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RUSSIAN INFORMATION WARFARE IN SLOVAKIA

MASTER'S THESIS

DEVELOPMENT AND INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS

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Abstract

Since the annexation of Crimea, the Russian Federation has considerably increased its usage of information warfare in Europe. The Slovak Republic and the whole region of Central and Eastern Europe are particularly vulnerable to these attacks due to their frail political structure and civil society. No government strategy is known that would explain overall strategical, operational, and tactical goals Russia is trying to achieve by its campaign.

Therefore, the purpose of this thesis is to investigate the reasons for the Russian employment of information warfare in Slovakia. To this end, two hypotheses are formulated based on the premises of soft power and strategic culture concepts and the theory of offensive realism. Verification of these hypotheses is conducted by content analysis of Russian strategic documents, speeches by relevant figures, and secondary sources. Throughout the analytical process, multiple government documents and speeches support the viability of the formulated hypotheses.

This thesis concludes that Russia has a particular strategic culture that allows for aggressive behavior. It perceives the West, as represented by the US and institutions such as NATO and the EU, as its rival. Russia has adopted its own interpretation of the soft power concept and views soft power in an instrumental way. Thus, Western soft power is seen as a threat, and to counter it, Russia attempts to curb Western soft power and to generate its own soft power by using information warfare.

At the same time, Russia struggles for regional hegemony over the region of Central and Eastern Europe with the West. Slovakia is a target of information warfare because Russia uses it, and other strategies, to gain an advantage in the regional struggle.

Keywords: Russia, information warfare, propaganda, Slovakia

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1 Introduction

In 2015, Russia annexed the Crimean Peninsula. The unlawful referendum and the deployment of troops caught the attention of every medium on the planet. Conflict in Ukraine that preceded and succeeded the annexation was one of the highlights for almost every news outlet for years to come. However, there was another war Russia was waging that very few people noticed at first, and even when the media started informing about it, it was never in the spotlight. It was the information war.

The Russian employment of information warfare against countries in Europe and the US escalated rapidly after the Crimean annexation, and it is continuing to this day. A massive campaign originated from the Russian state-sponsored media and rapidly extended its reach to the online space where various tools were used to spread fake news and disinformation. Experts recorded utilization of almost every media form with the goal of spreading narratives dictated from the Kremlin but also misinformation created by confused users. Often contradictory stories about the EU, the US, NATO, journalists, LGBT movement, liberals, Muslims, and many more, were employed presumably to sow discontent and disorganization from within. (Bokša, 2019)

The employment of disinformation, i. e. purposely spread false information, is a particularly popular form of waging information warfare by Russia. A consumer of disinformation does not have to believe it for it to be successful. Confusion about the truth and questioning of the veracity of every source of information is a success in itself. A consumer who no longer believes an official source unquestionably but will admit ‘the truth is somewhere in the middle’ unwittingly subscribes to the idea that even completely fabricated disinformation is partially correct. Thus effective spreading of disinformation can make for a very potent information warfare tool.

In this day and age, with the Internet becoming the primary source of information for the ever-larger part of the society, information warfare tools employed online are turning into a severe threat. Russia traditionally relies on its conventional and nuclear arsenal as a backbone of its military might to support great power ambitions. However, in the past several years, we have seen more focus on the information and cyber warfare by the Russian government and military, presumably due to potentially significant gains when compared to marginal cost.

Russia’s employment of information warfare might signalize attempted orientation on building back a sphere of influence lost after the Cold War. The country targets every

neighboring state as well as strategic targets abroad and oversees with a presumptive goal of securing its great power status or disrupt efforts of rival great powers.

One particular region was targeted the hardest by the information warfare campaign that followed the Crimean annexation – Central and Eastern Europe. From propaganda focusing on the Russian minority in the Baltics through the promotion of Communist-era nostalgia in Central Europe to anti-Western rhetoric in the Balkans. Every available tool was employed presumably to sway the counties away from rivals of Russia and back to its sphere of influence. Slovakia was targeted by multiple narratives at once to sway its population and policies. While the success of this strategy remains questionable, even some political leaders willingly subscribed to these narratives; therefore, it is deserving of a more in-depth study.

The goal of this thesis is to examine the usage of information warfare by Russia and to investigate its employment in Slovakia. We strive to determine the reasons behind the employment of this type of strategy and support these findings with a theoretical framework. Thus, we formulate a problem and our research question:

Why is Russia employing information warfare in Slovakia?

1.1 Thesis structure

The following visualization represents the structure of this thesis.

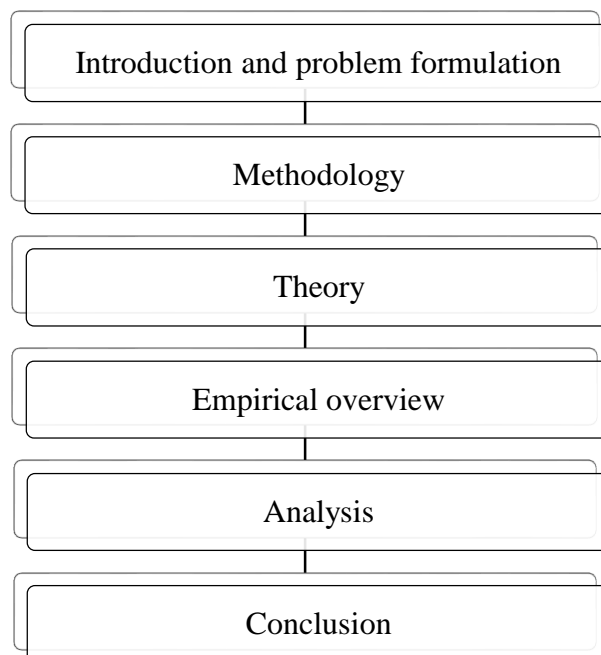


Figure 1 Project structure

2 Methodology

The purpose of this chapter is to present the chosen methodological approach as a roadmap to our research. By choice, we will not dive deep into abstract and theoretical aspects of methodology and its philosophy. The chapter is divided into six sections, each dedicated to the cardinal aspects of the chosen methodology.

2.1 Research strategy

This thesis examines the usage of information warfare by the Russian Federation in the Slovak Republic. Notably, the focus is put on reasons behind Russian employment of this tactic with regards to its overall strategy. Russia employs information warfare in multiple countries, and the narratives used vary from one to another. Rather than attempting to work with a broad focus that would map every approach employed, we chose to fix our attention to one country in particular – Slovakia. Therefore, we chose to adopt a case study method for this thesis. We consider it the most relevant approach for our purposes as it allows for analysis and a more profound examination of a particular case that is not limited to a single methodological approach or technique. At the same time, the method allows expanding our understanding of the broader phenomenon beyond just the case studied. The reasons for choosing Slovakia are explained in the separate section below.

In order to help explain the causal relation determined in the problem formulation, this thesis puts forward two hypotheses to set the course of the research. To resolve the research question and to verify whether the hypotheses are relevant, we apply the deductive research method.

A theoretical framework is established, followed by the collection of data from varied sources subsequently followed by an analysis conducted by applying the chosen theories on the collected data. Findings resulted from this process are the base for our conclusion. The linear structure of the deductive approach might be considered a weakness by some; however, the straightforward nature of the deductive method and its effectivity in obtaining results outweighs the disadvantages.

Moreover, this thesis uses a documentary research method as its application fits best in the case study research, and it provides better ground for in-depth analysis. In this regard, explanatory research design type is applied.

2.2 Choice of case

The choice of Slovakia as the focus of our case study is based on the information-oriented selection. The main reason behind the selection is the combination of political and historical factors that influence its relation with Russia. Slovakia is a member state of the EU, the Eurozone, and NATO; therefore, it subscribes to the Western worldview. At the same time, it is a post-Communist country with its past closely tied to that of the former Soviet Union. However, as a former part of a satellite state, the connection to the USSR was not as directly linked (and thus is not as marked by the past) as that of the three former Soviet republics in the Baltics in a similar position.

In addition, ethnolinguistic and further historical realities were taken into consideration. Slovakia is a Slavic country, and Slovaks historically inclined towards Pan-Slavic ideology that viewed Russia as a center of the Slavic culture.

Lastly, the relative weakness of the Slovak civil society, media, and political structure suggest low resilience towards foreign influence campaigns. From among the Visegrad Group countries, Slovakia is the most vulnerable in terms of public opinion and perception of the US, Russia, the EU, and NATO. These weaknesses are a result of the above-mentioned political, historical, and ethnolinguistic factors and impede the implementation of effective countermeasures. (Milo & Klingová, 2017)

All these factors combined mean that Slovakia is in a unique position to be a target of almost every narrative Russian information warfare uses, and therefore we believe it is in an excellent position to provide the most relevant results concerning the research topic.

2.3 Choice of theory

The theoretical framework is the foundation of our research and a lens through which we analyze the collected data and attempt to answer the problem formulation. For this purpose, two theoretical concepts: soft power and strategic culture and a prominent international relations theory of realism were chosen. A combination of these theories is what we base our hypotheses on. We evaluate whether the chosen theories fit our purpose in the Analysis chapter.

First, strategic culture as a concept was primarily chosen because it had originated in the research of the strategic behavior of the USSR, and it is therefore almost tailored to examine reasons why Russia employs specific strategies. By design, it takes into consideration the cultural aspects that influence the strategic decisions of a country and is thus uniquely applicable to the specific nature of the Russian strategic thinking. As we discuss in our Critical reflections section in the Theory chapter, strategic culture does not necessarily have to be in

opposition to behavior based on rational choice, as some theories suggest, but it can construct an additional framework for a more extensive explanation of the states' behavior.

Subsequently, the choice of the soft power concept was a pragmatic one. The concept's popularity among the states leads to its inclusion into the policies of every great power, including Russia. We hypothesize that the answer to our research question closely ties Russian strategic culture with its adapted perception of the soft power concept that is used as a basis for the employment of information warfare. We believe that the frame of the Nye's original concept is how soft power should be interpreted and that the Russian understanding of soft power is distorted; nevertheless, it is a crucial element of our research.

Realism, more specifically, offensive realism, is the theory we have chosen to attempt to provide an explanation of the position of Slovakia in the equation. As we point out in our Theory chapter, Mearsheimer's theory has its limitations as it is unable to explain the lack of a (hard) power struggle in the West and the non-aggressive behavior of some great powers towards each other. That could, among other things, suggest that the premise of rational behavior has exceptions, which can be explained by the incorporation of strategic culture, that strives to add another dimension to explaining states' behavior.

However, deficiencies aside, offensive realism is seemingly more suitable when applied in the context of our thesis than liberal theories such as the complex interdependence model. Russia's aggressive behavior, whether we consider the conflict in Ukraine and annexation of Crimea or the belligerent employment of information warfare, is suggesting that it is, in fact struggling for power in the region, not seeking cooperation.

While we attempt to understand the Russian view of soft power and its strategic culture to formulate an explanation of Russia's behavior, we utilize Mearsheimer's struggle for regional hegemony to put this behavior in the context of a power struggle within the Central and Eastern Europe region and explain the targeting of Slovakia. European Union as a perceived opponent of Russia in the region, is obviously not employing the same strategies as Russia within this struggle; it is, therefore, essential to view the utilization of offensive realism with regards to Russian perception of this struggle and its behavior. If we were to attempt to explain the position of the EU within this perceived struggle with the same strategic culture framework, we would probably have to employ a different theory than offensive realism.

Additionally, a weakness of realism regarding our focus is that it provides contrasting views on information warfare, which can be both a result of a failure to update outdated theory or a choice not to try to incorporate every modern strategy into the theory. We adopt the view

that information warfare is a novel strategy in the traditional interstate conflict and not a game-changing factor.

In our consideration of theories, we have also engaged a thought of including cybersecurity theories to more expand on the usage of information warfare by Russia. However, we have decided against it as it would broaden the scope of this thesis and move the focus away from the international relations implications of using this strategy to more practical aspects more suited for security studies. For this reason, we only list a definition of information warfare we apply and do not attempt further elaboration. Although, we put several findings of a security studies research into use in our Empirical overview chapter, in which we use a categorization of Russian disinformation narratives and apply it to the Slovak context.

2.4 Data selection

As mentioned above, we chose the documentary research method for this thesis as it fits the chosen focus and the theories, and provides a solid foundation for an in-depth analysis. Our qualitative data will be based mainly on government sources such as strategic materials, ministry papers, and similar publications supported with the speeches made by relevant leaders and officials and also on academic sources such as scholarly journals and monographs. Additionally, news articles and reports are among our recurring sources due to the relatively recent occurrence of the researched phenomenon. Quantitative data such as statistics and survey data are used only to support the qualitative data.

Since the topic of information warfare and propaganda is somewhat problematic when it comes to its relativistic relationship with the truth, we employ the selective sampling technique to select data. In addition, we consciously vary data sources and provide multiple sources wherever possible. Triangulation in data collection not only strengthens the research but also effectively prevents a biased or inaccurate source from being used. In the case of the examples that we provide in our Empirical overview, the information-oriented selection was based on quantitative data such as the social media reach and web traffic to provide the most representative illustration of the researched phenomenon. The examples provided are thus not meant to be exhaustive.

2.5 Analytical approach

Due to the selected source of our data, content analysis is the analytical approach we employ in this thesis as it is a well-suited method for case study application. The analysis is

conducted within the set theoretical framework that provides support for any consequent findings.

We divide our analysis into three sections to separately evaluate both our hypotheses and whether the chosen theories are suitable to explain the phenomenon concerning the usage of information warfare set in our problem formulation. First, we split the hypothesis 1 into two components – one focused on strategic culture and the other on soft power. We proceed to analyze existing research to frame general aspects of Russian strategic culture in the historical context. Then, we analyze strategic documents and speeches of the relevant leaders to weigh if they provide support for the first component of hypothesis 1.

Second, we research the Russian understanding of soft power in existing research and the official documents. We analyze how the unique perception differs from Nye's concept and how these divergences influence perception of Western soft power. Based on this, we analyze the connection to information warfare, as suggested in the second component of hypothesis 1.

Third, we utilize Mearsheimer's offensive realism and the struggle for regional hegemony to analyze Russia's position in the Central and Eastern Europe region. We use secondary data to analyze whether the chosen theory can support hypothesis 2 and to provide an understanding of how is Russian employment of information warfare relevant in the regional struggle for power and the case of Slovakia.

We base our conclusion on the findings from these three analytical sections.

2.6 Limitations

The main limitation of this thesis stems from the chosen topic. Information warfare is secretive by design, and it is difficult to penetrate the thick layer of ambiguity that surrounds it. To combat this limitation, it was necessary to conduct extensive preliminary research into relevant and trustworthy sources and the practical side of information warfare. A deeper understanding of the topic was required before we could frame it within the international relations context. Some of the preliminary research made it into the Empirical overview chapter; however, even purely descriptive insight into the Russian information warfare would exceed the length restrictions of this thesis multiple times.

Another limitation is the recent and ongoing nature of the Russian information warfare campaign. It is continuously evolving; therefore, it is sometimes difficult to keep track of all the developments as it is sadly not a topic media pay enough attention. It also obviously limits the extent of the available literature.

The theory we have chosen can also be limiting. The complexity of international relations allows for the usage of multiple theories from different schools, and an argument can be made that another theory could also be utilized to resolve the problem formulated in this thesis. However, we believe that the chosen theories work well within our framework. More specific critical reflections on the chosen theories can be found in the Theory chapter.

The chosen methodology also carries some limitations to it. A case study method can be limited in its representativeness of the overall phenomenon. The research might also prove that a seemingly fitting theory fails to provide an explanation for the studied case. Similarly, the use of the selective sampling technique in choosing the sources poses a risk of omitting data and thus is to be employed very thoroughly due to the somewhat limited number of sources.

3 Theory

In this chapter, we build a framework out of three international relations theories that will support our research. The chapter is divided into six sections. In the first brief section, we provide a definition of information warfare. In the following three sections, we focus on the core assumptions of chosen theories – soft power concept, realism, and strategic culture. The fifth section comprises of critical reflection on these theories. The last section is dedicated to the hypotheses formulated on the basis of the chosen theories.

3.1 Information warfare

Information warfare is a term that has accumulated many definitions over the years. Military academics tend to define it mostly through military means (Borden, 1999; Tashev, Purcell, & McLaughlin, 2019), while other scholars might connect it with political warfare. (Theohary, 2018) In his comprehensive monograph on information warfare, Daniel Verte provides an exhaustive analysis of a great number of doctrinal interpretations and more than twenty academic definitions of information warfare and its components, proving the complexity of the term. (Verte, 2016, pp. 247-325) While a more detailed account of the topic could be provided, as mentioned in the Methodology chapter, it is not the ambition of this thesis to include cybersecurity theories due to our orientation on international relations aspects.

Therefore, for the purposes of this thesis, we choose to operate with a general definition: “Information warfare is conflict between two or more groups in the information environment.” (Porche, et al., 2013, p. 14) Since the focus is mostly put on the specifics of Russian information warfare¹, this definition is to be applied only when referring to the information warfare in general.

3.2 Soft power

Soft power concept was first introduced by a political scientist Joseph Nye in his 1990 book *Bound to Lead: The Changing Nature of American Power*. He later expanded on the topic with a separate monograph, *Soft Power: The Means to Success in World Politics*, in 2004. Nye continued to popularize the concept over the years with multiple books and articles, and since

¹ While the term used by Russia, ‘информационное противоборство,’ is better translated as ‘information confrontation,’ information warfare is typically used instead despite possible shortcomings. (Tashev, Purcell, & McLaughlin, 2019, p. 133)

its introduction, soft power has entered the mainstream of international relations theory and practice.

The core of Nye's concept dwells on the differentiation between two types of power: hard power and soft power. Nye perceives power as the ability to get outcomes one wants. The way in which an actor achieves the desired outcomes is what differentiates the two types of power. (Nye, 2004)

According to Nye, hard power rests on carrots and sticks, i. e. inducements and threats. It is comprised of military and economic might that get others to change their positions with the usage of commands supported by threats or sanctions. (Nye, 2004)

On the other hand, soft power achieves set objectives indirectly by getting others to desire the same outcomes as the actor. It co-opts actors rather than coerces them. Co-optive usage of power can rest on "the attractiveness of one's culture and values or the ability to manipulate the agenda of political choices in a manner that makes others fail to express some preferences because they seem to be too unrealistic." (Nye, 2004, p. 7) However, co-optive power is not the only soft power resource. Actors may also be attracted by a determined hard power user that is surrounded by a myth of invincibility and strength. (Nye, 2004)

Soft power is a source of influence; however, it is not the same as influence. One's influence can equally rest upon threats or payments and, thus, hard power. Soft power is also not merely the ability to persuade or ability to sway others by a convincing argument. It combines these abilities with the ability to entice and attract. The level of attraction of multiple factors that form an actor's behavior constitutes the source of their soft power. (Nye, 2008, pp. 29-32)

Nye identifies three main sources of an actor's soft power: "its culture (in places where it is attractive to others), its political values (when it lives up to them at home and abroad), and its foreign policies (when they are seen as legitimate and having moral authority.)" (Nye, 2004, p. 11) If culture, values, and policies of an actor are universal or at least correlate with interests that others share, the probability of achievement of desired outcomes rises due to the created attraction. (Nye, 2004)

In contrast with hard power, soft power is not controlled solely by a state actor. Civil society, universities, and the popular entertainment industry is a source of a large proportion of the state's soft power. These organizations are part of the culture and values of a country and therefore partake in the perceived attractiveness. (Nye, 2004, p. 17)

Nye does not consider hard and soft power to be the opposite. Hard and soft power can, at times, reinforce each other while at other times, they might interfere with each other. Hard

power resources such as coercion might lead to a decrease in soft power due to the unattractiveness of such acts. At the same time, an actor that wields both hard and soft power might achieve set objectives without the necessity to use hard power. (Nye, 2004, pp. 25-27) Nye calls the effective use of a combination of both hard and soft power ‘smart power.’ (Nye, 2004, p. 32)

3.2.1 Soft power and information warfare

Nye addressed the contemporary role of information warfare in soft power strategies in his 2017 article *Information Warfare Versus Soft Power*. In the article, Nye draws a comparison between offensive use of soft power (like the substantial amounts of money spent on instruments such as public diplomacy and broadcasting) and information warfare. While the former is used to generate attraction, the latter is predominantly used to offensively disempower rivals, a phenomenon Nye calls ‘negative soft power.’ “By attacking the values of others, one can reduce their attractiveness and thus their relative soft power.” (Nye, 2017)²

Most prominent actors who try to reduce other’s attractiveness are NGOs that use this strategy against international corporations by ‘naming and shaming’ campaigns. Information warfare can be similarly targeted at reducing one’s attractiveness with interference and propaganda. (Nye, 2017)

Information warfare and propaganda have a long history of trying to manipulate the population of a rival state, and at the same time reducing its soft power. Although, if the attempts to sway the population are seemed as too propagandistic, they lose credibility and are thus not attractive to some audiences, i. e. they do not produce soft power. Thus, while the effective usage of information warfare might generate disruption, it fails to generate soft power efficiently. At the same time, employment of information warfare by a state actor might be seen as unattractive and could lead to loss of the actor’s soft power. (Nye, 2017)

3.3 Realism

The theory of realism has been a dominant paradigm of international relations studies for a long time. Its origins can be arguably traced to ancient history, although concrete foundations of the theory were set in the 1930s and 1940s. The most prominent and influential

² Peter Rutland & Andrei Kazantsev work with a different definition of negative soft power – they connect it to events damaging public perception of Russia and reducing its attractiveness. (Rutland & Kazantsev, 2016, p. 405) To avoid confusion, we choose to operate with Nye’s definition that is focused on attacking other actors to reduce their attractiveness. Callahan (2015) also operates with this definition of negative soft power.

scholar behind realist studies was Hans J. Morgenthau. His 1948 book *Politics Among Nations* became the principal text of realism theory and was expanded over the years with multiple posthumous editions published. (Lebow, 2011)

The fundamental premise of realism dwells on the anarchical nature of the international system and the premise that the states, as dominant actors, struggle for power. Strong states are able to do as they choose, while weaker states have to do what they must to survive. Actors are thus motivated by both a desire for domination and a need to secure their survival within the system. This premise is based on a pessimistic assumption that conflict is unavoidable; however, it can be managed through mechanisms such as the balance of power. (Harrison & Callan, 2013)

Accumulation of power by the actors in the international system is closely associated with the realist theories. The realist concept of power is tied to political interest, and it is primarily thought of in the sense of material instruments that will allow an actor to dominate over other actors. The role of power has been central to the realist theories, although differences and ambiguities exist between various schools of realist thought. (Schmidt, 2005) That is also one of the reasons why it is wise to limit generalizations about realism and to distinguish between the schools that had evolved over the years.

The oldest realist school is classical realism (a neologism), as represented by Morgenthau or E. H. Carr (Harrison & Callan, 2013). Perhaps the most significant distinction between the classical realists and later schools is the belief that the laws of political realism and society as a whole have roots in the human nature of statesmen and politicians. (Morgenthau, 1978, pp. 4-5)

Neorealism or structural realism was developed by Kenneth Waltz in his 1979 monograph *Theory of International Politics*. This reformist perspective on realism attempted to construct a more systematic and less contradictory argument than his predecessors. Instead of basing the premise of strive for power in human nature, the neorealist view believes it is rooted in the nature of the international system as such. (Lebow, 2011) Anarchy in the international system is thus an even more prominent premise, and Waltz considers it to be an “ordering principle” for international politics. (Waltz, 1979, pp. 88-93) Neorealism can be divided into two branches, defensive and offensive realism. We pay further attention to offensive realism below.

The last noteworthy school of realism is neoclassical realism, as represented by William Wohlforth. Neoclassical realists attempt to offer a synthesis of systematic approach of neorealism and unit-level analysis of classical realism. (Harrison & Callan, 2013)

3.3.1 Offensive realism

Waltz's neorealist theory was at the beginning of defensive realism theory (although the name 'defensive realism' came later). (Lebow, 2011) Defensive realists argue that anarchy in international systems prompts actors to assume a moderate approach. Actors adopt cautious and reserved policies in order to procure their security and, thus, survival. (Walz, 1979)

Offensive realism, developed by John Mearsheimer as a branch of neorealism, assumes a different approach. It suggests that actors will not satisfy with a given amount of power, and it is their desire to maximize it. Anarchical nature of the international system motives actors to aggressive behavior and seeking domination and hegemony that would achieve their security within the system. (Mearsheimer, 2001, p. 21)

Mearsheimer assumes that achieving global hegemony, i. e. domination of the international system, is the most secure way of assuring the survival of a state and thus the most desirable outcome of the struggle for dominance. Although he considers global hegemony to be virtually impossible to achieve due to the nature of our planet. Vast ocean bodies represent the main impediment to world domination, as it is very difficult to project power across the oceans. For this reason, Mearsheimer considers 'regional hegemony' (or dominance over a particular region) the reasonable goal great powers can hope to achieve. (Mearsheimer, 2001, pp. 40-41)

While it might be impossible to achieve global hegemony, it does not mean that regional hegemons do not interfere in other regions. Great powers that have managed to achieve regional hegemony strive to prevent competitors from achieving the same in other regions as they fear the potential interference of the rival hegemon in their own region. Similarly, if more great powers exist within one region, they attempt to contain any single power that did or could rise to the position of regional hegemon. (Mearsheimer, 2001, pp. 41-42) The assumption that great powers "are always searching for opportunities to gain power over their rivals, with hegemony as their final goal" (Mearsheimer, 2001, p. 29) is also the reason for the name 'offensive realism.'

In their struggle for dominance, states have two kinds of power: latent power and military power. Latent power encompasses socio-economic ingredients, such as wealth and population, necessary for building military power. Mearsheimer puts emphasis on the importance of an actor's military power as the most relevant factor when comparing the respective power of states. The powerful military is vital to the state's security and assurance of survival. Obtaining wealth and economic prosperity serves as an essential goal for great powers due to its importance in increasing the state's military power. (Mearsheimer, 2001)

When powers face a threat from an aggressor, the primary strategies they employ are balancing and buck-passing. Balancing means that the threatened states commit themselves to contain their aggressive opponent either by deterring or fighting them. Buck-passing refers to attempting to get another great power to check the aggressor while they remain on the sidelines. The latter is preferred due to the potential cost of fighting the aggressor. (Mearsheimer, 2001, p. 139)

3.3.2 Realist view on information warfare

Information security experts are sometimes critical when it comes to international relations theories' reaction to the digital age. All major theories seemingly lack a deeper understanding and incorporation of cybersecurity into their worldview. (Eriksson & Giacomello, 2010)

In the case of realism, scholars do not seem to be prompted to revise their theory by the changing nature of security in the digital age. States are still seen as the main and perhaps only important actors by realists, and security definition is viewed in a narrow military way that does not take into consideration the power of the non-state actors. Therefore, many realist theorists do not perceive information security threats such as information warfare through a narrow definition of security but largely as an economic issue that does not directly affect the security of the state actors. (Eriksson & Giacomello, 2010, pp. 11-12)

Another view considers information warfare to be a new technological aspect within the otherwise traditional interstate conflict. Similarly, as was psychological warfare and electronic warfare before, information warfare is just a continuation of the evolution of strategic studies and not a ground-breaking new reality that the theory needs to adapt to. (Eriksson & Giacomello, 2010, pp. 11-12) As noted in the Methodology chapter, we choose to adopt this view as well.

Finally, international relations scholars A. Craig and B. Valeriano argue that “the cyber domain resembles a realist world with its anarchical nature and lack of institutional governance where states fear one another and develop their capabilities in response.” (Craig & Valeriano, 2018, p. 6) Even though realist theories fail to explain the unique dynamics of cyber conflict, they remain useful as a framework for identifying critical security-related issues in the cyber domain. (Craig & Valeriano, 2018)

3.4 Strategic culture

References to links connecting culture and national security policy can be found in historical works of Thucydides, Sun Tzu as well as Carl von Clausewitz. In a modern sense, the concept of strategic culture was developed by Jack Snyder in 1977 when he applied political culture argument into modern security studies to interpret the military strategy of the USSR. The strategic culture was rediscovered in the 1990s when many theorists began to focus on the culture in international relations in the post-Cold War era. (Lantis, 2002, pp. 93-96)

Strategic culture as a concept builds on the premise of realism that assumes state actors behave the rationally. It amplifies this assumption by explaining the rationality of an actor's behavior within a cultural context. (Johnson, Kartchner, & Larsen, 2009, p. 6) Both terms, 'strategic' and 'culture' can be understood in multiple ways that can sometimes contradict each other. Similarly, strategic culture has been defined in various ways by different scholars over the years, and there is no clear consensus. For example, Ken Booth refers to a concept as a state's "traditions, values, attitudes, patterns of behavior, habits, symbols, achievements and particular ways of adapting to the environment and solving problems with respect to the threat or use of force." (Booth, 1990, p. 121)

One of the most comprehensive and ambitious attempts at defining strategic culture was made by Alastair Iain Johnson. In his definition, strategic culture consists in:

"an integrated system of symbols (i.e., argumentation structures, languages, analogies, metaphors, etc.) that acts to establish pervasive and long-lasting grand strategic preferences by formulating concepts of the role and efficacy of military force in interstate political affairs, and by clothing these conceptions with such an aura of factuality that the strategic preferences seem uniquely realistic and efficacious" (Johnston, 1998, p. 36)

Important research applications of strategic culture include A. I. Johnson's (1998) investigation of the historical strategic culture of China that made connections between it and the Chinese use of military force against external threats. Similar research studies were conducted with regards to the strategic culture of Germany and Japan that attempted to explain the evolution of their foreign and security strategy during and after the Cold War. (Lantis, 2002, pp. 97-101) The concept of strategic culture has thus proven useful in expanding the understanding of linkages between strategic choices and cultural aspects that form a state's behavior.

Arguably, definitions do not help with the ubiquitous nature of the strategic culture that can make it seem vague. To combat this, Colin S. Gray has introduced six general points in an attempt to advance understanding of strategic culture:

- (1) *Strategic behavior cannot be beyond culture* – although behavior can sometimes be contrary to cultural norms, it can never be a-cultural and is always, to some degree, influenced and based on one's culture,
- (2) *Adversity cannot cancel culture* – in times of duress or triumph there is always a cultural element present in decision-making,
- (3) *Strategic culture is a guide to action*,
- (4) *Strategic culture expresses comparative advantage* – the strategic culture that is oriented towards a dominant focus is not going to excel when performing other, unfamiliar tasks, for example, a strategic culture focused on land warfare will not perform well in naval warfare,
- (5) *Strategic culture can be dysfunctional* – strategic culture can contain strongly dysfunctional elements such as policies that do not correlate with the dominant culture and might lead to strategic failure,
- (6) *Strategic cultures can be variously categorized* – human and organizational agents of culture behave with respect to several categories that influence their strategic views such as nationality, geography, and others. (Gray, 1999, pp. 61-68)

3.5 Critical reflections

No single theory manages to cover all the bases when it comes to international relations research. With this in mind, we provide a critical reflection on the theories described above in an attempt to discuss concordance and opposition of these theories to evaluate possible weak spots within our framework.

The focus of this thesis, information warfare, is generally not shared with international relations theories. While cybersecurity theories might attempt to explain practical sides of using this type of warfare by state actors, only international relations theories can help identify motivations behind such usage. Thus, information warfare can be viewed merely as an instrument through which states act to achieve their goals, and therefore theories such as soft power concepts and realism are sufficient to explain related phenomena.

In contrast, an argument can be made that due to the relatively recent spread of information warfare use, the theory is merely lagging behind reality. It is entirely possible that

we will see more ambitious attempts to reform international relations theories to fit the digital age better. However, we are not there yet and have to operate with what is available.

As for the chosen theories, Nye's soft power concept is nowadays widely used by politicians and academics, but that did not spare it a large amount of criticism it was submitted to over the years. Scholars had questioned its originality when compared to classical realist E. H. Carr's understanding of power, its inability to measure, or its excessive focus on the agent or the structure which determines attractiveness but not the combination of the two. (Yukarıç, 2017) Arguably, most of the criticism is not relevant for the purpose of this thesis; however, at the same time, it is important to admit that the concept has its limitations. For this reason, we operate with the concept within the scope instituted by Nye to apply it in the most relevant and least limiting way.

Soft power concept as an alternative to hard power was formulated in opposition to our second chosen theory, realism. Realists have traditionally put emphasis on hard power and, most prominently, military power. Mearsheimer's offensive realism is no exception. His theory was repeatedly criticized not only by liberal international relations scholars but also by realists for excessive focus on the (hard) power struggle. For example, offensive realism received criticism for the perceived inability to explain phenomena such as long-term cooperation between two great powers, the United Kingdom and the United States, or the emergence of the European Union. Critics claim that offensive realism fails to take historical experiences that are contrary to the theory into account. A counterargument could be made that a more eclectic and open-minded approach that would try to explain all relations between great powers would transform theory into history and thus defeat its purpose. (Jackson & Sørensen, 2013, pp. 85-86)

Furthermore, offensive realism and other realist schools are traditionally subjected to criticism by neoliberal international relations scholars. Among the theories that oppose the realist worldview is Robert Keohane's and Nye's complex interdependence model that challenges the fundamental assumptions of realism focused on military and economic capabilities to explain state behavior. Their theory points out to the interdependent relations state actors have and focus on the cooperation between the states, not on the conflictual aspects as the realism does. They consider military power to be an important bargaining chip but do not regard military confrontation to be a preferred option in the contemporary independent world. Instead, cooperation and economic gains take precedence. (Rana, 2015) While Keohane and Nye present a robust and widely acclaimed theory that can be applied to most countries in the developed world, we still see that for other parts of the world, anarchical nature of international

relations and power struggle, as well as usage of military power, is still prevalent. The application of realist and liberal theories are thus still dependent on the context.

Moreover, the third theory chosen was also a subject of many criticisms and opposing views. The strategic culture concept was said to be ambiguous and literature on the topic confusing and meritless. A lengthy debate about the concept's definition and applicability without an explicit agreement has also generated a fair share of criticism. However, it can be argued that as a relatively young concept, strategic culture is just going through the standard process of healthy scholarly divisiveness and debate that would not exist if it was not compelling for the scholars. (Haglund, 2004)

Lastly, we aspire to address the seemingly contradictory nature of strategic culture concept and realism. The realist power-centric view on international relations does not consider the concept of strategic culture to be of significant importance and claims that military strategy can be explained solely in terms of circumstances. (Glenn, 2009) At the same time, realists are often connected with the assumption that the states act rationally, and rational choice is one of the assumptions of their theory, as we mentioned above. Rational choice is oftentimes seen as a contradictory concept to the strategic culture. The central conflict between the two dwells on the ambiguous nature of culture, which, among other definitions, can be interpreted as a non-rational norm-driven behavior, strategic culture thus logically cannot be rational. (Kahler, 1998)

This point leads to another debate about the rationality in international relations. For example, Mearsheimer's offensive realism claims that great powers behave aggressively because they have to seek power to maximize their odds of survival. (Mearsheimer, 2001, p. 21) He thus explains that there is the rationality behind their behavior. However, we fail to observe this aggressive attitude in some cases, such as the above-mentioned US-UK relationship, which leads to an assumption that rationality, as perceived by Mearsheimer, is, in fact, not without exception.

He does not acknowledge this since he claims that states' behavior follows the same logic regardless of their culture, political system, or leadership. (Mearsheimer, 2001, pp. 17-18) Nevertheless, another contradictory example besides strategic culture can be found in the democratic peace theory, which claims that if a state's political system is democratic, it will be hesitant to engage in an armed conflict against another democratic state. Mearsheimer addressed this by explaining that the periods of peace among democratic nations such as the US, the UK, and France were caused not by their political system (or strategic culture) but by a common threat, first German and later Soviet. (Mearsheimer, 1990, pp. 50-51) Still, this would suggest a notable degree of trust between those states, which he denies when he claims

there is little space for it as the basis of states' perception of one another is fear. (Mearsheimer, 2001, pp. 32-33) Nevertheless, even though Mearsheimer insists states behave by the logic of realist theory, there are clearly exceptions regardless of their cause.

Similar examples could perhaps be made for other theories that presume rationality behind a state's behavior. This leads to an effort by some scholars to incorporate cultural explanations into models of state choice as a means to enrich them, not overturn them. Strategic culture can thus be viewed as an extension of these models. (Kahler, 1998, p. 934) Likewise, an argument can be made that strategic culture can serve as a variable in the equation for explaining state behavior even in some realist schools, for example, neoclassical realism. (Glenn, 2009, pp. 527-528) We, in a similar manner, regard strategic culture to be a valuable addition that is utilized along with realism and expands our overall theoretical framework.

3.6 Hypotheses

Based on the chosen theories, we formulate two hypotheses, relevancy of which will be evaluated after we conduct our analysis:

Hypothesis 1: Russia has a particular strategic culture and thinks in terms of rivalry in international relations. It has adopted its own view on soft power. It sees Western soft power as a threat and, at the same time, utilizes propaganda and information warfare in an attempt to generate soft power of its own.

Hypothesis 2: Slovakia is a target of Russian information warfare due to its geographical position within the Central and Eastern Europe region. Russia is struggling for regional hegemony over this region with the EU and the US.

4 Empirical overview

The purpose of this chapter is to map the Russian usage of information warfare in Slovakia. The chapter is divided into three sections describing specifics of the Russian information warfare, the tools used to spread disinformation in Slovakia, and, lastly, the response of the Slovak government.

4.1 Russian information warfare

The practice of information warfare by the Russian Federation has evolved from a long history of propaganda and disinformation efforts of the Soviet Union. After the collapse of the USSR, the propaganda apparatus had lied dormant until reinvigorated by the extensive military reform that followed the 2008 Russo-Georgian War. The newly designated approach, sometimes called ‘hybrid warfare,’³ which was created after 2012, adapted the old Soviet measures to a new geopolitical context. (Snegovaya, 2015, p. 10) The signature attributes the information warfare portion of this strategy coincides with the old Soviet practices:

- fakes and forgeries – the creation and distribution of fakes is used to reinforce policies and talking points of the Kremlin,
- “reflexive control” – a form of warfare that leads the target to disorganization and disorientation caused from within,
- “active measures” – direct intervention in other countries in the form of influencing policies, undermining leaders and institutions, disrupting relations with other states, and discrediting opponents. (Lucas & Pomeranzev, 2016, pp. 6-7)

A full-scale test of this revived strategy came in 2014, accompanying the Russian annexation of Crimea. Massive disinformation campaigns found a new breeding ground on the Internet and social media. This new battleground for information warfare was previously largely unexplored; however, it quickly became apparent how difficult it is to differentiate the correct, incorrect, and misleading source of information online, making the spread of disinformation easier than ever before. The information availability is accompanied by a wide variety of methods used to spread disinformation ranging from real or fake news media to online

³ Hybrid warfare represents a combination of political, military, economic, and information policies. It is useful when describing the multifaceted nature of Russian strategies, but at the same time, there is an ongoing academic debate about the relevancy of the term. (Lucas & Pomeranzev, 2016, p. 11) We choose not to use it since it has no backing in the official government documents of Russia.

troll campaigns and directed approaches to individual targets. The Russian campaign is making use of all of them. (Čížik, 2017a, pp. 8-10)

The tactics and tools used for waging information war are specifically tailored for a specific country or region. The campaign that followed the Russian annexation of Crimea was primarily targeted at the European Union; however, it had various forms in different countries. In Scandinavia, the prominent tools used were attempted discretization of journalists and the spread of conspiracy theories and anti-Western propaganda, often with the assistance of Russian state-controlled media and embassies. On the other hand, in the Baltics, information warfare was primarily targeted at considerable Russian-speaking minorities by raising ‘Soviet nostalgia’ and interest in Russian culture by Russian media operating there. (Čížik, 2017b) In some countries, these efforts were also accompanied by cyber-attacks that targeted mostly government institutions. (Pashkov, 2017)

Another example can be found in the focused use of online trolls and the spread of internet memes with a specific aim. “For example, supporters of the French right-wing are sent memes about the defense of Christianity, the post-communist left in Germany gets memes referring to pacifism and how peace is threatened by American militarism, Slovakia gets content about German domination of the EU, etc.” (Ostrowski, 2015) This targeted spread of disinformation can be linked with the above-mentioned reflexive control method that aims to cause disorganization and disorientation.

These and other methods used in specific regions by the Russian information warfare campaigns fit into a system of cascading narratives put forward by a cybersecurity expert, Michal Bokša (2019). Bokša categorizes the narratives as those concerning the Russian World (targeting Russian-speaking minorities to encourage association with Russia), Slavic unity (targeting Slavic countries and promoting Pan-Slavism), Ostalgia⁴ (targeting former communist bloc to invoke nostalgia), ‘anti’ rhetoric (producing opposition rhetoric towards the EU, NATO, the United States, immigration, liberalism, or Western values in general), and alternative information narratives (promoting conspiracy thinking, inciting mistrust towards the governments and the mainstream media). (Bokša, 2019, pp. 2-4)

One of the main aims of deliberately spread disinformation narratives is for it to transform into unwittingly spread misinformation, i. e. information not known to be false. Misinformation is then shared by individuals genuinely convinced of its veracity and thus assuring the most desired outcome of the Russian disinformation source. At the beginning of

⁴ The term is used in Germany to describe nostalgia for the era of Communist East Germany.

this process, disinformation usually originates with the Russian state-run or state-sponsored media (such as RT, TASS, or Sputnik) and so-called ‘friendly voices’ (domestic and foreign experts, representatives and other interlocutors who publicly corroborate disinformation narratives). The disinformation is then spread further by the disinformation websites that do not have to be directly supported by Russia; however, they follow the same worldview. These sites translate disinformation content into other languages and inject it with further conspiracy theories, xenophobia, fear-mongering, and alarming language. All these actors depend on mutual corroboration. (Bokša, 2019, pp. 4-6)

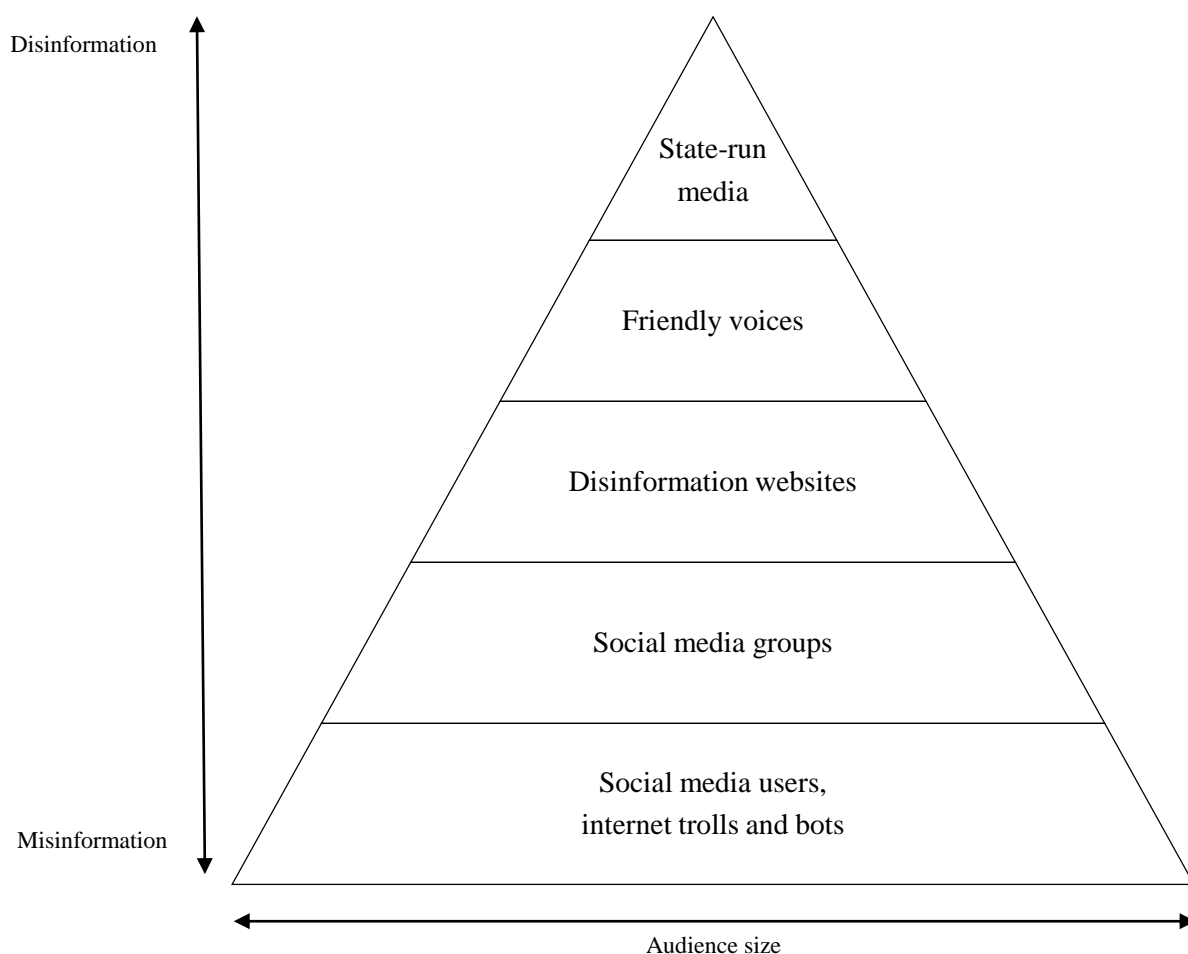


Figure 2 The Amplification Pyramid (Bokša, 2019, p. 5)

On the other side of the process is the second group of actors: social media groups, social media users who receive the disinformation, and then share it further as misinformation. Internet trolls and automated bots assist the process by continuously sharing and recycling misleading information and thus creating a perception that the information is truthful. This sense is further strengthened if the user conducts a quick search to verify the information only

to find numerous disinformation media and friendly voices that support the narrative. (Bokša, 2019, pp. 6-7)

The disinformation narratives within the Russian campaign that started in 2014 used several recurring anchoring points, no matter which narrative category is used. One of these consists of the European Union as one of the primary targets of disinformation. Since the beginning of the crisis in Ukraine, the EU was blamed for orchestrating a coup d'état there by the Russian media. However, the full-scale information warfare campaign has begun only after the 2015 migrant crisis. A mass influx of people fleeing war zones in the Middle East and beyond caught the EU member states by surprise, and their lack of prompt reaction and resolution of the crisis allowed Russia to use it in their narratives. Other problematic topics of the time were used, such as "Brexit, TTIP, the Greek debt crisis, Schengen, and the migrant relocation." (Šuplata & Nič, 2016, p. 5)

Different narratives often contained information that contradicted with another narrative. Some anti-EU narratives painted the EU as weak and unable to protect Europe from immigration, and too liberal in relation to socio-cultural issues. Another claimed that the EU is transforming into a totalitarian super-state, destroying the sovereignty of its member states. Conspiracy theories also played a part in the disinformation, for example, a narrative that the EU was designed by the CIA and former Nazis or that it is only a puppet controlled by the United States. (Šuplata & Nič, 2016)

EU vs Disinfo website set up by the East StratCom Task Force, a part of the European External Action Service, contains a database of over seven thousand disinformation spread by sources aligned with Russia. Almost a thousand of these are tagged with 'EU' or 'European Union' keywords and contain claims of various levels ranging from relatively mild ones about harsh economic directives from the EU (EU vs Disinfo, 2020a) to extremely wild claims such as a bazaar for buying children set up for gay people in Brussels. (EU vs Disinfo, 2019)

Similarly, the North-Atlantic Treaty Organization was also among the main targets. Anti-NATO narratives work with anti-Americanism more prominently and often portray NATO as a US tool for subordinating European nations. Narratives about NATO claim that the organization's goal is to encircle and crush Russia with the use of force. The organization is claimed to be aggressive, dangerous, warmongering, and threatening to the sovereignty of other nations. (Šuplata & Nič, 2016)

The effectivity of anti-EU and anti-NATO narratives is questionable; however, the countries in Central and Eastern Europe (CEE) are perhaps more vulnerable to them due to their weaker civil society, media, and political structures. The region is also susceptible to more

narrative categories and thus a more attractive target for the targeted disinformation campaigns. Furthermore, Russia does not restrict its narratives and disinformation to a specific ideology and in CEE countries is able to target both sympathizers of the communist totalitarian past as well as extreme right-wing parties oriented against the EU and NATO. (Bokša, 2019, p. 4)

In the Central and Eastern Europe region, Russia tends to apply common narratives in the Visegrad Group (V4) countries. These four Central European states have similar cultural and historical experiences and have been part of the Eastern Bloc during the Cold War. A slight difference among them is that Poland has always had a critical and cautious approach to Russia, while the other three were more ambiguous in their policies. (Čížik, 2017a, p. 15)

According to a security analyst, Tomáš Čížik, the primary tools used by Russia in Central Europe are: “alternative media, pro-Russia oriented trolls; the ambiguity of high-level politicians; financial support for extremist right-wing parties, whose policies include anti-EU and anti-NATO rhetoric; and allegations of fascism, Nazism or anti-state and illiberal activism.” (Čížik, 2017a, p. 16)

4.2 Tools used to spread disinformation in Slovakia

4.2.1 Friendly voices

As noted in Bokša’s compartmentalization of disinformation spread, friendly voices play a significant role in reinforcing the credibility of the Russian disinformation. These voices were also prominently represented on the Slovak political scene from 2016 to 2020. Speaker of the National Council during this period and Chairman of the Slovak National Party (SNS), Andrej Danko, was known to be a very vocal pro-Russian politician. He visited Moscow very frequently – only in 2019, he visited five times. He held frequent meetings with his counterpart Vyacheslav Volodin, Chairman of the State Duma, whom he called a friend. (Mikušovič, 2019) Before serving as a Chairman, Volodin served as First Deputy Chief of Staff of the Presidential Administration and, during that time, took part in developing the so-called hybrid warfare strategy against anti-regime domestic opponents. (Snegovaya, 2015, p. 10)

Danko used appeasing rhetoric in relation to Russia but also other authoritarian countries such as Belarus or Kazakhstan. (TASR, 2019a; TASR, 2019b) He repeatedly spoke against the presence of American forces on Slovak territory (Šnidl, 2019a) and used narratives that were used by Russian state media on multiple occasions (SITA, 2018), precisely fulfilling the definition of a friendly foreign voice for Russian disinformation media. Danko was also

responsible for blocking the passage of the proposed Security Strategy in the National Council due to the mention of the illegal annexation of Crimea. (Šnidl, 2018a)

In the 2020 general election, the SNS failed to meet the 5% threshold (Statistical Office of the Slovak Republic, 2020); thus, Danko's prominent presence as a friendly voice for Russian disinformation will most likely diminish rapidly.

Although less prominent than Danko, Marian Kotleba, leader of an extreme-right People's Party Our Slovakia (ĽSNS), also played the unlikely role of a friendly voice. His rhetoric is even more aggressive than Danko's. He is openly anti-American, routinely calls NATO a terrorist organization, and his party's long-standing policy is for Slovakia to leave the EU and search for closer ties with Russia. (AP, 2016)

In 2016, the ĽSNS began collecting signatures in two referendum initiatives for Slovakia to exit the EU and NATO. The initiatives did not manage to collect enough signatures so far, and the party unsuccessfully proposed a bill to the National Council that would lower the number of required signature as well as the quorum. (Mikušovič, 2017) The initiative was connected to Russia by German public broadcaster ZDF. The news medium claimed that Russian pro-Kremlin businessman, Konstantin Malofeev, had supposedly sent 100 000 USD to Belarusian Alexander Usovsky to financially support pro-Russian activities in Central Europe, including the ĽSNS in Slovakia. Usovsky denied the allegations but said that he supports the idea of Slovakia leaving NATO. The General Prosecutor's Office started an investigation into the matter as it is illegal for parties in Slovakia to receive financial support from abroad. (Chovanec, 2017)

A severe blow to Marian Kotleba's pro-Russian rhetoric came in 2019 when the Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs published an official document evaluating extremist tendencies in the world. During the time, Kotleba's party promoted cooperation with Russia and an end to the EU sanctions. The document labeled the ĽSNS the only registered party in Slovakia to openly advocate extremist ideas with elements of racial intolerance, using especially anti-Romani rhetoric. It also mentions the ĽSNS's sympathies to the fascist Slovak State and its president and a war criminal, Jozef Tiso. (Šnidl, 2019c)

The ĽSNS protested and said that the officials in Moscow "do not seem to know the activities and views of the ĽSNS, or have been the victims of demonic misinformation" (Šnidl, 2019c) from the mainstream media. Party officials suspected that Andrej Danko was behind the report as the two parties are fighting over the pro-Russian votes in Slovakia. On the other hand, Slovak political scientists suspected that the document was an attempt by Russia to seemingly

condemn far-right extremists and instead show support to more moderate and predictable people. (Šnidl, 2019c)

Even after the widely shared report from the Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs hit the ĽSNS, the party continues to be useful for the Russian information warfare campaign as the anti-EU and anti-NATO rhetoric helps create ideological disorientation from within the Slovak society. (Vagovič, 2020)

Another party worth mentioning is the leftist Smer - Social Democracy party that has dominated Slovak politics for 14 years from 2006 until 2020, out of which it spent 12 as a member of a governing coalition and had even formed a one-party government from 2012 to 2016. It used to be a strong pro-European and pro-Western voice in the Slovak politics and oversaw Slovakia's ascension into the Eurozone in 2009. It was their party that was the main architect of the proposed Security Strategy of 2017. On the other hand, while Smer is a leftist party, it was always conservative in socio-cultural questions such as gay marriage. It also always operated with the nationalist agenda, and thus their positions repeatedly paralleled the far-right conservatives on the other side of the spectrum. (Filová, 2019)

While in its core, the party remains pro-EU as represented by the former Prime Minister, Peter Pellegrini (TASR, 2018), many party members became more vocal about socio-cultural issues. They started using more nationalist rhetoric that brought them ever closer to the far-right conservatives. The key turning point of this was the murder of the journalist Ján Kuciak and his fiancée Martina Kušnírová in 2018. Robert Fico, who was then Prime Minister, resigned, and the Smer-led Government was reshuffled after mass protests. (Davies, 2018) Even before his resignation, Fico quoted conspiracy theories and blamed conspiracies for destabilizing the country, he most notably named George Soros, Hungarian-American billionaire, as a culprit. (Kern, 2018) While Fico himself was not often outspoken critic of the previously highly valued Western orientation of the country, a few members of his party became very prominent on the Slovak disinformation scene.

Luboš Blaha, the Chairman of the European Affairs Committee of the National Council from 2016 to 2020, became the most prominent pro-Russian and conspiratorial voice of Smer after Kuciak's murder. With his aggressive posts, he rose to popularity on Facebook and attracted likely-minded extremist followers. (Praus, 2019) Blaha considers himself a Marxist and could be described as far-left oriented. The main target of his criticism was often the Slovak liberals including, President Zuzana Čaputová and NGOs. (Echo24, 2019) In relation to the Smer's rhetoric that is progressively more similar to the conservatives as mentioned above, he very seldom targets the extreme-right such as the ĽSNS in his attacks. Lately, he even appeared

on a photograph together with a deputy chairman of ĽSNS, a chairman of now mostly irrelevant Communist Party of Slovakia, and editors of disinformation media, a public affection not seen before. (Pataj, 2019)

As of 2020, Blaha achieved the largest amount of interactions (likes, comments, and shares) of any Slovak politicians on Facebook. In addition to that, he also over-performed multiple disinformation media pages, and his Facebook page became the most prominent propagator of problematic content in Slovakia. (Struhárik, 2020) Blaha is generally not mentioned in the mainstream media, and if he is, it is usually in regards to a lawsuit against him. Political commentators call him “a Smer’s troll” or “a communist troll,” and in the past, several politicians referred to him as ‘the Member of Parliament who must not be named’ out of disrespect. (Pataj, 2019; Bárdy, 2019)

Facebook is Blaha’s main platform where promotes his pro-Russian stances and very aggressively criticizes the EU calling it “anti-human, anti-social, full of hatred towards Central Europe and Slovak culture” and its leaders “losers.” (Kováčová, 2019) Blaha is also critical towards NATO and does not restrain from using conspiratorial narratives. He has a very positive view of the former communist regime and is the vocal supporter of authoritarian and totalitarian countries around the world. (Peraus, 2019)

Although Blaha is seemingly very proud of his statements in the Council of Europe where he defended voting rights of the Russian Federation, or his attacks on the US Embassy in Bratislava (Blaha, 2020), there is no evidence that he ever appeared in the Russian state-sponsored media.

The last point worth mentioning with regards to Smer is concerning the 2020 election campaign that included several online video advertisements full of conspiracy theories and outright false claims. One of them was a claim that the opposition parties want to admit thousands of migrants into Slovakia. Another claim made in a video by Fico and later supported by Blaha suggested that the United States is trying to influence the election so that upon victory, the opposition parties allow American military bases to be built in Slovakia. (Köles, 2020) This internet campaign moved Smer further away from the mainstream political parties and closer to conspiratorial extremists favored by Russia.

Among other friendly voices, besides several minor figures from the above-mentioned parties, SNS, ĽSNS, and Smer, are politicians and personalities with a smaller audience but often more extreme rhetoric. Štefan Harabin, a former Chairman of the Supreme Court and a candidate who ended 3rd in the 2019 Presidential election, spread conspiracy theories about thousands of illegal migrants heading to Slovakia and claimed that Crimea’s annexation was

legal. (Kováč, 2019) Róbert Švec, leader of the neo-Nazi Slovak Movement of Revival, is a supporter of Slovakia exiting the EU and NATO and is openly anti-Semitic and anti-Romani. (Benčík, 2016) Lastly, Tibor Rostas, owner and editor-in-chief of conspiratorial pro-Russian magazine *Zem a Vek* [Earth and Age], who was convicted of anti-Semitism is another notorious personality of the Slovak disinformation scene. (Kysel', 2019) The position of these minor friendly voices is perhaps too unimportant to be noticed by the Russian state-sponsored media, but they play an important role in the Slovak disinformation media.

4.2.2 Disinformation media

The main method of spreading disinformation in Slovakia is the usage of social media. Among social media, Facebook is dominant, and a very distant second is perhaps Instagram that is only now starting to attract disinformation spreaders. Twitter community is almost not existent in Slovakia as are communities on other social media such as Reddit.

Among the top Facebook pages spreading so-called problematic content when it comes to interactions are numerous friendly voices named above, such as Ľuboš Blaha on the top of the list but also Štefan Harabin or Marian Kotleba. However, pro-Russian disinformation media are also popular, and their interaction numbers are sometimes rivaling those of the smaller mainstream media. (Struhárik, 2020)

Disinformation media in Slovakia are monitored and listed by an independent site *Konšpiratori.sk* (or *konspiratori.sk*) [Conspirators]. Review Board of the site is occupied by numerous academics, journalists, media specialists, and security experts. Their list serves as a tool for advertisers to block ads from appearing on a disinformation website to prevent their brand from being associated with such medium. The list contains not only disinformation media but also sites that use hateful rhetoric or spread medical misinformation and wild conspiracy theories. Paradoxically, the most popular disinformation website was recently removed from *Konšpiratori.sk*'s database by a court's decision as a precautionary measure before a final ruling can be made. (*Konšpiratori.sk*, 2020)

The said website is *Hlavné správy* (or *hlavnespravy.sk*) [Main News]. The site's Facebook page achieved over a million and a half interactions in 2019, making it the most popular disinformation medium in Slovakia. *Hlavné správy* had existed from 2007 as a mostly dormant news medium. Its reinvention as a pro-Russian information source happened in 2014, shortly after the Maidan revolution in Ukraine took place. Besides picking over stories from Russian state-sponsored media, *Hlavné správy* started using pejorative adjectives in relation to

representatives of opposing worldviews, for example calling LGBTI activists ‘extremists.’ (Disinformation Hoaxes Propaganda, 2016)

Hlavné správy began spreading various disinformation, for example, a claim that the Ukrainians illegally transplant organs from dead bodies, a supposed Bible ban issued by the US library association while the Quran was not banned, a claim that 78% of British people would willingly move to Siberia if given free land, regular articles about how the US fears Russian army, a claim that Russia outsmarted the US and made 20 billion. (Disinformation Hoaxes Propaganda, 2016)

Over time, the website eased from the aggressive rhetoric and tried to transform into a seemingly trustworthy medium. The website was famously infiltrated by a political activist Jakub Goda under a fake identity. Goda wrote articles for the website containing fictitious facts and outright falsehoods. Editor-in-chief usually published his texts right away with little editorial control, although some overly conspiratorial articles were not published or were deleted only a few hours after publishing. Goda explained that the website is trying to look like a serious news source, and most of their articles contain only a short text taken from legitimate press agencies. The website stopped publishing blatant non-sense mentioned above, and a thematic focus on specific narratives nowadays creates the core of their content. Opinioned articles about immigrants and Muslims, anti-EU and anti-NATO, positive news about Russia, and nationalistic articles dominate the website. (Goda, 2018)

In 2018, a connection to Russian state-owned media was proven by an oversight on social media. Russian citizen Yevgeny Palcev living in Slovakia was detained at Bratislava Airport, and disinformation media tried to create a sensation from the incident. Activist page Disinformation Hoaxes Propaganda uncovered that Palcev wrote for Hlavné správy under a pseudonym Eugen Rusnák. His articles were among the most supportive of the Russian narratives on the Slovak disinformation scene. Association was proved between Palcev and Russian news agency Rossiya Segodnya that owns Sputnik agency, one of the main state-sponsored propagators of Russian narratives. Palcev supposedly cooperates closely with Sputnik and takes over Sputnik’s articles. This makes it one of only a few proven connections between Slovak disinformation media and Russian disinformation sources. (Šnidl, 2018b)

Another connection is a magazine Zem a Vek [Earth and Age], which we already mentioned above in relation to its editor-in-chief Tibor Rostas convicted of anti-Semitism. Although the magazine is not as popular as other disinformation sources, it is somewhat of a symbol of Russian-sponsored disinformation media in Slovakia. Zem a Vek is anti-Western

and pro-Russian, it spreads conspiracies about Jews, Americans, LGBT, and minorities. (Shekhovtsov, 2016)

In 2014, Rostas interviewed the Russian ambassador to Slovakia, Pavel Kuznetsov. A leaked audio file of informal dialogue between the two and another reporter that followed the interview revealed Rostas was asking the ambassador whether Russia would be interested in supporting like-minded media. Kuznetsov replied that he would be glad to write to Moscow and connect him with relevant structures. (Shekhovtsov, 2016) It is unknown whether Rostas was successful in his attempts to gain financing; however, it is known that he repeatedly visited Moscow and Slavic conventions in Prague and Belgrade, where he supposedly attempted to gain support from Russia. (Otajovičová, 2019)

Other popular disinformation media that are worth mentioning are Slobodný vysielateľ [Free Transmitter], online radio that connects personalities from all over the disinformation scene, and InfoVojna [InfoWar] which takes its name from an American alt-right website. Both Slobodný vysielateľ and InfoVojna follow Hlavné správy in the number of articles about Russia. Slobodný vysielateľ also often links articles from Hlavné správy. Both sites use similar pro-Russian rhetoric to Hlavné správy and seemingly follow their example about how to deliver information. (Šnidl, 2019b)

4.2.3 Social media groups, trolls, and bots

Lastly, an important tool for spreading pro-Russian disinformation are users themselves. Social media groups serve as an important vehicle for sharing disinformation articles among similar-minded individuals who often take the information and spread it further as misinformation. The connection between users then allows for the reinforcing of users' views and might lead to the radicalization of individual opinions. Social media groups also have mobilization potential higher than any other forms of disinformation tools, which might culminate into gatherings and protests that, even if small in numbers, can serve as a base for a disinformation media story. (Bokša, 2019, p. 6)

It is difficult to evaluate the impact of social media groups in Slovakia. As mentioned above, Facebook is the main and only relevant social media platform, and there indeed exist multiple large groups spreading problematic content. However, it is impossible to tell without using advanced analytical tools, whether these groups share the same members, or whether their large membership is even an important factor. These are the pages we reviewed, which contained pro-Russian posts, links to disinformation media containing narratives associated with Russian information warfare campaign, and other fear-mongering and hateful posts:

- RUSKO-SLOVENSKÉ priateľstvo / СЛОБАЦКО-РУССКОЕ приязельство [Russian-Slovak Friendship] – c. 34 000 members
- Priatelia Ruska [Friends of Russia] – c. 24 000 members
- Priatelia Ruského Veľvyslanectva na Slovensku [Friends of the Russian Embassy in Slovakia] – c. 18 000 members
- Za národné, kresťanské a sociálne Slovensko [For national, Christian, and social Slovakia] – c. 15 000 members
- ZA SUVERENITU SLOVENSKA , PROTI základniám NATO [For the sovereignty of Slovakia, against NATO bases] – c. 10 000 members
- SLOVANSKÝ ŠTÁT [Slavic state] – c. 6 000 members
- SLOVENSKO-RUSKÁ SPOLOČNOSŤ [Slovak-Russian Society] – c. 4 000 members
- Nechceme NWO, NATO, EU, imigrantov a nechceme vojnu proti Rusku! [We do not want NWO, NATO, EU, immigrants, and we do not want war against Russia!] – c. 1 500 members (Facebook, 2020)

With the above-listed groups, users generally have to be aware of the content they want to subscribe to when joining such groups since it is obvious from the name of the group. Arguably, more problematic groups are the ones that have politically aimed or ambiguous names, and users who join might not expect pro-Russian posts or conspiracy theories that often appear in these groups. We mapped a few known groups, although these can only serve as a sample:

- Hanbím sa za prezidentku Zuzanu Čaputovú. [I am ashamed of president Zuzana Čaputová] – c. 44 000 members
- Nedôverujem ex-prezidentovi Kiskovi, ani prezidentke Čaputovej [I do not trust ex-president Kiska, nor president Čaputová] – c. 24 000 members
- Slovensko.. !!! [Slovakia] – c. 7 000 members
- Otvor oči SLOVENSKO [Open your eyes Slovakia] – c. 3 000 members (Facebook, 2020)

Finally, in addition to social media groups, internet trolls are also an effective way to spread disinformation further. No complex study was ever conducted that would reveal the presence of a troll farm in Slovakia, or systematic usage of paid internet commenters. However, in our research into social media groups, we noticed that multiple users were very active in several groups, which could suggest that the user was an automatic bot or a troll.

One of the outcomes of a study of Russian sharp power in Slovakia suggested “either a strong presence of bots and trolls in the conversations occurring in Slovak online outlets or passionate individuals engaging in related online conversations and spreading pro-Russian narratives.” (Milo, Klingová, & Hajdu, 2019, p. 4) Although, the study worked with limited data and thus no solid conclusions can be made about how widespread is the presence of trolls and bots in Slovakia.

4.3 Government assessment of the Russian threat in Slovakia

As mentioned above, the extensive disinformation campaign accompanied the Russian annexation of Crimea, and the effects were also becoming visible in Slovakia; however, it was not until two years later when a Slovak governmental body published the first official notice of Russian disinformation. In June 2016, Ministry of Interior published an unprecedented statement which among other things stated:

“The topic of Russian propaganda as part of the hybrid threats destabilizing the organization of the state and its political system is one of the greatest challenges faced by many EU countries, including Slovakia. Like other states in Central and Eastern Europe, Slovakia has become a subject of the information activities of the influence structures of the Russian Federation. This is manifested in the form of creation and support of information channels and related entities, which spread the pro-Russian narrative and question the core values anchoring of Slovakia in the Euro-Atlantic area.” (Šnidl, 2016)

The statement also mentioned disinformation about the conflict in Ukraine, the migrant crisis, and conflict in Syria. The ministry promised to pay attention to the topic in the new Security Strategy as well as further analysis allowing for more concrete steps to be taken. (Šnidl, 2016)

In 2017, Andrej Kiska, then President of the Slovak Republic, addressed the European Parliament. In his address, Kiska warned about the threat of Russian disinformation and did not hesitate to name it directly:

“While we start talking about the European defense projects, we should act together against imminent and dangerous threat we all face — the Russian propaganda and information war. ... Propaganda has real consequences in our everyday lives, it shapes the moods in the EU and influences attitudes of our citizens. It seeks to spread chaos, to weaken our stability, to undermine trust of people in our institutions, and to make us afraid of every upcoming elections. ...

In many cases, we simply ignore it, or feel inappropriate to take actions. But Russia becomes more bold in their efforts to destabilize Europe and it is ready to use any situation to this end. ... We shall not tolerate disinformation to interfere into our strategic interests. We must defend ourselves. In words and in deeds.” (Office of the President of the Slovak Republic, 2017)

Another significant milestone came in 2019 when the Slovak Information Service (SIS) mentioned Russia in relation to hybrid threats in its yearly Activity Report. It was the first time that Russia was directly named in SIS reports in regards to hybrid threats:

“In the Slovak Republic, the Russian Federation pursued activities that were primarily aimed at maintaining the sympathy of the Slovak public towards Russia, its culture and politics, and at weakening forces openly skeptical or critical of Russia. The Russian side also sought to give the impression to its domestic and foreign audiences that Slovakia is a close ally of Russia, which, as a member of NATO and the EU, respects and understands Russian interests.” (Slovak Information Service, 2019)

In comparison to other countries, for example, neighboring Poland (AFP, 2016), Slovak authorities were very cautious about suggesting Russia is a hostile actor or a security threat. We cited the above-mentioned statements due to their rarity.

One of the reasons for the sparse governmental reaction to the Russian disinformation could be considered a result of failure to pass Security Strategy through the National Council on multiple accessions, as mentioned above. Even though the strategy was prepared by the government in 2016 and adopted in 2017, the National Council did not manage to even discuss it by 2020. (SITA, 2020)

As a part of the ruling coalition, the Slovak National Party headed by the above-mentioned Andrej Danko vetoed the submission of the proposed Security Strategy to the parliament on multiple occasions. As a party with a similar world view to that of the Russian Federation, they refused to vote in favor of the strategy until the government removes all mentions of Russia that refer to the illegal annexation of Crimea and Russia’s violations of international law. (Šnidl, 2018a)

Even though the pro-Western opposition parties were in favor of the government strategy and had actually submitted it to the parliament themselves after the SNS blocked it the first time, other coalition parties did not want to vote along with the opposition on the proposal. The situation had evolved into a stalemate, and the government bodies had to operate with the old Security Strategy passed in 2005, and Cybersecurity Strategy passed in 2008 that are both

long outdated. Their application to an ever-changing geopolitical situation is increasingly difficult. (Stráňavová, 2019)

As a result, the authorities have often operated with ambiguous statements or simply did not put out any statements about Russian disinformation. It could be speculated this was because they were trying to avoid offending positions of the SNS and other pro-Russian political forces since they lacked a security strategy approved by the National Council that would provide them with political backing for more daring approach. The above-mentioned statements from the Ministry of Interior and later SIS were unprecedented and made the news because they did not contain the usual ambiguity.

The situation in the government and authorities derives from the political situation. The SNS played a crucial role during the election period 2016 – 2020 in relation to lack of action with regards to Russian disinformation and, along with other actors, helped with the creation of fertile ground for disinformation media.

At the end of March 2020, a new government was formed in Slovakia. Its government program promises to fight the spread of disinformation and hoaxes, as well as strengthen the state's response to cyber and hybrid threats. (Kernová, 2020)

5 Analysis

Our analytical chapter is divided into sections corresponding with the compartments of our hypotheses. The first hypothesis is compartmentalized into two sections, one focused on Russian strategic culture and the other on the Russian adaptation of soft power. The second hypothesis focuses on the struggle for regional hegemony in Central and Eastern Europe and is addressed in the last section.

5.1 Strategic culture and perception of rivalry

H1: Russia has a particular strategic culture and thinks in terms of rivalry in international relations. It has adopted its own view on soft power. It sees Western soft power as a threat and, at the same time, utilizes propaganda and information warfare in an attempt to generate soft power of its own.

As we touched on in our Theory chapter, the strategic culture of a nation can be a vast subject to address, especially in a thesis not primarily focused on it. We will thus address overall characteristics of Russian strategic culture in more general terms and pay closer attention to those aspects that we have formulated in the hypothesis, namely view on the rivalry in international relations and position towards the West (as suggested by the second compartment). Also, Alastair Iain Johnston recommends that content analysis research of strategic culture be conducted within the historical context; we thus proceed accordingly. (Johnston, 1995, pp. 49-50)

After the end of the Cold War, both Russia and the West were searching for a new direction. US President George H. W. Bush was talking of ‘new world order’ (Bush, 1990), and Russian leaders were uncertain who the new enemy was. (Blank, 2006) A Western-dominated world order that would include the participation of Russia might have seemed inevitable at the time, but the Russian attitude started to shift away from this notion even at the end of the 1990s.

Although, it was not until Vladimir Putin became president that Russian strategic culture began to re-orientate away from the focus on the internal threats. Putin government set new security and foreign policy objectives that they judged impossible to achieve on the basis of cooperation with the West. Roger E. Kanet argues this change of strategic culture direction was caused by the unilateral decision to invade Iraq in 2003 by the US and by other Western initiatives such as the eastward expansion of NATO and the EU, US decision to deploy an anti-

missile system in Poland and Czechia, EU's new neighborhood policy, and Western support for the color revolutions in the former Soviet republics. (Kanet, 2019, p. 193)

NATO and EU expansions were viewed as an intrusion into the former Soviet zone and now the would-be sphere of influence of Russia. At the same time, the color revolutions underlined the Kremlin's intertwined perception of internal and external security as the regime was wary of a similar development in Russia. (Kanet, 2019)

Supporting Kanet's point, Mette Skak suggests Russian leadership's background, Vladimir Putin's in particular, has a significant impact on the current Russian strategic culture. She argues that Putin's idol, Soviet leader Yuri Andropov was traumatized by his experience from the Hungarian revolution of 1956, which lead him to adopt military interventionism as a universal solution to similar threats. According to Skak, Putin was similarly influenced by events of 1989 in Dresden when his KGB station was besieged by protestors. Putin was acting pragmatically during his first presidential term until the US invaded Iraq with the intention of regime change. In light of his Dresden experience, this and subsequent Ukrainian Orange Revolution of 2004, which Putin perceived as orchestrated by the West, then pushed him to conservatism, militarism, and brinksmanship that has shaped Russian strategic culture ever since. (Skak, 2016)

The importance of Vladimir Putin in the contemporary strategic culture has to be understood through the lens of the long-spanning historical legacy of Russian personalism and authoritarian rule. From Peter the Great to Soviet leaders, Russian rulers have historically consolidated a large amount of power and ruled with considerable authority. The current 'managed democracy' regime built by Putin is no different in that the President has managed to consolidate enough power and effectively silence the opposition to remain in power for two decades. (Shamrat, 2018)

Therefore, Putin's foreign policy positions have an inherent influence over Russian strategic culture. The above-mentioned and other factors that lead to his tilt away from pragmatism culminated in now somewhat iconic and often-quoted speech at Munich Security Conference in 2007.

In his blunt speech, Putin rhetorically started a new direction of Russian foreign policy when he took a stand against the unilateral position of the US in international relations and instead called for a multilateral international order. Most importantly, he openly called the expansion of NATO a serious provocation and suggested that it is directed against Russia. The whole speech and the subsequent discussion was held in a confrontational tone against the US

and the West. Putin repeatedly asserted the Russian position of a major power that has to react to what he perceived threats to Russia's sovereignty. (Putin, 2007)

Wary position of Russia towards the expansion of the Western institutions was also the underlying reason for the five-day war with Georgia in 2008. Georgian shift towards the West after the Rose Revolution in 2003 with the perspective of NATO membership and closer ties with the EU was viewed as an impediment of the Russian effort to maintain regional dominance in the former Soviet space. The sense of Western encirclement resulted in a military intervention that locked Georgia in frozen conflict by creating two secessionist republics only recognized by Russia. (Ellison, 2011)

This gradual tilt to a more aggressive stance could be considered an adaptation of Russian strategic culture to the circumstances perceived as increasingly unfavorable. Russian opposition against the expansion of NATO remained the same as in the era of the Cold War; however, the use of force to prevent further expansion of Western influence is a decision made by the Putin government in an effort to regain weight on the international stage.

However, engaging in foreign military intervention to prevent unfavorable outcomes is not unprecedented in Russian history. In some ways, the incursion into Georgia can be compared to Soviet-led military intervention in Hungary in 1956 mentioned above, as well as the invasion of Czechoslovakia in 1968. They, too, were conducted in order to prevent a country from drifting away from Soviet control and potentially joining the adversary.

Skak also argues that events of Hungarian Uprising boosted Andropov's sense of paranoia as he was afraid both of the repetition of similar events in the Soviet Union and the satellites as well as a Western conspiracy. Skak parallels this with Putin's fear of color revolutions and Western influence that attempts to expand its institutions and surround Russia. Putin, similarly to Andropov, does not hesitate from using the military as an answer to these fears. (Skak, 2016)

The period after the Russo-Georgian War marked deterioration of East-West relations as Moscow adopted an increasingly aggressive foreign policy in the post-Soviet space. Even the attempts of the US President Barack Obama to restart the relations during the somewhat more open presidency of Dmitry Medvedev did not manage to improve mutual relations markedly. Some progress was made when the US abandoned its anti-ballistic missile system in Poland, and the two countries agreed on the New START Treaty. Similarly, US-Russia military cooperation in Afghanistan was mutually beneficial; although, policies of the two countries concerning the Arab Spring differed widely as well as positions on power projection. The asymmetric relationship between the US and Russia can also be considered a cause for the

inability to expand the spheres of cooperation. Nevertheless, it was the return of Vladimir Putin to the presidency accompanied by a nationalistic campaign and attacks on the US, NATO, and the EU that derailed any progress achieved during this period. (Ulyanov, 2015)

As part of a plan to reestablish the dominant position of Russia in the former post-Soviet space, Putin moved towards the consolidation of the Eurasian Economic Union (EEU). To gain members for this union, Russia started a pressure campaign on the former Soviet states. (Kanet, 2019, p. 199) Armenia was among the countries that eventually joined the EEU at its launch in 2015; however, the process was far from straightforward. At that time, Armenia had already finalized an association agreement with the EU but withdrew at the last moment. This was caused by the Russian pressure campaign that indirectly threatened military support for Azerbaijan in the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict. Armenia had no other choice but to accept the invitation to the union. (Zank, 2017, p. 82)

Even before Armenia, Ukraine had also been pressured to enter the EEU, and the premise even seemed feasible in 2013 when Viktor Yanukovych was president. At the time, Ukraine had negotiated association agreement with the EU and, not too differently from Armenia, was scheduled to sign at the end of 2013. Just a few days before signing, Yanukovych announced that the agreement would not be signed, and Ukraine will instead join the EEU as Russia offered more favorable terms. The move initiated massive protests that culminated when Yanukovych fled the country a few months later, and a new government took power. Ukraine changed its position regarding the agreements, and in response, Russia sent troops to occupy Crimea and armed separatist movements in Eastern Ukraine that started a war unresolved to this day. Russia thus punished Ukraine by a frozen conflict that ceased its ability to further integrate into the Western organizations. (Zank, 2017, p. 81)

Russian willingness to once again use military means to achieve its goals marked the downfall of relations with the West. This acceptance of aggressive stance within the strategic culture is also seen in its strategic documents that nowadays view multiple Western policies as a security risk to Russia.

Military doctrines adopted in 2010 and 2014 both name NATO as the main external military risk (or danger, depending on the translation) to Russia's security. Emphasis on NATO military infrastructure near Russian borders and further expansion of the alliance as a danger underlines the gradual deterioration of the mutual relations. For comparison, the 2000 Military Doctrine does not mention NATO at all, and any indirect references are mild at best. (Russian Federation, 2014; Russian Federation, 2010; Russian Federation, 2000)

The indirect but obvious references to NATO in 2014 doctrine also include external military risks such as the deployment of military contingents in territories bordering Russia by ‘foreign states (groups of states)’ and establishment of strategic missile defense systems that violate established balance of forces. Arguably, several more indirect references to the US can be found, although the text is too ambiguous in these parts. (Russian Federation, 2014) Nevertheless, the prominent inclusion of NATO is a striking symbol of perceived rivalry that appears in Russian strategic documents.

Perhaps more telling than the military doctrines is the National Security Strategy adopted at the end of 2015. The strategy is emphasizing the country’s status as one of the world’s leading powers with independent foreign policy and carefully guarded sovereignty. The document steps away from somewhat indirect statements in its previous versions and openly identifies the US as a rival in achieving its foreign policy goals:

“The strengthening of Russia is taking place against a backdrop of new threats to national security that are of a multifarious and interconnected nature. The Russian Federation's implementation of an independent foreign and domestic policy is giving rise to opposition from the United States and its allies, who are seeking to retain their dominance in world affairs. The policy of containing Russia that they are implementing envisions the exertion of political, economic, military, and informational pressure on it.” (Russian Federation, 2015, p. 12)

Here, the document is outright establishing a rival relation between ever-stronger Russia challenging the US, which is attempting to keep hold of its international dominance. It also portrays the US as a bully that is seeking to stop Russia’s rise.

This is further strengthened by the view that the world is a dangerous, chaotic, and unstable place. Newly forming polycentric world order is accompanied by increasing global and regional instability and is full of threats, including a struggle for resources and competition of values. (Russian Federation, 2015) A description that would suggest Russian strategic culture subscribes to the idea of anarchy in international relations.

An interesting point that would also suggest a realist worldview was made by Katri Pynnöniemi, who, in her analysis of the strategic documents, noticed the usage of key terms such as national security, national interests, threats to national security, strategic national priorities and others. These terms are connected to a realist vision of international politics and relate to a struggle between states pursuing their national interests. (Pynnöniemi, 2018, p. 244)

The patterns that imply a connection between Russian strategic thinking and realist concepts are not definite proof that Russian leadership and elites choose to or are compelled by

circumstances to think in realist terms. Countries such as Germany have managed to completely transform their strategic culture as a response to unfavorable terms (Becker, 2013), and many liberal scholars would undoubtedly argue that this was a critical point in building European cooperation. Russia could take a similar turn, as suggested over the years by Russian liberal scholars. (Solov'ev, 2006) An argument can be made that unwillingness to go through change towards a more cooperative strategic culture is caused by the currently advantageous terms realist arguments bring to the ruling elites as they can be more easily used to keep hold of power. Regardless of the motivation, realist thinking is undeniably present in Russian strategic culture, at least to some degree.

In the National Security Strategy and more extensively in the Foreign Policy Concept adopted in 2016, Russia expresses will for closer cooperation with the EU and also NATO. However, areas of cooperation are very limited and restricted to the issues not connected with the post-Soviet space. In this region, Russia promotes institutions where it plays a leading role, such as the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS), Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO), and the EEU as mentioned earlier. In this context, Foreign Policy Concept mentions NATO and the EU only as a reason behind systemic problems in the Euro-Atlantic region caused by their geopolitical expansion and unwillingness to cooperate on the European security framework with Russia. (Russian Federation, 2016a) National Security Strategy goes further when stating that “The West's stance aimed at countering integration processes and creating seats of tension in the Eurasian region is exerting a negative influence on the realization of Russian national interests.” (Russian Federation, 2015, p. 4)

Russian strategic documents thus quite clearly state that Western countries and organizations are viewed as obstacles to the realization of its foreign policy goals in and beyond the post-Soviet space. In this way and the above-mentioned signs of realist perspective, we access that Russian strategic culture indeed thinks in terms of rivalry in international relations and considers the US, NATO, and the EU to be strategic rivals in the areas that fall within Russian national interest.

5.2 Interpretation of soft power and information warfare

H1: Russia has a particular strategic culture and thinks in terms of rivalry in international relations. It has adopted its own view on soft power. It sees Western soft power as a threat and, at the same time, utilizes propaganda and information warfare in an attempt to generate soft power of its own.

Several experts have, over the years, suggested that Russia operates with a different perception of the soft power concept than Nye's original theory. Multiple studies conducted over the years mapped these deviations of Russian international relations school. (Sergunin & Karabeshkin, 2015) Analysis of this premise is necessary in order to verify the second compartment of our first hypothesis.

Interpretation of the soft power concept by Russian academics and politicians is not strictly clear or uniform. However, several researchers who have studied this topic seem to agree that the key signature of the Russian view is primarily based on an instrumental and pragmatic approach to the soft power concept. (Sergunin & Karabeshkin, 2015; Osipova, 2014; Kiseleva, 2015; Kazharski, 2020)

Definition of soft power included in the Foreign Policy Concept of 2013 defines it as “a comprehensive toolkit for achieving foreign policy objectives building on civil society potential, information, cultural and other methods and technologies alternative to traditional diplomacy” (Russian Federation, 2013) The 2016 concept is even briefer by stating soft power “primarily includes the tools offered by civil society, as well as various methods and technologies – from information and communication, to humanitarian and other types.” (Russian Federation, 2016a)

Neither of these definitions offers much in terms of complex understanding of soft power beyond notable incorporation of information into the definition.

Complex understanding of the concept is better illustrated by statements made by prominent figures of the Russian government. In his 2012 essay outlining the foreign policy goals of the country, Vladimir Putin defines soft power as “a matrix of tools and methods to reach foreign policy goals without the use of arms but by exerting information and other levers of influence.” (Putin, 2012) More telling than this definition is the next sentence: “Regrettably, these methods are being used all too frequently to develop and provoke extremist, separatist and nationalistic attitudes, to manipulate the public and to conduct direct interference in the domestic policy of sovereign countries.” (Putin, 2012)

Similar rhetoric is repeated in the 2013 Foreign Policy Concept:

“Increasing global competition and the growing crisis potential sometimes creates a risk of destructive and unlawful use of "soft power" and human rights concepts to exert political pressure on sovereign states, interfere in their internal affairs, destabilize their political situation, manipulate public opinion, including under the pretext of financing cultural and human rights projects abroad.” (Russian Federation, 2013)

While a similar statement does not appear in the newer 2016 concept, this line of thinking remains. For example, in 2016, the Chief of the General Staff, General Valery Gerasimov said that “Russia faces a broad range of multi-vector threats, especially linked to the use of soft power: political, diplomatic, economic, informational, cybernetic, psychological and other non-military means.” (McDermott, 2016) He also called for the development of Russia’s own soft power instrument and strategy in order to combat the threat of a color revolution in Russia. (McDermott, 2016)

These statements most notably refer to a danger that can be caused by the usage of soft power. Soft power is viewed in an instrumental way to achieve countries’ interests abroad, and the aspect of the attractiveness of a state’s culture, political values, and foreign policy is seemingly overlooked.

The suggestion that soft power is not used to increase the attractiveness of a country but as an offensive tool marks a clear derivation from Nye’s original concept. Nye himself addressed this misconception in his 2013 article, where he points out that the development of soft power does not need to be a zero-sum game, and all countries can gain from finding each other attractive. (Nye, 2013) Russian view thus wrongly interprets soft power as a zero-sum game and a tool of manipulation and destabilization while the Nye’s original definition revolves mostly around the attraction. (Kazharski, 2020)

In a counterargument, a political scientist, Andrei Tsygankov, argues that the non-zero-sum character of soft power is only applicable to American soft power. Actors with different cultural values and foreign policy interests, such as Russia or China, need to apply soft power in a way that reflects these interests. Their perception of soft power as a non-zero-sum game stems from a perceived need to counterbalance American values and policies these actors do not support. (Tsygankov, 2013, pp. 259-260) In this view, while Russia is not faithful to the original concept, it does not necessarily mean its interpretation is wrong, as suggested by Kazharski. However, for this thesis, the content of the Russian perception is relevant, not the argument about its correctness.

One of the most prominent derivations of the Russian perspective on soft power is often said to be the inclusion of economic dimensions into the concept. Some Russian theorists believe that economic instruments can be viably implemented in both hard and soft power scenarios. (Sergunin & Karabeshkin, 2015, p. 353) For example, Russian trade and economic relations with the former Soviet republics is considered a viable tool for generating soft power by some scholars. (Tsygankov, 2013)

This inclusion originates in a much broader understanding of soft power proposed by some Russian international relations academics and leaders. They perceive all non-military instruments and resources available as part of an actor's soft power in direct contradiction to Nye, who excludes not only economic instruments but also coercion. (Sergunin & Karabeshkin, 2015)

The derivation of Nye's and Russian soft power concepts was perhaps best captured by Russian foreign policy expert Mikhail Troitski who claims that soft power has two definitions, narrow – defined as the ability to attract by Nye – and broad. “Broadly defined soft power is the ability to make others want what you want to do.” (Troitski, 2011) This definition is very close to the definition of hard power and even power in general. A possible explanation for broadening the definition of soft power could be that Russia fails to operate within the narrow definition and utilize it effectively.

Russian ‘high’ culture is often overshadowed by the authoritarian image of current Russia (Troitski, 2011), and contemporary popular culture, lifestyle, and media do not seem to be attractive to foreigners, or even compatriots. Similarly, Russia struggles to harmonize its traditional political values with internationally recognized democratic values and standards that are generally perceived as more attractive. At the same time, Russia's foreign policy initiatives are not internationally supported and are divisive in their nature. (Sergunin & Karabeshkin, 2015, pp. 357-358) These shortcomings of Russia in fulfilling Nye's definition of soft power suggest the reason behind the more popular broadened definition. The broad definition allows Russia to operate with the soft power concept in its way instead of the original one.

Sergunin and Karabeshkin sum up their view on the Russian interpretation of soft power as instrumentalist, pragmatic, and interest-centric:

“On the one hand, the Kremlin sees soft power as an important instrument in reclaiming and maintaining Russia's great power status, shaping the future world order and making the West (particularly the US) abide by the rules of that order. On the other hand, Moscow – in a very pragmatic way – views its soft power strategy as an efficient tool in promoting its national interests in foreign countries, building coalitions and counterbalancing the West in the global geopolitical game.” (Sergunin & Karabeshkin, 2015, p. 359)

Russian perspective also leads to a different interpretation of the use of soft power by other countries (as suggested by the quotes from Vladimir Putin, the Foreign Policy Concept, and General Gerasimov above). Orange Revolution in Ukraine or Arab Spring is viewed as destructive and unlawful use of soft power by the West. Used in this way, Russia perceives

other actors' soft power as a danger to Russia by corrupting the public and inciting extremism and separatism. (Kazharski, 2020; Kiseleva, 2015; Nye, 2017; Bouchet, 2016)

This perception is supported by statements such as that then President Dmitry Medvedev made in 2011 regarding the Arab Spring and the Western involvement:

“Look at the situation that has unfolded in the Middle East and the Arab world. It is extremely bad. There are major difficulties ahead... We need to look the truth in the eyes. This is the kind of scenario that they were preparing for us, and now they will be trying even harder to bring it about.” (Giles, 2016, p. 42)

An indirect reference to the Western use of soft power to incite protests and regime-changes is dangerous to Russia can also be found in the National Security Strategy. Among the threats to state and public security, the document identifies:

“foreign and international nongovernmental organizations, and financial and economic structures, and also individuals, focused on destroying the unity and territorial integrity of the Russian Federation, destabilizing the domestic political and social situation -- including through inciting "color revolutions" -- and destroying traditional Russian religious and moral values.” (Russian Federation, 2015, p. 9)

Both the broadened definition of soft power that also includes usage of information and perception of a threat from the Western use of information to incite color revolutions lead to another component of Russian perception, incorporation of information warfare into its own soft power strategy.

This was directly addressed by Nye in his 2017 article. As mentioned in the Theory section, information warfare can be used to offensively curb rival actor's soft power – Nye calls this negative soft power. Interference in European countries' internal matters to reduce the attractiveness of NATO – a threat to Russia – is an example of this. (Nye, 2017)

As noted in our Empirical overview, the disinformation narratives employed by Russia also include the so-called ‘anti’ rhetoric narratives that target the Western institutions and values to produce opposition rhetoric and undermine them. Even though these narratives seem to be less or, at best, as equally employed than others, from Nye's perspective, this could be considered an attempt to generate negative soft power. When taken into consideration, the generation of negative soft power might also be one of the goals of the Russian information warfare campaign that we have not accounted for during the formulation of our hypothesis.

Another matter is the attempt to generate soft power by friendly and positive narratives utilized by propaganda and information warfare. Nye argues that if a message is perceived as

too propagandistic, it loses credibility and is not able to attract and generate soft power among some audiences. He also refers to a complex study conducted by Finland's Institute of International Affairs (Pynnöniemi & Rácz, 2016) that found Russian propaganda had little impact in the Western media and did not result in a change of policy. (Nye, 2017)

Nye also addressed this in 2013 when he wrote that the Russian interpretation of soft power is mistaken by thinking that the government is the main instrument of soft power. He considers the utilization of government propaganda in soft power strategy ineffective, and much better results in gaining soft power would be achieved if civil society and the private sector were allowed to operate freely, autonomously, and critically. (Nye, 2013)

While authors generally question the effectiveness of the Russian strategy, Nye's conclusions are not universally accepted, and researchers tend to be restrained as the actual influence of propaganda and information warfare campaign is difficult to assess, and results vary from narrative to narrative and country to country. (Paul & Matthews, 2020, pp. 289-290; Gerber & Zavisca, 2016; Puddington, 2017) However, Nye's assessment that Russia uses information warfare and propaganda to both offensively diminish the soft power of rival actors and to promote a positive image and build attraction is in line with our findings in the Empirical overview. There we outlined both aggressive usage of narratives against the West but also uncritical rhetoric of pro-Russian figures, and publication of various positive stories in the disinformation media about Russia.

In addition, we have already mentioned above possible reasons for why Russia operates with a broadened understanding of soft power. Rutland and Kazantsev similarly note that it is challenging to promote a positive image of a country such as Russia. Besides the burden of history and economic stagnation that is hardly appealing, unpopular usage of hard power in the form of military incursions into Georgia and Ukraine also damaged the soft power building potential of Russia. (Rutland & Kazantsev, 2016) In the conceptualization of soft power, Nye had also noted that hard power exercises might lead to loss of soft power and illustrated it on the example of the US invasion of Iraq. (Nye, 2004, pp. 26-29)

Nevertheless, as quoted above, Russian strategic documents and President Putin consider soft power a valuable tool that Russia needs to develop. Although Nye's assumption that information warfare and propaganda are not effective in generating soft power might be relevant, Russia is seemingly in a position where there are not many alternatives left.

To sum up, Russia has adopted an instrumental and pragmatic view on soft power as a non-zero sum game. This perception influences not only its own soft power strategy but also how it sees Western soft power. Russia considers the usage of Western soft power to be

dangerous and destabilizing due to the incitement of popular revolutions. At the same time, Russia fully realizes the potential of soft power, and it tries to develop soft power of its own. However, it lacks the ability to attract; it thus uses information warfare as an arguably less effective way to generate soft power. In addition, Russia uses information warfare to target Western countries and institutions in an attempt to reduce their attractiveness and generate negative soft power.

5.3 Targeting of Slovakia

H2: Slovakia is a target of Russian information warfare due to its geographical position within the Central and Eastern Europe region. Russia is struggling for regional hegemony over this region with the EU and the US.

Mearsheimer's offensive realism, as described in the Theory chapter, is built on the premise that state actors seek to maximize the amount of power they have in order to achieve security and increase their odds of survival in the otherwise unsafe anarchical international system. One of the fundamental goals of great powers that lead to maximized security is to accomplish regional hegemony as global hegemony is not feasible.

Multiple authors have, over the years, argued that Russian foreign policy operates primarily with a realist perspective, and Russia's actions are, to this day, influenced by focuses connected to realist concepts. (Lynch, 2001; Wieclawski, 2011; Reichwein, 2016; Thalís, 2018; Hamilton, 2019) We have also touched this in the first section of this chapter, where we addressed Russian strategic culture. Mearsheimer, too, wrote a long article where he explains the realist point of view of Russian leadership that led to military incursions into Georgia in 2008 and Ukraine in 2014. (Mearsheimer, 2014)

From this perspective, Russia is geopolitically sensitive and views Eastern Europe as its 'backyard.' It relies on the region to provide a buffer zone between it and former enemy states in the West that it continues to view as a risk. Continuous expansion of NATO eastward endangered this buffer zone, and potential admission of Georgia and Ukraine lead to Russian military action. (Mearsheimer, 2014)

Russian perception is based on long historical experience with the indefensible landscape, its western borders being particularly vulnerable. Domination over neighboring countries prevented the borderlands from being used against it by another power. To prevent possible invasion, Soviet leadership had created puppet states in Eastern Europe as a preventive measure. They were to act as a buffer between the West and the Soviet Union. Once the

defensive frontier collapsed with the disintegration of the Warsaw Pact and dissolution of the Soviet Union, Russia was forced to retreat to its borders, farther east than they were for centuries. (Steil, 2018)

During the period of weakness after the fall of the Soviet Union, Russia had ‘lost’ multiple countries from its former sphere to the West. First, due to the expansion of NATO, and later the EU. Former satellites including the Visegrad countries, Romania, and Bulgaria were all incorporated into Western institutions as well as former Soviet republics in the Baltics.

While the former buffer zone created by the USSR disintegrated, NATO and the EU continued to expand. Steil points out that cases of military incursion into Georgia and Ukraine, but also Moldova, which we have not mentioned before, were all conducted in order to prevent their integration into NATO and secure the previously lost buffer zone. (Steil, 2018)

In terms of offensive realism, the loss of the Soviet buffer zone meant that Russia’s attempt to maximize its security within the Central and Eastern Europe region was undermined. It had lost the hegemony that it held over the region during the Cold War and is now struggling to regain at least some control to secure its borders against expanding US-led NATO and the EU – institutions that in Russia’s view represent rivaling great powers and a serious threat to its security.

We have already addressed the shift in Russian strategic behavior after 2014 several times in this thesis. To summarize, the newly revived confrontation between Russia and the West after the annexation of Crimea had also underlined perceived geopolitical threats to Russia. Mainly, NATO expansion is seen as a hostile initiative driven by US leadership, not a free-willed effort of the states in the region. And secondly, after the Euro-Maidan revolution in Ukraine that was viewed as orchestrated by the European politicians and networks, EU enlargement is now viewed as a security risk, and the EU is seen as ‘sanctions-enforcing adversary.’ (Baev, 2016, pp. 8-9)

To combat the risks to Russian security in the region, Russia attempts to gain an advantageous position by employing several strategies as described by Pavel Baev in his 2016 analysis of Russian activities in CCE region:

(1) Energy policy – mainly export of oil and gas into a greater European market with the intention to circumvent Ukraine and gain a politically favorable position that would allow asserting pressure on individual countries through reliance and prices. In addition, energy policy includes the export of nuclear power technology.

(2) ‘Export of corruption’ – clandestine deals with representatives of political parties in Central and Eastern Europe to assure their support. For example, Russian friendly treatment of

Hungarian Prime Minister Viktor Orbán and possible financial support might be used to fuel disputes within the EU.

(3) Military – Russian readiness to project military force and increase in the scale of provocative military activities mostly in the Baltic theater with a build-up but higher reluctance in the Black Sea theater. Reliance on the military to provide deterrence remains high, although the attempts to demoralize NATO with the provocations in the Baltics have not been fruitful.

(4) Information warfare/propaganda – a campaign that utilizes modern information and communication technologies to target European countries with a higher focus on the CEE region to influence public opinion and disrupt public discourse. (Baev, 2016)

Understanding of all these strategies is important when trying to comprehend the complex nature of Russian policies in the CCE region in the struggle for hegemony. However, due to the focus of this thesis, we will pay closer attention to information warfare. We have already addressed that offensive realism and most of the other realist theories do not pay special attention to information warfare as it is usually considered to be just another novel tool in an otherwise traditional inter-state conflict. We will thus attempt to focus on those aspects of the Russian information warfare campaign in CEE that could be aimed at gaining an advantage in this conflict.

While the outcomes of Russian information warfare in targeted countries are mapped extensively, very little is known with regard to the overall strategy. Russian information warfare is not strictly addressed in the published strategic documents. The military doctrine simply calls for equipping the Armed Forces with equipment “to enhance capacity and means of information warfare” (Russian Federation, 2014) without further elaborating on it. Similarly, a separate document, Information Security Doctrine, identifies threats to Russia and objectives to maximize domestic security but does not address Russian activities abroad at all. (Russian Federation, 2016b)

If documents that address the strategic, operational, and tactical level of conducting information warfare exist, they, or the information about their existence, are unavailable. Russian approach traditionally lacks openness and provides no insights into strategy, tactics, techniques, and procedures. As a result, Western analysts are often in the dark when it comes to Russian information warfare, and it forces them to conceptualize explanations due to a lack of precise information. (Tashev, Purcell, & McLaughlin, 2019, p. 138)

These secondary sources provide several possible objectives of the Russian information warfare strategy. For example, we described the cascading narrative groups in the Empirical

overview chapter that Russian information warfare campaign uses in the CEE region. Bokša categorizes these narratives to those that:

- target Russian-speaking minorities to encourage association with Russia,
- target Slavic countries to promote Pan-Slavism,
- target former communist bloc to invoke nostalgia,
- produce opposition rhetoric against the EU, NATO, the United States, immigration, liberalism, or Western values in general,
- produce alternative information narratives to promote conspiracy thinking and undermine legitimate information sources. (Bokša, 2019, pp. 2-4).

As referenced by Paul and Matthews, this is just one categorization that attempts to provide a partial explanation for the goals and objectives of the strategy behind Russian information warfare and propaganda. As there is no transparent source on the subject, authors deem that the overall goal is to overwhelm Russia's adversaries with misinformation to make them challenge the basis of their reality, or to destroy the credibility of all sources of information, or to sow discord in the West. As Paul and Matthews point out, neither of these are mutually exclusive, and all are plausible motives. Beyond general goals, Russia might also seek specific goals and use its propaganda machine to surgically pick targets and achieve particular narrow objectives. (Paul & Matthews, 2020, p. 290)

Without insight into the Russian strategy, we must proceed by the logic of the chosen theory. The goal of the Russian information warfare campaign in the CEE might thus also be an attempt to undermine Western structures and work towards regaining at least a partial control over the region.

Information warfare can be a very effective tool for diminishing the enemy's capabilities without resorting to the use of physical force that comes with not only higher costs in finances but also lives. In Western democracies, military decision-making is made by elected representatives based on public opinion. By targeting the general population directly, Russian information warfare aims to shape public opinion in favor of Russian objectives. In short, it is a strategy that is intended to break the enemy's will without fighting. Modern communication infrastructure allows for much more effective utilization of this strategy than in the past. (McGeehan, 2018, pp. 50-51)

However, military decisions are not all that is subject to public opinion. The Russian approach is holistic and targets other decision-making processes besides the armed forces. Not

just the state but the entire society is a target of information warfare. (Tashev, Purcell, & McLaughlin, 2019, p. 139)

A campaign to influence general public opinion to achieve desirable political outcome was with a high degree of probability employed in the period that preceded the referendum on the UK membership in the EU. The media had informed that the not yet published report by the special committee investigating Russian activities preceding the referendum was not able to quantify the impact Russian interference had. The report reportedly included dissemination of widely shared anti-EU articles by Russian state-sponsored media such as RT and Sputnik that reached four times as many impressions online than the official Vote Leave campaign did. (Wheeler, Kerbaj, & Harper, 2019) If it were ever confirmed that the Russian disinformation campaign had indeed had an impact on Britain leaving the EU, it would mean a massive success in weakening one of the rival Western institutions Russia views as a security risk.

We have already mentioned in the previous section that the effectiveness of information warfare is a questionable topic, and without knowing the exact objectives and having solid quantitative data, it is very difficult to determine whether a campaign is successful or not. If a similar campaign with a goal of influencing public opinion in the CEE region were employed, it would be thus equally difficult to measure.

However, without attempting to validate their success, we can point out several employed narratives that Russia used in countries of Central and Eastern Europe that directly targeted Western institutions, presumably with the intention of swaying public opinion closer to Russian interest. We have already briefly mentioned some of these in the Empirical overview.

One of the prominent and well-documented examples of an anti-EU narrative is the disinformation campaign utilized during the 2015-2016 migration crisis. At the time, the anti-migratory discourse was present in multiple CEE countries, including Slovakia. Russian narratives in the disinformation media leveraged it to create an image that the EU is an undemocratic organization that forces countries to accept migrants and surrenders European culture to Islamization. This narrative even found its way into mainstream media in Hungary since it correlated with the official government rhetoric. (Boyanova, 2019; Šuplata & Nič, 2016) Almost 150 examples of various disinformation and hoaxes under the tag ‘migration crisis’ can be found in the EU vs. Disinfo database in the period from January 2015 to December 2016, many of them produced directly by the Russian state-sponsored media. (EU vs. Disinfo, 2020b)

The second example is the long-running disinformation campaign against NATO that portrays the organization as war-mongering and often employs conspiracy theories. A disinformation spread by Russian sources falsely claimed that German soldiers deployed under

NATO mission had raped a teenage girl in Lithuania. Russian state-sponsored media also claimed NATO had plotted poisoning of Sergei and Yulia Skripal in the UK to justify increased defense spending. Similar stories that intend to portray NATO in the worst light possible were propagated widely in countries of the CEE region. (Beaulieu & Salvo, 2018, p. 2)

The alliance itself has established a separate page on its website that addresses the most popular disinformation and hoaxes spread by Russia, including enlargement, threatening Russia, and legality of its operations. (NATO, 2019)

These are just two samples of Russian information warfare narratives that are employed to subvert the EU and NATO in CEE countries. Little is known about the overall strategy of employment of these disinformation narratives. However, if the objective were to influence public opinion, worsen the perception of the EU and NATO in CEE and advance Russian interests closer to achieving hegemony over the region as indicated by the offensive realism theory, employment of these narratives would undoubtedly be in line with this objective.

Therefore, we conclude that Russia is struggling over regional hegemony in Central and Eastern Europe with the EU and the US. It is also employing various strategies to gain an advantage in this conflict. Russia is unquestionably employing information warfare in the region and Slovakia, as we described in the Empirical overview. The strategy that acts as an umbrella for these activities is arguably unascertainable; however, the nature of employed information warfare narratives suggests that they could indeed be employed to advance the Russian position in the struggle for hegemony over the region.

6 Conclusion

In this thesis, we have examined Russian information warfare and its employment in Slovakia intending to determine the reasons behind and provide an explanation based on a theoretical framework. Our analysis was based primarily on two hypotheses built on the chosen theories: strategic culture and soft power concepts and the theory of offensive realism. Our findings provided sufficient ground to verify the hypotheses and thus provide a plausible answer to the problem formulation.

To start with, we addressed our first hypothesis. When researching strategic culture, we have noted that Russia has indeed a specific culture that shapes its international behavior. The strategic culture of today's Russia is influenced by historical experience and bears several signature marks from previous regimes such as the notable presence of authoritarian leadership and personalism that allows the leaders to wield a large amount of power. The personal positions of President Vladimir Putin thus play a significant role in forming the Russian strategic culture. The outcome of Russian historical experience and Putin's ideology is the exorbitant focus on security against external threats. Combined with an arguably paranoid fear of Western influence and perceived interference to invoke regime changes, Russia reacts aggressively and is willing to employ military means outside its territory to defend its security.

Due to the perception of danger from Western interference, Russia views the West, led by the United States, as a rival to its interests in and beyond the post-Soviet space. Russian strategic documents mirror this by branding the expansion of NATO and the European Union as a military risk and impediments to free exercise of the sovereign foreign policy of Russia.

Next, we have affirmed that Russia has adopted a specific view on soft power that does not coincide with the original concept of Joseph Nye. Russia views soft power in a pragmatic and instrumental way, and its definition is expanded to all non-military means as opposed to just the means of attraction and co-optation. The view has been adopted as Russia finds it challenging to generate soft power by the means defined by Nye – attractive culture, political values, and foreign policy. Due to this expanded definition, the Western usage of soft power is viewed as similarly instrumental and thus threatening to Russia because of the Western support for color revolutions.

Realizing the potential of soft power, Russia is interested in having it at its disposal. Due to its inability to generate it in the standard way, Russia instead includes usage of information warfare into its soft power strategy. Russia uses this strategy to employ propagandistic

narratives that paint it in a positive light. This effort has a questionable success, however, and is not efficient in generating soft power.

We have not accounted for it in our hypothesis but discovered during the analysis that Russian information warfare might also be employed with a goal of generating the so-called negative soft power. By undermining Western institutions and values with disinformation campaigns, Russia is reducing their attractiveness and diminishing their soft power. Generation of both soft power and negative soft power is thus included in Russia's utilization of information warfare.

After the first hypothesis that focused on strategic culture and soft power, we have moved towards the second that attempted to provide a better understanding of reasons behind the targeting of Slovakia supported by offensive realist theory.

From this perspective, Russia considers Central and Eastern Europe vital to its goal of maximizing security. After the fall of the Soviet Union, many of the former Soviet republics and the satellite states joined Western institutions and diminished once an extensive buffer zone between Russian territory and the adversary in the West represented by the US-led NATO and the EU. The expansion of NATO and the EU is threatening to eliminate this buffer altogether and thus diminish Russian security. From the offensive realist standpoint, this is a struggle over the regional hegemony between Russia and its adversary, the West. To gain an advantage in this struggle, Russia is employing various strategies, including information warfare.

Little is known about the official strategy and tactics of Russian information warfare in Central and Eastern Europe, but in general, information warfare can be employed to influence the public opinion of the targeted country to achieve preferred outcomes, whether military or another. Judging by Russian information warfare narratives as described in the Empirical overview, it is viable for the employed Russian strategy to be focused on gaining an advantage in the struggle over the regional hegemony.

Finally, to conclude and answer the problem formulation directly: Russia is employing information warfare due to its specific strategic culture that allows for utilization of aggressive policy and due to a particular view on soft power that incorporates information warfare into the possible methods for soft power generation. Russia views the West as its rival and Western usage of soft power as a threat; in response, it attempts to generate soft power of its own, as well as to reduce Western soft power, by using information warfare. Slovakia is a target of this effort due to its geographical position within the region of Central and Eastern Europe. Here, Russia and the West struggle for regional hegemony, and information warfare is one of the tools Russia uses to gain an advantage in this struggle.

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