IT and information resources, aimed at functionally and decision-making paralysis of the enemy. Such attacks primarily utilize mass media, propaganda and agitation campaigns, as well as radio-electronic means (for example, jamming) and influencing enemy information systems using special computer programs. The authors of the concept believe that striking the enemy's information space can yield effects far superior to those achieved by conventional means²⁵. Back in September 2000, Russian President Vladimir Putin signed the Information Security Doctrine, which established new principles for Russian information policy, including strengthening state propaganda and state control over independent media. The document reaffirms information warfare tactics as the foundation of Russian foreign policy, emphasizing the role of national interests in the information sphere. Significantly, the Russian Federation refused (2001) to sign the European Convention on Cybercrime, which entered into force in 2004 and is in force in over 40 countries. The convention aims to enhance cybersecurity and prevent cyber threats²⁶.

Contemporary Russian disinformation campaigns are primarily carried out by spreading false information on social media, usually simultaneously across multiple platforms, using fake user accounts, trolls, and bots. Artificial intelligence is increasingly being used to create fictitious accounts, create images, and send large numbers of messages at once. Disinformation campaigns are conducted in the languages of the target countries and in Russian, often using websites impersonating well-known news outlets such as the BBC or CNN²⁷.

Activities aimed at shaping the information space of countries within the Russian Federation's sphere of interest intensified in 2007-2008. The Russian World Foundation was established at that time, and – after the end of the Russian-Georgian war – the Federal Agency for the Commonwealth of Independent States, Compatriots Living Abroad, and International Humanitarian Cooperation (Rossotrudnichestvo). The main task of these organizations became to raise

²⁴ S. Gardocki, J. Worona, *Wykorzystanie przez Rosję cyberprzestrzeni w konfliktach hybrydowych a rosyjska polityka cyberbezpieczeństwa*, „Colloquium Pedagogika – Nauki o Polityce i Administracji” 2020, No 2(38), p. 36.

²⁵ M. Wojnowski, *op. cit.*, pp. 36-37.

²⁶ I. Tkeshelashvili, *Rosyjska propaganda w przestrzeni informacyjnej Gruzji przed i po konflikcie w sierpniu 2008 roku*, „Wschodnioznawstwo” 2021, Vol. 15, pp. 61-62.

²⁷ E. Kaca, *Zwalczanie w UE rosyjskiej dezinformacji na temat Ukrainy*, „Biuletyn PISM” 2022, No 145(2564), <<https://pism.pl/publikacje/zwalczanie-w-ue-rosyjskiej-dezinformacji-na-temat-ukrainy>> (12.06.2025).

awareness among residents of areas designated as the Russian Federation's spheres of influence, allocating increasing amounts of funds to Russian-language media. With Putin's return to the presidency in 2012, the activity of centers of influence outside Russia intensified, systematizing information and propaganda efforts. At that time, the leadership of Rossotrudnichestvo was changed, and the Novosti agency was transformed into the Rossiya Segodnya holding company. The adopted framework assumed the creation of local centers in a given country, such as the Russian House, which would then be followed by smaller centers uniting Russian-speaking citizens. These organizations can count on financial subsidies, including the creation of various types of regional media, not only strengthening the position of the Russian language and Russian culture, but above all, delivering messages consistent with the assumptions of Kremlin propaganda²⁸.

Rossotrudnichestvo reports directly to the Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs and is federally funded. It serves as a „soft power” tool in Russia's foreign policy strategy, shaping local and international public opinion, presenting Russia as a counterweight to Western influence. The agency organizes disinformation operations and collaborates with Russian intelligence services, including recruiting new agents of influence. It operates approximately 90 Russian Houses worldwide, where, under the guise of promoting Russian history, culture, and language education, influence operations are conducted, targeting not only local Russian-speaking communities but also individuals with no ties to Russia. However, these centers primarily serve to disseminate pro-Russian and anti-Western narratives, serving as a clear propaganda and disinformation platform for the Kremlin, whose primary mission is to strengthen support for Russia and undermine trust in Western countries²⁹.

The main goal of Russian influence operations remains to weaken the potential of the attacked state in the political, social, institutional, and economic dimensions, reducing public trust both interpersonally and in citizen-state relations. The effectiveness of Kremlin policies is facilitated by sowing chaos and uncertainty, dividing and confusing society, undermining trust in the state, political elites, accepted values, and established points of reference. Russian disinformation policy is clearly regional in nature, adapted to the prevailing political and economic situation and the level of public education. Therefore, influence operations are prepared differently in former Soviet republics and former Eastern Bloc countries than in Western countries. The main goal of these operations – consistently for decades – is to interfere in democratic processes and devalue Western norms and values. One example is undermining trust in

²⁸ M. Marek, *Operacja Ukraina. Kampanie dezinformacyjne, narracje, sposoby działania rosyjskich ośrodków propagandowych przeciwko państwu ukraińskiemu w okresie 2013-2019*, Warszawa 2020, pp. 18-20; K. Wojda, *Rossotrudnichestwo jako narzędzie rosyjskich operacji wpływu w Afryce*, <<https://disinfodigest.pl/2024/10/29/rossotrudnichestwo-jako-osrodek-rosyjskich-operacji-wplywu-w-afryce/>> (24.06.2025).

²⁹ K. Wojda, *op. cit.*

democratic elections, which – according to the Kremlin’s narrative – are failing to fulfill their role, while the state is untrustworthy because it pursues policies directed against its own citizens³⁰.

In contemporary hybrid warfare, alongside classic media propaganda and disinformation, Russia also utilizes hacking attacks on the infrastructure of political opponents. One of the groups carrying out cyberattacks is the APT28 (Advanced Persistent Threat 28) malware group, linked to Russian intelligence services. The group likely formed in 2004 and was identified in 2014 by FireEye analysts based on a set of characteristic techniques and tools used by the hackers. It was proven that the analyzed APT28 malware samples were written in Russian and targeted the infrastructure of governments and armed forces of many countries, particularly in the post-Soviet region, including the Caucasus region, but also the United States and international institutions and organizations, including NATO and the OSCE, which the Kremlin has long called „existential threats.” To attack selected targets, APT28 uses spearphishing emails containing malicious attachments. Clicking on the attached link opens access to the victim’s computer, allowing them to perform any actions, including data theft³¹.

The first massive cyberattack on a sovereign state took place in 2007, when Russian hackers attacked Estonian government servers, blocking access to official websites for three weeks, including those of the president and parliament, as well as major banks and the police. The Kremlin, of course, denied any involvement in the incident, and the Estonian authorities took effective legal and organizational measures to protect the country from further attacks³².

The five-day Russian-Georgian war, involving the separatist republics of Abkhazia and South Ossetia, is a form of hybrid warfare, during which attacks took place from land, sea and air, and the operation of the Russian Armed Forces was preceded and supported by disinformation and massive attacks in cyberspace

The origins and course of the Russian-Georgian conflict

For centuries, the South Caucasus region was one of the most disputed and conflict-prone areas, where the interests of many countries clashed, especially Persia, Mongolia, Turkey and the Russian Empire³³. This region encompasses

³⁰ B. Piasecki, *Wpływ dezinformacji na procesy demokratyczne na przykładzie wyborów prezydenckich w USA w 2016 r.*, [in:] *Zjawisko dezinformacji w dobie rewolucji cyfrowej*, ed. M. Wrzosek, Warszawa 2019, p. 53.

³¹ *APT28: A Window into Russia’s Cyber Espionage Operations?*, FireEye Special Report 2014, <<https://www.trellix.com>> (27.01.2025).

³² S. Gardocki, J. Worona, *op. cit.*, pp. 36-37.

³³ J. Jartyś, M. Orzechowski, *Konflikt rosyjsko-gruziński z 2008 roku i jego implikacje dla reintegracji strategii Federacji Rosyjskiej na obszarze poradzieckim*, „Wschodni Rocznik Humanistyczny” 2018, Vol. 15, No 4, p. 62.

many nations, national languages, and religions, and Georgia is the only country among the former Soviet republics where the largest number of conflicts, which undermined the country's development and international standing, took place. Georgia felt the influence of Russian propaganda as early as the 19th century, and to defend itself against it, in Tbilisi in 1819, the first newspaper in Georgian was published, the „Gazeta Georgia” (Georgia Newspaper). It published truthful information instead of the propaganda promulgated by the Russian Empire, which spoke, among other things, about the prosperity of Georgians and tsarist decrees. Considerable attention was devoted not only to the cultivation of the national language but also to the regions transformed by the tsarist authorities into Russian governorates. The newspaper was closed in 1821³⁴. Pierwszą próbę umiędzynarodowienia konfliktu z Rosją, Gruzja podjęła w 1907 r., informując Międzynarodowy Kongres w Hadze o braku poszanowania ze strony Rosji dla gruzińskich granic oraz żądając przyznania autonomii³⁵.

Georgia was an independent state in the years 1918-1921, when – after the entry of the Red Army – it lost its independence for 70 years, becoming one of the republics of the USSR³⁶, the final dissolution of the Soviet Union (1991) resulted in the creation of three independent states in the Transcaucasus – Armenia, Azerbaijan, and Georgia – reducing Russia's influence in the post-Soviet areas and weakening its status as a major power. The young states, rich in natural resources, and the emerging regional conflicts, primarily ethnic in nature, remained a focus of Russia's attention, striving to maximize its influence over the internal situation in these countries. The most important issue was preventing their integration into Euro-Atlantic structures, while simultaneously maintaining economic dependence on Russia and maintaining a military presence, and above all, regaining control over the communication routes and transit routes for mineral and energy resources running through the region. Armenia and Azerbaijan remained Russia's partners, while Georgia became its adversary due to its pro-Western policy. The most important conflict in the region at the time, alongside the Armenian-Azerbaijani dispute over Nagorno-Karabakh, was the dispute between Georgia, South Ossetia, and Abkhazia over the status of the two republics. The Russian Federation was involved in these conflicts in various forms, including military intervention³⁷. Abkhazia, South Ossetia and Adjara are autonomous regions located in the territory of Georgia and of interest to the Russian Federation, with only South Ossetia openly (in a referendum in 1992) expressing its willingness to join Russian North Ossetia.³⁸.

³⁴ I. Tkeshelashvili, *op. cit.*, pp. 62-63.

³⁵ After: I. Tkeshelashvili, *op. cit.*, p. 64.

³⁶ I. Tkeshelashvili, *op. cit.*, p. 63.

³⁷ J. Jartyś, M. Orzechowski, pp. 62-64.

³⁸ R. Grodzki, *op. cit.*, pp. 25, 27.

Georgian-Russian relations, despite Georgia's accession to the Commonwealth of Independent States (1993) and signing a Treaty of Friendship and Cooperation with Russia (1994), deteriorated during the Georgian-Abkhazian conflict (1993-1994), when the Georgian government changed its foreign policy and security strategy in the energy sector, planning integration with European and transatlantic energy networks. A significant increase in tensions in relations between the two countries occurred in 2003, when, as a result of the so-called „Rose Revolution,” President Eduard Shevardnadze, former Soviet Foreign Minister, was removed from power. He was replaced (2004) by Mikheil Saakashvili, who implemented significant reforms and initiated a pro-Western policy, focusing on cooperation with the United States and NATO membership. The second flashpoint was Georgia's regaining of political control over the Ajarian Autonomous Republic (2004)³⁹, and the next ones – accusing Russians of organizing the bombing in Gori and accusing Russian „peacekeeping forces” in South Ossetia and Abkhazia of supporting separatists (2005)⁴⁰.

Having exhausted diplomatic options for resolving the issue of the two separatist republics, Saakashvili focused his efforts on internationalizing the issue. It was emphasized that Russian troops stationed on their territories were not a peacekeeping factor, and that the Russian Federation was not an impartial intermediary between the conflicting parties, as it openly supported separatist movements that directly threatened Georgia's territorial integrity. The proposal (2007) to transform Georgia into a federation with both republics as members, nor to create the Republic of South Ossetia on the principles of Adjara, also failed to resolve the issue⁴¹.

During this period, Georgia also became independent from Russia in terms of the transit of energy resources, thanks to the launch of the Baku-Tbilisi-Ceyhan (BTC) oil pipeline in 2006 and the Baku-Tbilisi-Erzurum (BTE) gas pipeline in 2007, allowing the transmission of Azerbaijani raw materials to European and global markets, bypassing Russia, which until then had been a monopolist in their transit in the region and to Europe⁴².

³⁹ B. Musiałowicz, *Gruzja – wybrane problemy polityki wewnętrznej i zagranicznej*, [in:] *Region Kaukazu w stosunkach międzynarodowych*, ed. K. Iwańczuk, T. Kapuśniak, Lublin 2008, p. 85; J. Jartyś, M. Orzechowski, *op. cit.*, pp. 65-66; M. Kowalczyk, *Przyczyny wojny gruzińsko-rosyjskiej w 2008 r.*, „Annales Universitatis Mariae Curie-Skłodowska” 2017, Vol. II, pp. 173-174; R. Grodzki, *Wojna rosyjsko-gruzińska 2008 rok. Przyczyny – przebieg – skutki*, Zakrzewo 2009, pp. 64-65.

⁴⁰ R. Grodzki, *op. cit.*, p. 65.

⁴¹ A. Miarka, *Wojna rosyjsko-gruzińska jako przykład tendencji imperialistycznych Federacji Rosyjskiej wobec obszaru postsowieckiego*, [in:] *Militarne i pozamilitarne aspekty współczesnego bezpieczeństwa międzynarodowego. Wybrane problemy*, Vol. 2, ed. T. Iwanek, Katowice 2017, pp. 119-120.

⁴² E. Wyciszkievicz, *Rosyjski sektor naftowo-gazowy – uwarunkowania wewnętrzne i perspektywy rozwoju*, [in:] *Geopolityka rurociągów. Współzależność energetyczna a stosunki międzypaństwowe na obszarze postsowieckim*, ed. E. Wyciszkievicz, Warszawa 2008, pp. 47-55; M. Kowalczyk, *op. cit.*, pp. 179-180; R. Grodzki, *op. cit.*, pp. 74-75.

Saakashvili's intensified cooperation between Georgia and the United States and Western Europe resulted in aggressive propaganda directed against him, with the Kremlin portraying him as a „dictator” and „enemy of the people.” Negative opinions also affected the first president after independence, Zviad Gamsakhurdia, who sought Georgia's independence from Russia. He was overthrown in 1992 and died a year later under unclear circumstances. The presidency of his successor, Shevardnadze, was a period of economic chaos, numerous hardships, and an increase in crime. However, the Russian narrative proved so effective that to this day, Georgian society remains divided in its assessment of the actions and achievements of the first three presidents. Gamsakhurdia is described as an authoritarian politician, Shevardnadze as a good president, and Saakashvili as a president pursuing a provocative foreign policy and unable to maintain stability in the country. He is also held responsible for the 2008 war. A large part of Georgians say they prefer the next and current government of the Georgian Dream party to a return to the times of Saakashvili's presidency, which ended in 2013⁴³.

Russian propaganda and disinformation activities against Georgia have been ongoing for many years, intensifying at the turn of 2004 and 2005, when various forms of border incidents, portrayed by Russian media as Georgian provocations, joined the information war. Attacks on Georgian information and IT systems were combined with the expansion of the weak Ossetian army and the growth of Russian influence in the region, as well as with the Kremlin's narrative portraying Georgia as the aggressor against South Ossetia⁴⁴. Initially, this narrative was accepted as true by the Western public, as confirmed by poll results. However, Western audiences changed their minds when Georgia hired media agencies that quickly improved its international image⁴⁵.

As part of the Russian Federation's information-strike operation, hackers launched a series of attacks on Georgian telecommunications and IT networks and government websites, seizing all available resources, simultaneously from multiple computers with Russian and Lithuanian IP (Internet Protocol) addresses. The attacks were carried out not only by Kremlin-linked hacker groups but also by specially trained military units. Any Russian with internet access was also allowed to participate, as instructions were posted on a dedicated forum outlining how to attack Georgian websites⁴⁶.

As part of a large-scale disinformation campaign, almost a year before the war broke out, Russian news channels broadcast reports showing the dire state

⁴³ K. Grigorian, I. Tkeshelashvili, *Rosja sieje zamęt. „Wcięż odczuwamy skutki rusyfikacji”*, <<https://www.onet.pl/informacje/nowaeuropawschodnia/rosja-sieje-zamet-wciiez-odczuwamy-skutki-rusyfikacji/fmj2q2b,30bc1058>> (13.06.2025).

⁴⁴ S. Helma, *op. cit.*, p. 92.

⁴⁵ E. Iasiello, *Russia's Improved Information Operations: From Georgia to Crimea*, „Parameters” 2017, Vol. 47, No 2, pp. 52-54.

⁴⁶ M. Wojnowski, *op. cit.*, p. 37.

of the Russian military: rusting warships and planes without fuel, and even soldiers begging for food. These materials were clearly aimed at then-Russian Prime Minister Vladimir Putin and President Dmitry Medvedev, but they were broadcast until the outbreak of hostilities, after which they changed their tone to triumphant ones⁴⁷.

In the period leading up to the war, Russia also resorted to acts of sabotage and terror, hindering Georgia's stabilization efforts in the region, energy transfers, and the construction of new roads. After the Russian spy network in Georgia was exposed in 2006, the Russian Federation evacuated the families of military personnel and diplomats, further intensifying its anti-Georgian narrative. Russian Defense Minister Sergei Ivanov even spoke of „unimaginable levels of banditry in Georgia.”⁴⁸. In January 2006, Putin suggested that if Kosovo's independence were recognized, the same solution should also apply to Abkhazia and South Ossetia⁴⁹. The detention of four Russian officers and ten Georgians on espionage charges (September 2006) and their subsequent conviction resulted in the evacuation of Russian diplomats and military personnel from Georgia and the announcement of a combat alert at military bases⁵⁰.

Russian-Georgian relations intensified in 2007, when – after numerous failed attempts to destabilize Georgia – information increasingly indicated the imminent outbreak of war, especially in the context of the country's continued policy of independence and rapprochement with the West. In February 2008, Presidents Saakashvili and Putin met for the last time, during which Putin warned of a possible decisive Russian response to Kosovo's recognition of independence. In the propaganda and disinformation narrative used against Georgia at the time, the Russian Federation utilized proven methods. Thus, it invoked the need to defend Russian citizens living in Georgia and protect Ossetians from Georgian genocide, while emphasizing its own peaceful intentions. The escalating conflict was reported almost exclusively by Russian journalists, with Western media representatives banned from entering. One of the final stages preceding the open conflict was the shelling of Georgian villages by Ossetian separatists. A few days before the war, Russian and Ossetian media spread contradictory information about its outbreak, while Abkhazian media reported probable attacks by saboteurs, after which Abkhazia joined the military operations⁵¹.

The main reasons for the outbreak of the war, in addition to the construction of the BTC and BTE and Georgia's increasingly independent and pro-Western policies, are cited as two events that took place in 2008. The first was the

⁴⁷ M. Świerczek, *op. cit.*, p. 223.

⁴⁸ I. Matcharashvili, *2008 rok. Wojna rosyjsko-gruzińska. Wojna, która nie wstrząsnęła światem*, Oświęcim 2013, p. 47; S. Helma, *op. cit.*, p. 92; R. Grodzki, *op. cit.*, p. 67.

⁴⁹ R. Grodzki, *op. cit.*, p. 66.

⁵⁰ I. Matcharashvili, *op. cit.*, p. 47; R. Grodzki, *op. cit.*, p. 67.

⁵¹ I. Matcharashvili, *op. cit.*, pp. 42-60; S. Helma, *op. cit.*, pp. 92-93.

recognition of Kosovo's independence by the United States and most Western countries, which sparked sharp opposition from Russia, which threatened the same response with regard to South Ossetia and Abkhazia. The second event was the NATO summit in Bucharest, where – due to the unresolved status of the two separatist republics – Georgia was not granted a Membership Action Plan (MAP). Russia also opposed this, rejecting both NATO's expansion into the Caucasus and the declaration of the future admission of Georgia and Ukraine to the Alliance, announced during the summit. It is believed that even granting the MAP would not have protected Georgia from war, as it did not provide any security guarantees⁵². In response to the declaration confirming the future admission of Georgia and Ukraine to NATO, Moscow issued warnings about possible military and non-military steps aimed at securing Russian interests⁵³.

At the same time, a large-scale cyberwar was underway. The APT28 group was proven to be behind many of the cyberattacks against Georgia, with its primary targets being government agencies, particularly the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, the Ministry of Internal Affairs and Administration, and the Ministry of Defense⁵⁴. American experts have demonstrated that distributed denial of service (DDoS) cyberattacks, which overloaded and crashed Georgian servers, were being carried out as early as July 20, 2008. According to Shadowserver experts, Saakashvili's website was taken offline for 24 hours a day weeks before the outbreak of open hostilities, and government websites were blocked when Russian troops entered South Ossetia. Websites of Georgian media and transportation companies were also attacked. These attacks are believed to have been perpetrated by hackers from the Russian Business Network group, known for phishing and identity theft⁵⁵. The attacks resulted in the decision of the Georgian government to transfer its own IT resources to the USA, Poland and Estonia⁵⁶. Already in the midst of open armed conflict, another massive cyberattack on Georgian cyberspace took place. Russian hackers again attacked numerous state institutions, blocking commercial and media websites, and access to scientific servers. The aim of these actions was to restrict access to the internet and media, and thus the flow of information within Georgia itself, but above all, to inform the international community about the current situation in the country⁵⁷.

⁵² A. Kozłowski, *Rola Gruzji w polityce zagranicznej Stanów Zjednoczonych w XXI w.*, „Politeja” 2014, No 6(32), pp. 346-349; M. Kowalczyk, *op. cit.*, pp.181-182; A. Miarka, *op. cit.*, pp. 120-121.

⁵³ R. Grodzki, *op. cit.*, p. 86.

⁵⁴ *APT28: A Window into ...*, *op. cit.*

⁵⁵ J. Markoff, *Before the Gunfire, Cyberattacks*, „The New York Times”, 12.08.2008, <<http://www.nytimes.com/2008/08/13/technology/13cyber.html>> (11.06.2025).

⁵⁶ S.W. Korns, J.E. Kastenberg, *Georgia's Cyber Left Hook*, „Parameters” 2009, No 38(4), p. 60.

⁵⁷ M. Lakomy, *Znaczenie cyberprzestrzeni dla bezpieczeństwa państw na początku XXI wieku*, „Stosunki Międzynarodowe” 2010, No 3-4(42), pp. 62-63; S. Gardocki, J. Worona, *op. cit.*, p. 37; A. Urbanek, *Cyberwojna – zagrożenie asymetryczne współczesnej przestrzeni bezpieczeństwa*, „Studia nad Bezpieczeństwem” 2016, No 1, p. 18.

Georgians have responded to Russian hackers' demands, actively engaging in cyberwarfare both before and during the open conflict in South Ossetia. Even before the conflict broke out, Georgian hackers launched two attacks on the websites of the Ossetian News Agency and the government radio station in Tskhinvali. As a result, the media began to repost information from the Georgian television station Alania TV, which is aimed at Ossetians⁵⁸.

The Russian-Georgian war was also preceded by increased activity of Russian troops in both republics and Putin's decree on establishing official relations with both separatist republics⁵⁹, and began without notice and without severing diplomatic relations. On August 7, 2008, Saakashvili announced a unilateral ceasefire on the border with South Ossetia and offered the Ossetians autonomy within Georgia. Faced with the Ossetians' refusal, he decided to militarily restore constitutional order in the republic. On the night of August 7-8, Georgian troops began artillery shelling of Ossetian paramilitary units in Tskhinvali and the Java region. After initial successes, the following days brought fierce fighting, which ultimately resulted in the retreat of Georgian forces (August 12, 2008)⁶⁰, and both separatist republics consolidated their status as independent from Georgia. Also on August 12, a rally was held in Tbilisi, during which leading politicians from Central and Eastern European countries, including President Lech Kaczyński, demonstrated support for Georgia and its authorities⁶¹.

It is believed that Georgia, provoked by Russian cyber and military activities, after numerous provocations and border incidents, launched the offensive in Tskhinvali and this five-day war against itself⁶², in the absence of unanimity among NATO and EU members regarding this conflict, due to unsettled territorial issues and the pursuit of their own policy towards Russia⁶³.

Five days of fighting, combined with the mass flight of Georgians from towns controlled by Ossetian paramilitary forces and the defeat of Georgian troops by Russian-Abkhazian forces in the Kodori Gorge, culminated in the signing of a six-point ceasefire plan. The plan, negotiated in Moscow with President Dmitry Medvedev on August 12th by French President Nicolas Sarkozy and OSCE Chairman Alexander Stubb, stipulated, among other things, a permanent end to hostilities, the return of Georgian troops to their permanent locations, and the withdrawal of the Russian army to pre-military lines. The sixth point of the plan proved to be a sticking point, which called for the initiation of an international

⁵⁸ A. Urbanek, *op. cit.*, p. 18.

⁵⁹ A. Kozłowski, *op. cit.*, p. 350.

⁶⁰ J. Jartyś, M. Orzechowski, *op. cit.*, pp. 70-73; See more: R. Grodzki, *Wojna rosyjsko-gruzińska 2008 rok. Przyczyny – przebieg – skutki*, Zakrzewo 2009.

⁶¹ M. Kusion, *Wojna rosyjsko-gruzińska w sierpniu 2008 roku i jej implikacje dla międzynarodowego bezpieczeństwa*, „Zeszyt Naukowy” 2010, No 4, p. 98.

⁶² S. Helma, *op. cit.*, p. 93.

⁶³ A. Kozłowski, *op. cit.*, pp. 349-350.

discussion on the status of South Ossetia and Abkhazia and measures to ensure their security. Saakashvili signed the plan only after this provision was amended⁶⁴, accepting the international debate, but without the possibility of determining the future status of the republics, which – according to Medvedev – should be decided by the Ossetians and Abkhazians themselves, something Saakashvili was against⁶⁵.

According to Marek Świerczek, in its long-running information war against Georgia, Russia clearly employed a „matryoshka system,” maintaining an extensive spy network in the country, with dozens of agents also working for Georgian intelligence. It was the activities of these agents, mutually reinforcing disinformation messages with the ability to verify them with equally false sources, as well as presenting the dire state of the Russian army, that contributed to President Saakashvili’s decision to attack South Ossetia. The conflict ended with the loss of the separatist republics’ territories, and only the intervention of Western diplomacy prevented the Russians from occupying all of Georgia, overthrowing Saakashvili, and establishing pro-Kremlin authorities in Tbilisi⁶⁶.

In the West’s view, Georgia initiated the war without any specific cause, as NATO experts found the preceding incidents and provocations ineffective in justifying the Georgian operation. The offensive against South Ossetian positions was deemed a calculated act and an attempt to pursue a policy of fait accompli. Saakashvili was branded a gambler who had triggered the conflict and deceived the West, as indicated by Western intelligence data on Georgian war preparations. The negative assessment of the Russian Federation’s actions, which also included lies, remained unchanged⁶⁷. An interesting example is the Russian narrative about the successes of the Black Sea Fleet, which fought victorious naval battles and sank Georgian ships, although – as has been proven – the latter never left their home ports⁶⁸.

Russia won the five-day war, keeping both separatist republics in its sphere of influence, whose independence it had already recognized on August 26, 2008. This unilateral decision of the Russian Federation was met with criticism from EU member states, but without any sanctions being announced⁶⁹. On August 28, 2008, the Georgian parliament passed a resolution calling on the government to sever diplomatic relations with the Russian Federation, which it did the following day. In October, based on the Hague Conventions and international law, the Georgian parliament adopted a law on occupied territories with respect to both

⁶⁴ J. Jartyś, M. Orzechowski, *op. cit.*, pp. 72-73.

⁶⁵ M. Rzeszutko, *Konflikt o niskiej intensywności: sytuacja rosyjsko-gruzińska po 2008 r.*, „Res Polticae” 2022, Vol. 14, p. 68.

⁶⁶ M. Świerczek, *op. cit.*, p. 222.

⁶⁷ R. Grodzki, *op. cit.*, pp. 132-133.

⁶⁸ I. Matcharashvili, *op. cit.*, pp. 152-154.

⁶⁹ J. Jartyś, M. Orzechowski, *op. cit.*, p. 74; M. Kusion, *op. cit.*, pp. 101-102; I. Tkeshelashvili, *op. cit.*, p. 66.

separatist republics. To combat Russian disinformation, with the support of the Georgian government, a television channel, First Information Kavkazsky (PIK TV), was launched, broadcasting news materials in Russian. PIK's programs reached not only Russian-speaking residents of Georgia but also the former Soviet Union⁷⁰.

The main mission of PIK TV, launched in 2011, was to provide Russian-speaking viewers with news independent of the Kremlin, which would also reach Russia from Tbilisi. Robert Parsons, the channel's then-director general and former BBC correspondent in Moscow, stated that the goal was not to broadcast anti-Kremlin propaganda and antagonize the parties, but to break the Russian news monopoly. However, the channel's launch raised many doubts in Georgia, along with concerns that it could threaten the delicate relations between Tbilisi and Moscow. It was recalled that the previous channel, launched in January 2010, was quickly taken off the air, likely due to pressure from the Kremlin. It was emphasized that presenting events from a Georgian perspective to Russian viewers abroad could destabilize the already highly volatile region, and that any decision in this regard should be made after bilateral consultation between Georgia and Russia. The complete independence of the channel, which is entirely state-funded, from the government in Tbilisi was also questioned⁷¹.

The PIK TV channel, however, became a platform for free expression and expression of opinion not only for journalists and politicians but also for citizens of virtually all former Soviet republics, where they were prohibited from publicly discussing issues frowned upon by their governments. It thus offered an alternative to Kremlin propaganda, which primarily challenged a series of programs about Chechnya, in which Chechen emigrants presented the truth about the Russian-Chechen war. In 2013, when the Georgian Dream party came to power, the PIK TV channel was closed, along with the removal of archived programs available online⁷².

The end of hostilities, however, did not mean an end to Russian propaganda, disinformation, and cyber activity, both against its own population and against Georgia and many democratic states. These activities intensified when Putin re-assumed his presidency in 2012. At that time, the dictator stated that, given Russia's distorted international image, it was necessary to strengthen the state's information activity, a position reiterated in the Military Doctrine of the Russian Federation, published in 2014. The 2021 National Security Strategy of the Russian Federation, however, recognizes the information sphere as a front for military operations. According to its provisions, a hostile disinformation

⁷⁰ I. Tkeshelashvili, *op. cit.*, p. 66.

⁷¹ D. McGuinness, *Russian-language Georgian TV to start Broadcasting*, <<https://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-12274548>> (10.06.2025).

⁷² I. Tkeshelashvili, *op. cit.*, p. 68.

campaign is being conducted against the Russian Federation, accusing it of interfering in the affairs of other states, distorting historical truth, and threatening Russia's national identity, with the goal of destabilizing the state. This situation therefore authorizes the Kremlin, on the one hand, to protect its own citizens from external informational and psychological influences, and on the other hand, to conduct defensive disinformation activities, with the intensification of state entities' activity in cyberspace and the further development of tools for the effective implementation of tasks in the area of information warfare⁷³.

Georgia was the first post-Soviet country where the Russian Federation tested mass propaganda and disinformation, targeting its large Russian-speaking population, primarily using television channels and social media. These activities intensified significantly during and after the war, and especially after the subsequent referendum (2008), in which a majority of Georgians voted in favor of integration with the EU and NATO⁷⁴.

The Kremlin's narrative towards Georgia and anti-Western attitudes are most visible in three Georgian media outlets – Obiektivi, Sakinformi, and Geworld.ge, which officially cite Russian sources for their information. Obiektivi also presents numerous Russian videos and English-language films without citing their sources. One striking example of disinformation is the fabricated information – reported in 2014 by Sakinformi, based on the Russian source politikus.ru – that the EU was building a Nazi concentration camp for political prisoners in Ukraine, with the help of a Turkish company, a claim confirmed even by photos from the construction site. Also in 2014, Sakinformi, citing the Russian source Regnum, reported on the importation of bacteriological weapons to Ukraine – manufactured in Georgia under the supervision of American specialists – intended for Luhansk and Donbas. The common denominator of the Kremlin's media narrative was the demonization of the West as demoralized and fighting against Orthodoxy and family traditions, while Russia was portrayed as a fighter against homosexuality and a positive alternative to the West. The USA was portrayed as an instigator of coups, Euro-Atlantic integration as a threat of Turkish expansion and loss of territorial integrity, and the events in Ukraine as a provocation of Western powers. Meanwhile, Georgia's Association Agreement with the EU was interpreted as a tool to subjugate the country and destroy its economy⁷⁵.

According to a 2016 report by the Institute for Development of Freedom of Information, Russian propaganda and disinformation narratives directed at Georgia focused on four main areas. One was portraying the NATO integration

⁷³ M. Marek, *op. cit.*, pp. 18-19; P. Jež, *op. cit.*, pp. 89-90.

⁷⁴ T. Kintsurashvili, *Anti-western propaganda: Media monitoring report 2014-2015*, Tbilisi 2015, p. 18; I. Tkeshelashvili, *op. cit.*, pp. 64-65.

⁷⁵ T. Kintsurashvili, *Anti-western: ... 2014-2015*, *op. cit.*, pp. 18-21.

process as a threat to Georgia's territorial integrity, and the second was discrediting Western values in the context of EU integration. The third area concerned Orthodox Christianity as a faith that historically connects Georgia with Russia, serving as a counterweight to Western values. The fourth area involved openly inciting negative attitudes toward not only NATO and the EU but also Georgia's other strategic partners, including the United States and Turkey. The United States was portrayed as a state responsible for global destabilization, while Turkey was portrayed as a threat of appropriation of Georgian territories. From 2014 to 2016, Georgian media identified 98 such fabricated Kremlin anti-Western myths⁷⁶.

The end of military operations in Georgia did not mean a complete end to the conflict. As early as 2009, Russia began implementing the process of bordering Abkhazia and South Ossetia, with the construction and modernization of installations separating the two republics from Georgia. The construction and strengthening of border installations accelerated significantly after 2019, accompanied by Russian hybrid operations and disinformation campaigns, the narrative of which continued to undermine not only the credibility of NATO, the EU, and the US, but also the ability of the Georgian authorities and armed forces to protect their own citizens. The COVID-19 pandemic period (2019-2021) involved a complete ban on movement and contact, as well as an indefinite suspension of bilateral traffic between Georgia and South Ossetia. The positions of the two separatist republics regarding integration with the Russian Federation remain divergent. While the South Ossetian authorities are enthusiastic about the possibility of incorporating both republics into the Russian Federation, the Abkhazian authorities see Russia solely as a strategic partner, citing the Abkhazian constitution guaranteeing the country's independence. Until the end of 2021, Russian and Ossetian media actively pursued the issue of border regulation, which became less important with the outbreak of the Russian-Ukrainian war (2022), a noticeable decline in Georgian trust in both their own government and Western institutions, as well as the increased reliance of the Georgian Dream government on the Russian Federation and the signing (2021) of an agreement with Belarusian security services providing for the exchange of information on state security. Shortly after Russia's invasion of Ukraine, Prime Minister Irakli Garibashvili refused to include Georgia in the economic and financial sanctions imposed on Russia by the EU, arguing in favor of Georgian national interests and the well-being of the nation. There was also no reaction to the attacks by Russian journalists on Belarusian and Russian oppositionists who sought refuge in Tbilisi⁷⁷.

The APT28 group's activities have also continued, continuing to target sensitive data from Georgian ministries related to internal and external security and diplomacy.

⁷⁶ L. Avalishvili, G. Lomtadze, A. Kevkhashvili, *Kremlin's Information War: Why Georgia Should Develop State Policy on Countering Propaganda*, Policy Paper, Institute for Development of Freedom of Information, 22.VIII.2016, pp. 9-12.

⁷⁷ M. Rzeszutko, *op. cit.*, pp. 69-73, 76-79.

According to FireEye data, these activities intensified after 2011. For example, in 2013, an attempted attack on computers at the Ministry of Internal Affairs and Administration was identified, using a lure in the form of an IT-related email containing links enabling malware to break into the ministry's network. It was revealed that the APT28 hackers speak at least two languages, English and Russian, but the grammar of the posts indicates that English is not their native language⁷⁸.

Since 2013, government policies have been drawing Georgia closer to Russia, and internal disinformation has become a key tool for manipulating public opinion. In 2017, freedom of speech was significantly curtailed and several independent media outlets were closed, brutally suppressing public protests. Georgians are believed to have a strong sense of national identity, but at the same time, they are susceptible to influence, especially in the context of tradition and religion. Domestic and Kremlin propaganda exploits these very elements, portraying the West as a threat to Georgian culture and Christian values, while the virtual lack of access to independent media facilitates the perpetuation of disinformation. For example, the pro-government Imedi television's coverage of the protests following the 2024 elections, where allegations of election fraud were ignored, the opposition was portrayed as a threat to the country's stability, and the mass protests were portrayed as a small demonstration. Russian disinformation also persists online and on Georgian social media, presenting narratives that align with Kremlin interests and fuel social divisions. The West continues to be portrayed as a threat to traditional Georgian values and national identity. False reports also appear, for example, regarding alleged NATO crimes and biological experiments conducted in Georgia by American laboratories. Such narratives are underpinned by a positive image of Russia as the perennial defender of Georgia, which cannot cope without Russian assistance⁷⁹.

Analyses of Russian communications conducted in 2022 showed that most of them were directed against the promiscuous West, followed by the EU and NATO. This narrative was primarily homophobic in nature, and to a lesser extent related to identity, the Church, Orthodoxy, family tradition, and the imposition of values. It considered liberalism incompatible with patriotism, recommending illiberalism, in line with the Hungarian model of Viktor Orbán, who – as it was pointed out – is punished by the West for pursuing nationalist policies. On economic matters, it was reported that the US and the EU not only fail to help Georgia but even create barriers to Georgian products, in contrast to the open Russian market. There were also reports of Russian citizens who emigrated to Georgia during the war, stimulating the Georgian economy⁸⁰.

It was thus demonstrated that anti-Western propaganda in Georgia, as before, continued in 2022 to resort to manipulation through imagined threats, formulated

⁷⁸ *APT28: A Window into ...*, *op. cit.*

⁷⁹ K. Grigorian, I. Tkeshelashvili, *op. cit.*

⁸⁰ T. Kintsurashvili, *Anti-western propaganda 2022*, Tbilisi 2024, pp. 33-35.

not only by external actors linked to the Kremlin, but also by internal ones, especially the ruling Georgian Dream party and its affiliated People's Power, which were attempting to maintain and strengthen their power. Among the alleged threats, the most frequently cited were fears of war, the physical safety of citizens, territorial integrity issues, and the protection of internal democratic processes and institutions against external interventions. Western financial aid for strengthening internal democracy was considered one of the serious threats, while local institutions operating under Western influence were labeled agents of foreign countries and carriers of their interests. Turkey, in the context of its alleged intention to restore the Ottoman Empire, was still considered a significant threat to Georgia's territorial integrity⁸¹. The Kremlin narrative also indicates that only good relations between Georgia and Russia will ensure greater economic and political stability and predictability, as well as economic development and prosperity, without the risks and high costs associated with integration with the West⁸².

The Kremlin's narratives directed at Georgia are based primarily on emotional manipulation, particularly instilling a sense of threat and fear, which are key propaganda tools for manipulating public opinion. The goal of these actions is to strengthen public support for the government's current policies and weaken support for integration with the West, which is constantly portrayed as a force seeking to destabilize the region and drag Georgia into war. The narrative of political destabilization also aims to incite fear in the public. Georgian opposition parties and non-governmental organizations are accused of orchestrating this, planning a Western-inspired „color revolution.” In turn, portraying the West as promoting liberal values and morally corrupt aims to stir public outrage, which is intended to translate into greater support for pro-Russian forces. Pro-Russian attitudes among Georgian society are also being fueled by the Kremlin's narrative, which promises stability, peace, and economic benefits, as well as the protection of traditional values solely in cooperation with Russia, as opposed to the threats posed by integration with NATO and the EU. Georgian authorities and pro-Russian media are also promoting the idea of Georgia's neutrality and abandoning NATO aspirations, which is intended to protect the country from conflict with Russia, as is the case with Ukraine⁸³.

In 2022, Georgian media and political discourses, in addition to discussing documents concerning regional security and stability, included claims that Georgia should not irritate Russia with its actions but rather consolidate society around threats. One conspiracy theory claimed that the West and Western institutions were attempting to draw the country into military operations and create—using Georgia and

⁸¹ *Ibidem*, p. 37.

⁸² T. Kania, *op. cit.*

⁸³ T. Kania, *Manipulacja emocjami narzędziem rosyjskich operacji wpływu w Gruzji*, <<https://disinfodigest.pl/2025/03/06/manipulacja-emocjami-narzedziem-rosyjskich-operacji-wplywu-w-gruzji/>> (13.06.2025).

Ukraine—a second front against Russia. This narrative was spread not only by pro-Kremlin parties and their media platforms, but also by Georgian Dream and People’s Power. At the same time, the international conference „Glory to Ukraine!”, organized by the McCain Institute, The George Bush Institute, and the Economic Policy Research Center, was taking place in Tbilisi. The participants were labeled enemies of Georgia by the leaders of the ruling parties and accused of seeking to change the government, open a second front, and drag the country into war. Research conducted in 2023 showed that conspiracy theories about Georgia’s alleged involvement in the war were considered credible by the majority of respondents. Against the backdrop of the war in Ukraine, another narrative has emerged: Russia’s defeat in Ukraine will strengthen the influence of Georgia’s archenemy, Turkey, in the region. This narrative aligns with long-standing narratives that only Russia can protect the region from the Turkish threat⁸⁴.

It should also be remembered that Russian disinformation and cyber activity resulted in the illegal annexation of Crimea and the war in Donbas (2014), exploiting primarily ethnic and linguistic factors, and the subsequent launch of a full-scale war in Ukraine (2022). It is also important to remember that Russia continues its intensive disinformation and interpretation of facts against the Baltic states and Moldova, as well as the countries of the former Eastern Bloc, and also against the West. The open aggression against Ukraine has significantly changed the democratic world’s approach to Russian narratives, resulting in the rapid implementation of measures to combat Kremlin propaganda and disinformation, both at the state level and within international institutions and organizations⁸⁵.

It is believed that as the war in Ukraine continues, Russian disinformation will intensify, targeting both domestic and foreign audiences. Its effectiveness in the current situation is difficult to assess and varies, depending on the detection and prevention measures implemented. For example, numerous disinformation campaigns conducted in Bulgaria, a country sympathetic to Russia, resulted in the lowest support in the EU: 44% for EU economic sanctions against Russia, and only 33% for military aid to Ukraine (May 2022)⁸⁶.

Summary

Russian propaganda, information manipulation, and disinformation have been honed and used for decades, targeting both its own population and democratic states, and within them, specific ethnic and social groups deemed most susceptible to a suitably fabricated narrative. The foundations of Russian propaganda and disinformation have changed little since the Bolshevik era, still serving to convince societies of the

⁸⁴ T. Kintsurashvili, *Anti-western ... 2022*, *op. cit.*, p. 39-41.

⁸⁵ P. Jež, *op. cit.*, pp. 94-95; T. Kintsurashvili, *Anti-western: ... 2014-2015*, *op. cit.*, p 18.

⁸⁶ E. Kaca, *op. cit.*

righteousness of the presented political path and justify non-military and military operations, particularly against post-Soviet states, but also against the West. However, the tools used for this purpose have undergone significant change, with cyberspace joining traditional media, with its cross-border capabilities to influence both public sentiment and the functioning of states, international institutions, and organizations. Years of propaganda, information manipulation, and disinformation, understood as influencing the conscious and subconscious minds of recipients through the systematic implementation of specific short- and long-term agendas, played a significant role in the Russian-Georgian conflict in 2008. The five-day war also clearly demonstrated the differences in the strategic objectives of Russia and Western countries, whose political involvement in the Caucasus is perceived by the Russian authorities and public as interference in the exclusive sphere of influence of the Russian Federation, while the intervention in Georgia is perceived as appropriate action by the Russian authorities. By swiftly defeating the Georgian army, Russia strengthened its position in this region of the world, simultaneously demonstrating its consistency in striving to maintain its dominant position in the post-Soviet area, suppressing the pro-Western tendencies of the former Soviet republics through both propaganda and disinformation, as well as military intervention.

The 2008 Russian-Georgian conflict unfolded in four dimensions: on land and at sea, in the air, and in cyberspace. Russia implemented the same scenario in Ukraine, where a war—also undeclared—has been raging since 2014, employing both regular and irregular military operations (guerrilla warfare, sabotage, and sabotage), combined with economic, cyber, and information warfare (propaganda, information manipulation, and disinformation). As in Georgia, Russia first annexed Crimea and deployed armed forces in Donbas, creating separatist republics, before finally committing open aggression. The difference is that in the case of Georgia, the West demonstrated a far-reaching passivity and reluctance to engage in the conflict with the Russian Federation, maintaining a stance of „deep concern.” In the case of Ukraine, sanctions were quickly implemented, targeting both specific individuals and Russian institutions.

The five-day Georgian-Russian war demonstrated to the world that Georgia is a strategic geopolitical region for Russia, and the massive media attack on the country, preceding and during the several-day war, demonstrated the significant role of the internet as a tool for propaganda, information manipulation, and disinformation. The nature of this conflict fits the concept of hybrid warfare, where – in addition to traditional military operations – the parties utilize cyberspace, which can have a much more serious effect than direct clashes – significantly weakening the opponent and even paralyzing the state’s infrastructure. However, while it is a simple matter to attribute blame to a specific state for a conventional attack on another state, proving activities and attacks in cyberspace is difficult and, in most cases, impossible.

For many years, Russia has been conducting complex influence operations in Georgia, which continue to this day. The basis for these actions is primarily the manipulation of the emotions of those targeted by the Kremlin's narrative. It is well known that people are more prone to responding to emotional stimuli than to concrete and logical arguments. These narratives are dominated primarily by anti-Western and pro-Russian attitudes, with promises of defense against numerous imagined threats. Kremlin propaganda and disinformation continue to be directed in a similar vein at other former Soviet republics and former Eastern Bloc countries, finding varying degrees of receptivity.

The Russian-Georgian war and subsequent Russian activities, both in cyberspace and in the military, have highlighted the need to effectively combat propaganda and disinformation and build resilience against this phenomenon. This can be achieved primarily through media education, conducted from an early age, aimed at teaching people to perceive messages consciously, critically, and responsibly, including the proper recognition of Kremlin narratives. A significant role in this effort falls to journalists and volunteers who detect fabricated information, as well as to local and state authorities, and international institutions and organizations, whose effective tool is the sanctions imposed on the Russian Federation. Will they prove sufficient, especially in the context of the protracted war in Ukraine?

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