How Russian Propaganda Portrays European Leaders

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Kremlin Watch is a strategic program of the European Values Think-Tank, which aims to unravel and confront instruments of Russian hybrid war which is focused against liberal-democratic system.
About the analysis:

Analysis of Russian-speaking media coverage of several leaders of European states and organizations was conducted in order to determine how those people are perceived in Russia and what events and actions might influence this perception. The analysed personalities were chosen based on the fact that they are significant actors in relations between Europe and Russia and that their presence in Russian-speaking media was sufficient to represent a relevant sample for the analysis. The research covers the period from January 2014 to May 2016, which enables a comparison of the situation before and after the start of the conflict in Ukraine. Over 59 million articles from 22,463 sources were analysed.
Summary:

- Instead of the representatives of the European Union, the leaders of the big European states, especially the German Chancellor and the French President, are perceived by the Russian-speaking media as the voices of Europe worthy of dealing with the Russian President Vladimir Putin.

- The most respected adversary is with no doubt Angela Merkel. By number of mentions in the Russian-speaking media as well as by her share of space in important topics and areas she many times exceeds Jean-Claude Juncker, Donald Tusk, Federica Mogherini, but also the other Heads of States.

- The Kremlin disinformation campaign works very hard to portray the European leaders accordingly to their inclination to support Russia. The more favourable those personalities are to Vladimir Putin's regime, the stronger voice in the international community they have according to the Russian-speaking outlets.

- This phenomenon leads to a large overrepresentation of Central European leaders like Miloš Zeman, Viktor Orbán or Robert Fico in the Russian media space. Together with Matteo Renzi, those politicians are Russian-speaking media favourites, some of them disproportionately to the weight backed by their population or even to the competencies and powers they have on their domestic scene.
1. Mentions (how often do Russian media refer to which of selected European leaders)

1.1. The first graph shows the number of mentions of each personality in Russian-speaking media during the whole period day by day. Angela Merkel has been mentioned twice as much as François Hollande, three times more than David Cameron, five times more than Federica Mogherini and eight times more than Jean-Claude Juncker. Her name has been also present in the article titles three times more than François Hollande's, five times more than David Cameron's and 18 times more than Jean-Claude Juncker's.

There are two obvious peaks in February 2015 and November 2015.
1.2. (a-c)

The first peak coincides with the visit of German Chancellor Angela Merkel and the French president François Hollande in Moscow where they participated in the five-hour negotiation with Russian President Vladimir Putin and tried to put pressure on him in order to ensure a peaceful solution of the Ukrainian crisis.

First peak - visit of Merkel and Hollande in Moscow
The second peak represents the period when the accession of Montenegro into the North Atlantic Alliance (NATO) was discussed. Despite Russian protests it was decided at the beginning of December that the accession negotiations would begin.

Second peak – Montenegro in NATO discussions
If we focus on the Czech President Miloš Zeman, most references to him occurred during the first half of April 2015 which corresponds to his statements about the closed doors addressed to the US Ambassador in Prague Andrew Schapiro after he would try to discourage the President from visiting Moscow.

*Czech President Miloš Zeman*
1.3. In general, the chosen personalities were mostly mentioned in Russian-speaking media in connection with the Ukrainian conflict, but also migration, NATO and terrorism.

The British Prime Minister and the French President were mentioned a lot in the articles concerning the Islamic State. David Cameron played a big part in article fragments about Russian intelligence while François Hollande had a significant role in the media coverage in connection with terrorism where he has been mentioned 2.5 times more than Angela Merkel.

From the three representatives of the European Union, the High Representative Federica Mogherini was mentioned the most in Russian-speaking media, at least concerning the chosen topics. She exceeds in this aspect both her colleagues Jean-Claude Juncker, the President of the European Commission, and Donald Tusk, the President of the European Council, sometimes even several fold more (in the range between 1.5 and 7.5 times more). The exceptions are the topics of energy, extreme right, migration, NATO and partly also the Ukrainian crisis.

It is no surprise that most mentions within most of the topics belong to the German Chancellor Angela Merkel. She does not occupy the first place only in the areas of armaments, the Islamic State, Syria, NATO and terrorism. On the other hand, she almost remarkably dominates the topic of extreme right, where she takes almost 70 % of the references concerning this area.
1.4. The negotiations of Angela Merkel and François Hollande with Vladimir Putin in Moscow were not only the peak number of mentions of European politicians in Russian-speaking media, it was also the point when the Ukrainian crisis many times exceeded all other topics and even broke records on its own line. That suggests that the significance of official visits of the European statesmen to Moscow should not be underestimated since the Russian-speaking media can use them very well to their advantage, for example to legitimize the Vladimir Putin’s regime and to exaggerate the relations he has with European politicians.

*Mentions by topic/time*
2. Sentiment (how do Russian media portray selected European leaders)

2.1. The following section presents charts and conclusions based on data sub-set which contains emotional dimension, also called positive or negative “sentiment.” We can see here that David Cameron was portrayed in the most negative manner. Opposite to that the favourite politician of Russian-speaking media is the Italian Prime Minister Matteo Renzi. Over 65 % of the mentions of him were positive. Good position is also held by François Hollande with more than 60 % of positive articles.

Negative/positive sentiments
2.2. – 2.3

Next to the British Prime Minister, quite negative coverage also belongs to the Czech President Milos Zeman. It can be mostly explained by the context of his vocabulary and actions which are strongly pro-Russian but their content itself is perceived as negative. This is very convincingly shown when we closely compare his media coverage on Russian and non-Russian domains. The share of all the references regardless of sentiment about Zeman on Russian domains contrary to the non-Russian ones is less then 41 %, while the 55 % of the clearly positive mentions is present on Russian domains.

Amount of Miloš Zeman references in Russian/non-Russian domains

Positive sentiments on Miloš Zeman in Russian/non-Russian domains
2.4. The following graph clearly shows that for the Russian-speaking media, the most important adversaries of the Russian president are the representatives of the big European states, probably much more than the leaders of the European Union or NATO. In the lead with Angela Merkel there are François Hollande and David Cameron, who are mentioned several fold times more than Jean-Claude Juncker, Donald Tusk, Federica Mogherini or Jens Stoltenberg. The leaders of the Central Europe seem to play more of a marginal role compared to the rest of the politicians, which would be logical considering the size, political and economic power of the countries they represent.

**Biggest adversaries of the Russian president according to Russian-speaking media**
3. Relative comparison (who is preferred by Russian media)

3.1. It is clear that the European leaders have different weight backed up by their population. The following comparison takes the size of the country into account. The leading position of the German Chancellor is unassailable in any case, but contrary to the previous graph, Milos Zeman, Robert Fico and Viktor Orban outrun David Cameron by several rungs, even though the size of the population in the Czech Republic is roughly 6 times lower than in the Great Britain. We can therefore say that due to their countries population, the Central European leaders and especially Milos Zeman are strongly overrepresented in the Russian-speaking media. The Czech President is overrepresented around sevenfold compared to Angela Merkel, while it is important to remember he has only a small fraction of executive powers she holds.

*Representation of European leaders in Russian-speaking media*
3.2. – 3.10

The footprints targeted to the single politicians show us for example that for the representatives of the European Union it is very typical to focus on the Ukrainian crisis and Ukraine when in contact with Russian-speaking media. Contrary to that the heads of states have much broader range of topics they pursue.

There are some interesting differences in the share of articles concerning the Russian president. It is obvious from the footprints that the most prominent actor facing Vladimir Putin is Angela Merkel, but very often there is Matteo Renzi mentioned in connection with the president as well as the Czech President.

*Topics associated with Cameron*
Topics associated with Hollande
Topics associated with Merkel
Topics associated with Mogherini
Topics associated with Renzi
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Topics associated with Tusk
Topics associated with Zeman
3.11. The footprints covering the leaders of the European institutions suggest that their agenda is very well coordinated. Donald Tusk seems to play a more significant role in the Russian-speaking media than his colleague Jean-Claude Juncker but they seem to be expressing themselves in the media on similar topics.

*Juncker/Tusk comparison*

3.12. The position of the German Chancellor in terms of the Ukrainian conflict and the relation to the Russian president cannot be competed even by the French President François Hollande, she exceeds him roughly twice.

*Hollande/Merkel comparison*
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European Values Think-Tank is a non-partisan institution defending liberal democracy based in Prague, Czech Republic. It runs its Kremlin Watch Program seeking to expose and counter Kremlin-orchestrated disinformation operations. Find more at http://www.kremlinwatch.eu.