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DISCUSSING HYBRID WARFARE VIA SOCIAL PSYCHOLOGY: THE CASE OF DISINFORMATION AND PROPAGANDA EXPLOITING MINORITY GROUPS

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Abstract*: This paper argues that minority issues are often exploited in hybrid warfare, serving as both subject and target of disinformation and propaganda. The ultimate aim is to polarise society, weaken cohesion and even trigger conflict in the countries of interest to the aggressor. The paper discusses studies on disinformation, propaganda and minorities and applies the lens of social psychology to identify key characteristics of minorities that can be targeted by third parties in hybrid warfare. Finally, it briefly examines how the Russian Federation is using these tools in its hybrid war against Ukraine and other democratic states. As part of a larger work in progress, the paper does not offer at this stage a complete and tested analytic model, but signals the need for an approach that goes beyond simple debates about disinformation and propaganda narratives towards the socio-psychological mechanisms that make them efficient.*

Keywords: *minorities; hybrid warfare; social psychology; identity; disinformation; propaganda; Ukraine; Russian Federation.*

Introduction

The paper addresses from a theoretical perspective a particularly sensitive concern in the sphere of national security, namely *the use of minority issues as elements that can be speculated upon by an actor seeking to destabilise a state or group of states by means of hybrid warfare*. The paper does not aim to constitute a complete analysis of this phenomenon, but only to signal the need for an approach that goes beyond simple debates about disinformation and propaganda narratives and to identify the mechanisms that make them so efficient. Building a tool for data collection and analysis, as well as identifying causal relationships, is a long-term process whose results will be included in a comprehensive study.

Minority issues can be exploited due to the already existing vulnerabilities related to these groups, such as the failure to respect their rights in many countries despite the development of national and international legislation in this area over the last 30 years. Furthermore, historical events portrayed as discriminatory have generated resentments, which still persist. In addition, features of democratic societies such as respect for human rights and fundamental freedoms, including freedom of expression and of the press, can be used to empower extremist and separatist discourses. According to some studies, certain international actors employ a variety of military and non-military tools to achieve their foreign policy objectives; this approach is commonly referred to as hybrid warfare (White and Overdeer 2020). According to them, one of the levers used by the Russian Federation, for example, is precisely the exploitation of ethnic problems in the targeted societies. Since 2014, Russia has resorted to escalating ethnic conflict as a primary technique in hybrid warfare. It has effectively exploited the fears of ethnic Russians and Russian speakers in the Baltic states and successfully mobilised ethnic Russians in Ukraine to support its goals (*Ibidem* 32). Western societies are highly

susceptible to this hybrid technique. Although liberal democracy promotes the acceptance of ethnic differences and cultural pluralism (Sardoč (Ed.) 2021) (Agarin 2019), the perception of fairness is not determined by the state actor in question, which acts in accordance with international law. Instead, it is determined by the minority's own perception of those policies. Minorities are often victims of discrimination, internal conflict and even armed conflict, while receiving different treatment from members of the majority group and seeing themselves as a separate group (Wirth 1941, 415). *If there is a discrepancy between the state's perception of how it handles minority issues and the perception of minorities towards this treatment, both majority and minority populations may be susceptible to messages from a third party seeking to exploit the divisions between them.* Russia targets not only the ethnic Russian population, but any other ethnic group or minority, so as to achieve its goals for that country (White and Overdeer 2020, 33). Disinformation and propaganda are, in this context, non-military tactics of hybrid warfare by which a state or non-state actor can destabilise a country in order to promote its own interests which, among other things, can destabilise and even lead to armed conflict (World Economic Forum 2024).

In its first section, the paper emphasizes the importance of the subject matter by outlining the perceived security risks. Then it identifies how minorities can be used in hybrid conflicts by clarifying their definition from the perspective of social psychology. The third section briefly discusses how the Federal Russian government employs minorities in the hybrid war against Ukraine and other Western countries. It is crucial to note that this is not a case study, but rather a framework to be suggested and tested later for future analysis.

1. Propaganda and disinformation as risks and threats to national security

Propaganda and disinformation, whether offensive or defensive, by their intentional and targeted nature, constitute risks and threats to national security according to both current literature (Erbschloe 2019) (Vann 2020) (Sługocki and Sowa 2021) and institutional reports (NATO Parliamentary Assembly 2021) (European Parliament 2023).

Propaganda is intended to promote a specific point of view or political agenda (that might be biased or misleading), rather than to deceive and mislead like disinformation. Its basic definition refers to a systematic activity of transmitting, promoting or spreading doctrines, theories or ideas from the positions of a particular social group and ideology, with the aim of influencing, changing, shaping attitudes, opinions, beliefs or behaviours (Vlăsceanu 1998). From this perspective, propaganda includes not only messages, but the formation of an entire system that comprises a dedicated institutional structure, an ideology, and the means and methods of transmitting those messages. It is worth noting that the term propaganda has undergone a shift in connotation over time, although it is important to recognize that it does not necessarily carry a negative meaning inherently, but also it is neither objective nor neutral. It may pose a threat to national security if it promotes ideas that contradict the rule of law and thus destabilize the country.

Disinformation, in exchange, is widely perceived as a significant risk to national and international security. It might be a component of propaganda and it is defined as the deliberate modification of messages conveyed in a communicative process by a particular social agent with the intention of inducing desired attitudes, reactions, or actions in the target audience (Bulai 1998). This is a matter of concern for both the general public and experts in the field, as two recent reports confirm.

The most recent report, *The Munich Security Report* 2024 highlights the *Munich Security Index*, which assesses perceived risks across five dimensions – overall risk, trajectory, severity, imminence, and preparedness - based on responses from 1,000 people from each of the 11 surveyed countries (Bunde, et al. 2024). The examination of the risk of "disinformation campaigns from

enemies" reveals a consistent upward trend in its score across both the G7 countries and the BICS countries (Brazil, China, India, and South Africa). The final risk index score changes in both cases. In the G7 countries, it drops from 12th place in November 2021 to 15th in October/November 2022, and then rises to 9th in October/November 2023. Meanwhile, in the BICS countries, it steadily increases from 12th place in November 2021 to 7th in October/November 2023 (*Ibidem* 32-33). The risk of "racism and other discrimination" is another important perceived risk. In November 2021, it ranked 13th in the final risk index score in G7 countries, then dropped to 19th place in October/November 2022, before rising again to 14th place in October/November 2023. Meanwhile, it increased from 12th place in 2021 to 8th place in 2022, before decreasing to 10th place in 2023 in the BICS countries (*Ibidem*). At this time, there is no available information regarding the potential correlations between these two perceived risks.

The other report to which we refer is *World Economic Forum*'s analysis of global risks in 2023. One of the most important difference is that it interviews over 1,400 experts and performs a network analysis of the perceived risks. In this context, "misinformation and disinformation generated by artificial intelligence" is identified as potential trigger for a global material crisis in 2024 (World Economic Forum 2024). Next to it, the other two places in the hierarchy of perceived risks are occupied by "extreme weather" (first place) and "societal and/or political polarisation" (second place). A projection of the likelihood of impact over the next 2 and 10 years respectively shows a shift in the ranking towards environmental risks (extreme weather events; critical changes in Earth systems; biodiversity loss and ecosystem collapse; natural resource shortage). For the next two years, however, the most important perceived risks are: misinformation and disinformation; extreme weather events; societal polarisation; cyber insecurity, and interstate armed conflict. The network analysis clearly demonstrates the existence of strong two-way links between four major nodes: misinformation and disinformation, societal polarisation, intrastate violence, and erosion of human rights (*Ibidem* 7-8, 21). *Misinformation and disinformation have the strongest link to societal polarisation*, as confirmed by the respondents. The first perceived risk is defined as persistent false information, whether deliberate or not, widely disseminated through media networks, which significantly alters public opinion in a way that diminishes trust in authorities (includes false, misleading, manipulated, fabricated content, etc.) (*Ibidem*, 98). Such actions can result in societal polarisation, which refers to ideological and cultural divisions within and between communities. This can lead to a decline in social stability, decision-making blockages, economic disruption, and increased political polarisation (*Ibidem*, 97). The explanation for the two-way relationship is because members of polarized societies are more likely to trust information that confirms their beliefs, whether that information is true or false, and vice versa, trusting such information can lead to societal polarization.

Another link identified by the experts interviewed in the report is *between misinformation and disinformation* and *interstate armed conflict*. This is done on two branches between whose nodes there are also biunivocal relations:

- Misinformation and disinfomation ↔ Societal polarisation ↔ Terrorist attacks ↔ Interstate armed conflict;

- Misinformation and disinfomation ↔ Intrastate violence ↔ Terrorist attacks ↔ Interstate armed conflict.

Misinformation and disinformation are destabilising forces in any country where they are employed. This is evident in all of the cases mentioned. NATO's definition of hybrid warfare identifies disinformation as non-military means to blur the boundaries between war and peace, sow doubt in the minds of the target population, and destabilise and undermine societies (NATO 2023). *It is crucial to identify and study the most significant aspects of social life that can be exploited in such a conflict.*

Minority-majority relations are a significant theme for debate. UN estimates suggest that there are currently between 600 million and 1.2 billion people belonging to minorities worldwide (United Nations 2024). *This highlights the need to address statistical imbalances and qualitative*

issues related to their rights and relations with the majority in general that might be speculated in hybrid conflicts. The issue is all the more complex because the term minority is defined not only by appeals to ethnicity and nationality, but also by all the different characteristics that distinguish a smaller group from a larger one. Furthermore, it could be argued that the utilization of minority issues in hybrid warfare could be viewed as a premise. This is due to both the transformation of social media into weapons (Singer and Brooking 2018) and the intensification of hate speech online, particularly towards minorities (UN General Assembly 2021) (Singer and Brooking 2018, 266). Hate speech poses a significant threat to the peace and stability of entire countries, as well as to minority groups (UN General Assembly 2021, 4, 6). History has shown that when hate speech is combined with disinformation, it can lead to widespread stigmatisation, discrimination and violence (United Nations 2023). For example, the OSCE Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights recorded more than 7,200 hate incidents reported by civil society, international organisations and the Holy See in 2020, most of which are motivated by racist and xenophobic prejudice (2,385), anti-Semitic (2,322), anti-LGBTI (1,207), anti-Christian (997), anti-Muslim (333), gender-based (208), anti-Roma (84), disability-related (29) or religion/belief (12) (ODIHR 2022).

Consequently, it can be seen that the predisposition of democratic societies to an increase in hate incidents is a vulnerability that can be exploited in a hybrid war. By definition, hate speech can be directed at minorities, regardless of their nature, and minorities can thus become targets of hybrid operations.

The issue of minorities is addressed from different perspectives, including international law, sociological theory, social psychology, and political studies. Each of these perspectives provides a unique and valuable insight into the complex issues surrounding minority rights and representation. However, the aim of this paper is to translate the debates into the field of security studies, but not in the sense of studying the securitization or desecuritization of minorities. This topic has already been widely debated in various works (Roe 2004) (Jutila 2006) (Al and Byrd 2018) (Carlà and Djolai 2022) (Jašina-Schäfer 2023). Rather, *the paper is intended to take the first steps in analysing how this process can be influenced from outside, by a third actor, to increase insecurity and destabilise another state actor.*

Such an approach starts from the constructivist premise that security is a social and intersubjective construct (Taureck 2006).

2. Minorities and their weaponisation: a social psychology perspective

Identifying a comprehensive and widely accepted definition of minorities is a challenging task. The primary reason is the varying contexts in which minority groups are discussed, including differences in their defining characteristics, the degree of collective identity, and their geographical dispersion throughout the country. There are various types of minorities, including national, ethnic, religious, linguistic, and sexual minorities. They may have a strong sense of collective identity and historical landmarks, or they may have only partially preserved their common heritage. Minorities may also be concentrated in specific areas within a country or dispersed throughout its territory.

The international legal framework on minority rights is particularly comprehensive. However, "The Universal Declaration of Human Rights", the main document that enshrines the rights and freedoms of all human beings, does not include the term minority (United Nations 1948). In 1949, the Economic and Social Council of the United Nations launched the most comprehensive international effort to clarify issues related to social groups. A descriptive study was completed, which identified over ten criteria to distinguish various types of minorities (United Nations Economic and Social Council 1949). Also, "The Declaration on the Rights of Persons Belonging to National or Ethnic, Religious and Linguistic Minorities" is a particularly

noteworthy document among those that govern the status of minorities at the international level. It emphasizes the crucial link between the promotion and protection of the rights of national, ethnic, religious, and linguistic minorities and the political stability of the states in which they exist (United Nations 1992) This connection is a useful element in security analysis. The Declaration pertains not only to the rights of individuals who belong to minorities but also to the responsibilities of states where such groups exist. States have the responsibility to safeguard their existence and identity, promote the development of their identity, enact the necessary legislation, and foster international cooperation to encourage mutual understanding and trust.

Relying solely on the perspective of international law is insufficient. *A multidisciplinary approach that includes sociology and social psychology is necessary to create a framework for identifying how minorities are exploited in hybrid warfare.*

In sociology, the main directions of defining minorities either use discrimination as a basic criterion (Wirth 1945) *apud* (Berbrier 2002, 6), or reduce everything to the statistical factor (Kennedy Jr. 1973), or define them by interaction with other groups that are similar or not (Turliuc 1996). In the first case, the limitation is that minority members are presented as victims, not as active agents in society who are involved in the development and implementation of policies that directly concern them. The second case has limitations, particularly regarding reporting rights in countries where women are statistically in the majority but do not enjoy equal rights with men in various areas of social life (see gender studies). In the third case, the characteristics of a minority, especially a national or ethnic minority, can be summarised as follows: its physical and cultural features are socially defined and interpreted; it holds less power compared to the majority group; its chances of socio-professional achievement are lower due to limited access to resources; it suffers differential and pejorative or discriminatory treatment; its self-consciousness is gradually formed by the group members' awareness of their common status (*Ibidem*, 55-56).

To truly capture the essence of minority and majority, it is imperative to broaden the definition beyond statistics and encompass additional criteria such as religion, nationality, gender, skin colour, and language. In this sense, the minority attribute is associated with groups whose norms and values deviate from those desired and valued by the majority (Perez and Dasi 1996, 62).

Our review of the academic literature devoted to the analysis of minorities has identified some of the characteristics of these social groups that can be exploited in a hybrid warfare:

- They are self-conscious units, linked to distinct traits that members share, some of which are even special physical and cultural characteristics (Wagley and Harris 1964, 10) that allow dominant segments of society and even to third party actors to induce low self-esteem in the minority group.

- Various texts highlights the potential negative consequences of ethnocentrism, such as conflict and separatist tendencies. It is important to recognize that ethnocentrism may benefit the survival of a group (*Ibidem*, 261), but it should not be used as a justification for discriminatory behaviour or exclusionary policies (Turjačanin, et al. 2017, 71). The suggestion that the minority's attachment to the state may be lacking is a complex issue that requires further examination and consideration of multiple perspectives including the one of hybrid warfare.

- Minority groups, especially ethnic ones, may be concentrated in a certain region of the country, which favours the development and fuelling of separatist feelings[1].

- Minorities may be subjected to either brutal persecution or moderate discrimination, leading to increased conflict with the majority and general social instability[1].

- Most of the minority groups want to preserve their identity and differences from the majority, even in the face of pressures that can be speculated by a third party actor with the aim

[1] These characteristics are not exclusive. Minorities can live among members of the majority, without being concentrated in certain regions. Some minorities may seek to free themselves from their distinct social identity, while others may seek to retain their identity. (Wagley and Harris 1964, 11).

of increasing social instability[1]. They may also reject majority norms and values in reaction to prejudice and intolerance (Letki 2022, 131).

- Some minority groups have been forcibly displaced, which gives rise to resentment towards the actors or events that caused the phenomenon and which can be speculated by a third party actor in order to increase instability[1].

- In multicultural societies, although the effect is not strong, cultural diversity can decrease social cohesion (Letki 2022, 131) and, obviously, this aspect can be speculated by a third actor in hybrid warfare.

- According to many sociologists, hostility and conflict are universal aspects of intergroup relations, institutionalized in nature rather than being solely aggressive behaviour. The unique characteristics of minority social groups tend to favour hostility and conflict in minority-majority relations. This trait can be exploited in a hybrid war to fuel its conventional dimension (Wagley and Harris 1964, 256-258).

In analysing how the above characteristics can be exploited in a hybrid warfare, one of the concepts that can be raised is *identity* (the result of the interplay between self-perception, presentation to others as that person, and designation or recognition by others as that someone). Identity is frequently used to defend either the minority or the majority, depending on the political stance. Left-wing politicians often argue for communitarianism, while right-wing politicians may use it to justify xenophobia (Heinich 2022).

Henry Tajfel demonstrated that an individual's group membership exerts a significant influence on their social behaviour, along with their character and motivations, raising the idea of threat to identity. If social identity is defined in terms of dominance or power relations, its main dimensions become inequality and limited access to power in society, as members of minority groups are isolated, labelled and treated discriminatorily on the basis of their differences from the majority group (Phenice and Griffore 2000). Minority members, particularly those in younger age groups, are at risk from this perspective. Comparing one's social identity to that of a dominant group can result in dissatisfaction with one's own identity, potentially leading to hybrid conflict (*Ibidem*), an element that can be exploited in hybrid warfare.

In hybrid warfare, identity is exploited by both disinformation and propaganda.

Disinformation is manipulating issues related to social identity and it is most impactful when these issues are previously creating social divisions ready to be exacerbated. An European Parliament report on the impact of disinformation campaigns on migrants and minority groups in the EU shows that by 2021 there is a rich literature on disinformation about minorities in member states which is most often weaponised during election campaigns (Szakács and Bognár 2021, 11) (Hoogensen Gjørv and Jalonen 2023). Also, propaganda is a powerful tool that political elites use to influence the behaviour of specific social groups, with the goal of altering the social identity of its members. Identity propaganda refers to narratives that strategically target and exploit identity-based differences in accordance with pre-existing power structures, in order to maintain the dominance of one group over another (Reddi, Kuo and Kreiss 2023) (Horz 2023).

A team of experts, led by Austrian social psychologist Wolfgang Wagner, has demonstrated that each group possesses a unique comprehension of social phenomena, which serves as the foundation for their social identity (Wagner, et al. 1999). Phenomena and events can be unfamiliar and disruptive to social groups. However, with the help of others and scientists and experts, these groups can effectively cope with new situations materially and also symbolically with the help of social representations. They play a crucial role, as they help anchor and objectify these phenomena/events. It is important to acknowledge that different groups may have varying understandings of the same issue (Moscovici 2011) (Wagner, et al. 1999) (Seca 2008).

Minority and majority groups adopt a certain style of behaviour to maintain or not their identity or to influence social representations of themselves. According to S. Moscovici (Perez and Dasi 1996, 64), minorities can be classified into two categories based on their behaviour:

nomic groups and *anomic groups. This typology creates a new classification of societies, essential for understanding how minorities may be exploited in hybrid conflicts*. Nomic groups are defined as those groups which, although deviating from the norms of other groups, propose alternative norms which make them appear in the social field as independent social groups, and each group will construct a representation of the others according to the relationships they have (cooperation, conflict, complementarity, coalition). Perez and Dasi assert that negative valorisation of a group results in discrimination against it, and vice versa (*Ibidem*). Anomic groups deviate from majority norms but do not propose alternative norms, creating the impression that they are social categories rather than independent groups, unlike nomic groups. These groups do not create a conflict. However, they do appear as posing a social problem and will be forgotten and marginalized (*Ibidem*, 65).

It is important to point out that these two types of groups or minorities can coexist or dominate each other in a given society because, according to Perez and Dasi, four types of societies are thus identified. They can be helpful to identify situations where a society may be susceptible to misinformation and propaganda by exploiting both minority groups and their relationship with the majority.

A type of society with low levels of social conflict and high levels of uniformity is one in which both nomic and anomic groups are few. From the perspective of hybrid warfare, it could be argued that this type of society presents certain challenges when it comes to destabilisation.

Another type of society is one that is experiencing objective change, with few anomic groups and many nomic groups. In this case, the rules proposed by the latter can serve as alternatives to those of the state. Therefore, if change is desired, it may be beneficial to encourage the formation of nomic groups.

The third identified society is the one in a state of anomie, with few nomic groups and many anomic groups, where social marginalisation is at a high level and there are no alternatives to this situation. In this case, it is possible for a society to experience disorder and destabilization due to the influence of a third-party actor who disseminates targeted disinformation messages that challenge the existing social order.

Finally, there is also the type of disintegrating and radical change society, with many minorities both anomic and nomic, in which the majority is delegitimised. Therefore, when conducting hybrid warfare, encouraging the emergence of nomic and anomic minorities is, in theory, an effective way to delegitimise a society.

It must be noted that the discussion we propose in this section on how nomic and anomic groups can be exploited in hybrid warfare can only be conducted at the theoretical level, as there is no complete theory of the emergence of minorities in general, as noted in the works in this field (*Ibidem*, 63). We are referring to all kinds of minorities, not just ethnic minorities whose existence is a result of the establishment of state borders.

The socio-psychologists Serge Moscovici, Willem Doise, Augusto Palmonari, Gabriel Mugny, Juan Antonio Perez, and Francisco Dasi have developed theories that include concepts supporting the understanding of the mechanisms involved in the potential use of minorities in a hybrid conflict. These concepts include conformity, power, and influence.

This paper will not discuss each of these, but it dwells on Moscovici's assertion that a potential failure of Western democracy may be the result of the gap that will emerge between the profound influence that minorities exert and the small share of authority that they are allocated with (*Ibidem* 26). The situation where the minority holds influence but not power can create a growing divide between the systems of governing people and managing their beliefs. This trend was identified over 40 years ago and can now be speculated in a hybrid conflict where influence is enhanced by easy access to media and social media.

3. A brief overview of how Russian Federation uses minorities in the hybrid warfare against Ukraine and other Western countries

With regards to the concept of hybrid warfare as conducted by Russia, it is worth noting that this term is not officially used by this actor, but expresses a Western view of this type of warfare. There are several terms used to describe it, such as "new generation warfare" (Radin 2017, 9), the so-called "Gerasimov doctrine" (Galeotti 2014) (Galeotti 2018), and "non-linear warfare" (McDermott 2014a) (McDermott 2014b). However, it is worth noting that these terms may not always have the same meaning (Ball 2023). However, for the purposes of this study, the term "hybrid warfare" will be used, based on the definition originally developed by F. Hoffman. It is worth noting that this term is used from a Western cultural perspective: "Hybrid wars can be waged by states or political groups, and incorporate a range of different modes of warfare including conventional capabilities, irregular tactics and formations, terrorist acts including indiscriminate violence and coercion, and criminal disorder" (Hoffman 2007, 14, 29, 58). From this point, the definition has been refined by various authors, including Weissmann et al. (Weissmann, et al. 2021), and at the institutional level by NATO and the EU. However, it is worth noting that ambiguities still remain due to the definition's widening scope.

From the perspective of this paper, the non-military component stands out in hybrid warfare. It is about the securitisation of various social issues in order to provoke a political response to them, but also about disinformation campaigns designed to influence and deceive in order to create disorder and polarise society. Even if propaganda and disinformation are not a new phenomenon, today they stand out for their comprehensiveness, frequency and impact, all amplified by traditional media and social media, as well as by technological innovations such as bots or deepfake apps. According to recent analyses, it has been suggested that Russia is the primary actor in carrying out such campaigns (Torossian, Fagliano and Görder 2020). Other studies have analysed the Russian model of propaganda and identified four main characteristics (Paul and Matthews 2016). It has been suggested that there is a high volume and multi-channel dissemination of information, with fast, continuous and repetitive messaging. Additionally, it has been noted that there may be a lack of commitment to objective reality and to the message consistency. All these characteristics speculate the psychological mechanisms that allow the use of minority group as weapons in a hybrid war (see the second chapter of this paper). The variety and volume of sources, together with views similar to those of the recipient, lead to greater acceptance of the message. Then, first impressions are persistent and repetition creates a sense of familiarity, leading to acceptance of the message. Moreover, since it is difficult to decide whether information is false or not, information overload causes humans to follow shortcuts to determine whether it is reliable or not, and the appearance of objectivity and similarity of messages can increase the credibility of propaganda. Finally, although initially the inconsistency of the message may have a negative effect on persuasion, it can be counteracted by using reasons that are considered convincing enough to change the opinion, such as the credibility of the source that can be quoted or only mentioned generically ("experts say...").

With over 5 billion social media users worldwide in January 2024, which is an increase of 260 million from the previous year (Kepios 2024), it is obvious why the hybrid warfare is increasingly being waged on these platforms by largely exploiting the basic psychological mechanisms. Social media technologies enhance the speed, scale, and reach of propaganda and disinformation, giving rise to new international security concerns regarding foreign influence operations online (Bradshaw 2020).

During RAND expert Todd Helmus' testimony before the US Senate Select Committee on Intelligence, he revealed that as of 2018, Russia was actively engaged in a global propaganda

campaign, with social media being a crucial component of Russian state activities in this regard (T. Helmus 2018). The report on which this hearing is based covers Eastern Europe. It is particularly interesting in that it explains the nature of Russian propaganda on social media and identifies pro-Russian propagandists and activities on Twitter (currently X), but more importantly highlights the extent to which Russian-speaking populations have adopted pro-Russian propaganda themes into their language on this platform. The study also offers recommendations for reducing Russian influence in the region (Helmus, et al. 2018).

Recently, the RAND Corporation identified seven types of content disseminated by Russia and its agents. This content was distributed through various channels, including traditional media such as TV, radio, and print, as well as online and social media platforms (Matthews, et al. 2021, xv-vxi, 19-24). The appeals to common heritage, culture, history, and interests, as well as the potential for divisive sentiments among fans, are of significant interest for the present analysis. The first involves promoting cultural, linguistic, religious, or ethnic links between the target audience and Russia or the Russian people (*Ibidem* 23). The second is based on Russia exploiting existing divisions within and between countries, whether they stem from historical grievances or current controversial issues (*Ibidem* 24). The report suggests that societal divisions, including those related to migration, LGBTQ + issues, divergent views on Western institutions, national, ethnic, religious, and class differences, are exploited by Russia and its agents. The presence of minority groups can potentially be exploited for manipulation, as seen in cases where Russia has taken advantage of possible feelings of exclusion and the existence of Russian-speaking communities. The narratives developed and disseminated by Russia present an alleged discrimination and oppression of Russian speakers in the ex-Soviet space, and also an occasional mention of genocide (*Ibidem* 41-42).

One potential example to consider within this theoretical framework is the interview given by President Vladimir Putin to American reporter Tucker Carlson that took place in early February 2024. Although he does not use the term minorities, Putin repeatedly refers to the territories of Hungary and Romania that now belong to Ukraine, which he considers an artificial state, and argues that Ukrainian originally meaning a person who is "living on the outskirts of the state, near the fringe, or was engaged in border service. It didn't meant any particular ethnic group." (The Kremlin 2024). Using a classic technique of manipulation, evoking an "interesting" and supposedly strong "personal" experience, Putin once again reaffirms his view that Ukrainians have no rights over their territory and denies the statistical prevalence of the Ukrainian population: "Moreover, I would like to share a very interesting story with you, I'll digress, it's a personal one. […] I went to the town of Beregovoye, and all the names of towns and villages there were in Russian and in a language I didn't understand – in Hungarian. In Russian and in Hungarian. Not in Ukrainian – in Russian and in Hungarian." (*Ibidem*). Moreover, Putin is weaponizing the Hungarian minority by claiming that that in the 1980s "They preserve the Hungarian language, Hungarian names, and all their national costumes. They are Hungarians and they feel themselves to be Hungarians. And of course, when now there is an infringement [...]" (*Ibidem*).

It is not only minority groups themselves that can be weaponised, but also their rights through a focus on disrespect and discrimination. Another example is the intervention of the representative of the Russian Delegation to the Human Rights Council at the Geneva meeting (2 October 2023) on the adoption of the results of the Universal Periodic Review Outcomes of Romania, Mali and Montenegro (The UN Office at Geneva 2023) (Digi24 2023). He supported his view, included in the Report of the Working Group on the Universal Periodic Review, that the Russian Federation is "concerned about violations of the rights of specific groups in Romania and reported cases of xenophobia and nationalism" and recommends "the adoption of measures to combat racism, anti-Semitism, xenophobia and any other forms of discrimination on religious or ethnic grounds" (UN Human Rights Council 2023, 3, 10). Russia's position is

consistent with its strategy of using the Russian diaspora as a tool to achieve foreign policy; we refer here to the concept of the "Russian world", which includes "Russians and other people belonging to the cultural and civilizational community" (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation 2023). During the meeting, the Federation's representative mentioned the Transcarpathian Ruthenians, along with the Roma and the Hungarians, as one of the main minorities (Digi24 2023). It is worth noting that, according to the 2021 census, 834 people identified as Transcarpathian Ruthenians in the region (INS 2023). However, it is also important to acknowledge that a much larger number of individuals who identify as Transcarpathian Ruthenians reside in neighbouring countries such as Slovakia, Serbia, Poland, Ukraine, Hungary, Croatia and the Czech Republic (Magocsi 2022). In contrast, it is worth noting that the majority of participating countries, with the exception of North Korea, expressed their appreciation to Romania for accepting recommendations aimed at protecting ethnic migrant groups and addressing ethnic gaps in various areas of social life (The UN Office at Geneva 2023).

These are not the only examples of how the Russian Federation is trying to weaponise minority issues. The Romanian platform Veridica monitors Russia's disinformation and propaganda campaign related to Romania, Hungary and the Republic of Moldova. Introducing the criterion of minorities in our search, we have identified 25 messages inserted in the Romanian media between 27.01.2022 - 30.11.2023 (Veridica 2023). These messages appear to speculate on ethnic and historical biases of the three countries and are mainly addressed to Russian, Hungarian, and Ukrainian minorities, Eurosceptics, nationalists, conspiracists, and bigots. Russian propaganda aims to antagonise the Ukrainian authorities by speculating on the well-known issue of the rights of Romanian minorities, as well as the authorities of the Republic of Moldova in relation to national minorities, especially the Russian community. A recurring theme is the alleged collaboration between Poland, Hungary, and Romania to recover historical territories from Ukraine. In addition, it aims to create tensions between Romanians and Moldovans by raising the false issue of the "annexation" of Rep. of Moldova by Romania with the consent of the EU. These are just some of the minority and historical issues that have been identified as being used by pro-Russian media to create tensions in and between states supporting Ukraine. The problem is all the more serious as the trend in recent years, which began before the launch of the Russian invasion of Ukraine, has been the erosion of democracy in Eastern Europe (Nord, et al. 2024) and the resurgence of right-wing extremist and populist forces as a result of the multiple crises that countries have faced (from the refugee crisis and illegal migration to the far-reaching restrictive measures during the COVID-19 pandemic). In this context of undermined democracy, Russian propaganda and disinformation find fertile ground.

Conclusions

In hybrid warfare, offensive actors may exploit minorities on at least three dimensions, as identified in this paper. Firstly, minority groups may be directly targeted to create tensions between them and the majority group. In this case, disinformation and propaganda may focus on issues of group identity, historical grievances, and even alleged or actual violations of their rights that are instilled in the collective minority mindset. A second dimension concerns the majority, with messages being disseminated that promote an exacerbation of its rights over the territory inhabited by the minority (when we have minorities with a clear demarcation of the area of disposition), some alleged malign characteristics of the latter for the whole society (securitization of the minority issue) or even inborn superiority of the majority. A third dimension refers to the international community which is presented with so-called serious problems in respecting minority rights to justify intervention in internal affairs or military intervention in a particular country. In this case, misinformation and

propaganda can promote messages that refer not only to serious violations of minority rights, but even to an alleged lack of legitimacy of the majority group over held territory.

The aims are also multiple: firstly, to destabilise a country without using military means (Romania, Republic of Moldova, Poland, and the entire Western world where elections are interfered with or right-wing extremism is supported, etc.); secondly, to damage its image in the face of the international community and to lose the support in various areas (Romania, Republic of Moldova, Ukraine, etc.); and, thirdly, to justify a military intervention whose real purpose is to annex territories (Ukraine). From the cases discussed in the last section of the paper, it appears that the third-party actor carrying out all these actions is the Russian Federation.

The exploitation of minorities in hybrid warfare involves their characteristics, identity, their relationship with the majority, and even the evolution of society as a whole. To highlight these aspects, monitoring messages disseminated by a particular actor is not enough. It is crucial to comprehend the background mechanisms, to understand the socio-psychological phenomena that allow an aggressor to use minority groups to achieve its own ends. Concepts specific to social psychology, such as identity, intergroup relations, influence, persuasion, conformity, and discrimination, must be included in the current scientific vocabulary of those analysing disinformation and propaganda campaigns. This is because they are crucial in understanding the complex dynamics of the hybrid warfare.

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