



# **A short review of the infosphere-based information and psychological operations targeting relations between Poland and Ukraine**

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# Management summary

In this report, we present a short review of the infosphere-based information and psychological operations targeting relations between Poland and Ukraine. This report and the presentation contain the expert view of the Info Ops Polska Foundation, which may not constitute the official view of the Polish government.

This report reflects only the report publisher's views and does not constitute an official position of the Polish Ministry of Foreign Affairs.

To manipulate and influence relations between Poland and Ukraine and between our nations, Russians target all areas of the infosphere: virtual area (cyberspace), physical area (physical actions and events) and cognitive area (the way we interpret events and make decisions based on these interpretations). In this report, we review the main characteristics of their activities, we share our data on the messaging dynamics and we share examples of messaging and activities in the virtual and physical spheres. We also describe one of the advanced information distribution and replication model, which we believe Russia uses to saturate the virtual sphere with manipulative messaging and to influence the cognitive sphere of Poles in relation to their view of Ukraine and Ukrainians.

## Introduction

Processes of manipulating information, which are supposed to negatively influence the mutual perception of Polish and Ukrainian societies, have the character of multidimensional activities. Manipulation activities are carried out in the media, Polish-speaking Russian media, social networks, the blogosphere and other dedicated information areas in a virtual information environment. Communication activities would not be sufficiently effective if they were separate from events, inspired by provocations, carried out in the physical dimension, as well as other active measures: information, political, military and economic pressure exerted by the Russian Federation against Poland and Ukraine, and in particular against mutual relations.

The specific features directly related to the Russian impact assessment of Polish-Ukrainian relations described above can be divided into basic groups by the methodology for implementing the Russian active measures. The Russian influence operations on Polish-Ukrainian relations are characterized by a comprehensive set of manipulative operations, journalism, disinformation, provocation, and other active information operations measures. The most important techniques include:

- Multivector narratives - adapted to the primary goal of shaping a negative image of Polish-Ukrainian relations on both sides of the border.
- Continuity of operations - that is a permanent and systematic influence on journalism, use of negative context, suggestive messages, including auxiliary materials (journalism other than just Russian "journalism").
- Manipulation activities in physical and virtual dimensions - Russian media centers, directly called propaganda centers, select the message aligned with the sensitive elements of history between Poland and Ukraine. Alternatively, in the case of messages referring to current events, they present these events in a negative context, using elements that evoke emotions based on a deliberate choice of words, graphics, and sociotechnics. The activities occur both in the physical and virtual dimensions. Provocations, including special operations aimed at triggering information incidents destabilizing mutual relations, are one of the critical features of destabilizing Russian information operations.
- Advanced model for the distribution of manipulative messages - Russia built a comprehensive cognitive model for the cyberspace. This model is a complex process of specially crafted distribution of a message to saturate the targeted areas of cyberspace and permanently distort the information, which realizes the ultimate goal - the distortion of the perception of events by the targeted audience.
- Other active measures - these are actions of political warfare conducted - most probably - by the Russian security services (to influence the course of world events, in addition to collecting intelligence and producing "politically correct" assessment of such events). Active measures range from media manipulations to special operations involving various degrees of provocation and violence.



We have selected and analyzed the most popular examples, in terms of the scope of the operation of discrediting mutual Polish-Ukrainian relations, coming directly from the Russian propaganda center Sputnik which is one of the main information objects implementing Russian manipulation activities into the Polish information

environment. Sputnik is not overly popular in Poland, however, its range is constantly growing and its message is available to a much wider audience than only readers of the information portal, which is discussed at the end of this report.

One of the main objectives of Russian disinformation is to evoke the conviction that "Ukraine is a failed state, plunged into economic crisis and corruption", that "Ukrainians threaten its neighbors" and that Kyiv lacks decision-making power and the authorities are powerless

The fact that Russia and its supporters are playing out the issue of the Polish-Ukrainian conflict of remembrance, focused on the issue of the Volhynia massacre, is a model

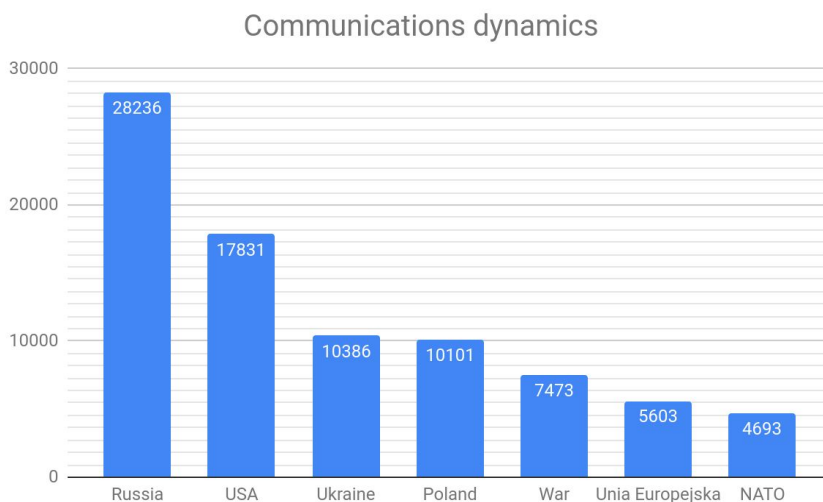
example of the implementation of the "divide and rule" method. However, it is important to note that the Russian propaganda uses not only an artificial, chauvinistic and falsified image, but also facts are used for the purposes of their campaigns - to mix the messaging and make it harder for the human cognitive space to differentiate the truth from fake.

One of the features of the continuity of influence of Russian propaganda centers is the desire to saturate the information environment with a manipulated message in a systematic way - which is called continuity of activities.

In order to ensure operational continuity, the Russian side systematically produces a certain number of manipulative materials, disinformation, and propaganda, which it then implements into the Polish-speaking information environment. Measurement of communication dynamics highlights the main informational objectives of Russian operations.

## Communication dynamics

We measured the communication dynamics of the Russian media. Here is the list of 7 main thematic areas discussed by Russian media outlets in Poland since the first day of its operation till May 25, 2019 - on Sputnik website.



Apart from shaping propaganda materials on Russia, negative communication about the USA, Poland, NATO, the third place in terms of the number of messages is taken by Ukraine.

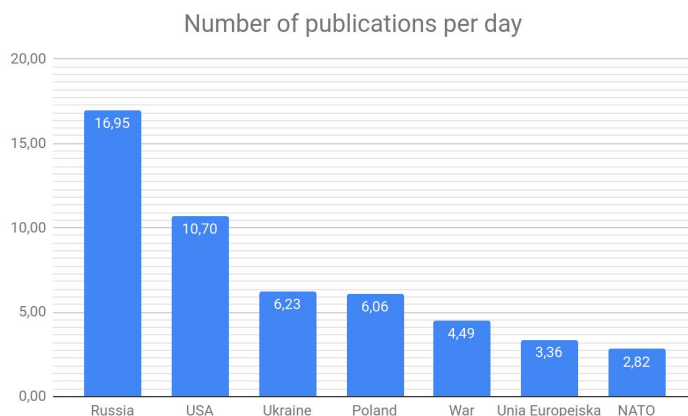
The result of this measurement confirms that Ukraine is one of the main vectors of the impact of Russian propaganda in Poland.

The priorities of Russian activities are variable, but the subject matter of Ukraine is invariably high in the objectives of Russian propaganda. Over the past two years, operations to influence Polish-Ukrainian relations have been at the forefront of Russian operations.

Comparing the growing data in relation to the measurement of informational impact in the period of 2017-2018, there are no significant changes in the objectives of the Kremlin's activities.

1. 38% - Presenting the negative image of the foreign policy of the United States and NATO countries.

2. 32% - Creating a falsely positive image of relations between Poland and the Russian Federation.
3. 23% - Depreciation of Poland's defense capabilities.
4. 23% - Shaping the negative image of Ukraine in the context of relations with Poland.
5. 22% - Shaping the negative image of the European Union.
6. 18% - Shaping a negative image of the actions taken by the European Union Member States in their relations with the Russian Federation.
7. 17% - Disavowing the Polish statehood, shaping the negative image of Poland.
8. 17% - Building a negative image of immigration and refugees.
9. 4% - Manipulating the area of information related to the Polish energy sector.



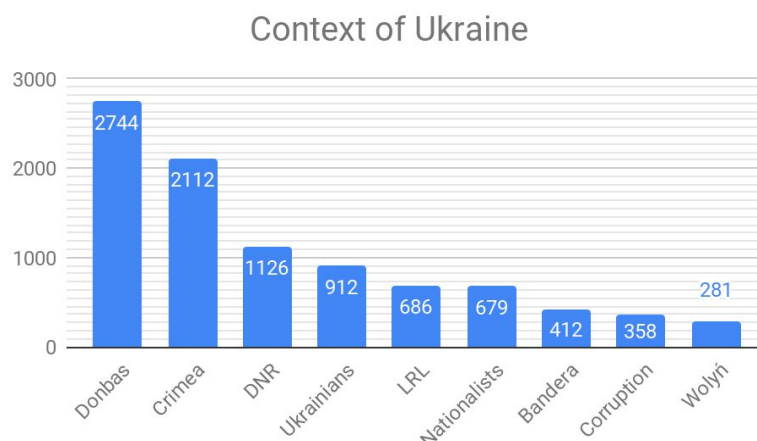
The detailed research shows the constant influence that Russia has adopted in order to manipulate the image of Poland, Ukraine, and mutual relations. In a daily survey, on average since 2014, the Russians have been creating 6.23 messages per day.

Such a model of propaganda activities is aimed at permanent creation of cognitive conditions in the information environment, which

will have a permanent negative impact on the perception of mutual relations between Poland and Ukraine by the societies of both countries.

Among these materials, there is a variety of topics discussed in the context of Ukraine. The chosen subject matter devoted to Ukraine is consistent with the context of the current situation, including the promotion of false theses, manipulative materials concerning the situation in occupied Donbas, Crimea, or the promotion of the so-called "self-proclaimed republics", Donetsk and Lugansk. Apart from the above-mentioned goals, such approach allows to carry out a number of destabilizing operations using themes sensitive to both nations: Poland and Ukraine.

Therefore, the messaging contains materials devoted to the Volhynia crime, the promotion of a false fascist painting, the Bandera of Ukraine as well as the promotion of all negative information, which are supposed to influence the perception of Ukraine by Poles.



The selected measurement indicates the messaging threads. However, one should not forget that these are not all the negative disinformation measures contained in the Russian messaging. An important element recognized in Russian activities is the reference to the current situation context, events taking place in Poland and Ukraine. Messaging and manipulative actions are adapted to interact with the current media coverage of actual events and consist of not only manipulative materials.

It can, therefore, be concluded that the attempt to create a false image of Ukraine in order to influence mutual relations is multidimensional in nature.

In order to illustrate some of these actions, one can quote some simple, false and permanent narratives which systematically appear in the Russian Sputnik:

“Ukraine as an unfriendly country to Poland”:

- nationalism;
- territorial claims;
- risk of military action against Poland;
- negative aspects of relations between Poland and Ukraine in the historical context.

“Ukraine as a failed state”:

- corruption;
- lawlessness;
- epidemiological threat.

“Ukraine as an economic risk for Poland”:

- reason for unemployment of Poles;
- reasons for underpayment, falling standard of living in Poland;
- the threat to the retirement and health care system.

## Examples of Russian manipulative messaging

### Unemployment risk and lower wages in Poland

Manipulative journalism aimed at creating the impression that the influx of emigrants from Ukraine to Poland caused unemployment and reduced the standard of living of Poles. The aim of the message is to create the impression that the presence of Ukrainian citizens in Poland, their employment, has a negative impact on Polish society.

To justify these manipulative theses, propagandists invoke narratives concerning unemployment among Poles, the reduction of Poles earnings by Ukrainians due to performing work for a lower salary than Poles, and many similar, negative impact on the image of Ukraine, false information. One of them is promoting all negative media reports and falsifying media reports on negative events related to Ukrainian citizens in Poland and Ukraine. E.g. Reports of crimes, fights and similar incidents



## Ukrainians and Ukraine as a military threat to Poland



Another example is disinformation about an alleged flood of Poland with weapons from Ukraine and an attempt to build underground armed organizations. This false information message is intended to create the false impression that Ukraine is a military threat to Poland. The propaganda materials contain elements of a conspiracy theory suggesting that Ukrainians are preparing for an armed uprising on Polish territory, or similar, saying that they are an element of hybrid actions, potential in terms of military action.

These messages are usually combined with many others, such as promoting disinformation about Ukraine's territorial claims against Poland and vice versa.

## Fascism and the cult of Bandera

“Ukraine as a country possessed by fascism and the cult of Bandera.” A fake message that has been realized constantly since the moment of the launch of the Polish-language Sputnik. Russian propaganda promotes the theses about the fascism that dominates Ukraine, promotes all negative media reports related to the speeches of Ukrainian nationalists and duplicates disinformation shaping the image of Ukraine and Ukrainian society by imposing the image of fascism, flag and nationalism through propaganda messages.



Another frequently encountered propaganda message is an attempt to evoke fear of the threat that may result from giving support to Ukraine. These disinformation activities are being implemented in many accompanying narratives, such as support in economic, military



and political contexts. Russian propaganda centers create false theses that the "conflict" is exacerbated (conflict in the eyes of Russian propaganda, which avoids statements that Russia is at war with Ukraine and masks all information about hostile actions against Ukraine). The messaging is the following: the war between Ukraine and Russia, to which the Western world is

supposed to contribute, will lead to the outbreak of war, including the Third World War and even nuclear extermination. This type of messaging is intended to reduce the willingness of Poland to support Ukraine and to change the way the society perceives Ukraine's role in the international security system.

## The epidemiological risk for Poland

Another example is creating the picture of the risk of immigration from Ukraine due to the epidemiological threat Russian "media" outlets try to create a false impression that Ukrainian citizens living in Poland are an epidemiological threat. Both information on the situation regarding vaccinations or lack of vaccinations in Ukraine and promotion of fake messages



based on previously prepared materials by the Russian administration sector, such as Russian Federal Supervisory Service for the Protection of Consumer Rights and Human Welfare (Rospotrebnadzor) and it's manipulative report "About the situation with the Tuberculosis in Ukraine'. Its main goal was to build

negative narratives to influence project of visa-free traveling to EU for Ukrainians. This material was also published in the Polish version of the Russian website Sputnik. The general goal of these activities is obvious: it is another attempt to shape the negative impression and image of Ukraine in the eyes of Poles in order to obtain in the future permanent conditions for lowering the sympathy between the two nations.



## Ukraine as a failed state



Building a negative image of the Ukrainian authorities in accordance with the situational context. Russian propaganda activities are not detached from the context of current events in Ukraine. They pursue one common goal: the depreciation of the Ukrainian authorities, shaping the impression that the Ukrainian state is unstable, incapable of self-determination, permeated with corruption and Ukrainian politicians are presented as incompetent, unable to function in

the reality of international politics and pursuing only their own particular interests. An example was a series of publications on a Polish-language Sputnik related to the inauguration of the new Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky. In a short period of time, propaganda materials targeted both the outgoing President Petro Poroshenko and the new President Volodymyr Zelensky. The fact that Russian propaganda refers to the current situation increases the effectiveness of actions as well as allows to maintain a constant narrative of a negative message about Ukraine using current contexts, aimed at creating manipulated information resources that will have a negative impact in the future as well. One of the elements of these activities is also the use of sarcasm and humor through publications and the reproduction of mocking drawings such as the one depicting the outgoing President Petro Poroshenko who is "fleeing Ukraine to take up a lucrative position in the structures of the European Union".

## Restitution of Polish property lost in Ukraine



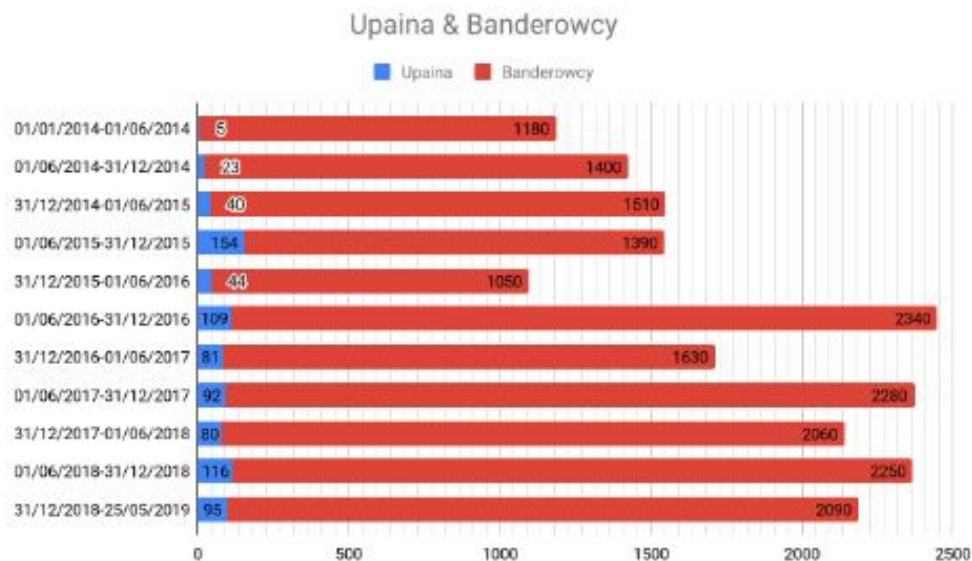
Russian activities are aimed at Polish-Ukrainian relations not only by using the context of the image of Ukraine or Ukrainian citizens but also by promoting a negative image of Poland in the eyes of Ukrainians, as well as attempts to provide media support for communities involved in activities aimed at restitution of property. These operations are aimed at promoting the message that the property of Poles living in the

territory of present-day Ukraine before the Second World War should be returned to Poles and at the same time constitute an element of building and stimulating animosity on both sides of the border by promoting information on territorial claims of Ukraine against Poland as well as territorial claims of Poland against Ukraine.

## Negative wording

One of the side elements of Russian psychological operations is a visible attempt to create and popularize words that have a permanent negative impact on Ukraine's image. Such an element is called a rhetorical incident In this case, we have investigated two such cases, the words "Banderowcy" and "Upaina".

One of these words is "Upaina", which is a combination of the words Ukraine and UPA, which is an abbreviation of the Ukrainian insurgent army. This word was intended to attribute the image of Ukraine as a nationalist state to one unique word which was promoted in the Polish language network, but it is not possible to say that this operation was successful in



the success of the gradual permanent inclusion of Upaina phrases in social networks in the context of discussions on Ukraine - it did not become popular.

The situation is different with the second word: "Banderowcy" which was created from the name of Stepan Bandera. The idea was to create a unique word negatively depicting Ukraine in the eyes of Poles. The statistical chart shows that this word can be considered as at least partially successful - the range and popularity of this tag/word have been steadily increasing since 2014.

## Causing incidents and provocations; maskirovka

Another element of manipulating and disrupting Polish-Ukrainian relations are physical incidents and provocations, aimed at fuelling xenophobia, local hatred, provoking international incidents as well as provocations, which are then promoted in the media by Russian propaganda to disrupt the mutual relations between Poland and Ukraine,



The shooting from the grenade launcher of the Polish consulate in Lutsk took place in the night of 28-29 March. The perpetrators of the attack were arrested by the Ukrainian justice system and are said to be involved in many similar provocations, such as the devastation of the synagogue in Czernowce and the grenade attack on the U.S. Embassy. One can assume the thesis that the group's activity was deliberately aimed at taking criminal action in order to

destabilize relations between Ukraine and its allies, including Poland.

Apart from the attack on the consulate in Lutsk, there were also other incidents and provocations of various nature: the devastation of the monument of the Poles murdered in the Pieniacka Steelworks. In the Lviv region in Mościski, there was also arson of one of the classes of the Polish school.



All these events were condemned by the Ukrainian authorities, who explicitly stated that the nature of these provocations is aimed at provoking a conflict between Poland and Ukraine and Russian secret services were pointed out as the initiators.

Other similar provocations include an attack on Polish cemeteries in Lviv, arson of a Polish tourist bus among which former local government officials were set on fire in order to intimidate the population, arouse fear and negative associations associated with Ukraine, and provoke international complications in relations between Ukraine and Poland.

Provocations directed against Polish-Ukrainian relations are even more effective if Poles are directly involved in them, as in the case of the setting fire to the Hungarian cultural center in Uzhorod in Ukrainian Zakarpatie.

The perpetrators tried twice to set fire to the Hungarian cultural center in Uzhorod at night. The first time the losses were small, the second time the ground floor of the building was partially burned down. The incident affected not only Polish-Ukrainian relations but also



Ukrainian-Hungarian relations. The attack in Uzhorod was perpetrated by Poles belonging to a radical right-wing organization and detained by the Polish law enforcement. One of the defendants, who recruited both Poles from the radical right wing to arson, claimed that the financing of this provocation (a total of 1.5 thousand EUR) was by Manuel Ochsenreiter, an associate of Markus Frohnmaier, a deputy to the Bundestag from the party Alternative

to Germany (AfD), allegedly known for his pro-Russian sympathies and many Russian contacts.

## Russian advanced model for the distribution of manipulative messages

We discovered and analyzed multiple models that we believe Russians use to distribute and replicate manipulative messages. We present a short description of one of these models.

The first information object that operates in this model is the Sputnik website. It is used to inject manipulative messages into the Polish-language infosphere. It has a limited range as a website, but this is misleading. Messages originating from Sputnik are changed and replicated multiple times by other means. Sputnik is the beginning of the process of entering of a message into the infosphere.

The second stage of the model is the first multiplication of Sputnik content into a set of websites. At this stage, the text of the message is not significantly changed by Russian operators. The title sometimes changes, but the lead remains similar to the content placed on Sputnik. This is the duplication of content, slightly changed to other information objects in order to increase the potential of impact.

The next phase is the transfer of content to the blogging network. What distinguishes this

process from the previous one is the fact that the contents are subject to major changes at



this stage and are often referred to in the form of opinions on publications from the second stage. This phase is already used to stage the shaping the cognitive area through the creation of specially crafted information environments.

The next step in this distribution model is to use objects in social media to distribute propaganda material in various ways. The distribution method is obviously adapted to the purpose of the operation, the recipients' vulnerability, the preferences of groups and social units in relation to which the opponent wants the disinformation operation to be effective.

The infographic shows selected social media sites, but in practice we have seen the use of even small social networking sites as tools for distribution. The next area shaped by the opponent are the places on the web which can be qualified as areas of exchange of opinions by natural internet users.

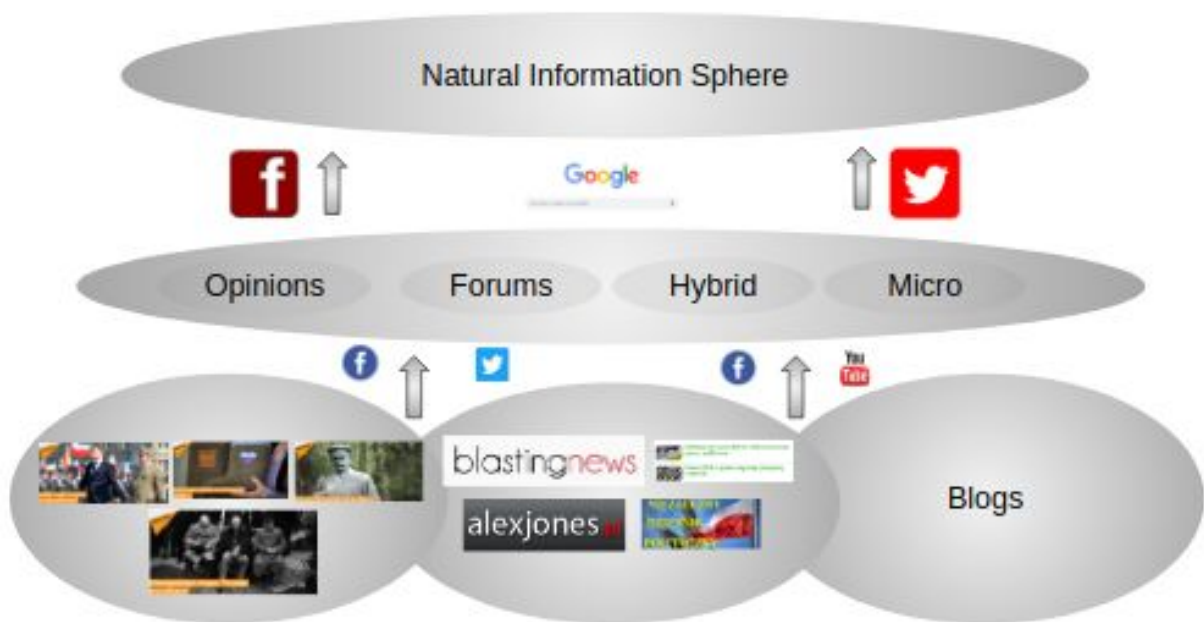
The field of opinion means in practice putting comments in the fields of publications on the pages with messages links to content created and multiplied in the two previous areas - alternative websites and the blogosphere.



This stage of the process is also the beginning of the activity of the Russian or so-called pro-Russian objects in the social media that distribute this content and/or address selected users.

The next information area targeted in this model are the internet forums that can be qualified to the previous areas, i.e., the exchange of opinions by the society, but in this case, the

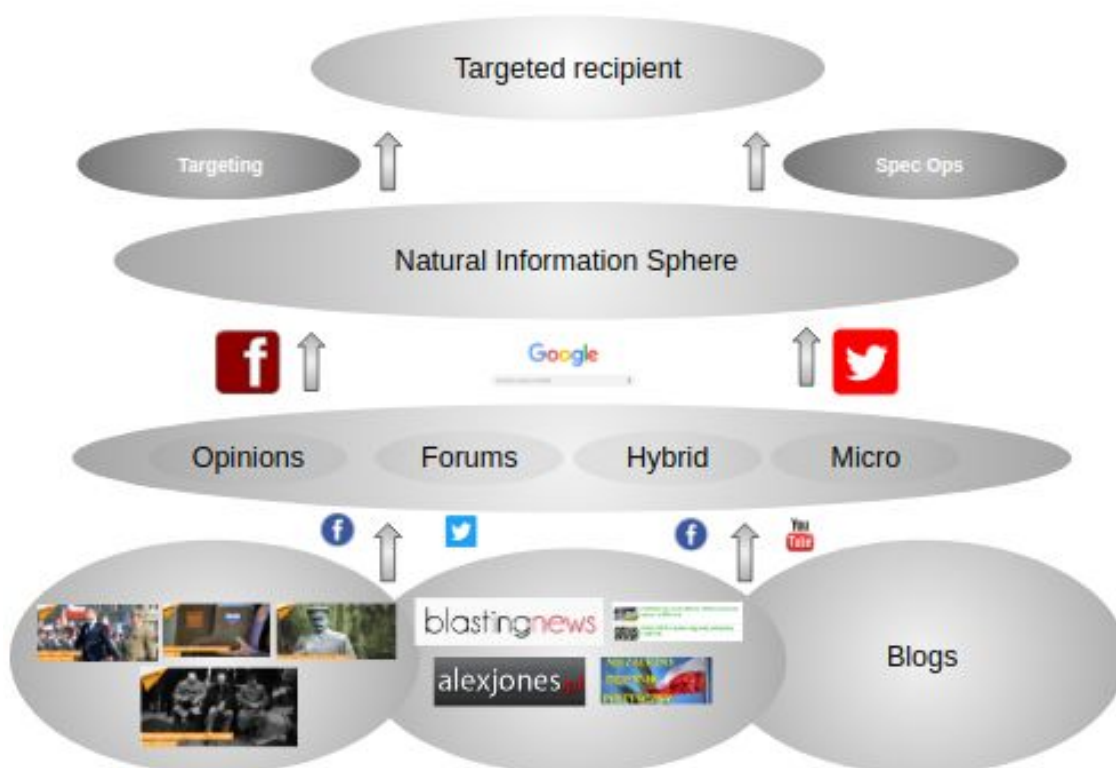




The next stage of operations in this distribution pyramid is dedicated and qualified operations for specialized psychological operations conducted against events or individual recipients. In this case, an extensive profiling and targeting model can be identified. One of the tools used by the Russians is checking the response to information stimuli - in this case, information, disinformation or manipulation. One of the elements facilitating the identification of these activities is the recognition of a user or group of users who conduct contradictory discussions and addressing them to selected persons or groups that are in fact checked and recognized.

In some very specific operations, one can identify special operation techniques, such as the use of a color graphic message adapted to the prevailing weather conditions in a given location (a human reacts differently to bright colors at low and high atmospheric pressure). The use of such methods proves the involvement of professional special operators in the process of conducting an information attack.

The full model infographic is presented on the next page.



## Summary

Modern society functions in a much different data flow than it was ten years ago. It will come as no surprise to anyone that cyberspace has now become the dominant dimension of message shaping. The information environment requires increasing commitment to ensuring sovereignty and security in the complex space of human beings, organizations, entities and systems that collect, process and distribute data.

Cyberspace and the infosphere are inseparable areas of the information environment, which functions in three interacting dimensions: physical, virtual and cognitive. The present virtual information environment differs from the traditional one because messages are subjected to a process of dynamic continuous creation/processing/replicating/modification by various tools, media centers, social media, and the blogosphere.

The Russian operation to influence Polish-Ukrainian relations cannot be seen only in the context of actions carried out in social networks or using media centers. The process of recognizing Russian influence operations requires a comprehensive approach. The recognition of the message should be based not only on the verification of media or propaganda content but above all on the analysis of the entire spectrum in which a public or private entity may conduct a hostile operation.



With the development of the Internet, cyberspace has become a key communication space, intensively used to manipulate the information environment by shaping all dimensions of the informational impact in open and hidden areas. However, cyberspace is not the only dimension of impact operations. It often remains a secondary aspect of the stimuli initiated by actual or simulated incidents in the physical dimension.

In order to protect information environment shaping the way Poles and Ukrainians perceive mutual relations, a broad spectrum of recognition of all Russian hostile operations is required, in order combat one of the primary Russia goals which is to destabilize the social, political and economic relations between the two countries.