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## **Anti – Russian Propaganda or Rusophilia? The Image of Russia in the Polish Media**

Russia is a state where for centuries propaganda was skilfully directed not only against Poland but also against other countries of Western Europe, as well as the United States of America. Disinformation campaigns, discrediting the politicians, public people and common citizens belong to tools which are amazingly often used by Russian propaganda, tools that the Kremlin authorities use all too gladly. In relation to the Republic of Poland, Russian media and educational institutions most willingly use the strategy which consists in false argumentation, claiming that Poland lies in the zone of the so-called Russian influence and the integration of Poland as well as other countries of the former communist bloc with the European Union are deliberate blows against the interests of Russia (PE 2016). History of Poland witnessed over 1000 years of bilateral relations with our eastern neighbour. What is more important, contemporary history of those mutual relations – apart from events which concern politics, economic and social lives of both the countries – is written first of all by the media, traditional as well as the new ones, which in a significant way influence the way reality is perceived by their addressees on both sides, at the same time forming the images of all countries, including Russia and its authorities. What is the image of the Russian Federation in the Polish media? Does the audience of the Polish media believe in what is said about Russia and the people by whom it is governed in TV or press information services? And, finally, can we say that the Polish media are not objective in their passing on information about Russia and their work shows signs of broadcasting anti-Russian propaganda or rusophilia?

### **Russia as a permanent threat to Polish sovereignty**

Media informational services relate the actions initiated or supervised by political leaders. To all the European Union, but especially to Poland as a country of unique geopolitical situation, an incredibly important event was the aggression of the Russian army against Ukraine in April 2014. Thy hybrid war which is being run in the eastern districts of Donetsk and Luhansk has been one of the most important news in the Polish media. Still today in the Polish TV, press and internet information services, there appear reports from Donbass – accounts of armed activities; reports concerning the life situation of civilians as well as information concerning humanitarian help addressed to that region; political decisions and international reactions undertaken concerning the situation of the eastern part of Ukraine. In the days 28-29 August 2014, the ministries of foreign affairs of Lithuania, Latvia, Estonia and Poland condemned the aggression of the Russian military forces onto the territory of Ukraine. Politicians univocally emphasised that the Russian aggression poses a serious threat to safety in all the region. Is the audience of the Polish media aware of the possible threat?

As is shown by research conducted for the purposes of this article, as much as 60% of the questioned gave a positive answer to the question whether or not Russia is a possible threat to Poland (Butkiewicz 2017). Only 24 % declared that Russia poses no threat to Poland, and 16% of the people taking part in the research indicated that they have not considered the issue so far. That means that the events taking place in the east of Ukraine were received by ordinary citizens of Poland (not only by politicians and journalists) as a deeply disturbing signal, forcing one to think intensely about what awaits us in the future. However one cannot rule out the possibility that even without the aggression against Ukraine one would fear Russian attack, still the medial reports about the situation in Donbass evoked much disturbance in the Polish society.

In the next question, the participants of the poll were requested to point to a specific kind of threat they fear from Russia. 42% of the questioned pointed to the possibility of Polish land being annexed. Surely it has some connection with the military activities in the east of

Ukraine and with the propaganda communication permanently run by Russia, consisting in proving the historical dependence of Polish land on Russia. 38% of the polled are afraid of Russia waging an open war on Poland, whereas as many as 32% of the questioned are afraid of cyberterrorism, being aware of the skills and possibilities of the Russian hackers. The answer: "I am not afraid of anything, because Russia does not pose any threat to us" was indicated by as few as 14% of the questioned people. Only one person made use of the option "other kinds of threat". The person said we should be concerned that Russia shall keep up actions aiming to ridicule Poland on the international arena. That means that very few people are aware of unconventional, but still real threats to which the Polish authorities and the entire society are exposed. The propaganda spread by the states which do not belong to the European Union, including Russia, aims at ridiculing the member countries, weakening their images, twisting their ideas in the public mind as well as weakening the common stance of the EU by belittling the significance of some member countries (PE 2016). Creating a false image of Poland on the international arena, ridiculing the actions of Polish politicians, showing the government as weak and incompetent, and portraying all the nation as full of flaws and complexes can bring far reaching consequences. Definite stereotypes are a source of knowledge not only for the so-called average citizen but also for such media which, in spite of the recommendations of the EU, take no care of the quality and obeying suitable standards by their editing boards (PE 2016).

### **Media and strengthening national stereotypes**

What stereotypes concerning Russians, Russia and the Federation authorities have taken root in Poland through the media and have become fixed because of the media? What role do those stereotypes play in the process of shaping the image of Russia? Can they be treated as manifestation of propaganda aimed against the members of brotherly nation?

Although most of Poles do not know any Russians personally, yet almost everybody has their own opinion about Russians as nation (Gawarkiewicz 2011). People taking part in the research were first asked to indicate, whether or not they know any Russian – a man or a woman – personally. 57% of the polled people gave a negative answer, whereas 43% confirmed such acquaintance. In the next question the questioned people were requested to describe the Russian nation with one adjective. 70% of the adjectives given in the poll are words of negative slant, and a vast majority of them are related to the stereotype image of Russians as an alcohol-abusing nation. Most often they were described as a drunken, unforgiving and quarrelsome nation. Such opinion of a society whose members one does not personally know can, and well should be, something to worry about, but, what is more important, it shows exactly what great significance long grown national stereotypes have. Their reflection can be found even among positive features with which Russians have been described. Most often mentioned adjectives in this category indicate that the nation is joyful and loves entertainment.

Considering that over a half of the studied sample do not know any Russians personally, what do those people base their judgment and opinions about Russians on? In the research run for the needs of this text there was the question: "What do you base your beliefs about Russians as a nation on?". The participants of the research could choose more than one of the answers offered, but they could also add to the lists their own sources of information concerning the Russian society. A vast majority of the researched party answered that the source of any opinions they had about Russians was the knowledge they brought from their school history lessons. This answer was given by 56% of the interrogated persons, whereas another 8% put in variants indirectly connected with this source of knowledge, pointing, for example, to literature. Media images or information took the second place among the most popular answers, with the result 50%, and the third most often chosen option were

experiences of one's own, which were indicated by 38% of the researched persons. What is interesting, 28% of the questioned chose the answer indicating that their image of Russians was shaped basing on common gossip, at the same time acknowledging that in every gossip there is a grain of truth. One person wrote straightforwardly that the knowledge he or she had about Russians is drawn from the common stereotypes about them. The media doubtlessly do contribute to the popularisation and fixation of particular stereotypes concerning nations, but what matters in this process is not so much information passed on to the audience as the propaganda communicates hidden in feature and documentary movies, as well as images created in literary works (Thomson 2001). What was particularly important here were the productions emitted by the television which were created in the times of the cold war – the American movies portrayed Russian exactly as a drinking nation, treacherous and backward, whereas the Russian productions showed all the people of the capitalist West as thoroughly corrupt – immoral and worshipping money (Płazewski 2001).

Some traits have been attributed to both the sides of the cold war conflict for such a long time, that the uprooting of nation images and stereotypes built this way can be impossible for long years to come (Błuszkowski 2003).

In the light of these facts, it is very interesting to see what answers were given to the next question. The examined persons were asked to choose, out of a given list of factors, all those which in their opinion have influence on what opinions about Russians are formed in the heads of other Poles. Five ready answers were offered and one's own observations were allowed to be added. The greatest number of people indicated that the Poles' opinion is shaped by the knowledge of history of Polish-Russian relations. This answer was chosen by over 71% of the people. 69,9% of the people pointed to news broadcast in the media, and 50% indicated TV programmes, documentary films and reportages about Russia. Personal experience of contact with the Russians or a stay in Russia was chosen by 30,6% of the researched body, whereas in the opinion of 23,3% of the researched considerable influence on the Poles' opinion on contemporary Russia is made by western feature and spy movies, even though their scripts are most often literary fiction. Only one person mentioned their experiences from the times of the People's Republic of Poland and about the lack of independence in this time. So, as it is clear to see, the researched consequently showed that the same elements have influence on building their personal opinion as well as the opinion of the whole Polish nation about contemporary Russia. Knowledge holds the first place in both cases, most frequently the knowledge obtained at school. Only the second position was ascribed by the examined to media message. Similarly, around ¼ of the polled sees a significant influence of cinema.

### **Media and references to the history of Polish-Russian relations**

Propagandists, forever active since the beginnings of times, have always been aware how important a factor history is, shaping not only national identity but also regulating international relations (Butkiewicz 2016). The history of Polish-Russian relations is long and difficult – there are many painful moments in it, but also many shameful ones. Russian propaganda assumes distorting history. It consists not only on dropping the curtain of silence on those events which show the range of crimes committed over the years by the authorities of the former Soviet Union. It also concerns attempts at concealing the violation of human rights and the rules of international laws in relation to their own citizens as well as citizens of other countries, perpetrated by the authorities of Russian Federation. What is more important, belying history by Russian propaganda consists in meddling in historical memory of people of neighbouring countries (Kirwiel et al. 2011). Mutual resentment is evoked or kept alive. Negative stereotypes are built and strengthened in many different ways. A tool which is used on a broad scale is disinformation; access to historical documents is made difficult, their

authenticity is undermined. The choice of what facts should be spoken about and what anniversaries should be celebrated in the old days as well as now is dependent on political decisions (Łęcicki 2013). The truth about many events could be spoken loud only after the fall of communism and the rebirth of free Poland and therein, of free media.

It has been long known that media are an extremely important element (if not the key factor) in the system of factors shaping the public opinion (McCombs 2008). Their involvement in the education of the young generations, especially as concerns history, has tremendous importance in the fight against the propaganda of countries which disrespect not only the tradition and culture of neighbouring countries but also historical truth. The benefits which come from the media's involvement are manifold. First of all, the media help shape the identity of the young generation as well as the way they look at the world, secondly – they efficiently weaken their susceptibility to foreign influence (KWE 2007; Drzewiecki 2010). Thanks to their work and their devotion to the educational mission they are entrusted, their audience have a chance to become immune to propaganda which is spread by bad quality journalism and the products of mass culture, that is: feature movies or para-documentary productions, especially those marked by historicism (Dziadzia 2007).

Not only the Polish media, but also state institutions designed for that purpose (that is: the Institute for National Memory) or academic and research centres are busy spreading knowledge about the crimes of communist regime in Poland as well as in other satellite countries of the former USRR. Public campaigns are conducted, educational systems implemented, documents are elaborated and published in an accessible form – documents on the basis of which the security service and especially called committees persecuted and even liquidated persons who were considered inconvenient and suspected of running actions hostile towards communism (Chłopek 2005). All the measures of this type agree with the recommendations of the European Parliament and their purpose is to fight Russian propaganda and disinformation in order to weaken the attempts to use history as a tool, serving to blast the unity of the EU, and to lower the sense of confidence and national pride, especially in the countries of the former communist bloc.

### **Relations about Russia in the Polish media**

In the Polish information media there appear many news about Russia. Among the issues to which the journalists most often refer there are – apart from the above mentioned war in Donbass – among others: the Smolensk disaster and all the motifs connected with the investigation as to the causes, the incident itself and its consequences; image-creating activities undertaken by Vladimir Putin; the actions of the Russian national concern Gazprom; doping affairs with the participation of Russian sportsmen who – in the atmosphere of scandal – are deprived of their medals won at world championships and during Olympic Games.

For all those reasons, Russia is most often portrayed in the Polish press and television in an unfavourable light. It does not spring from incompetence of journalists construing the agenda, or overall unfriendly attitude of the Polish media, or from attempts to shape a negative image of Russia among the Polish media audience. Simply, the relations in the sphere of politics, economy and culture on the Polish-Russian line have been amiss for years. There is no will of establishing proper communication or agreement nor of improving the quality of cooperation, which seems to be conscious work on the part of the Russian side, which is supposed to put Poland in a bad light on the international stage. The audience of the media, especially those who possess the critical ability to interpret media news, notice the complexity of the problem. As follows from the August research, over a half of the questioned (52%) indicated that the Polish media do not create a false image of Russia (Butkiewicz 2017). However the state is mentioned mostly in negative context, still the media

audience can feel that it allows them to stay objective and to work out their own opinion on the subject of Polish-Russian relations.

### **The medial image of Vladimir Putin**

Quite different, however, is the reception of the news concerning the leader of the Russian Federation. 58% of the questioned say that the Polish media practice propaganda directed against Vladimir Putin. He is doubtlessly a person towards whom it is hard to be indifferent. The questioned were asked to take stance in relation to two consecutive questions connected with the evaluation of the actions of the President of Russian Federation. Firstly, they were supposed to indicate whether in their opinion he is a good president of Russia, and secondly – to write maximum three adjectives of their own which would describe Vladimir Putin as politician. 48% of the participants of the poll spoke positively about him as a president, 40% said that he is a bad president and as many as 12% have no opinion on the subject. The knowledge about the quality of Putin's presidency, as well as ideas of his political skills, come mostly from media news, and the participants of the poll do not know the leader personally. What proved extremely interesting were the adjectives with which the polled defined Putin. The most frequent definitions were: reckless, hard, efficient, tyrant, intelligent and consequent. It follows thence that the media audience are aware of his political abilities. However he is a figure shown mostly in negative context, still his activities aimed at securing all the Russian interests are evaluated positively in political context.

### **Conclusions and postulates**

The results of the research show that however the Polish media speak about Russia and its leader in a mostly negative way, yet the audience is coping better and better with the analysis and interpretation of the presented facts. They do not accept media news without criticism, they are becoming immune to informational propaganda. It is so thanks to a broad range of educational actions, undertaken among others in the area of un-lying of history and unmasking medial propaganda directed against Poland and other members of the EU, practiced by Russia. Since the educational measures bring the desired effects, one should not spare efforts for them to be continued.

What is important, one cannot unambiguously describe the activities of media in our country as spreading anti-Russian propaganda, but also there are no grounds to call their activities in the area of creating the image of Russia as rusophilia. As long as the bilateral relations with Russia are disadvantageous for Poland, media do present facts which can be interpreted as putting Russia in a bad light. However, saying the truth should never be treated as a manifestation of manipulation or propaganda.

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