

Public Discourse and Political Identity

Viorel ȚUȚUI
“Al. I. Cuza” University of Iași (Romania)

The “Unpredictable Past”: How Can We Explain the Efficiency of Old Propaganda?

Abstract: An interesting fact emphasized by the contemporary propaganda studies concerns the surprising efficiency of old propaganda that is reactivated and used in new social and political contexts. There are many examples of this phenomenon, but in my paper I will focus on illustrating the way in which Communist propaganda themes are used in Central and East European countries. My main objective is to try to explain why old propaganda still works. I will argue that the propagandist should not be conceived as an all-powerful manipulator. He is more of an ingenious communicator who is able to reactivate and use pre-existing propaganda themes and legitimating narratives in accordance to his interest, exploiting, in the same time, the basic need for social identity. In trying to answer why old propaganda still has the potential to be an efficient instrument for political communication, I will use Jason Stanley’s theory according to which propaganda “involves repeated association between words and social meanings” that are presented as a part of the conventional meaning or the “not-at-issue content” of our language. These meanings are perceived as not negotiable and have the potential to reinforce people’s beliefs that are resistant to available evidence.

Keywords: propaganda, legitimating narratives, social identity, not-at-issue content, evidence resistant beliefs

1. Introduction

Why do I talk about old propaganda in an age dominated by the new technology and its consequences: social networks, fake news, trolls, bots and so on? Because, in my opinion, in the New Media the old demons are the ones that cast the most terrifying shadow and the old

propaganda narratives seem to thrive. Hence, the media are new, but many of the influential contents are surprisingly old, but nevertheless effective. And the proofs of their efficiency are all around us in the social and political context of the last decade. We are the witnesses of a new and powerful propaganda conflict which separates the most important western democracies like United States, Great Britain, France, Germany and others from the Eastern powers like China and Russia, characterized by authoritarian or totalitarian regimes. But this new propaganda wave also creates social, political, religious and ideological tensions in specific and local circumstances like those generated by the economic crisis of 2009 and by the refugee and migration waves from Middle East and Nord Africa to Europe, or from Mexico and other Latin American countries to Unites States.

This new propaganda wave has also spread with a considerable force across Central and East European countries like Romania, Ukraine, Poland, Hungary, Moldova, Russia and many others. And one of its most puzzling effects is the reactivation of old propaganda topics and especially of themes and issues that were used extensively by the communist regimes which governed these countries for several decades. This new and paradoxical process led me to the main question which is the focus of this paper: *How can we explain the efficiency of old propaganda in the new social and political context?*

And I tried to answer this question by:

1. arguing that the efficiency of old propaganda has to do with a basic human need: the need for social identity;
2. referring to the fact that the propagandist is not an all-powerful manipulator: he is an ingenious communicator who is able to reactivate and use pre-existing propaganda themes and legitimating narratives in accordance to his interest, exploiting the basic need for social identity;
3. using and developing Jason Stanley's theory in order to explain how old propaganda conserves its efficiency;
4. speaking about the *meta-narrative* of the Great Patriotic War a nation or community has to fight against its devious and powerful enemies;
5. illustrating the way in which old propaganda themes are used in Central and East European Countries.

However, before I begin analysing the relation between propaganda and the human need for social identity, I feel that I have to explain the paradoxical expression used in the title of this paper: "unpredictable past". It was inspired by a phrase used by a Romanian journalist named

Marian Voicu in a recent book about contemporary propaganda *Matrioșka minciinoșilor: fake news, manipulare, populism* (The matrioska of liars: fake news, manipulation, populism). In this book he states that "for Kremlin, the past is unpredictable" (Voicu 2018, 16).

In my opinion, this is a feature which characterizes propaganda in general: in his effort to change people's beliefs, attitudes, actions or social identities the propagandist often tries to change people's opinions about the past. Therefore, the reinterpretation of past is a feature of propaganda even in the Western democratic countries. Nevertheless, the level reached by this process is much greater in totalitarian or authoritarian regimes. In these states the official historical narratives often presuppose a profound distortion and even falsification of the past and the censorship of alternative historical views. Moreover, the changes in the official ideology are frequently accompanied by changes in the view about history. Consequently, the official view about the past is never established once and for all and it is, so to speak, unpredictable.

2. Few remarks about propaganda and social identity

So let's reframe our question: *Why does the propagandist use reinterpretations of the past and old propaganda?* In order to answer this question we must understand the *basic role* played by propaganda.

First I will mention a definition of propaganda offered by Garth Jowett and Victoria O' Donnell: "the deliberate, systematic attempt to shape perceptions, manipulate cognitions, and direct behaviour to achieve a response that furthers the desired intent of the propagandist" (2012, 7).

However, in my opinion, this definition is not complete and it does not even address its most important role. As it was mentioned by some of the most significant theoreticians of this field, like Edward Bernays, Walter Lippmann and Jacques Ellul, propaganda should be conceived only as an instrument, a form of persuasive mass communication that can be used both for constructive and destructive purposes. And I believe that this instrument is able to shape:

1. *Cognitions*: perceptions and beliefs;
2. *Social emotions*: hate, fear, contempt, but also love, respect, pride etc.;
3. *Attitudes*: hostility, but also of tolerance, dialogue etc.;
4. *Social actions*: violence, discrimination, but also voting, fund raising etc.;

5. *Social identity*: a sense of common identity for the members of a community.

Hence, the *positive effects* of propaganda could be:

- *The formation of public opinion*: propaganda plays an essential role in this process, but also in the process of transforming and aggregating public opinion in a democratic society;

- *Inducing positive social emotions*: pride, compassion, respect, love and so on. As a consequence it could be used to increase social inclusion of marginalized people and decrease the level of complex social problems like racism, oppression, famine and so on;

- *Cultivate positive social and political attitudes* like patriotism, tolerance, sympathy, generosity, open-mindedness, civility etc.;

- *Generate collective actions*: without propaganda the masses could not be mobilized to engage in common projects and activities;

- *Forming social identity*: communities and nations do not have a “natural” identity. Therefore it has to be symbolically conferred in the form of a self-legitimizing narrative. And, the propagandist is usually the one who plays the role of the agent that is able to disseminate this narrative and to project a sense of social identity for a given community.

The *negative effects* of propaganda could be:

- *Manipulating the cognition* of the targeted audience by the use of information that is incomplete or false and by discouraging rational thinking and counter argumentation. As Jacques Ellul rightfully underlined, the victims of propaganda often lose their capacity of thinking in a critical and autonomous way:

“He absorbs the collective judgments, the creatures of propaganda; he absorbs them like the nourishment which they have, in fact, become. He expounds them as his own. (...) When he recites his propaganda lesson and says that he is thinking for himself, when his eyes see nothing and his mouth only produces sounds previously stencilled into his brain, when he says that he is indeed expressing his judgment – then he really demonstrates that he no longer thinks at all, ever, and that he does not exist as a person.” (Ellul 1973, 171).

- *Inducing negative social emotions* like hatred, fear, distrust, contempt and so on;

- *Cultivating attitudes of hostility* between social and political groups. It was very often used for increasing the level of social conflict and to promote hatred and hostility towards those who were labelled as being “the enemies”;

- *Initiating and legitimating actions* like discrimination, violence, the violation of basic human rights and so on, against those characterized as being hostile and different;

- *Manipulating the symbols that shape the social identity* of a community in order to increase the level of social and political control.

In my opinion the most important role of propaganda is the one of shaping the social identity of a community. Human communities *do not have a given, natural sense of identity*. Therefore it must be *offered or shaped* in the form of *fundamental legitimating narratives*.

The most basic way of shaping the identity of a community is *by opposition to another community or group*. René Girard talked about the process of directing the chaotic violence from within a social group towards one or several victims, a process that provides the members of that group with a sense of solidarity and common identity and therefore they tend to repeat it in the form of a ritual. In his book *Violence and the Sacred*, he stated that violence should be perceived as a social disease, a form of infection that can propagate almost unlimitedly and that "the slightest outbreak of violence can bring about a catastrophic escalation" (Girard 1979, 30). Moreover, in his view, violence can only be countered by more violence. Therefore, the religious answer to this problem is to distinguish between "pure" and "impure" violence and to recommend the "pure" type of sacrificial violence directed against the sacrificial victims as the solution for stopping the spreading of impure and harmful violence: "The function of ritual is to 'purify' violence; that is, to 'trick' violence into spending itself on victims whose death will provoke no reprisals" (Girard 1979, 36).

But, we could ask: what is the relation between the sacrificial ritual and social identity? In Girard's opinion, the sacrificial rites are closely linked to the sense of social and cultural identity of a community. The disappearance of the sacrificial rites would produce a *sacrificial crisis*, a state in which any difference between pure and impure violence would disappear and the spread of impure contagious violence throughout the community would be unstoppable:

"The sacrificial distinction, the distinction between the pure and the impure, cannot be obliterated without obliterating all other differences as well. One and the same process of violent reciprocity engulfs the whole. The sacrificial crisis can be defined, therefore, as a crisis of distinctions—that is, a crisis affecting the cultural order. This cultural order is nothing more than a regulated system of distinctions in which the differences among individuals are used to establish their 'identity' and their mutual relationships" (Girard 1979, 49).

Hence, we could say that social life is made possible only in a community in which there is a legitimating story that distinguishes between “good” and “bad” violence and between those who can and those who cannot become victims of sacrificial violence without the risk of retaliation.

A similar process with the one presented by Girard as the foundation of the social and cultural order is described by Émile Durkheim in relation with the moral and legal system when he insisted that crime is a normal social fact which enhances the level of social solidarity. In his work *The Rules of Sociological Method* Durkheim affirmed: “Thus crime is necessary. It is linked to the basic conditions of social life, but on this very account is useful, for the conditions to which it is bound are themselves indispensable to the normal evolution of morality and law” (Durkheim 1982, 101). So, in his opinion moral and legal regulations have the primary aim of defining the type of actions that are socially prohibited and, as a consequence, the type of the people that could “rightfully” become the subject of collective violence, a process that would enhance the level of social solidarity.

To understand how this process works I believe we only have to imagine that we are the witnesses of a vicious crime which is committed in a public place. Even if there would be a great number of people present in that public place, with different social background, education, political opinions and so on, they would react to the vicious crime committed in their presence in a similar way. That's why, although they are very different to begin with, they will nevertheless react “as one”. And this similar reaction corresponds to the transition from the individual level to the social level and it is a premise of their common social action. But the similar reaction should be understood as a social emotion generated by a specific interpretation of the action which is perpetrated in our presence. And, the specific interpretation that we are in the presence of a vicious crime and not of a justified act of violence is provided by a narrative about what kinds of actions should be allowed or prohibited.

Referring to the same process of defining the identity of a community by opposition, Umberto Eco spoke about the need to “invent the enemy”. In his opinion, this need is so important that when a community does not have a real enemy it has to be invented in order to define its identity and to construct an obstacle in relation to which the members of that society could evaluate and affirm its values (Eco 2017, 10). And this process is one that could be observed all the way through history: human communities defined their identity by portraying their opponents in the most sinister ways. Therefore, those who were labelled as enemies were also described as

being evil, ugly, perverse, degenerated, vicious and capable of committing the most horrible crimes. They were also depicted as having unpredictable and irrational behaviour and non-human features, as being incapable of speaking and thinking in a rational and civilized manner (that is precisely the original meaning of the word "barbarian"), as having a distinct and almost animal stench and so on (Eco 2017, 14-22).

Hence, I believe that people have a fundamental need for a social identity: for a legitimating story that would explain why they should live together as the members of the same community. This need is so basic that people are experiencing it even in private and interpersonal communication contexts. For example, when two people meet they feel the need to initiate a conversation that would project a meaning for their mutual company. And they are doing it by identifying common features and values, but especially by underling the "unpleasing" and "undesirable" features of those people they wish to be separated from. This is the reason why gossip is so common that, in my opinion, it is safe to consider it an almost unavoidable element of our social life. It is a sad but obvious truth that we relate to other people primarily by differentiating ourselves from those which according to our self-legitimizing stories are depicted as different, as strangers, as less civilized, as less worthy and sometimes even as less human than us.

And, as was mentioned above, the same kind of process can also be observed at the level of a social community or nation. At this level the propagandist is the main agent capable of providing the self-legitimizing narrative that would project a sense of common social identity for a given community by opposition to another community or group.

3. All-powerful manipulator vs. skilful communicator

There is a dominant view concerning the role played by the propagandist according to which he should be conceived as a powerful manipulator who is able to influence the public opinion in whatever way he desires. As I already argued in a previous article, I believe that this theory overestimates the role of the propagandist and underestimates the role played by the recipient. Although, the propagandist usually has the dominant position in relation with his specific audience, this does not transform its members into a mob of mindless victims at the mercy of an all-powerful manipulator. Many other important factors have to be taken into consideration: the pre-existing needs, expectations, perceptions,

beliefs and even customs and social norms specific to the members of the audience (Țuțui 2018, 121-122).

Hence, in my opinion, the propagandist is an agent capable of using in his own interest the basic need for social identity. In this process the old propaganda themes that were used efficiently in the past represent an important resource. Because, the main challenge of the propagandist is to give a definite configuration and unity to all the diverse emotion, opinion, and tendencies to action, a configuration which corresponds better to his objectives. And he has some strategies and techniques at his disposal which could help him to face this challenge. Nevertheless, none of these propaganda techniques or strategies works in an instantaneous and miraculous way. People are born into communities that already have their own legitimating narratives. Therefore, the propagandist who tries to reshape the identity of a community cannot rewrite those narratives altogether. He is just a *skilful communicator* that is able to *reactivate and use pre-existing legitimating narratives* in accordance to his interest exploiting the basic need for social identity.

In other words, if the propagandist wants to shape people's emotions, beliefs, attitudes, actions and social identity, he has to use, in a different composition, those legitimating stories that previously gave unity to that specific community: the narratives that already made them feel, think or act in a similar manner. And, for this reason, he is forced to exploit the valuable resource of old propaganda.

But, we should notice that even if this view explains that old propaganda could play an important role in the work of the new propagandists, it does not yet explain how it manages to survive and to conserve its efficiency even long after the moment it was disseminated in the form of a propagandistic communication. Therefore, the question remains: *How can we explain that old propaganda still works?* By using Jason Stanley's theory I will argue that it becomes imbedded in that community's language, way of thinking and identity.

4. Jason Stanley's theory and its development

In his book *How Propaganda Works*, Jason Stanley states that propaganda "*involves repeated association between words and social meanings*" that are presented as a part of conventional meaning or of "not-at-issue content" which is not negotiable. For example, if media repeatedly connects images of black people with the term "welfare", the term will come to have a non-negotiable content that Blacks are lazy (Stanley 2015, 133).

This effect is enhanced by the epistemic and practical authority of the speaker and it erodes the empathy for the targeted group of people.

Therefore, the success of propaganda depends on the fact that people have beliefs that are resistant to available evidence. These beliefs are supported by *flawed ideologies* that reinforce and increase the level of inequality, social discrimination and oppression (Stanley 2015, 168). They are "cherished beliefs" which are very hard to revise in the light of counterevidence because *they are linked to social practices and identities*.

I will develop his idea by stating that this mechanism explains how old propaganda transforms our language and our way of thinking: when a term is *repeatedly and systematically* associated with a specific social meaning by *a speaker who possesses a significant level of epistemic or practical authority* that meaning gradually *becomes a part of the "not-at-issue content" of our language*, a part that is perceived as non-controversial, and, therefore, *very resistant to rational revision*.

This part of the language becomes a very important resource for the propagandist and his activity. And the reason for this is the fact that it acts as a reservoir of social norms, standards and common beliefs, which are the essential elements that make us feel, think and behave in a similar way and to be convinced that we belong to the same social and political community. And, these norms, standards and common beliefs are reactivated by specialized propaganda agents, but also by common people in the normal course of the social life. So, we are reinforcing them each time we define ourselves or we are defined by the projection of a self-legitimizing narrative which describes us by opposition to another community or group portrayed as inferior, as less worthy, as less human and so on. This type of narrative is defective from a rational point of view: it is not meant to represent the social and political reality in an accurate way. Its purpose is to play a political role in the process of enhancing the level of social control and to legitimize the status of those who govern or benefit from the most important social and political privileges.

As a consequence, the success of old propaganda is not explainable in terms of a "mysterious influence". It is explicable if we understand that old propaganda never really disappeared, but became a part of that community's conventional language, way of thinking and social identity. In the next sections, I will illustrate the way in which old Communist propaganda themes are reactivated in Russia and other Central and East European Countries. But before that I will present what I consider to be a propagandistic meta-narrative which is effectively used, especially, but not only, in contemporary Russia: the theme of The Great Patriotic War.

5. A propaganda meta-narrative: The Great Patriotic War

A propaganda theme that was widely used by the Russian propaganda in the last decades was the one of the „Great Patriotic War”. Lacking any real ideology the Russian authoritarian regime tried to *gain legitimacy, to silence its opponents and to justify its economic failure* by using the potential of this Soviet propaganda construct. Hence, the propaganda machine of contemporary Russia is using quite effectively this Communist meta-narrative in order to achieve a similar result: to legitimize an illegitimate regime.

This is a problem that the Communist regime had to face even from the start, not only in the Soviet Union, but in all the Central and East European Countries in which it was imposed by the brute force of the Red Army. Referring to the way in which the Communist repression was used by the regime in order to gain absolute power, Karel Bartošek affirmed in the chapter dedicated to Central and South Eastern Europe included in the *The Black Book of Communism*:

“The constant strategy of the Communist repression, whose central aim was always the establishment of absolute power and the elimination of political rivals and anyone else who had any sort of real power in society, was to attack systematically all the organisms of civil society. Because the aim was a monopoly on power and truth, the necessary targets were all other forces with political and spiritual power” (Bartošek 1999, 407).

This is how we can explain the fact that in all these countries the Communist regimes were constantly inventing new enemies from outside or from within, and were frequently initiating new purges, political trials, deportations, arrests, and even extermination campaigns against those who were labelled as being their opponents.

Therefore, the meta-narrative of a perpetual war the nation has to face against its devious adversaries was indeed constructed and consolidated by the Soviet regime in the two decades before the Second World War, by inventing new propaganda themes, but also by building upon the nationalist propaganda of the imperial Russia. According to Françoise Thom, this is a myth created from many “ingredients”: the war between Russia and Poland from September 1612, the war against Napoleon from 1812, the Polish Insurrection from 1863 and of course the battle against Nazi Germany from 1941 to 1945 (Thom 2017, 18-20). And I believe we can add to this mixture the campaign of Alexander Nevsky against the Swedes from 1240, and the fight against Germany and Austro-

Hungarian Empire from the First World War. All these historical events are used to compose a propaganda story which speaks about a so called "Great Patriotic War" that Russia had to fight against his enemies from the West.

Hence, this expression is used with two different, but closely related meanings. In a *narrow sense* it is used to refer to the war against Nazi Germany and its allies (1941-1945). It should be noticed that the representation of the war itself is a *propaganda construct* because from the official point of view of the regime the war started in June 1941, eluding the fact that Soviet Union signed the Ribentropp-Molotov Pact in August 1939, and invaded Poland, Finland, the Baltic States and a part of Romania. It was constructed by „assassinating the memory” (Courtois 2017, 82). Hence, the old war and its propaganda terminology was used to create the impression that the country has to fight a new war against enemies from the West, namely United States and European Union.

In a deeper and a *broader sense* the expression is used to refer to the perpetual war that Russia had to fight against its enemies from the West through its entire history (Ruban 2017, 194-195). With the help of the Russian Orthodox Church this discourse became „mythological” shaping the new Russian identity: Russia is presented as the only defender of Christianity, normality and traditional values.



Fig. 1. Soviet propaganda poster from the WWII showing the Red Army and "heroic shadows from the past" (Alexander Nevsky, Kutuzov and the revolutionary soldier) which represents a vivid image of the meta-narrative of the Great Patriotic War¹

¹ Source: https://www.researchgate.net/figure/Soviet-propaganda-poster-from-the-Second-World-War-showing-the-Red-Army-and-heroic_fig9_328392216, accessed at 28.10.2018.



Fig. 2. A propaganda poster in Donetsk (Ukraine) urging to “repeat the heroism of our forefathers” and to enrol in the army of the “DNR” in which we notice the use of the same narrative of The Great Patriotic War (Photo by Christopher Miller, 2014)².

As Alexandr Osipian (2015, 110) states, the Ukrainian “Orange Revolution” of 2004, the crisis of 2013-2014, the Arab Spring of 2011 and the Russian popular protests of 2011-2012 set the agenda of Russian propaganda towards discrediting the idea of popular protest which is conceived as a threat for the Russian authoritarian regime. Therefore, Russian propaganda presented protesters as *financed from outside* (by USA, George Soros etc.) as *perverse and Russophobic aliens, fascists, banderites, extremists* and so on. Officials and media adapted terms and categories from the cultural memory of the „Great Patriotic War” (Osipian, 2015, 110).

In his study *Putin, Ukraine and the Historic Revisionism*, Bernard-Henry Lévy speaks about the “war of aggression” that Putin has started against Ukraine, a war that is fought not only with missiles, tanks, mercenaries, but also with words, slogans, and the falsification of history. He even uses the expression “language and memory piracy” in order to refer to this type of war (Lévy 2017, 151). And the main reasons that justify this expression are the recent revaluation of the past and of the role played by Stalin in the History of URSS, the fact that they closed museums and remembering sites, like the camp Perm-36, the process of “semantic hysteria” adopted by Russian officials and historians and so on. An example for this latter phenomenon is the insistence of Russian historians on

² Source: <https://www.stopfake.org/en/russian-media-operates-by-law-of-war-tapping-into-great-patriotic-war-myth/>, accessed at 28.10.2018.

affirming the thesis that even the name “Ukraine” doesn't mean anything else than a “border territory” of Russia. Another example is their claim that there is a large Russian-speaking population in Ukraine, which is presumably in danger of being exterminated (Lévy 2017, 153-156).

Moreover, he speaks about operations of “pure negationism” in relation with the mass extermination by starvation of the Ukrainians in the fourth decade of the last century (The Holodomor). This historical moment is presented not as genocide, but as a tragedy that affected not only Ukraine, but all the Soviet Union. And this attitude of Russian officials and historians is reflected in the language they use, but also in their specific activities, both at a national and an international level: parliamentary commissions, that voted resolutions in order to deny the fact that The Holodomor was a genocide, their diplomatic activity at the United Nations in order to prevent its labelling as a genocide and so on (Lévy 2017, 164-165).

Some very interesting details are presented by Toomas Alatalu in his paper “*Our Victory*”. A *Kremlin Concept 1965-2015* in which he underlines the fact that, paradoxically, the victory in the so called “The Great Patriotic War” was celebrated much more often after the falling of the Soviet Union and especially after Vladimir Putin's rise to power. In the Soviet Union the day of the victory was celebrated only twice: on May 9th 1965 and on May 9th 1985. The tradition of the military parade organized each year started on May 9th 1996 and developed into gigantic propagandistic events after 2000 in the time of Putin's authoritarian regime (Alatalu 2017, 130-135).



Fig. 3. The Victory Day Parade: from May 9th 1965 (left) and May 9th 2015 (right)³

³ The images represent video image captures from recordings uploaded on the site of sputnik.com: <https://sputniknews.com/russia/201805091064290423-victory-day-parades-throughout-the-years/>, accessed at 24.10.2018.

Hence, the myth of the Great Patriotic War is an invention of Soviet propaganda constructed upon the nationalist propaganda of the imperial Russia and cynically reactivated by the contemporary Russian propaganda. In my opinion, this myth acts as a platform for many other old propaganda themes, motifs and expressions that are exported and used, quite successfully, not only in Russia, but in all the Central and East European Countries.

6. Propaganda expressions and themes reactivated in Central and East European Countries

In the attempt to gain legitimacy for an authoritarian regime and to promote the political, economical and strategic interests of the Russian government and Putin's ambitions to restore the former glory of the Soviet Union, Russian propaganda uses, on a large scale, the old Communist propaganda topics and expressions. Hence, they are cunningly and pragmatically exploiting the effects of more than eight decades of intensive propaganda which affected the former members of the Soviet Union, but also the consequences of more than four decades of propaganda disseminated in the other Communist countries.

However, the new propaganda wave disseminated especially in Central and East Europe Countries is not generated only by the Russian propaganda machine. There are also many other local political actors who are interested in taking advantage of the vast reservoir of self-legitimizing narratives circulated in the former Communist countries. Because, if the view presented in the previous sections is right, then the old propaganda topics and expressions left their mark in the way that many of the citizens of these countries think, feel, act and represent their social identity.

As I already mentioned, an explanation of their efficiency should take into consideration the fact that the obsessive association between words and social meanings, which was intensively disseminated by all the public communication channels for several decades, made those terms and expressions a part of the non-negotiable or "the not-at-issue content" of the language. In other words, they became a constitutive part in the set of standards and values which are applied when people are thinking about social and political realities. Therefore, the simple propagandistic use of that terminology in relation with social and political actors and events is capable of triggering specific public evaluations, emotions, attitudes or actions.

One of the most important propaganda battlegrounds was, of course, the Ukrainian crisis of 2014 and the Russian-Ukrainian conflict

that followed. And in this propaganda war, the use of old Communist expressions and topics was extensive. As Alexandr Osipian noticed, when Russian propaganda presents events like the Ukrainian crisis, “value-judgements are built into the very form in which the information is packaged” (Osipian 2015, 117).

Some of the most important expressions of old propaganda used in the context of the conflict with Ukraine are (Voicu 2018, 92-96):

“*Ukrainian karateli*” meaning “Ukrainian executioners”, a term that was originally used by soviet propaganda during WWII in order to refer to the atrocities against civilians committed by Nazi collaborators. It had a prominent role in the Soviet enemy image on the German fascist occupiers (Osipian 2015,16) The term was utilized in the context of the Russian-Ukrainian conflict by Russian media and also by Russian officials.

The fascist junta of Kiev is an expression also used on a large scale by Russian journalist and officials in order to discredit the Euromaidan protest of 2014. Later this terminology was applied to the new Ukrainian government and its policies.



Fig. 4. A propaganda poster used in the 2014 campaign for the so-called referendum for the annexation of Crimea in which the citizens of the region are “informed” that they have to choose between Russia and fascism⁴.

“*Banderovtsy*” (Banderites) is a term initially used to refer to the followers of Stephan Bandera, a controversial Ukrainian nationalist who fought against the Red Army in WWII and became the leading figure

⁴ Source: <https://www.rferl.org/a/a-choice-between-nazism-and-russia-in-crimea/25294320.html>, accessed at 28.10.2018.

associated by propaganda with the Nazi collaborationists and their atrocities. Contemporary propaganda from Russia and from the separatist region of Donbas frequently links the new Ukrainian regime with his movement.



Fig. 5. A propaganda material from Russia Today (4.03.2014): president Putin is speaking about „Ukrainian armed extremists”⁵.

“Russophobia” is a word utilized by Russian propaganda in order to refer to the so called “anti-Russian frenzy” or “anti-Russian hysteria” which is said to characterize the attitude of Ukrainian and Western journalists and officials against Russia and its culture. It is also used to discourage the attitude of sympathy for the Euromaidan protest: any Russian who would express such an attitude could be labelled as a traitor (Osipian 2015, 112).

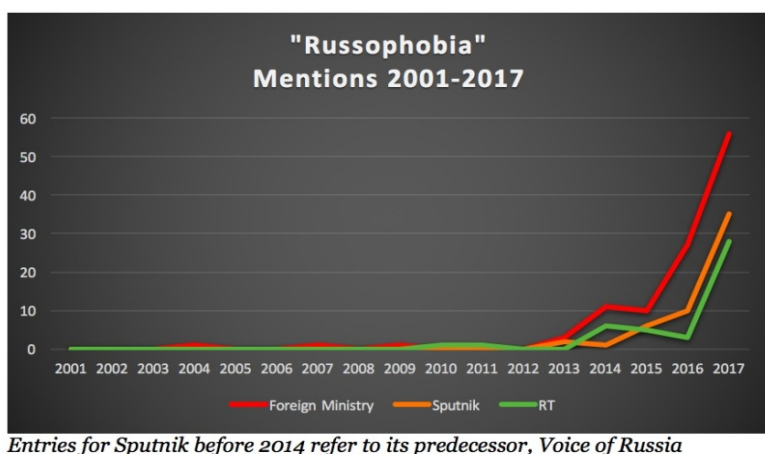


Fig. 6. The evolution of the mentions for the word “Russophobia” (2001-2017)⁶.

⁵ Source: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=LyrxsZC4IYY>, accessed at 29.10.2018.

Communist propaganda has also insisted on the narrative of *the corrupt and degenerate West*. Trying to divert the attention of the domestic public opinion from the economic and social failure of the abusive and illegitimate Communist regime, the propaganda machine described the Western countries as “imperialist” and “militarist” states dominated by corrupt capitalists who are exploiting and abusing the working class. Moreover, communist media frequently presented a significantly deformed image of the lifestyle and culture on these Western societies, speaking about alcohol and drug abuse, about racism and social and economical exploitation, about the decadent music and cultural movements, about their degenerate sexual habits and so on. For example, the Russian propaganda machine launched the Operation Infektion in the 1980s, a disinformation campaign which generated the conspiracy theory that the virus which causes AIDS was the product of biological weapons experiments conducted by the United States (Qiu 2017).



Fig. 7. A Soviet propaganda poster with the message “Every 21 seconds a serious crime is carried out in the USA”⁷.

A theme which continues this tradition is the one expressed in recent propaganda by the term “Gayrope”. “Gayrope” is according to Tatiana Riabova and Oleg Riabov a term used by Russian propaganda to signify the

⁶ Source: <https://medium.com/dfrlab/putinatwar-how-russia-weaponized-russophobia-40a3723d26d4>, accessed at 29.10.2018.

⁷ Source: <https://www.rt.com/news/443253-soviet-poster-us-election-fraud/>, accessed at 20.10.2018.

„perversion of the normal gender order” in Europe associated with the legalization of same-sex marriage and the crisis of the traditional family. Moreover, gender is used to differentiate between “Us” and the “Other” and to shape the systems of evaluation and preferences: “Gender discourse not only polarizes the ‘male’ and the ‘female’, but also places them in a hierarchy. (...) The treatment of the feminine as a second-rate determines the main (though not the only) form of gender metaphorization: the masculinisation of ‘us’, and the ‘feminization’ of ‘them’ or the Other” (Riabova and Riabov 2015, 87). Therefore the term has a *compensatory function for Russian identity*: Russia presents itself as the custodian of normality and the defender of Christianity and traditional values (Riabova and Riabov 2015, 89).



Fig. 8. A demonstration against "Gayrope" in the region of Kharkov that took place on the 4th of December 2013 (The message on the banner is "We don't need Gayrope!")⁸ and a poster with the message "Hello Gayrope! Mother Ukraine is calling!"⁹.

The same type of message is also present in other former Communist countries like Czech Republic, Bulgaria, Hungary, Poland, Romania or Moldova. For example, in the campaign for the Romanian referendum of 2018 organized with the objective of preventing the legalization of the same sex marriage, the topic of the degenerate Western sexual practices which was said to endanger our "normal" and "traditional" values was used extensively, not only by NGO-s and civic movements, but also by politicians and representatives of the Romania Orthodox Church. A similar

⁸ Source: <https://nahnews.org/8540-the-residents-of-kharkov-demand-that-the-president-will-not-allow-the-revolution>, accessed at 25.10.2018.

⁹ Source: Riabova and Riabov (2015, 94)

strategy was adopted in Moldova in 2016, where the presidential candidate Maia Sandu was portrayed as the representative of the sexual minorities.



Fig. 9. A propaganda material from Sputnik Moldova which speaks about the fact that the homosexuals in Moldova will vote for Maia Sandu¹⁰ and a propaganda flier used in the campaign for the Romanian referendum of 2018 which speaks about the need to defend the children of Romania against same sex marriage¹¹.

Another Communist propaganda theme was the one about the *illegitimate hegemony of the West* and its tendency to diminish the sovereignty of national states. According to their ideology the capitalist societies were destined to disappear from the scene of history and to be replaced by Communism. The only way in which the western states could delay this fatal historical outcome was, according to this story, by creating a conspiracy financed by major capitalists who were interested in maintaining their dominance over the working class. For example, a persistent topic of anti-American propaganda was that of the so called capitalist imperialism, described as a tendency to world domination, militarism and aggression, which was meant to artificially support the obsolete capitalist system. By contrast, the Soviet Union and other communist countries were depicted by their propaganda as states that were fighting for progress, national sovereignty, peace and harmony between all the nations. This topic was also associated with the attempt to

¹⁰ Source: <https://sputnik.md/moldova/20161020/9526205/homosexualii-Republica-Moldova-voteaza-Maia-Sandu.html>, accessed at 29.10.2018.

¹¹ Source: <http://www.ziare.com/oradea/stiri-actualitate/coalitia-pentru-familie-fluturasii-pro-referendum-sunt-legali-7436674>, accessed at 29.10.2018.

diminish the role played by the Western powers and other countries in the victory against Nazi Germany and its allies. As Toomas Alatalu underlines, the Soviet Union, but also the Russian regime of Vladimir Putin tried to take the credit for this victory presenting it as “Our Victory” (Alatalu 2016, 134-140).



Fig. 10. Two Soviet propaganda posters portraying the illegitimate hegemony of the West based on money, oppression and military force¹²

Contemporary propaganda uses a similar narrative: that of the „parallel state” or *deep state* which is supposed to govern from behind the curtain with the support of devious enemies. The theme is very popular in Russia, Hungary, Romania and other former Communist states, but, unfortunately, it is also present in traditional democratic countries like the United States. For example, the Hungarian regime of Viktor Orban frequently uses the image of the American billionaire George Soros which has Hungarian and Jewish origins, as a paradigmatic image of the capitalist puppeteer who is secretly influencing the major international decision-makers from beyond the curtain. From the Hungarian government’s perspective influential agents like George Soros have a secret plan: they are trying to destroy national states like Hungary by supporting the migration waves from Syria or North-Africa in order to impose their globalist agenda.

¹² Sources: <https://listverse.com/2012/12/08/15-revolutionary-posters-of-the-soviet-union/> and <http://capl.washjeff.edu/browseresults.php?langID=18&photoID=174&size=1>, Accessed at 20.10.2018.

In this propaganda operation, they affirmed even that the European officials like Jean-Claude Junker are taking part in this conspiracy.



Fig. 11. Contemporary Hungarian poster and old German anti-Jewish poster from the 1930s¹³.

Another example is the campaign launched by the governing party of Romania (the Social Democratic Party) in 2017 against the so called “parallel state” that is presumably governing in secret with the support of European Union and NATO. According to this narrative, this secret power system is financed from outside by rich and influential people like George Soros.



Fig. 12. Two images which illustrate the Romanian propaganda campaign about fight against the so called the so called “parallel state” financed from outside¹⁴.

¹³ Source: <http://hungarianspectrum.org/2017/07/12/the-totally-successful-anti-soros-campaign-comes-to-a-sudden-end/>, Accessed at 18.10.2018. This image proves that in this propaganda campaign they are also exploiting older nationalistic and anti-Semitic narratives.

Two propaganda topics that are complementary to the ones mentioned above are the story about the *corrupt opposition and civil society* supported and financed by the US or EU oligarchy and the story about the *European identity which is supposed to be threatened by the immigration crisis*. Regarding the first of these topics, we could point out that several high officials representing the government of some Central and East European Countries with authoritarian and illiberal tendencies tried to discourage any popular protest against them by labelling their leaders and organizers as corrupt and controlled by outside. It is the case with the major anti-governmental demonstrations from Russia (2011-2012), From Ukraine (2014), from Romania (2017-2018) and so on¹⁵. Concerning the second topic, it is obvious that many chauvinistic and anti-migration movements were generated both in East and West European Countries, which probably culminated with the successful pro-Brexit campaign from the United Kingdom.



Fig. 13. A campaign poster for the president Milos Zeman (Czech Republic) using the anti-immigration theme¹⁶ and an image from An anti-EU protest in Poland (2015) organized by Polish nationalists in which they burned the EU flag and used slogans like „EU macht frei”¹⁷

¹⁴ The image on the left depicts Liviu Dragnea the former president of Social-Democratic party speaking about the fight against the "parallel state" at a propaganda mega-event organised by the Romanian governing coalition in June 2018. Source: <http://www.ziare.com/liviu-dragnea/presedinte-psd/dragnea-spune-iar-cine-e-statul-paralel-oameni-din-conducerea-sri-spp-parchete-seful-lor-e-iohannis-1526421>, Accessed at 18.10.2018. The image on the right is a propaganda message posted on the site Exclusiv24.ro in which the former Romanian Prime Minister is accused of being the illegitimate son of the billionaire George Soros. Source: <http://www.ziare.com/tg-jiu/stiri-actualitate/stirea-falsa-cu-ciolos-soros-pe-un-site-din-targu-jiu-6488192>, Accessed at 18.10.2018.

¹⁵ For example, a material from the site of the Romanian TV channel Antena 3 posted on 23.01.2018 cited the allegations of the portal Fort Russ News according to which the Romanian protest were financed by Canada, Israel and United States. Source: <https://www.antena3.ro/actualitate/portul-rus-protestele-rezist-sunt-finantate-de-canada-israel-si-statele-unite-452013.html>, Accessed at 15.10.2018.

¹⁶ Source: <https://spravy.pravda.sk/svet/clanok/455140-spinava-kampan-zacala-drahos-inzeraty-ocakaval-dalsie-podrazy-pridu/>, accessed at 14.10.2018.

There are also other propaganda topics that are related to the ones mentioned above. Because it is not the objective of this paper to provide a complete inventory, in the concluding part on this section I will only specify some of them which are, in my opinion, the most influential: the narrative of the *imperialism of France and Germany* and other Western powers which have the tendency to transform the countries of Central and East Europe into their colonies¹⁸; the narrative according to which the Western European countries are using the other EU members as a *market flooded with poor quality products*¹⁹; the narrative about the *unfair economic policies* imposed by the corrupt EU officials who are trying to destroy the national economy of Central and Eastern European Countries²⁰; the narrative regarding the so called *secret "ecumenical" plan to attack the Orthodox Church* and its tradition in order to destroy it or to subordinate it to the Roman Catholic Church²¹; the narrative of the EU institutions and other organizations from the West European countries (for example, the Norwegian Barnevernet) which are *kidnapping our children in order to be adopted by gay couples*²², and so on.

Although, not all these narratives can be traced to a specific Communist propaganda campaign, because many of the social and political realities they are referring to did not even exist back then, their efficiency is facilitated by the similar topics that were intensively disseminated for several decades in Central and East European Countries. Therefore, even after almost thirty years since the falling of the Berlin Wall, the scars left by this long-lasting and abusive propagandistic aggression are still visible in these countries. Many people's beliefs, social emotions, attitudes and actions can still be triggered by the old propaganda expressions and topics which are used in the new social and political context. And, taking into consideration this success of the old propaganda, I believe we can say, by paraphrasing

¹⁷ Source: <https://www.express.co.uk/news/politics/618943/EU-flag-burned-Poland-Warsaw-Brussels-chants-eurosceptic>, accessed at 14.10.2018.

¹⁸ A paper about this propaganda theme and how it is used in Romania can be consulted on the link <https://pressone.ro/romania-colonia-europei-o-poveste-cu-propaganda-care-nu-se-mai-termina/>, accessed at 16.10.2018.

¹⁹ See, for example <https://dailynewshungary.com/shocking-lower-quality-products-put-shelves-hungary/>, accessed at 12.10.2018.

²⁰ See, for example the following material posted on the site of Russia Today <https://www.rt.com/business/437776-greek-bailout-disaster-eu/>, accessed at 12.10.2018.

²¹ This type of message was posted on the site, <https://ortodoxiasingurabisericadevarata.wordpress.com/ecumenismul-fara-masca-erezia-tuturor-erezilor/>, accessed at 15.10.2018.

²² A material on this topic was posted on the [www. cuvantul-ortodox.ro](http://www.cuvantul-ortodox.ro), accessible at the address: <http://www.cuvantul-ortodox.ro/recomandari/barnevernet-in-romania-scoala-de-vara/>, accessed at 16.10.2018.

Karl Marx, that the spectre of Communism is still haunting the Central and East European Countries.

7. Conclusions

The main objective of this paper was to provide an explanation for the efficiency of old propaganda used in the contemporary social and political context. We are witnessing a new propaganda wave that is spreading across many regions of the world. However, in an apparently paradoxical way, the most important influential contents and topics disseminated by this new wave can be traced to the old propaganda narratives. So, I tried to find an answer for the question *How can we explain the success of old propaganda?*

I started with the investigation of the main role played by propaganda which, in my opinion, is that of shaping the social identity of a community. By using the contributions of some prominent social and political thinkers like René Girard, Emile Durkheim and Umberto Eco, I argued that human communities do not have “natural” social identities and, as a consequence, they have to be provided from outside in the form of self-legitimizing narratives. But, usually, the most effective narratives are the ones disseminated by propagandists, who are defining the identity of a community *by opposition to another community or group*. However, I insisted that the propagandist should not be conceived as an all-powerful manipulator. He is just a skilful communicator who is capable of using old narratives and self-legitimizing stories and to reactivate them in accordance to his interest.

In order to explain how old propaganda themes and expressions survive and preserve their persuasive force, I used Jason Stanley’s theory according to which the repeated association between expressions and social meanings converts them into a part of the “not-at-issue” content of our language. And, this not-negotiable part of the language acts as a reservoir of standards, values and rules that are shaping people’s beliefs, emotions, attitudes and actions. Finally, I illustrated this process by presenting a list of important expressions and themes used by old Communist propaganda which were reactivated, primarily, but not only, by Russian propaganda, in the former Communist Countries from Central and East Europe.

So, in my opinion, the spectre of old propaganda did not disappear and will probably haunt mankind for many years to come. Because, it is deeply rooted in the way in which human communities have usually defined their identity. To be sure, I do not believe it is an inescapable aspect of the human nature, and I think there are better and more sustainable ways in

which we humans can define themselves as social beings. Nevertheless, as long as we will define our social identity by opposition to another community, the old propaganda narratives will still be effective and our past will remain unpredictable.

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