

Hybrid Warfare, Trolls, Agents of Influence, and Useful Idiots

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If, for the collocation “fake news”, the “birth date” can be approximated (the 2016 United States of America presidential election), about the concepts we will analyse in this material, it is very difficult to establish an initial date, and even harder to find the “godfather”. These concepts have somewhat remained in the shadows, being used only by specialists in the field. However, what happened in Europe and around the world, immediately after the beginning of the XXI century, made them come into prominence, to be intensively used, even excessively, and all political, social, and economic events that came out of the initial logic were suspected to be “wedged with” elements of hybrid warfare. In the absence of tangible evidence, we will avoid branding and we will use only those situations/events/characters that have been proven to fit into the obscure scenario, created in the misinformation laboratories of some powers interested in destroying the current world order, out of the desire to have a place in the inner circle that decides the fate of the Earth. Hence, we gather that: those who want a reconfiguration of spheres of influence represent powers that, now, do not occupy the dominant place they think they should have on the international stage. Naturally, we exclude the current economic and military powers that “call the shots” and direct our attention to other forces, which have been at the forefront of world politics and want to return to that place, or powers that are catching up and demanding a place with equal rights, alongside the only military and economic superpower of the moment, the US. We conclude that bipolarity is regretted by the Russian Federation, which is making efforts to return to superpower status, and this position is coveted by both China and India. Unfortunately, countries that aspire to equal status with the United States have a big problem understanding the concept of democracy, and “human rights” is a phrase that can raise an ironic smile. There is a fine line between this stage and the use of hybrid warfare, with all its elements: trolls, agents of influence, and useful idiots. Under these circumstances, it becomes imperative to decipher how these pawns are used, who directs them, for what purpose and how a state, a nation can defend itself from the danger posed by these threats.

First, we will analyse the concept of **hybrid warfare** or “war of the future”, according to the defence doctrine, developed by General Valery Gerasimov, at that time, Chief of the General Staff of the army of the Russian Federation. “Both in the official Russian rhetoric and in the «Military Doctrine», «Information Security Doctrine», «Foreign Policy Concept of the Russian Federation» the term «hybrid» is not used, but the phrases «war of the future», «asymmetric threats» and «measures to counter colour revolutions». The «Military Doctrine of the Russian Federation» of 2010 emphasizes the use of information tools, just as the «Military Doctrine of the Russian Federation» of 2014, signed by President Putin, talks about influencing the enemy throughout its territory and at the same time, in the global information space, as an armed conflict. The «Information Security Doctrine» of 2016 talks about

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undermining the historical bases and patriotic defence traditions, of the enemies, as being part of ensuring the information security of the Russian Federation.” [1]

An attempt was made to find a coherent definition that would encompass all the factors contributing to this war. One of them considers that hybrid warfare is “an undeclared, clandestine, disguised conflict, in which the aggressor state seeks to gain control over the political, economic and social decisions of the aggressed state” [2]. We will try to draw the “coordinates” of the hybrid warfare concept: an entity (usually state), based on a well-developed program, with adequate tools, wants to project an **alternative reality** on a target audience. This alternate reality involves a fabricated concept, containing sequences of truth mixed with shades of grey, rarely black, that are brought into the mainstream press, starting from an area of tabloids or obscure news websites. The goal is for citizens to believe in that reality and to build alternative groups, in relation to decision-makers, to alter political decisions.

This parallel reality is the first step of hybrid warfare, applied by a state entity (or not) to the enemy. The better this “reality” is outlined, using classical manipulation techniques, the **alternative groups** are created, with diverse beliefs, which can be controlled, because they have swallowed the bait stretched by hybrid warfare puppeteers. Who are the individuals who belong to these alternative groups, who criticise the attitude of their own authorities and militate for a different type of politics, being attracted by representative personalities from strong regimes, seen as saviours of the nation and true patriots? We are not talking only about individuals with a poor civic culture, quite quickly seduced by the siren song of authoritarian politics, which “brings order to the country”, but also about well-trained people who are dissatisfied with the direction in which society is heading, in their home country, and consider that a new political class is needed, a younger one, more involved and free-spirited. It is also in these groups that we meet people who are deeply frustrated that society does not give them what they think it should give them, social recognition and validation. Here we are talking, obviously, about the Dunning-Kruger effect, which causes many individuals to overestimate their value.

Another element that the puppeteers resort to is the **manipulation of emotions**. It is known that individuals often give up critical thinking and respond instantly to stimuli aimed at emotions. It is about the old stimulus-response model, which makes people, in special situations, completely give up reason, in order to make momentary decisions, obviously under the influence of emotions. Emotional communication is the most empathetic, especially when we talk about fundamental emotions, such as fear or humiliation, and speculating on them can generate the phenomenon of mass psychosis (hysteria) or movements to reject social and political measures that, naturally, should be taken.

Hybrid warfare involves the use of any tactics that can help achieve the goal of sowing panic within the enemy state, inciting the population against their own authorities, and dismantling the mechanisms that support a nation. For such purposes, image shapers are bought, who become agents of influence for foreign powers. These can be journalists, as well as politicians, businessmen, cultural figures, etc. The more well-known they are, the better, because their moral authority cannot be questioned.

The methods used are being constantly improved, and artificial intelligence takes a leap forward, facilitating the work of those who aim to destroy the social fabric of the enemy. It's cheaper and bloodless. Social interaction networks are fully utilized, from which, as we will see later, useful idiots are recruited. The tactic of anonymity ensures that those in the

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shadows remain undiscovered, while in a country, significant special movements take place, which can result in serious disorder, sometimes even triggering civil war. The “leaderless revolution” on social networks is already a well-known phenomenon, and at the end of such an operation, everyone wonders who the puppeteers were. They, in the vast majority of cases, are not discovered, and they have achieved their goal. The target is the whole society, communities are targeted, perverted, resettled, divided and directed. All this is also happening in countries with democratic regimes because puppeteers use human rights for their own benefit. For instance, for the Kremlin human rights are a weakness of democracy.

Analysts researching hybrid warfare say that after the occupation of Crimea in 2014, but especially after the attack against Ukraine, Russia proposed several themes, including the destruction of NATO and EU cohesion. The basic themes, circulated by the Kremlin, focused on statements such as “the EU is an empire, like the USSR, that grabs national wealth”; “The Moral Decadence of the West in Relation to the Orthodox East”; “Romania, colony of the EU, second-class state”; “Romanians became slaves”; “Second-hand food”. These themes are quite common in Romanian media and social media, revealing a primary inability to discern between democracy and authoritarianism, as well as a nostalgia for the past that cannot be explained solely by a desire to return to the golden age of youth.

It must be emphasized that there is a tendency in Romanian society to attribute all hybrid warfare attacks to the Russian Federation, when in fact, the truth is different. No, Russia does not orchestrate all attacks. Often, the Kremlin capitalizes on the opportunities created by the weaknesses, failures, and fears of Romanian society. And it does so quite effectively, but there is also a silver lining, if we can call it that: our country is less exposed to Moscow's rhetoric, due to the more recent or older history of relations between the two countries. Since 1878, following the disappointing actions of the Russians, who annexed the southern part of Bessarabia, despite the provisions of the alliance convention of April 4, 1877, and threatened to occupy Bucharest, the political class and public opinion in the country have become deeply Russophobic. This Russophobia persists today, perhaps only Poland and the Baltic states surpassing us in this regard. After the outbreak of the war in Ukraine, Romanians who still harboured illusions realized who Russia truly is. Of course, there is no reason to be complacent, as a recent survey shows that Romanians rank third in Eastern Europe in terms of belief in conspiracy theories, after Slovenia and Bulgaria.

Democratic countries indeed face an insidious enemy, which employs various forms of hybrid warfare and has the ability to change its approach along the way if the situation on the ground demands it. An example of this is the war in Ukraine, the themes of which have been widely disseminated in Romania. “In the first months after the outbreak of the conflict, the main narratives of the conflict were outlined, some of transnational inspiration, others with a local flavour. The main promoters of the ideas supporting anti-vaccination turned out to be the same ones who carried forward ideas favourable to the Kremlin.

There have been three stages in how narratives regarding the war in Ukraine were evaluated, explains Andrei Tiut, Director of Democratic Resilience Programs at the GlobalFocus Center. «In an initial phase, there were more open positions, even before and immediately after the war began - Ukrainians are Nazis, with emphasis on the Azov Battalion», Tiut explains. He says that because they were not very successful, the promoters of these messages abandoned them, especially since public opinion sided with the Ukrainians from the early days of the conflict.

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This is how the second stage of pro-Russian communication emerged, based on a strategy that was “more evasive, avoiding directly stating that Russia is okay, that Russia is right about this war”. In this stage, the messages were more inclined towards: «but the Ukrainians also have their share of blame».

The third stage, much better defined in time, was marked by the moment of the shelling of the Kerch Bridge in October 2022 by the Ukrainians. It was at this point that, Tiut says, propaganda agents began sending messages that aroused fear of Russia. «The narrative was piecemeal, like a puzzle piece, showing us that Russia is strong, and we must fear it and, at the same time, the West will not come to our aid».

Trolls are usually closely linked to hybrid warfare, considered indispensable ingredients for carrying out the puppeteers' plans. However, trolls can also act independently, to satisfy repressed desires, gestures of revenge, as they are not brave enough to make their identity public. In the following, we will refer to trolls directed by the “factory” management, as they are the most active and cause the greatest damage. “Originally, trolls can be found in Scandinavian folklore, described as malevolent and disgraceful creatures - either dwarves or giants, anything but normal - who lived isolated, usually in unfriendly places such as caves. The precise origins of «Internet trolls» are not known, but they likely emerged in the 1980s when, with the development of the Internet, digital forms of socialization such as groups, forums, or discussion lists were created. However, the first documented appearance of the term is dated by the Oxford English Dictionary in 1992. And, ironically, it was a friendly-ironic practice to identify newcomers to a forum by throwing them a theme - usually absurd - that had been discussed before and settled by the «veterans». If they took the bait, it was clear: they were gullible. Over time, the practice of leading with bait - because trolling can also mean that - lost its benign character and became equivalent to the coordinated and intentional effort to divert the discussion in another direction - or nowhere at all. Once again ironically, we witness the transformation of an imaginary character into a digital one, both equally elusive and provocative.” [4]

The classic type of troll is found on social networks, on Internet discussion forums, and it doesn't take much attention to distinguish him from the eternal “devil's advocate”, who is angry at everyone, including himself. The role of a troll is well established: he must divert the discussion from its original meaning, create false problems and incite the parties to a conflict that often leads to insults and threats of all kinds. If “the devil's advocate” feeds on the anger, agitation and frustration of others, the authentic troll has a boss, a salary and a target; he is the exponent of a state (or commercial) agent developing a strategy on a macro scale. Research done on trolls shows that each of them has several profiles on social networks (usually three), and the messages, slightly modified, are present on conspiracy links and sites or those promoting sensationalism and fake news.

Trolls have been involved (there is clear evidence) in many high-profile political events in the world of the last decade: Brexit, the US presidential election (2016), the secessionist movement in Catalonia, Belgium, the war in Syria, as well as in the military conflict between Israel and Hamas. After Donald Trump's surprising victory in the US presidential election, researchers “looked at the flow of information that fuelled the voting decision. That's how the huge volume and global dynamics of what would go into common parlance as fake news came to light”. [5] Furthermore, “The accusations were reinforced during the American presidential campaign and especially after Trump's victory, attributed in

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part to the speed with which Facebook spread negative and false news about his opponent.” [6]

But “at least three years earlier, with the outbreak of pro-European protests in Kiev, the Kremlin launched a veritable campaign of fake news, propaganda and misinformation. After the annexation of Crimea and the war in Donbas, the campaign acquired the characteristics of a full-fledged information war. The West was surprised, trying to understand whether it was a new kind of hybrid warfare. But we will see that fake news is the modern expression of old Soviet practices institutionalized within the army and secret police, which then became the foundation of the Soviet state itself”. [7]

The Kremlin leader outlined the future of information warfare in his speech at the Valdai Club in 2013, stating, among other things, that “Europe is disintegrating in an increasingly powerful centrifugal movement, with nation states revolting against Brussels' plans to turn them into colonies; street movements are increasing; The EU is run by a secret paedophile lobby that snatches children from the arms of their families and entrusts them to gay families (paedophilia to be legalised in the EU); Ukraine is ruled by a fascist junta that has begun the mass extermination of Russians in Donbas; the Americans want to start a war with Russia, as they did in Syria, where they created and armed ISIS; the US generated the refugee crisis in order to subdue Europe; the world oligarchy (whose exponent is Soros) finances color revolutions to seize power through coups; people's democracy is under attack by the parallel state etc..

At the same time, Russia is the defender of traditional values, the only one who can save the West, just as it saved it from fascism through the sacrifice of the Great Patriotic War”. [8] The Russian leader's aberrations continued, stating that “the West puts faith in God with faith in Satan on the same level”. [9]

Trolls “sell” such pills with distrust and alienation, and appealing to emotions makes them extremely dangerous, as they can divert individuals' attention from society's real problems, turning it to false leads, creating false heroes, and subjecting to public lynching those to whom they are supposed to create the image of pariahs. “The intentionally generated fake message is being reposted by armies of trolls and bots involved in information warfare.” [10]

It is considered that there are three types of trolls: a. **defensive troll** - the one who creates the topics, most often, without being vulgar; raises hosannas to some at the expense of others; b. **attack troll** - insults, is extremely aggressive, resumes copy-paste attacks of other trolls. “These trolls are the most numerous and aggressive of all [...] post provocative comments full of swearing, insults and rudeness” [11]; c. **“disappointed” troll** - he likes neither power nor opposition, in fact, he discredits the idea of democracy. As stated, trolls have several profiles, therefore, they can be, in turn, defensive, attacking and “disappointed”.

Obviously, each troll differs from another by their perception of vulnerable points in a dialogue in which they engage, and they can manipulate discussions more or less effectively. I've referred to them as “smart trolls,” who “craft” themselves, have a profile containing (stolen) photos, activity on their own profile, many friends, etc. “Lazy trolls” are much easier to spot because they have a profile extremely poor in information, the profile picture fluctuates between a tree, a flower, a pet, a weapon, a quote, a historical figure, an authoritarian political leader, etc., they have few friends and extremely limited activity on their own profile, their target being internet forums, where they can manifest themselves. Even though “lazy trolls” are extremely easy to spot, few individuals make this minimum

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effort to verify the authenticity of the person they are engaging in conversation and subsequently debating with. It is paradoxical to observe how much lack of media literacy citizens have and how easily they fall into the trap of trolls, who know how to exploit the emotional factor and general human sensitivities. Under these circumstances, the natural question arises: how do we defend ourselves against trolls?

First, we need to identify them. As I mentioned, it's not too difficult; the important thing is to be willing to move beyond the comfort provided by the virtual environment. The simplest method is to block and report them. It's a good idea, however, they will create other profiles. It would be extremely important for citizens to realize the seriousness of this phenomenon and take action against it. How do we do it? There are several methods. For example, on Facebook, there is TrollHunt. Media education, something that, in Romania, despite the efforts of NGOs (see the Center for Independent Journalism), is still in its infancy. Media and social media consumers do not want to understand the importance of this type of education. If this were done from the primary school level, an essential thing could be understood, namely that, after identifying a troll, they should not be "fed"; no matter how difficult it may be, we should not enter the lists. Thus, we take their "bread out".

Studies on trolling show that trolls not only divert attention from hot topics or incite, but also have the task of identifying those who think a certain way, "in order to be recruited into groups that can be used for a specific action" [12], says Iulian Chifu, founder of the Center for Conflict Prevention and Early Warning. Trolls track like-minded people (or totally the other way around) and place them in other comment spaces. In other words, we are talking about recruiting individuals who can serve their intended purposes. Some of these individuals may become trolls themselves, but most of them remain useful idiots.

Social media campaigns, directed at trolls, have led to changes in their practices. Since artificial intelligence programs detect messages with certain wording, trolls have switched to print screen technique to avoid blocking on Facebook. If, however, this happens, he screams as loud as he can from new profiles that Western social media platforms are controlled by the CIA. In fact, "there is a wider migration from Facebook to VKontakte, spread worldwide by various nationalist and anti-Western far-right groups". [13]

According to the latest data, the champion in sharing fake news is the TikTok platform, followed by Instagram and VKontakte. Among the state actors that allocate large sums in order to achieve effective trolling, the Russian Federation occupies a leading place. Until the outbreak of the war in Ukraine, the Russian Federation allocated between five and seven billion dollars for misinformation campaigns on the Internet. The Russian troll army has been operating since 2014 as a legal entity, Internet Research Agency (OOO "Internet Issledovaniia"), under the leadership of Mikhail Ivanovich Bystrov. But since 2013, there is the Internet Research Agency (OOO "Agentstvo Internet Issledovaniia"), coordinated by Mikhail Kurkin. [14] But the real date of birth of Russian trolls is 2000, when Putin took over in the Russian Federation and a small "armada" was created around him, composed of commentators who publicly expressed their adherence to the policy of the new Kremlin tsar. They were called Godfather-Bots - the pro-Kremlin movement "Godfathers". It follows that, ever since he ascended the throne, Putin had this pragmatic and at the same time evil thinking about the role and purpose of information warfare, a doctrine that would appear in official Russian documents a decade later.

In 2003, the first journalistic investigation about the presence of these proto-trolls, the FSB-sponsored (The Federal Security Service) "web brigades", was published, the material

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being signed by journalist Ana Paliaskaia. In 2012, hackers from Russian Arms of Anonymous published emails detailing how trolls were paid. A year later, journalist Andrei Soshnikov infiltrates the troll network, which is confirmed by *Novaya gazeta*, and provides evidence that the trolls were paid by Yevgeny Prigozhin's Concord holding company. The same Soshnikov said that, from informal discussions with colleagues, he realized that only 50% of trolls strongly believe in what they post, for others it is just a job, just like all the others. *Novaya gazeta* said the "Agency" had one directorate of bloggers and online commentators and seven, then five departments specializing in rapid reaction, video content creation, etc. In the year of Soshnikov's journalistic investigation, the daily norm was 100 posts. [15] Trolls were paid under the counter, but were forced to sign confidentiality agreements, which is paradoxical and amusing.

The same Soshnikov presents the way trolls work: the demographic structure of social networks in the targeted countries was carefully studied, the behaviour of those who post, who are the political leaders, media and social media audiences, their owners, their position towards Russia, etc. Trolls worked in teams, groups of 20 people, with three editors, who checked posts and levied fines if there was no appropriate content or if it was copied. [16]

Trolls' messages are addressed not only to media and social media consumers in the target countries, but also to citizens of the Russian Federation. According to studies, Russians spend 8-9 hours a day on social networks, double that of Western Europe. That's why social media platforms have multiplied, and they are backed by Russian tycoons: for example, VKontakte and mail.ru belong to Alisher Usmanov.

What's worse is that "we are witnessing the birth of a predictive personality model that has enabled Cambridge Analytica to create psychometric profiles of all U.S. voters, automatically updated with the data they each generate online. Using these profiles, Cambridge Analytica can not only find out each voter's electoral choice, but also influence their voting behaviour through fake news. It is about automating voter manipulation on an unprecedented scale. No radical political movement has ever had such handy misinformation technology. In the future there will be no war of candidates' ideas, the difference will be made by the precision of psychometric profiles and the ruse of fake news. It's going to be a full-blown information war, an artificial intelligence war". [17] Thus, based on 68 likes, it was possible to determine a person's skin colour, sexual orientation, political preferences, level of alcohol, tobacco, drug consumption, including whether the parents were divorced. Based on 10 likes, it was possible to get to know a person better than his co-workers, and the analysis of 150 likes given by the studied subject, on Facebook, made that individual better known by those who studied his behaviour than by his parents, while the analysis of 300 likes made him more known, in his preferences, said and unsaid, than in the eyes of his life partner.

Faced with threats generated by Kremlin propaganda, the West has begun to react. "The first step taken by the EU was the establishment in 2015 of a team - East StratCom Task Force, consisting of 16 specialists from European institutions. In 2019, the team's budget is three million euros and is expected to increase to five million euros. The team is also expected to expand to around 50 specialists". Their main task is to identify and analyse trends in misinformation, to explain and expose false narratives, and to draw attention to the danger coming from the East. EU specialists do this on the website euvsdisinfo.eu, where they take news through which Russia tries to deceive you and dismantle them for you". [18]

About bots, we will only state that they are automated tools for transmitting standard messages, and their analysis is not within our focus in this study.

Agents of influence are the most interesting characters, due to the fact that they are extremely difficult to detect, although at first glance they seem easily identifiable. It is an illusion, because in order to label an individual as an agent of influence of a foreign power (state agent or company), you must have arguments, and these arguments, in most cases, do not exist. First of all, we must make the appropriate distinction between agents of influence and spies. The foremost are citizens of the state in which forms of hybrid warfare are exercised, while individuals in the latter category are foreign citizens. Therefore, a Romanian cannot spy on Romanian territory. If they sell military or state secrets, they become traitors to the country, but cannot be classified as “spies”. Agents of influence are traitors to the country because, for various reasons: money, position in society, social validation, coercion, blackmail, they accept to play the games of a foreign power.

Agents of influence are recruited from the political, economic, social, media landscape, usually through buying tactics, but there are not few cases in which they are manufactured from among individuals who seek to climb the social ladder, possess certain qualities, and foreign power speculates on their weaknesses. Agents of influence come from various fields. Each has its purpose: the politician or political analyst challenges the quality of the exercise of governance and democracy in general; the economist laments for the fate of the economy, “crippled” by joining the EU, as well as the increase in poverty, while, in the area of culture, the loss of national identity, indigenous values, traditions and imitation of a form without substance, imposed or adopted from the West, are deplored.

Agents of influence can play into the hands of large corporations by favouring asset acquisitions in strategic industries, especially energy. “There are no documents proving Russian ownership in OMV, the majority shareholder of Petrom, but in my book *Romania – Energy and Geopolitics*, in the chapter «Romanian Energy Strategies and Pressure Groups in the Romanian Energy Industry», on page 168, I demonstrate how Russia obtains strategic information about the Romanian energy industry. We cannot fail to recall a statement by Russian anti-communist dissident Vladimir Bukovsky on the BBC channel: «Lukoil means Gazprom, which owns 30% of the Austrian company OMV. And Gazprom is nothing but the KGB». So things are clear, through Lukoil, the KGB got its hands on the entire energy system in Romania”. [19]

It is obvious that, “The more important Romania becomes in the Atlantist strategy, as a defender of NATO's eastern border, the more interested Russia is in developing networks of influence from here. The Russian Embassy in Bucharest continues to recruit Romanian students these days, luring them with scholarships, facilities and privileges at universities in Moscow and St. Petersburg”. [20] A standard tactic of agents of influence is to occupy the media space with trivial topics, which divert the attention of public opinion from the real topics, but also with themes that are favourable to the entity that directs them. Who is part of the fifth column? Hard to say.

In the current geopolitical context, generated by Russian aggression in Ukraine, fears are directed towards the Kremlin's intentions to penetrate Romanian society with agents of influence. “In Romania, there is a broad consensus that a political lobby network operates in our country, financed or, at least, morally encouraged by Vladimir Putin's regime.” [21] The Russian agenda can be found at AUR (The Alliance for the Union of Romanians), as well as at the “exotic” Diana Șoșoacă, notwithstanding, there are no documents on Moscow's interference in this direction. However, we know that the Russians encourage extremist

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parties in all countries of Europe, especially within the European Union, be they right or left, with the aim of discrediting community institutions and creating strong divisions in society.

It should be reiterated that Russian influence is multiplied by the incompetence of political decision-makers in Romania and other European countries, Moscow speculating on their blunders and taking advantage of the opportunities created. Returning to the agents of influence, the report of the Ukrainian hacker group “Shaltai-Boltai” made a big splash, publishing a list that presented the “people” of the Russian Federation in Romania, rather, people on whom action could be taken in this regard. It is about an email, sent by Gheorghii Gavrișa, to Aleksandr Dugin, the preacher of Eurasianism, declared fascist, called, by the international press, “Putin's Rasputin”. On the list we find well-known names, such as: Ion Iliescu, Adrian Năstase, Dan Zamfirescu, Mumcilo Laburici, Doru Tompea, Victor Roncea, Vasile Ernu, Ion Coja, Dan Puric, Mircea Dogaru. [22] However, there is no evidence that these individuals are agents of Kremlin influence.

On the other hand, there is a genuine psychosis generated by the war at Romania's borders, regarding the presence of Moscow's people operating in the country. Journalists and political analysts point accusingly, although, “through this conspiracy theory, our society may have only created a psychological space to escape from confronting a much simpler truth: public life in Bucharest is “flooded” with so many individuals who talk nonsense that it is statistically inevitable for their ramblings not to occasionally coincide with Moscow's propaganda” [23]. Some people are so insignificant that Moscow's status as an “agent of influence” gives them visibility and status, rather than compromising them. They would be willing to say “Yes!” if asked whether or not they are agents of Russia.

And yet, can we talk about agents of influence of Russia in Romania or useful idiots? Open sympathy for Russia and Vladimir Putin can only be found among representatives of extremist groups and radical ROC (Romanian Orthodox Church) circles, but they are more numerous and, above all, more prominent than one would expect in a country traditionally critical towards Russia, such as Romania. Archbishop Theodosius, for example, expressed open admiration for Vladimir Putin, whom he described as a great promoter of Orthodoxy. Diana Șoșoacă last attended a large-scale event organized by the Russian Embassy in Bucharest in February 2023, expressing her support for Putin's Russia. The honorary president of AUR, Călin Georgescu, was particularly pro-Moscow, stating before the Russian attack that «Romania's chance lies in Russian folly». After the Russian attack, Georgescu disappeared from the public eye for several months. However, for the past few weeks, he has been frequently appearing again in the mass media, spreading extensively anti-Western conspiracy theories. Georgescu is also one of the prominent representatives of neo-Legionary ideas. His party, Pământul Strămoșesc (Ancestral Land), bears the name of the most well-known Legionary newspaper. Among those who spoke at the founding of the party in September 2021 were the then Vice President of the Romanian Academy, Victor Voicu, and actors Dan Puric and Dorel Vișan, which enhances the image of the anti-Western sovereigntist group.

However, much more frequently encountered are those nationalists and sovereignists who make anti-Western propaganda and question the EU and NATO, through which Romania's security is currently assured. This is made most prominent by AUR, whose leader compares Moscow and Brussels, for example, suggesting that the EU can be equated with the Moscow regime. [...] There are also frequent critical statements regarding culture, corresponding to Russian propaganda, namely the idea of a morally decadent West,

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dominated by homosexuals and transsexuals, against which Orthodox countries should defend themselves with their supposedly intact values (in this context the enormous violence against women in Russia is omitted, as well as scandals in Orthodox churches). [...] In Romania, this sentiment has strengthened over the years: the referendum on the traditional family mobilized anti-Western Orthodox traditionalists and paved the way for AUR, which owes its electoral success to the support of priests at odds with modern society. These groups merged with anti-vaxxers, and from the latter group pro-Russia groups developed in turn – not only in Romania”. [24]

Unlike Romania, in Europe, cases in which some Western politicians have become agents of influence, due to the positions offered by the Russian Federation within companies, are notorious: former German Chancellor Gerhard Schröder, former French Prime Minister François Fillon, former Prime Minister of Finland, Paavo Lipponen, former Austrian Chancellor Christian Kern. As you can see, these are resonant names and related positions: prime ministers, chancellors, etc. In Romania, is Diana Șoșoacă the Kremlin's only “victory”? We doubt it. It is true that something else matters: the history of relations between the two states.

Sometimes the Kremlin's agents of influence are people you wouldn't expect to share Moscow's policy. “The Russian diaspora has become a bastion of the Putin regime abroad and acts in its interests even under war conditions. In France, the main resource of Russian *soft power* was the descendants of white emigrants – representatives of noble families. Even though they are native French, many of them have collaborated for years with Russian authorities, helped the Kremlin recruit allies from the French opposition and business, promoted the narrative of Western Russophobia and the genocide of Donbas residents. Today, structures associated with them, with the support of the Russian Foreign Ministry, are carrying out actions against NATO and the “Kiev government”. [25]

The authorship of the phrase “**useful idiot**” is attributed to Lenin, but no source proves this. It probably started with the famous phrase of the Bolshevik leader, which highlighted his contempt for Western democracies: “America is having a sale for the rope with which we will hang it”. The same cynical Lenin said that no method is immoral when it comes to fighting capitalism. The “soft” version of useful idiots is “innocent fools”. “The term has been present since the 1940s in newspaper articles and in the speeches of some politicians. For example, economist Ludwig von Mises speaks about innocent fools in his book *Planned Chaos*, a term he claims was used by communists to describe the liberals”. [26]

You find them in politics, media, civil society, and even state structures, and their theater of war these days is the Internet. Depending on their role and place in the propaganda and manipulation network, they can be direct agents of influence, “useful idiots” or “useful innocents”. “In the absence of a joint strategy between the European Union and NATO to deter communication warfare and Russian propaganda, in recent years, Moscow has quietly gone about its strategy of creating networks of useful idiots in Europe. Based on the old principles and techniques of propaganda, manipulation and misinformation, the Russian Federation has built its “army of useful idiots” in every state in the world where it has political interests.” [27]

In the Greek polis, *idiotes* were those who focused on their own interests rather than the welfare of the city-state. The useful idiot is the unwitting propagandist of a cause whose goals they are not fully aware of and who is cynically used by puppeteers. Today, reality is so complex that it is difficult to decipher even for educated individuals. Most people accept

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others to think for them and adopt slogans without critical analysis. Taking advantage of these realities, Russia attempts, either directly by exacerbating religious communities, geographical regions, or attraction to Russian culture, or indirectly by criticizing the West and Atlantic democracy, NATO, and the EU (comparing the EU to the USSR; portraying Western geostrategic interests as illegitimate; asserting Eastern Europe as a zone of Russian influence; highlighting Western secularization, etc.), to get citizens of targeted states to adopt its messages and “roll them along” on social media or even in mainstream media. The advantage of the Russian Federation lies in sovereigntist, populist, anti-European, isolationist, and nationalist parties that fall into the Kremlin's trap (they can be useful idiots or agents of influence). Moscow encourages “national buffoonery”, mocking the country's defence capabilities, and instils distrust in its own army. With Orthodoxy and sovereigntist, Russians attract the most useful idiots. It is also “demonstrated” that Russia and the US pursue the same type of politics. And if both do the same, why is only one cornered?

It must be noted that useful idiots exist on the other side of the barricade as well. There are journalists who constantly criticize the West, the 'parallel state,' but we also have journalists who are convinced that any mistake made by Romania is the work of Moscow. Thus, the useful idiots are led by agents of influence who have a hold on the public.

The typology of useful idiots is diverse; there are **permanent** or **sporadic useful idiots**. The former are the frustrated, the professionally unfulfilled, or antisystem individuals, while the latter category includes people who react emotionally to certain issues that sensitize them. It would be wrong to fall into the trap of the theory that useful idiots are uneducated individuals. Of course, most of them come from this area, but we encounter enough cases of useful idiots with higher education, with anti-system or extremist beliefs.

Often, useful idiots are attracted by Russian embassies, consulates, or cultural centers to various cultural events, and there, those who catch the attention of the services are photographed alongside the ambassador or other officials, and the publication of these images suggests the adherence of those individuals to Russian rhetoric. Although those people, in such cases, were innocent, they were also poorly advised. The case of the mayor of Alba, Gabriel Pleșa, photographed alongside the Russian ambassador in Bucharest, Valeri Kuzmin, caused a great stir. Meanwhile, the Russian Cultural Center in Bucharest was closed, precisely for these reasons. The Kremlin cultivates, with predilection, the maladjusted, the nostalgic, the nationalists, the anti-Westerners. The Russian Federation, through these individuals from civil society, conveys messages that suit its interests: sovereigntist, the secularized and morally decaying West, “Ukraine took Bucovina”, “the conflict between Russia and Ukraine is a war between brothers”, etc. The ultimate goal is to create an “Ol' Ben who praises Russia”.

Alongside all these categories, I would add one more, that of the **useful scoundrels**, consisting of individuals who have held positions of responsibility in the state or in political parties, have been ousted from the system for acts of corruption or other actions incompatible with their previous roles, and who now seek revenge by creating problems for the state whose citizens they are. We cannot label them as agents of influence, because we cannot prove that they are directed by the Kremlin for advantage, but neither are they useful idiots, because the useful idiot is being used without realizing that he is playing into the hands of a foreign power. These individuals are perfectly aware of what they are doing, therefore the phrase “useful scoundrels” seems most appropriate to me. I will not mention names in this regard, not out of fear, but because I might unfairly “omit” some.

In conclusion, hybrid warfare intertwines the activities of intelligence services with those of trolls, agents of influence, useful idiots, and useful scoundrels, and in the current context, the danger is very high. Society is infested with the viruses of false narratives, and in chaotic situations, the stimulus-response model prevails, which must be avoided at all costs. Therefore, media literacy and critical thinking must govern the information consumption of every media consumer, whether in Romania or in another country.

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