Strategic communications: East and South

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Just like the term 'hybrid' (often associated with warfare, tactics or threats), 'strategic communication(s)' has recently become rather fashionable. Moreover, not unlike 'hybrid', it often lacks a clear definition. This has advantages, of course, as the term can be used to cover a wide range of disparate issues and activities. Broadly speaking, strategic communications[1] infuses 'communications' activities with an agenda or a plan. The field of 'communications' is broad, encompassing individuals and organisations who create news or push information (public relations firms, broadcasters), who deliver news and media (journalists), and who study the interplay between media and society (researchers). As an umbrella term, 'strategic communications' combines them all.

Depending on the nature of an organisation, 'strategic communications' can range from marketing to policy. It can also refer to a process as well as a profession – let alone an academic discipline in its own right. Most importantly, it implies and requires tight coordination and consistency across the board in order to purposefully implement a large set of different, targeted and tailored actions. A useful definition, especially for the scope of this publication, is offered in a 2011 Chatham House report, in which strategic communications is described as 'a systematic series of sustained and coherent activities, conducted across strategic, operational and tactical levels, that enables understanding of target audiences and identifies effective conduits to promote and sustain particular types of behaviour'.

In practice, for policy-related organisations, it includes elements of public diplomacy and 'spin', media relations, advertising, recruitment and training and, most notably, high levels of situational awareness ('detect and deter'). In operational terms, it entails both a defensive ('react and respond') and an offensive ('probe and push') dimension.

Strategic communications is a notion which is applicable to Russia and the so-called Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL), i.e. the two external players which have contributed the most to destabilising the EU's neighbours in recent years. Given that both have engaged in aggressive messaging and deceptive media campaigns, a qualified use of the term 'strategic communications' for both certainly seems in order. That

said, a considerable degree of differentiation may be necessary, namely between a large state with powerful resources, extensive outreach (including to fellow 'nationals' in third countries) and active cooperation with the EU and its member states on a number of issues, and a dispersed organisation combining 'proto-state' or state-like behaviour where it is in control of territory with a sect-like modus operandi, acting across borders, operating outside the law and killing EU citizens.

I. STRATEGIC COMMUNICATIONS FROM THE EAST

Russia's strategic communications are complex, both with regard to ideas and institutions. Carried out both directly and through proxies, they shape people's perceptions of the EU – be it inside Russia, in the Eastern Partnership (EaP) states or in the EU itself, as well as its candidate countries. In light of the goals it intends to achieve, Russia's messaging has proved quite effective, if not necessarily consistent: while often crude and deceitful in terms of content, its delivery is sophisticated, targeted and tailored to different audiences.

Russia's grand narrative(s)...

The so-called 'Colour Revolutions' in Georgia and Ukraine (2003-2004) were a wake-up call for Russia. The resulting internal debate on what went wrong led Moscow to conclude that it needed to build up its own

2

'soft power', partly by making more attractive offers, but partly also by developing the machinery to promote itself through media, non-governmental organisations (NGOs), and other key players – from business lobbies to political parties. Most importantly, this was accompanied by the realisation that 'selling' Russia was not enough. The 'attractiveness gap' between Russia and the EU had to be bridged by improving Russia's standing – mainly through the promotion of the 'Russian World' (Russkiy Mir) – but also by discrediting that of the EU. The launch of Russia Today (RT), a dedicated TV channel, just one year after the Orange Revolution in Ukraine, was the first tangible outcome of Russia's lessons learned.

While the economic crisis that has dominated much of the last decade did not give much for Russia to boast about, it did generate a stream of negative news about the outside world, especially the EU. The focus on attacking others, rather than advertising itself, also granted Russia the possibility of reaching out to social groups that were disappointed with the political and economic situation in Europe. Russia's strategic communications do contain a 'meta' or grand narrative of sorts, i.e. a series of core themes that consistently appear in most communications efforts. However, these themes vary (according to Russian opportunism) and often contradict one another. Nevertheless, there are a number of recurrent storylines that the Kremlin-inspired media systematically promote.

One key message depicts the West as an aggressive and expansionist entity on the one hand, and as weak and verging on collapse on the other. The EU is portrayed as close to crumbling under the combined pressure of the fiscal and migration crises. The Union is also depicted as an unwieldy behemoth which is incapable of making decisions due to waves of hasty enlargements to the east. These two representations, in turn, feed into forecasts about the imminent demise of the EU, just as the Soviet Union collapsed 25 years ago.

... and target audiences

This messaging also tries to cater to specific audiences in the EU. Supporters of far-right political groups readily consume news claiming that the EU is actively promoting moral decadence by supporting LGBT rights and neglecting Europe's Christian roots, or that the 'Islamisation of Europe' is currently underway. On the far-left, Russia's messaging feeds anti-US sentiments and portrays the EU as a submissive partner or puppet of Washington. On both the right and left, Russia also relies on and fosters an anti-interventionist narrative, whereby Western military operations in Kosovo, Afghanistan, Iraq and Libya – as well as the conflict in Ukraine – are all depicted as a string of illegitimate, aggressive Western actions. The debacle in Iraq is the principal example used to reframe the debate about other crises, such as Kosovo or Ukraine.

Russian strategic communications efforts also target (and try to influence) specific Western policies, particularly towards Russia. This is most visible on the issue of sanctions. In general, and unsurprisingly, Russia aggressively promotes the idea that sanctions do not work and should not be extended. Tailoring this theme to the business community, Moscow tries to create the impression that sanctions hurt the EU more than they do Russia. In addition to lost revenue, Moscow hints at the possibility of its market being permanently lost to competitors, with China often quoted as the re-placement. It also tailors this message to national governments, stressing how many jobs they have lost due to the imposition of sanctions.

Moscow's ultimate goal is to convince European audiences that the EU is focused on imagined threats from Russia and neglecting the real ones from the south. Russia also regularly gets itself involved in other controversial political issues inside Europe. Any potential cleavage or actual divide within the EU is picked up and amplified. The refugee crisis is a case in point: Russia sought to inflame the issue, supporting an anti-refugee stance verging on outright racism, while suppressing any information inside Russia that could damage relations with its own Muslim communities.

These same strands of Russian narratives are used in the Eastern Partnership (EaP) states, albeit with local variations. Attacking EU policies is a guiding theme, with the European Union often being equated to the Soviet Union and described as a hostile geopolitical

project. The underlying message is that EaP states escaped the Soviet Union only to lose their freedom again to a similar entity, now equally on the verge of economic collapse. In cultural terms, Europe is presented as a morally decadent civilisation turning its back on Christian traditions.

A second line of attack targets the leaders of EU member states and institutions. The logic behind this is that the worse European leaders look, the weaker the EU as a whole will appear and consequently, the more impressive Russian leadership will seem in comparison. Accordingly, messages often convey a distorted interpretation of declarations to portray the EU as disrespectful, self-serving and largely uninterested in EaP states. EU membership is deemed unattainable while the EU leadership is depicted as being controlled by the US. The EU is also often accused of covering up for corrupt governments or openly interfering in domestic affairs.

Russian campaigns also try to drive a wedge between EaP states and their immediate EU neighbours. Moscow often plants stories in local media about territorial claims (by Romania or Hungary against Ukraine, for example) or other emerging 'security threats' (e.g. 'Roma gangs' from Romania). Russia also presents the Baltics, Romania and Bulgaria as failing states that are economically depressed and depopulated second-rate EU members, and prophesises the same fate for EaP countries should they join the EU.

In Armenia, Azerbaijan and Belarus, Russia nurtures local elites' chronic fear of externally orchestrated regime change. Narratives portray the EU as seeking to weaken governments to gain access to natural resources or industrial assets on privileged terms. Its financial aid and conditionality, in this context, are described as deliberate efforts to increase indebtedness and thus dependency. In Georgia, Moldova and Ukraine, by contrast, Russia uses uniform messaging on the destructive consequences of Deep and Comprehensive Free Trade Agreements (DCFTAs) and visa-free regimes. While the former allegedly lead to deindustrialisation, unemployment, and the loss of access to the Russian market, the latter is said to

lead to the risk of refugee reallocation, terror attacks, imposed legislation on LGBT rights, and restrictions on eastward mobility.

Russia also has a rather complex communications strategy – and significant infra- structure – in large parts of the Western Balkans. There are also a number of media groups financed by and from Moscow (although not openly) which promote the Kremlin's worldview, often in combination with conspiracy theories and Serbian ultra-nationalism. Openly pro-Kremlin views also feature in parts of the established print and electronic media. Russia's strategic communications are further sustained by a growing network of organisations ranging from governmental agencies to government-sponsored NGOs, civic associations, student groups, political movements or parties, as well as links to the Orthodox Church.

The East StratCom Task Force

In 2015, the EU created an East StratCom Task Force focusing on Russian disinformation based in the European External Action Service (EEAS). It consists of nine full-time communications experts, most of them with Russian language skills. As the team members are from the EU institutions or seconded by member states, the Task Force is budget-neutral.

The June 2015 EU Action Plan on Strategic Communication set the goals to improve the EU's capacities for effective communications and forecasting, addressing and responding to external disinformation activities, as well as strengthening the overall media environment in the eastern neighbourhood. In this spirit, the Task Force seeks to explain key policy areas and create a positive EU narrative through strategic communications campaigns focusing on the EU's actions in the region, unveiling and de-constructing conspiracy theories, and countering disinformation. It concentrates its activities mainly on the EU's eastern neighbours rather than the member states themselves. In order to bridge cultural gaps, the Task Force individually tailors action plans for each target country and assists the EEAS and EU delegations by optimising the communication of their work in the region.

The Task Force releases a 'Disinformation Review' and a 'Disinformation Digest' on a weekly basis. These offer a systematic overview of cases of disinformation and highlight broader media trends. They are promoted through a Twitter account (@EUvsDisinfo) with nearly 7,000 followers generating 500,000 tweet impressions per month.

II. STRATEGIC COMMUNICATIONS FROM THE SOUTH

The so-called Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL) has quickly gained a strong reputation with regard to its strategic communications. Not only what it communicates, but also how – with its slick magazines and videos, and effective use of social media – has redefined the way in which political messages are being relayed in conflict. ISIL's strategic communications are tailored to several audiences, ranging from international opponents who are susceptible to the idea of a 'clash of civilisations', to active members of ISIL and potential recruits. But ultimately, all of them are tied into the organisation's long-term political project: ensuring its own survival, ideally with the most territory possible under its control.

ISIL's grand narrative(s)...

ISIL's narrative draws on several sources to craft its messages, creatively combining Islamic religious texts, conspiracy theories in which Muslims are the subjects of Western oppression, as well as 'underdog' and youth culture narratives. Six elements are used roughly in equal measure: though the brutality element is the one which is most frequently cited in international media, its other themes of mercy, victimhood, war, belonging, and utopia feature just as much, if not more.

The use of brutality represents triumphalism and acts as a show of power. As it is designed largely with Arab and 'local' audiences in mind, the depiction of harsh punishments for alleged spies and traitors aims to discourage all forms of collaboration with the enemy. The beheading and crucifixion of soldiers in Mosul, for instance, greatly contributed to the desertion of parts of the Iraqi military. As a side effect, it also instils fear into potential adversaries outside of its territory.

This is mirrored by the mercy that ISIL demonstrates in other videos, where repentance is rewarded. Together, these two themes convey the message that ISIL is harsh yet just, and that whether an individual is subjected to brutality or mercy is a consequence of his or her actions.

At the same time, ISIL uses a narrative of victimhood to justify its 'resistance' and 'retaliation' against the 'Zionist-Crusader' complex, which it claims is waging a global war on Islam. Examples ranging from the creation of Middle Eastern states by colonial powers to the occupations of Palestine or Iraq all play into this part of its myth-making.

This somewhat paradoxically ties into the next theme: war, which serves to demonstrate ISIL's military capabilities. Despite the fact that it claims to face a global anti-Muslim conspiracy, ISIL promotes the message that it is an aggressive state that should be feared. Weapon types are frequently mentioned or military hardware displayed to showcase expertise, prestige and technical skills. An additional element is that war is reported on selectively and to ISIL's advantage. The group controls much of the information about its campaigns, since there are few independent journalists on the ground to provide audiences with an alternative, or to verify whether ISIL's reporting is indeed correct. Local news outlets, such as 'Raqqa is Being Slaughtered Silently' have to operate under highly dangerous circumstances. As a result, even its antagonists rely on ISIL material to report on its activities.

This (dis)information bestows an immediate sense of belonging to an in-group with a specific set of religious grievances. Videos exhibiting camaraderie during and after combat, for instance, capture this sense of togetherness.

Finally, all these narratives are weaved together to form perhaps the most important theme: ISIL's utopian alternative. This projected utopianism is the key to understanding ISIL's appeal, as it reveals that the group does not merely aim to undermine the existing world order, but offer a constructive revolutionary

alternative. And this alternative is not just theoretical: it allegedly already exists in its proclaimed caliphate, which, according to ISIL, is on a path to restoring the Islamic Golden Age of the eighth to thirteenth centuries.

… and target audiences

Each of ISIL's narratives outlined above serves a certain purpose and is tailored to a specific audience. Its goals are manifold, and range from rallying support to mobilising fighters, warning locals against collaboration with enemies, and provoking responses from local or international foes. It is worth noting that ISIL does not rely on strategic communications to raise funds – most of its financial resources come from activities inside its territories. These aims hint at the cyclical and self-reinforcing nature of the overall ISIL narrative, and its dependency on enemies to express their animosity towards the group both verbally and physically.

Four broad types of audiences are addressed, each in a different manner. The first target audience consists of the individuals living under direct ISIL control. These receive less electronic and more live messaging in the form of public film viewings, posters, announcements and leaflets. The primary purposes of these communications are to encourage cooperation and to prevent the emergence of opposition. In the territories under its control, ISIL has used both carrots and sticks: it has highlighted its ability to govern as much as it has regularly and publicly executed alleged spies and others defiant of its rule. Brutality is therefore chiefly employed for this type of audience, along with mercy or justice.

The second target audience is Muslims across the Middle East and North Africa (MENA). The messages are often in Arabic and serve the purposes of recruiting fighters and garnering local support in order to expand ISIL activities into third countries. Around half of ISIL's foreign fighters are Arabs (6,000 from Tunisia, 2,500 from Saudi Arabia, 2,000 from Jordan, 1,500 from Morocco, 1,000 from Egypt, to name the top senders), whereas its 'national' component is from Iraq and Syria. This makes it a predominantly Arab organisation

in spite of its international claims. But recruitment is no longer ISIL's main goal with regard to Arab audiences – its communications strategy is instead designed to build up popular support rather than attract people to its territory. This is in line with its five year expansion plan covering an area which essentially includes most Muslim-majority countries in the MENA plus those previously under Ottoman or Arab control, such as Spain or the Balkans. Consequently, its focus has been to encourage the creation of local spinoffs (called 'provinces') in these areas. Some of these have been very active (such as in Egypt, Libya and Yemen), while others less so (in Algeria and Saudi Arabia).

ISIL's third audience is non-Arab Muslims, with a focus on those in Europe, as well as in the former Soviet Republics. Together, these two regions make up the second-largest group of foreign fighters (after Arabs). For the time being, these groups are targeted mainly for recruitment purposes. The main messages relayed to them build on notions of utopia and belonging, although humanitarian purposes, war and justice can also be used (especially in individual-specific recruitment attempts). The main feature of European messaging is the creation of an alternative, utopian lifestyle in which the individual will find meaning, belonging and adventure.

ISIL's fourth audience is its formal enemies – the 'Zionist-Crusaders' – which it needs in order to justify its existence. ISIL thus targets more than just a pool of potential recruits, and the function of its messaging is not solely radicalisation. It also relies on reactions from enemies and propagates an apocalyptic view of an inevitable clash between Muslim and non-Muslim civilisations in order to have a reason to exist. Without an enemy, ISIL has no reason to fight, and consequently no leverage to attract recruits and individuals wishing to be a part of its political project. As ISIL's narrative revolves around being a valiant underdog, the organisation needs a strong opponent perhaps more than anything else in order to exist.

The Arab StratCom Task Force

Following the EU's Foreign Affairs Council in February 2015, an inter-institutional Arab StratCom Task

6

Force was set up to tackle the phenomenon of radicalisation in the Arab world through public diplomacy and communications work. The Task Force seeks to foster dialogue and cultivate mutual respect between Arabic-speaking and European communities, especially among their youth. It is chaired by the EEAS Strategic Communications Division and is made up of representatives from EEAS geographical departments, the Council's Counter-Terrorism Coordinator, and all relevant Commission DGs, including the Spokesperson's Service. It promotes EU policies and projects in the region and coordinates closely with the EU delegations in order to strengthen existing ties and highlight shared values.

Unlike the East StratCom Task Force, the Arabic-language Task Force has no dedicated staff and does its work using existing resources. It decided not to adopt a top- down approach with a single narrative to cover the whole region but rather to operate on the ground in the countries themselves via EU delegations instead, some of which already carry out significant work in this area. In June 2015, the Task Force produced an advisory report which fed into the HR/VP's contribution to the European Council with an initial set of 30 recommendations. Since then, the Task Force has met regularly with a view towards mapping existing outreach and communications tools, developing a business plan, implementing some of the June recommendations, and assessing resources and scope for action.

III. EU STRATEGIC COMMUNICATIONS: WHERE FROM, WHAT NEXT?

The EU's collective response was slow at first, but it has picked up speed recently. The Union does not engage in counter-propaganda, and a preference for (re)acting at the national level has long prevailed. Lately, the realisation that coordinated action at the EU level can actually make a considerable difference has gained ground, especially when the challenges are directed at the Union as a whole know no borders, and cannot be tackled separately.

If the rationale for (and the logic of) coordinating strategic communications at the EU level is to be

further and efficiently implemented, a number of issues may have to be addressed. First, any credible strategic communications effort – in both its defensive and offensive dimensions – needs to be built on research and analysis dissecting the problem(s), the audience(s), and the message(s), and has to be planned and implemented accordingly.

The budgetary lines allocated by the EU to 'communications' – including but not limited to foreign policy and external relations – are indeed significant. Yet they are scattered among the various Commission Directorates-General and other institutions, with different areas of responsibility and competences, and are often spread out across a multitude of projects and mini-campaigns that are sometimes unprofessionally designed, run separately from one another, and occasionally carried out only to tick a required box. Moreover, EU delegations (as well as member state embassies) have long 'done' communications half-heartedly, as a part-time activity and an afterthought. External communications and public diplomacy have become a key priority since the establishment of the EEAS, however.

The EU outsources part of its communications work to consultancies (e.g. strengthening web and social media communications). In some cases, however, this has translated into paraphrasing press releases rather than concentrating resources and know-how on a single coherent set of agreed common narratives. This is starting to change now, and much can be done at various levels to streamline expenditure and maximise output. The forthcoming mid-term review of the Multiannual Financial Framework may present an opportunity to consolidate communications efforts and budgets across the board.

Training and recruiting staff that is 'fit for purpose' is equally important. Simply publishing press releases or seeking media coverage is clearly not enough. Tailoring communications to particular environments and targets, and customising the EU's rebuttals and own positive messaging to specific groups requires know-how that cannot be expected of officials who often have administrative and technical backgrounds.

Regional analysts and media operators with relevant cultural and linguistic skills are essential in order to give substance and credibility to strategic communications. They could be employed as trainers for current EU officials, especially in EU delegations, but also as temporary/contract agents in the field and at headquarters in Brussels. Accordingly, the European Personnel Selection Office (EPSO) could organise dedicated calls in order to create pools of experts (mid-career and at the higher grades) to draw upon in Brussels, the EU delegations, as well as CSDP missions and operations. In addition, the current EU rules for Seconded National Experts (SNEs) could be reviewed to make room for such specialised personnel, who should come not only from national bureaucracies but also the private sector, NGOs or academia.

In terms of method and style, the EU's communications have often been faceless, anonymous, technocratic, unemotional, and reliant upon the expectation (or rather assumption) that facts will speak for themselves. This has started to change, with a greater emphasis on storytelling and the use of 'real people'. Re-shaping false perceptions and responding to outright lies or hoaxes does not require entering into a messy or dishonest contest with hostile opponents. That would not only be unacceptable for the EU but also, in all likelihood, be counterproductive. What is now being done with disinformation digests and reviews can in fact be extended and expanded to include outreach and dissemination efforts seeking to bring them to as many email and Twitter accounts as possible, and in as many languages as necessary.

Irony and satire could also be utilised to de-construct some hostile campaigns – but they will have to be handled with care and cultural sensitivity. All these features can then be translated and distributed among relevant publics, thus strengthening resilience to disinformation at the societal level. Internal guidelines could be drawn up and circulated across EU services, delegations and missions. A joint Commission-EEAS Communication could be prepared in order to streamline existing activities and create appropriate synergies.

Specific approaches

In the case of Russia, the call for more common action (also via NATO) came relatively soon, driven by the realisation of the scale of the challenge and the need to join forces and resources.

In many respects, the East StratCom Task Force has exceeded expectations, with widespread knowledge of Russian inside EU administrations proving to be a key asset, and deserves to be strengthened. The products it has delivered so far could, for instance, be translated into all EU languages and distributed more systematically among EU citizens through media outlets, arguably also via the European Commission representations in the 28 member states. Translation and dissemination in Ukrainian and Serbian would also likely improve the effectiveness of the (significant) resources spent on EU communications in the Western Balkans. Finally, discreet but steady support for independent local media in EaP states (also through professional training of local operators) could be intensified, building on the work already being done by the EED.

With regard to ISIL, although all member states feel similarly (if not equally) threatened, they have long preferred to act at the national level. They have only recently realised that the challenge concerns them all. However, the Arab StratCom Task Force is still comparatively under-equipped in terms of personnel and budget and lacks dedicated Arab-speaking seconded experts. Insufficient knowledge of Arabic – especially, though not exclusively, in Brussels – is also proving to be a serious problem.

ISIL may end up being a temporary or at least transient phenomenon, but jihadist radicalism itself may not. It is therefore crucial to focus on tackling radicalisation at large instead, and to avoid singling out Islam as its only source. Focusing purely on Islam is likely to antagonise (or neutralise) moderate Muslims further, both inside and outside the EU, which act as a crucial counterbalance to potentially radicalising groups. Similarly, engaging ISIL on religious grounds would be dangerous for the EU, as it would implicitly legitimise

8

the organisation's Islamic credentials – which it uses to pursue a totalitarian agenda. It is also a battle that cannot be won with theological arguments, at least certainly not by the EU. Strategic communications efforts, however, could consider using only the term Daesh to refer to the group (as some member states are doing already), thus avoiding a direct reference to Islam, as well as undermining its credentials as a state.

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ANNEX 1

Conspiracy theories

Several Kremlin-financed media outlets are covertly spreading anti-Western conspiracy theories. Among them are the following:

·· The disappeared Malaysia Airlines MH370 airplane might have been shot down by the US;

·· The Malaysia Airlines MH17 airplane could have been shot down by an Israeli missile or a Ukrainian fighter jet;

·· The German authorities tried to cover up the alleged rape of a Russian girl, 'Liza', by migrants in Berlin;

·· The West is killing defence witnesses of Serbian war criminals in The Hague;

·· The 9/11 attacks may have been planned by the US government;

·· Western politicians such as Madeleine Albright have a 'pathological hatred of Slavs' and 'the war in Kosovo was considered only a first step to establish control over Russia'– claims that were allegedly formulated by a former KGB officer with the supposed ability to read minds.

ANNEX 2

Inside Russia T

The propaganda spread by the Kremlin during the Ukraine crisis has led Russians to adopt negative attitudes towards the EU. Yet although Russian citizens have become more sceptical of European values and norms, they did not change their minds overnight. The anti-EU campaign began in February 2014 and reached its peak over the following two months, as President Yanukovych was deposed, Crimea annexed and the Donbass destabilised. News programmes increased in length and people tuned in for longer each evening, while Ukraine dominated the headlines. This had a decisive impact on perceptions of the conflict because over 80% of Russians receive their news from TV. As pro-Kremlin narratives claimed that the EU triggered the Ukraine crisis by forcing Yanukovych to choose between East and West, the EU's image was severely damaged. Russians' perceptions of their country's relations with the EU changed dramatically, from decidedly positive in early 2013 to decidedly negative just a year and a half later. Indeed, the EU's standing fell even faster than that of the US. When Russians think of 'Europe', opinion polls show that they now think not only of 'neighbours and partners' (28%) but also of 'potential aggressors' (23%) and the 'guard of US policy on the Eurasian continent' (23%). This represents a threefold increase over the past ten years. Most now agree that the West is hostile to Russia, and that this hostility is reflected in sanctions (55%) and an 'information war' against Russia (44%). One of the prime drivers of this hostility is thought to be the West's desire 'to seize Russia's natural resources' (41%). This myth has been repeated time and again in the media by figures such as Nikolai Patrushev, the secretary of the Russian Security Council. It follows, then, that it would not be contrary to Russian interests if the EU collapsed: indeed, a Russian Public Opinion Research Centre (VCIOM) poll from July 2015 showed that 49% of Russians believed that EU disintegration was in Russia's interest, with just 24% believing the contrary. Homosexuality is another issue that is exploited. When Vladimir Putin returned to power for a third term in 2012 (despite a wave of protests), his administration decided to build up its popularity on new ideological foundations. This campaign has manifested itself in a series of public attacks on LGBT rights. When a new law against 'gay propaganda' was passed amidst intense media coverage in June 2013, two-thirds of Russians feared that their children or grandchildren could become victims of such messaging. But when the media campaign subsided, so did parents' fears: by April 2015, fewer than half were similarly afraid. Likewise, refugees are also taken advantage of. In September 2015, a majority of Russian poll respondents said that Europe should let them in. Five months later, however, most Russians believed that their country should not take refugees and 59% stated that Europe was not obliged to do so, either. Their attitudes almost certainly shifted as a result of a Moscow-driven propaganda campaign that portrayed refugees as dangerous sexual predators. All this has translated into a decline in support for the values that are seen to define the West. In one poll, taken during the height of the refugee crisis, 56% of respondents said that 'the European political values of freedom, democracy, equality, the rule of law and respect for human rights' were not important to them.