

Iurie Rotari

(Stefan cel Mare University of Suceava, Romania)

<https://orcid.org/0009-0000-4886-6901>









e-mail: iurierotari95@gmail.com

The Most Persistent Narratives of the Kremlin's Propaganda Towards Romania in the First Year of the Russo-Ukrainian War

Najtrwalsze narratywy propagandy kremlinowskiej na temat Rumunii na przestrzeni pierwszego roku wojny rosyjsko-ukraińskiej

ABSTRACT

This article examines how the Russian invasion of Ukraine influenced Kremlin's propaganda against Romania. For one year (24.02.2022–24.02.2023), the author followed official statements by Russian politicians and diplomats, material appearing in the most important federal media outlets, and messages released via social media and other marginal propaganda sources. Thus, it was possible to determine the main Russian propaganda narratives against Romania: „Romania seeks to annex parts of Ukraine”; „Romania seeks to annex the Republic of Moldova and Transnistria”; „Romania promotes unreasonable

PUBLICATION INFO					
			UMCS UNIVERSITATEA MARE CELEBILĂ ȘTIINȚIFICĂ	e-ISSN: 2449-8467 ISSN: 2082-6060	
THE AUTHOR'S ADDRESS: Iurie Rotari, Stefan cel Mare University of Suceava, 13 University Street, Suceava 720229, Romania					
SOURCE OF FUNDING: Author's own funds					
SUBMITTED: 2023.04.20	ACCEPTED: 2023.09.30	PUBLISHED ONLINE: 2023.12.21			
WEBSITE OF THE JOURNAL: https://journals.umcs.pl/rh		EDITORIAL COMMITTEE E-mail: reshistorica@umcs.pl			
 DIRECTORY OF OPEN ACCESS JOURNALS			 EUROPEAN REFERENCE INDEX FOR THE HUMANITIES AND SOCIAL SCIENCES		

Russophobia”; „Romania is a «Western colony» used by the USA against Russia”, and last but not least, attempts to discredit Romanian aid to Ukraine. In this way, the author determined the image of Romania created by the Russian propaganda machine for its audience, but also the ways in which Moscow uses the distorted image of Romania to influence public opinion in Ukraine and Moldova.

Key words: Romania, Russia, propaganda, war in Ukraine

STRESZCZENIE

Artykuł analizuje sposoby, w jakie inwazja Rosji na Ukrainę wpłynęła na propagandę Kremla skierowaną wobec Rumunii. Przez rok (24.02.2022–24.02.2023) autor śledził oficjalne stanowiska rosyjskich polityków i dyplomatów, materiały ukazujące się w najważniejszych państwowych środkach masowego przekazu, wiadomościach kolportowanych poprzez social media oraz inne, pomniejsze narzędzia propagandowe. Badanie ujawniło główne propagandowe narracje skierowane przeciw Rumunii, m.in. „Rumunia chce zgrażyć części Ukrainy”, „Rumunia pragnie dokonać aneksji Republiki Mołdawii oraz Mołdawskiej Republiki Nadnistrza”, „Rumunia promuje nieuzasadnione postawy rusofobiczne”, „Rumunia to «kolonia zachodnia» wykorzystywana w konflikcie amerykańsko-rosyjskim”. Ukazano również próby dyskredytowania pomocy udzielonej Ukrainie przez Rumunię. Autor charakteryzuje obraz, jaki rosyjska propaganda rysuje swoim odbiorcom. Przedstawia on również, w jaki sposób Moskwa wykorzystuje zniekształcony przekaz medialny na temat Rumunii, wpływając na opinię publiczną obywateli Ukrainy i Mołdawii.

Słowa kluczowe: Rumunia, Rosja, propaganda, wojna w Ukrainie

One of the demands Russian President Vladimir Putin put forward before the full-scale invasion of Ukraine in February 2022 was the North Atlantic Treaty Organization’s (NATO) withdrawal from countries that joined the alliance post-1997, including Romania, which became part of NATO in 2004. As a result, Moscow’s intention to re-establish its imperial influence over Bucharest has become palpable. Thus, it is unsurprising that Romania has voiced its support for Ukraine, standing among the few south-eastern European countries with a genuinely pro-Ukrainian stance in the ongoing war. Although Russia currently lacks considerable leverage over Romania, the country remains a target of Russian propaganda. Local researchers draw particular attention to media resources controlled directly or indirectly by the Kremlin that work for the Romanian public. Our research, in contrast to such a stance, focuses on media products about Romania that are curated for Russian audiences. Considering that Russia’s imperialist ambitions exceed Ukraine’s borders and that Russian aggression has created the most profound geopolitical crisis in 21st-century Europe, we have linked our research to the Russian-Ukrainian war. Thus, we monitored press articles published mainly by major Russian media outlets and statements made by Russian officials during the first year of the war (24.02.2022–24.02.2023). In this way, we have determined

the main narratives the Russian propaganda machine utilized against Romania and how the Kremlin portrays Romania to the domestic audience in the context of the war in Ukraine.

I. ROMANIA SEEKS TO ANNEX PARTS OF UKRAINE

The first to voice the possible territorial claims of Romania towards Ukraine was already the former deputy of the Kyiv Rada, Illia Kyva. Two days before the Russian invasion in February 2022, he declared that Romania, Hungary and Poland would announce their claims on the regions that previously belonged to the mentioned countries, blaming the leadership of Ukraine¹. The Russian propaganda press heavily promoted Kyva's statement². It is worth mentioning that Kyva was known to be pro-Russian, and after the beginning of the Russian invasion, Kyva publicly supported the invasion and fled to Russia.

In addition to pro-Russian media, the same narrative has been promoted in Russia at the highest level. We are talking, in this case, about the Foreign Intelligence Service of the Russian Federation (SVR). At the end of April 2022, the SVR accused Poland of developing plans to occupy western Ukraine. The SVR statement specified that the USA supports the plan, but so far, Poland has not reached an agreement with „other willing states” that were not named³. In mid-summer 2022, SVR extended the narrative to Romania, declaring that to achieve its „expansionist” plans, Poland would cooperate with Romania and Hungary,

¹ И. Кива, *Теперь ждём когда Венгрия, Польша и Румыния предъявят свои права на территорию...*, Telegram Илья Кива – ZOV КРОВИ, 2022, https://t.me/The_Kyva/1799 [dostęp: 10.01.2023].

² В Раде допустили возможность аннексии со стороны Венгрии, Польши и Румынии. *Депутат Рады Кива: Венгрия, Польша и Румыния могут предъявить права на территорию Украины*, РИА Новости, 2022, <https://ria.ru/20220223/anneksiya-1774487530.html> [dostęp: 10.01.2023]; *Депутат Кива: претензии на Украину могут предъявить Венгрия, Польша и Румыния*, Вести.Ру, 2022, <https://www.vesti.ru/article/2680945> [dostęp: 10.01.2023]; *Депутат Рады допустил захват части территорий Румынией, Польшей и Венгрией*, Regnum, 2022, <https://regnum.ru/news/polit/3515327.html> [dostęp: 10.01.2023]; В Раде заявили о возможных претензиях трех стран Европы на земли Украины, Ведомости, 2022, <https://www.vedomosti.ru/politics/news/2022/02/23/910570-zemli-ukraini> [dostęp: 10.01.2023].

³ О польских притязаниях на Западную Украину, Служба внешней разведки Российской Федерации, 2022, <http://svr.gov.ru/smi/2022/04/o-polskikh-prityazaniyakh-na-zapadnuyu-ukrainu.htm> [dostęp: 13.01.2023].

which would have the same ambitions⁴. As usual, Russian propaganda massively picked up the SVR's unsubstantiated accusations⁵.

At the end of July 2022, ex-president Dmitry Medvedev also contributed to the distribution of this narrative. He published a map in which the territory of Ukraine is carved up by its neighbours⁶. Romania would get to the North of Bucovina and the Vinnytsia region. Romanian Ministry of Foreign Affairs pointed out that „such attitudes are part of the propaganda and disinformation tools that the Russian Federation has been using for a long time and that was amplified after the start of the illegal and illegitimate war of aggression against Ukraine”⁷.

The same narrative continued to be promoted in the Russian public space throughout the summer and September of 2022. In this sense, we must emphasize the declarations of Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov. In an extensive interview for TASS, he declared that „more than half of the inhabitants of Chernivtsi region (northern Bucovina) of Ukraine have Romanian citizenship”, and Romania has implemented programs to develop cross-border links and has been developing humanitarian contacts for a long time. Answering the question if Romania can annex some parts of Ukraine, he stated that Romania „can do everything because it is a member of NATO”⁸. Further, Lavrov's statements were expanded upon by several so-called experts. For example, the historian Yakov Evglevsky declared in June 2022 that Romania is interested in annexing northern Bucovina and Snake Island. According to him, European states treat Ukraine as „its property”, a „colony”⁹. Approximately the same

⁴ Польша пытается завуалировать экспансию в Западную Украину, Служба внешней разведки Российской Федерации, 2022, <http://svr.gov.ru/smi/2022/07/polsha-pytaetsya-zavualirovat-ekspansiyu-v-zapadnuyu-ukrainu.htm> [dostęp: 13.01.2023].

⁵ СВР: Польша готова использовать Венгрию и Румынию для захвата части Украины. СВР: Польша хочет с помощью Венгрии и Румынии прикрыть планы по захвату Западной Украины, РИА Новости, 2022, <https://ria.ru/20220712/zakhvat-1802054728.html> [dostęp: 14.01.2023].

⁶ Д. Медведев, В пострадавшем от психотропных веществ мозгу президента Украины возникла следующая картинка светлого будущего его страны..., Telegram Дмитрий Медведев, 2022, https://t.me/medvedev_telegram/150 [dostęp: 17.01.2023].

⁷ Press statement by Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Romania, Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Romania, 2022, <https://www.mae.ro/node/59337> [dostęp: 18.01.2023].

⁸ Интервью Министра иностранных дел России С.В.Лаврова информационному агентству ТАСС, Санкт-Петербург, 16 июня 2022 года, Министерство иностранных дел Российской Федерации, 2022, https://www.mid.ru/ru/foreign_policy/news/1818188/ [dostęp: 22.01.2023].

⁹ Д. Скворцов, Историк Евглевский назвал страны, которые засматриваются на земли Украины, Федеральное агентство новостей, 2022, <https://riafan.>

idea was expressed by political scientist Alexey Martynov who stated that Romania is not even „ashamed” of its intentions of annexing northern Bucovina where „every village is hoisting the Romanian flag”, and the Romanian citizenships is rapidly given to the locals¹⁰.

In parallel, some controversial figures expressed the same narrative inside Romania. Among them, we can single out the former informant of the secret services in communist Romania, professor Andrei Marga¹¹ who previously served as Minister of Education (1997–2000) and Minister of Foreign Affairs (may–august 2012) of Romania. Marga has repeatedly stated that „Ukraine is in unnatural borders”. Like Russian propaganda, he said Ukraine should cede territory to Romania, Hungary, Poland, and Russia. So naturally, Marga’s statements made headlines in Russia¹². The exact same harmful idea was publicly expressed by Diana Șoșoacă¹³, a member of Romanian Parliament with pro-Russian position¹⁴.

In conclusion, we note that the narrative that Romania intends to annex the territories of Ukraine has been promoted by Russian politicians, Russian government structures, so-called pro-Kremlin experts, state media and potential agents of Russian influence (or so-called useful idiots) in Romania. In other words, we have identified characteristic features of an organised propaganda campaign. Its most likely purpose is to discredit the Romanian and Ukrainian authorities, to sow seeds of discord between the two states and to agitate the nationalist side of the two states with the apparent intention of diminishing the support given to Ukraine.

ru/23504783-istorik_evglevskii_nazval_strani_kotore_zasmatrivayutsya_na_zemli_ukraini [dostęp: 14.01.2023].

¹⁰ A. Мартынов, *Кресы — полякам, Прикарпатье — венграм и румынам*, RT, 2022, <https://russian.rt.com/opinion/1046429-martynov-vengriya-ukraina-uchebnik-territorii> [dostęp: 15.01.2023].

¹¹ Bianca Felseghi, *Cariera și vorbele lui Andrei Marga, mereu în slujba partidului*, PressOne, 2022, <https://pressone.ro/cariera-si-vorbele-lui-andrei-marga-mereu-in-slujba-partidului> [dostęp: 23.01.2023].

¹² С. Строкань, *Вирус перемоги*, RT, 2022, <https://russian.rt.com/opinion/1051267-strokan-ukraina-mir-peremoga> [dostęp: 22.01.2023].

¹³ M. Marian, *În timp ce Putin atacă Ucraina, Șoșoacă îndeamnă România să revendice Bucovina de Nord. Val de critici din partea propriilor fani*, Defapt.ro, 2022, <https://defapt.ro/in-timp-ce-putin-ataca-ucraina-sosoaca-indeamna-romania-sa-revendice-bucovina-de-nord-val-de-critici-din-partea-propriilor-fani/> [dostęp: 25.01.2023].

¹⁴ S. Fatî, *Ambasada Rusiei și „idioșii ei utili” din România*, Deutsche Welle, 2022, <https://www.dw.com/ro/ambasada-rusiei-%C8%99i-idio%C8%9Bii-ei-utili-din-rom%C3%A2nia/a-61325427> [dostęp: 25.01.2023].

II. ROMANIA SEEKS TO ANNEX THE REPUBLIC OF MOLDOVA AND TRANSNISTRIA

Some Russian marginal Telegram channels spread messages about Romanian and Moldavian „cooperation” to „annex Transnistria” and provoke a war with Russia before February 2022. Nevertheless, those reports had a sporadic character.

On the other hand, by the end of April 2022, Russia launched a propaganda campaign against Romania based on the same topic. This propaganda campaign undergone a „classical” evolution, which means that it began in anonymous telegram channels, then moved to the marginal media and latterly was spread by some Russian public figures and big media.

First, the alarming „breaking news” about „Romania what is preparing invasion in Transnistria” appeared on the relatively big pro-Kremlin Telegram channel WarGonzo¹⁵, owned by a Russian propagandist, Semen Pegov. In the following month, this outlet, with more than one million subscribers, published several „reports” about the „preparation of annexation” of Transnistria done by Romania¹⁶. According to WarGonzo and all the other propaganda outlets presented in this chapter, Ukraine, Moldova and Romania „worked together” to raise tensions between Chisinau and Tiraspol to provoke the war and allow Romanian soldiers dressed in Moldovan army uniforms to conquer Transnistria¹⁷.

At the same time as this propaganda campaign, several provocations were orchestrated in Transnistria, including an attack on Tiraspol’s local secret service office¹⁸. As was expected, Russia accused Ukraine, Moldova and Romania of dealing with those provocations to „drag Transnistria in the war”. At this point (during April–May 2022) same propaganda narratives exceeded anonymous Telegram channels and were promoted

¹⁵ СРОЧНО. Румыния готовит вторжение в Приднестровье, Telegram WarGonzo, 2022, <https://t.me/wargonzo/6777> [dostęp: 2.02.2023].

¹⁶ Спецоперация НАТО под названием «Кровавая Майя», Telegram WarGonzo, 2022, <https://t.me/wargonzo/6778> [dostęp: 2.02.2023]; Что грозит «Русскому миру» на Днестре?, Telegram WarGonzo, 2022, <https://t.me/wargonzo/6827> [dostęp: 2.02.2023]; Троянский конь румынских учений НАТО, Telegram WarGonzo, 2022, <https://t.me/wargonzo/6845> [dostęp: 2.02.2023]; Игорь Додон – узник Сороса, Telegram WarGonzo, 2022, <https://t.me/wargonzo/7067> [dostęp: 2.02.2023].

¹⁷ Fake News: România își concentrează forțele militare la granițele cu Republica Moldova și Ucraina, Veridica, 2022, <https://www.veridica.ro/stiri-false/fake-news-romania-isi-concentreaza-fortele-militare-la-granitele-cu-republica-moldova-si-ucraina> [dostęp: 25.01.2023].

¹⁸ G. Kuczyński, *Tensions Surge in Moldova’s Breakaway Region of Transnistria*, Warsaw Institute, 2022, <https://warsawinstitute.org/tensions-surge-moldovas-breakaway-region-transnistria/> [dostęp: 5.02.2023].

by some Russian „experts”, especially Sergey Markov¹⁹, Igor Girkin²⁰, Nikita Mendkovich²¹, Alexander Khrolenko²² and more. At that point, the narrative shifted toward accusations against Ukraine. Russian „experts”, based on Tiraspol’s official statements about the „Ukrainian trace” in Transnistria’s provocations, mentioned that Ukraine and not Romania would annex Transnistria. At the same time, Romania will occupy Moldova and become a NATO member. According to „experts”, the „plan” was made by „Washington’s curators” of Ukraine and Romania.

Russian officials were more reserved in their accusations against Romania, but they repeated the idea that Transnistria was forcibly drawn into the war. Thus, Russian Foreign Minister Lavrov declared that, in his opinion, it is clear that „Moldova is turning into second Ukraine”²³. Russian deputy Viktor Vodolatsky extrapolated Lavrov’s narrative even further. In April 2022, the „Nazi” authorities of the Republic of Moldova, guided by curators from Romania, are trying to provoke a war in Transnistria because of „nationalism and Nazism”. The deputy declared that „the Transnistrians are our citizens (that is, Russians)”, and they want the inhabitants of Donbas to live in Russia²⁴. Subsequent, that information became headlines of dozens of Telegram channels²⁵ and Russian

¹⁹ С. Марков, *Военная атака на Приднестровье должна начаться в ближайшее время*, Telegram Логика Маркова, 2022, <https://t.me/logikamarkova/2124> [dostęp: 6.02.2023].

²⁰ Стрелков: Румыния и НАТО спешно готовят Молдавию к войне, EurAsia Daily, 2022, <https://easaily.com/ru/news/2022/04/25/strelkov-rumyniya-i-nato-speshno-gotovyat-moldaviyu-k-voynе> [dostęp: 6.02.2023].

²¹ Д. Смирнов, *Расширить границы конфликта: политолог Мендкович о планах Польши и Румынии в Приднестровье*, Федеральное агентство новостей, 2022, https://riafan.ru/23154114-rasshirit_granitsi_konflikta_politolog_mendkovich_o_planah_pol_shi_i_ruminii_v_pridnestrov_e [dostęp: 7.02.2023].

²² А. Хроленко, *„Второй фронт” в Молдове: кому выгодна серия диверсий в Приднестровье*, Sputnik Казахстан, 2022, <https://ru.sputnik.kz/20220427/vtoroy-front-v-moldove-komu-vygodna-seriya-diversiy-v-pridnestrove-24506221.html> [dostęp: 7.02.2023].

²³ Лавров: из Молдавии пытаются сделать «вторую Украину», RT, 2022, <https://russian.rt.com/ussr/news/1015555-lavrov-moldaviya-ukraina> [dostęp: 9.02.2023].

²⁴ М. Судаков, *«Хотят того же!» Приднестровью предрекли интеграцию с Россией по примеру ДНР и ЛНР*, Национальная Служба Новостей, 2022, <https://nsn.fm/policy/hotyat-togo-zhe-v-gosdume-dopustili-integratsiu-pridnestrovy-a-rossiei-po-primeru-dnr-i-lnr> [dostęp: 9.02.2023].

²⁵ В Приднестровье снова слышны взрывы, Telegram Оперативные сводки, 2022, <https://t.me/opersvodki/3923> [dostęp: 10.02.2023]; В Приднестровье снова слышны взрывы, Telegram Силовики, 2022, <https://t.me/SILOVIKI/47546> [dostęp: 10.02.2023]; Военная атака на Приднестровье должна начаться в ближайшее время, Telegram Евразийская Молдова, 2022, <https://t.me/eurasiamoldova/10758> [dostęp: 10.02.2023]; *Официальные СМИ, МВД*

press²⁶. In other words, Russian propagandists were preparing to justify Russia's intervention in Transnistria to „defend ethnic Russians from the Romanian nationalism of the Republic of Moldova”.

The second wave of this propaganda campaign started at the beginning of summer 2022, a Russian propaganda machine, almost simultaneously in Chisinau and Tiraspol. On June 5, RIA published an interview with Igor Shornikov. The so-called Transnistrian expert claimed that „Romania is fuelling the idea of unification with the Republic of Moldova”, and this prospect „could lead to a new war” in the region²⁷. In parallel, the pro-Russian Telegram channels in Moldova distributed similar narratives. A few days later, the same narrative was voiced to the former president of Moldova, the pro-Russian Igor Dodon. At the beginning of June, he declared that „the political and military annexation” of Moldova by Romania is being prepared. Thus Moldova „will give up its neutrality” (that is, it will become a member of NATO). For this reason, Dodon believes „Moldova risks being drawn into a bloody regional war”.

Furthermore, Dodon claims that President Maia Sandu (his political opponent) and her masters from outside the country follow the „Ukrainian scenario”. In this equation, Dodon considers that the West wants to use the Moldovans as „cannon fodder in geopolitical slavery” (with Russia). Furthermore, the ex-president claims that

Приднестровья почему то называют выстрелы из гранатомета в здание МГБ – взрывами, Telegram Молдавский Вагон, 2022, <https://t.me/mv6566/9443> [dostęp: 10.02.2023].

²⁶ В. Васильев, *Румыния нацелилась на Молдавию, а Украина на — Приднестровье*, Regnum, 2022, <https://regnum.ru/news/polit/3577039.html> [dostęp: 11.02.2023]; «НАТО провоцирует горячие головы». *Молдавия готовится к новой войне за Приднестровье. Кому нужен второй фронт в Европе?*, Lenta, 2022, <https://lenta.ru/articles/2022/08/28/pridnestrovie/> [dostęp: 11.02.2023]; *Румыния готовит вторжение в Приднестровье – WarGonzo*, Царьград, 2022, https://tsargrad.tv/news/rumynija-gotovit-vtorzhenie-v-pridnestrovecwargonzo_539099 [dostęp: 11.02.2023]; «Вторжение в Приднестровье может быть уже сегодня». *Местные военные склады очень интересуют американцев, Московский Комсомолец*, 2022, <https://www.mk.ru/politics/2022/04/26/vtorzhenie-v-pridnestrovecw-mozhet-byt-uzhe-segodnya.html> [dostęp: 11.02.2023]; В. Гулевич, *О ситуации в Приднестровье и великорумынских мечтах Бухареста*, *Международная жизнь*, 2022, <https://interaffairs.ru/news/show/35017> [dostęp: 11.02.2023]; А. Ставер, *Назревает ли конфликт в Приднестровье*, *Военное обозрение*, 2022, <https://topwar.ru/195497-nazrevaet-li-konflikt-v-pridnestrovecw.html> [dostęp: 11.02.2023].

²⁷ *Эксперт: амбиции Румынии в Молдавии могут привести к военному конфликту. Эксперт Шорников: румынские амбиции в отношении Молдавии приведут к военному конфликту*, РИА Новости, 2022, <https://ria.ru/20220605/moldaviya-1793254503.html> [dostęp: 14.02.2023].

the Chisinau authorities are causing „anti-Russian hysteria” to justify the presence of NATO troops on the territory of Moldova²⁸. At the same time, the narrative he launched was partially supported by the deputy chairman of the Security Council of Russia, Dmitry Medvedev. He declared that Romania was preparing to annexe the Republic of Moldova, guided by Brussels and Washington. At the same time, the basis of the annexation, says Medvedev, is the „Ukrainian scenario” in Moldova: promoting anti-Russian policies²⁹. Medvedev’s statements served as a new round of propaganda spread in the Russian press³⁰. The information fund created by the propagandists allowed the unrecognised authorities from Tiraspol to reappear on the front pages of the big propaganda outlets in Russia, demanding recognition and subsequent incorporation within the Russian Federation³¹ but Moscow did not obtain significant gains after the first and second rounds of promoting this propaganda narrative.

The third round of this narrative was launched in February 2023 by Sergey Lavrov, who declared that „Moldova claims the role of second Ukraine” because it has a president (Maia Sandu) at the head of the country who „wants to join NATO, has the citizenship Romanian; she is ready to unite with Romania and, in general, she is ready for almost anything”³². The stakes of Russia’s promotion of the narrative

²⁸ Додон заявил о подготовке в Молдавии к военному и политическому присоединению к Румынии, ТАСС, 2022, <https://tass.ru/mezhdunarodnaya-panorama/14852823> [dostęp: 14 II 2023].

²⁹ Д. Медведев, *Вопрос агентства ТАСС: Молдавия получила статус кандидата в ЕС. Насколько быстрым будет это вступление? Как можно оценить оперативную готовность Молдавии присоединиться к санкциям против России?*, Telegram Дмитрий Медведев, 2022, https://t.me/medvedev_telegram/122 [dostęp: 17.02.2023].

³⁰ Медведев допустил присоединение Молдавии к ЕС через создание „новой Великой Румынии”, ТАСС, 2022, <https://tass.ru/politika/15031603> [dostęp: 17.02.2023]; „Конфликт неизбежен”. В ЕС предложили Румынии поглотить Молдавию, РИА Новости, 2022, <https://ria.ru/20220531/moldaviya-1791801373.html> [dostęp: 17.02.2023]; А. Рудалёв, *Статус жертвенной пешки*, RT, 2022, <https://russian.rt.com/opinion/1015799-rudalev-lavrov-moldaviya-ukraina> [dostęp: 17.02.2023]; А. Латышев, А. Медведева, *«Ошибочная и опасная стратегия»: к чему может привести реализация планов по слиянию Молдавии и Румынии*, RT, 2022, <https://russian.rt.com/ussr/article/1012867-moldaviya-rumyniya-dodon-sandu> [dostęp: 17.02.2023].

³¹ А. Заквасин, Е. Комарова, *«Желание жить в одном государстве»: почему в Приднестровье подняли тему присоединения к России*, RT, 2022, <https://russian.rt.com/ussr/article/1028858-pridnestrovo-rossiya-prisoedinenie-ukraina> [dostęp: 3.03.2023].

³² Р. Абдуллин, *„Работа ведется”. Лавров объяснил, какая страна станет „новой Украиной”*, РИА Новости, 2023, <https://ria.ru/20230202/diplomatiya-1849221106.html> [dostęp: 4.03.2023].

regarding the annexation of Moldova by Romania became apparent after the president of Ukraine, Volodymyr Zelenskyy, revealed the plan of Russian secret services to overthrow the pro-European government of Moldova³³. Moreover, the Western media showed that Putin could annex Transnistria on the model of Crimea³⁴. At this point, it has become clear that from the beginning of the promotion of the narrative given in April 2022 until now, Russian propaganda has used Romania as a scarecrow to create tensions between Moldova and Transnistria and between pro-Russian and pro-western citizens of Moldova.

III. ROMANIA PROMOTES UNREASONABLE RUSSOPHOBIA

In recent decades, Russophobia has become one of the most used Kremlin propaganda narratives. Nowadays, the Kremlin sees Poland in this sense as a bastion of Russophobia. Although less visible internationally, Romania faces the same propaganda campaigns, often accused of challenging Poland for the „trophy of most Russophobic state”³⁵. Such narratives are launched not only through the press or social media but also by officials. For example, in March 2022, the Russian ambassador to Romania, Valery Kuzmin, accused without evidence that Russian students in Romania face discrimination because „Russophobia in Romania is a natural element in the political landscape”³⁶. These accusations became

³³ *Zelenskyy: Ukraine caught Russian plan to 'destroy' Moldova*, The Associated Press, 2023, <https://apnews.com/article/zelenskyy-politics-european-union-maia-sandu-moldova-90d280ff05db38bf0685a96c2203286b> [dostęp: 4.03.2023].

³⁴ R. Picheta, *Why Moldova fears it could be next for Putin*, CNN, 2023, <https://edition.cnn.com/2023/02/26/europe/moldova-transnistria-russia-tensions-explainer-intl/index.html> [dostęp: 5.03.2023].

³⁵ Р. Скоморохов, *Пара слов о главных русофобах Восточной Европы*, Военное обозрение, 2021, <https://topwar.ru/189020-para-slo-o-glavnyh-rusofobah-vostochnoj-evropy.html?ysclid=l6yуmc6swн150764562> [dostęp: 15.03.023].

³⁶ *Дипломат Кузьмин рассказал о дискриминации русских детей в Румынии*, НТВ, 2022, https://www.ntv.ru/novosti/2688525/?utm_source=yxnews&utm_medium=desktop&utm_referrer=https%3A%2F%2Fyandex.ru%2Fnews%2Fsearch%3Ftext%3D [dostęp: 16.03.2023].

headlines in the most prominent Russian state outlets, like TASS³⁷, Rossiya 24³⁸, Pervyy Kanal³⁹ and others.

Theses regarding the „anti-Russian hysteria” continued in April 2022 when a man drove his car into the gate of the Russian embassy in Bucharest. We do not know if the accident was intentional, but Russian propaganda used it to divert public attention from the terrible events in Ukrainian Bucha. Thus, the Russian embassy in Romania declared that the incident occurred „due to the explosion of anti-Russian hysteria in connection with the events staged in Bucha”. Furthermore, the Russian embassy stated that this „hysteria is directed by the propaganda of the neo-Nazis in Kyiv and their curators in the West because the empire of lies of the collective West needs bloody sacrifices”⁴⁰. In his order, the Russian ambassador in Romania claimed this was not an accident but a „terrorist attack”⁴¹. Also, Russian Foreign Ministry spokeswoman, Maria Zakharova, stated that this is not an „accident” but a „crime”. She also argued that this accident was caused by the „crazy daily (Russophobic – our note) media campaigns”⁴².

Statements about „Romanian Russophobia” returned in the official speech from Moscow in February 2023 when Romanian authorities decided to suspend the activity of the Russian Centre for Culture and Science in Bucharest, which has turned into „a tool for propaganda, disinformation and justifying the Russian Federation’s war crimes in Ukraine” according

³⁷ В посольстве РФ в Румынии сообщили об обращениях о нарушениях прав россиян, ТАСС, 2022, <https://tass.ru/politika/14855661> [dostęp: 16.03.2023].

³⁸ Москва направила Бухаресту ноту из-за случаев с россиянами, Россия 24, 2022, https://smotrim.ru/article/2684072?utm_source=internal&utm_medium=serp_news&utm_campaign=serp_news [dostęp: 16.03.2023]; Москва дала Варшаве финансовый ответ, Бухарест тоже нарывается, Россия 24, 2022, https://smotrim.ru/article/2739486?utm_source=internal&utm_medium=serp_news&utm_campaign=serp_news [dostęp: 16.03.2023].

³⁹ Информационная кампания против России привела к волне дискриминации наших соотечественников за рубежом, Первый канал, 2022, https://www.1tv.ru/news/2022-03-05/422707-informatsionnaya_kampaniya_protiv_rossii_privela_k_volne_diskriminatsii_nashih_sootechestvennikov_za_rubezhom [dostęp: 16.03.2023].

⁴⁰ Об инциденте у Посольства России в Румынии 6 апреля 2022 г., Russian Embassy in Romania, 2022, https://romania.mid.ru/ru/embassy/arkhiv_novostey/ob_intsidente_u_posolstva_rossii_v_rumynii_6_aprelya_2022_g/ [dostęp: 18.03.2023].

⁴¹ Ворота посольства России в Румынии протаранил легковой автомобиль, Первый канал, 2022, https://www.1tv.ru/news/2022-04-06/425752-vorota_posolstva_rossii_v_rumynii_protaranil_legkovoy_avtomobil [dostęp: 18.03.2023].

⁴² В МИД назвали инцидент у посольства в Бухаресте преступлением. Захарова назвала попытку протаранить ворота посольства в Бухаресте преступлением, РИА Новости, 2022, <https://ria.ru/20220406/bukharest-1782158699.html> [dostęp: 18.03.2023].

to Romanian Ministry of Foreign Affairs⁴³. Consequently, Maria Zakharova suggested that the Romanian decision was made because of „the background of the anti-Russian hysteria that covered the European Union”⁴⁴. Of course, the significant Russian propaganda publications heavily publicized the ravings of Russian officials. In addition, however, Romanians’ „Russophobia” is also widely addressed in the marginal media.

The central core of this propaganda thesis is that in Romania, Russophobia is artificially implemented by evil forces (ruling parties and „their masters from the West”). Russian propaganda presents actions taken by the Romanian government, such as closing the Russian cultural centre or expulsions of the diplomats, as „Russophobia”. In reality, this is the consequence of the Russian aggressive actions. Also, it is worth mentioning that the promotion of narratives regarding the Russophobia of Romanians and other European peoples is aimed at the domestic audience of the Russian Federation. Thus, the Kremlin maintains the myth of the „besieged fortress”, distorts reality by presenting Russia as a victim in a world full of enemies, and tries to coagulate the masses around the leader. In addition to Russian residents, this kind of propaganda is also designed for Russians outside the Russian Federation, especially those in the post-Soviet space.

IV. DISCREDITING ROMANIAN AID TO UKRAINE

During the year 2022, the Russian propaganda machine is trying to discredit Romania’s support for Ukraine. Such attempts have been made by representatives of the foreign and defence ministries and by the Kremlin-controlled media. In all these cases, Moscow’s propaganda narratives have either targeted sensitive aspects of Romanian-Ukrainian relations, especially the rights of the Romanian minority in Ukraine or focused on current war-related issues, mainly the export of Ukrainian grain.

Narratives about the rights of the Romanian minority in Ukraine were launched in 2022, mainly by representatives of Russian politics, whose statements were later spread by the Russian press. Thus, during the negotiations between Russia and Ukraine in the spring of 2022, Russian

⁴³ *Comunicat de presă privind decizia României de suspendare a activității Centrului Rus de Cultură și Știință la București*, Ministerul Afacerilor Externe al României, 2023, <https://www.mae.ro/node/61159> [dostęp: 24.03.2023].

⁴⁴ *Захарова прокомментировала закрытие Русского дома в Бухаресте. Захарова: Россия опровергает обвинения в продвижении пропаганды Русским домом в Бухаресте*, РИА Новости, 2023, <https://ria.ru/20230222/dom-1853864381.html> [dostęp: 24.03.2023].

Foreign Minister Lavrov stated that one of Moscow's aims was to ensure that there would be a legislative basis in Ukraine that „will ensure the legitimate rights of all peoples who live in Ukraine, which includes all national minorities without exception, their equal rights”. According to him, laws in Ukraine are currently directed against all ethnic minorities, including Romanians⁴⁵.

Later that spring, the RIA news agency published a story claiming that, according to its anonymous sources in Russian power structures, Ukraine had carried out an operation „to discredit Bucharest's foreign policy on Ukrainian, Moldovan and European issues before European countries, the European Union and the European Commission”. According to the source, the operation aimed „to give them a negative perception of Romania as a state whose policy is contrary to pan-European values”⁴⁶.

The Russian Foreign Ministry has also contributed to promoting theses that could worsen Romanian-Ukrainian relations. A good example is the statements of Maria Zakharova. At a press briefing in February 2023, the ministry's spokeswoman claimed that Ukraine was executing „a wholesale mobilization of the country's male population, often using subtle methods (intimidation, harassment, beatings) and brute force in all its forms”. According to her, this process occurs mainly among ethnic minorities: „This is beginning to worry people not only in Ukraine but also in neighboring Hungary and Romania, where they are seriously concerned about the mass recruitment of their compatriots into the Armed Forces. This is a real kidnapping when people are forced to call special security services because it is unclear who is pushing young people into cars and taking them to an unknown destination”. In this context, Zakharova reiterated Lavrov's earlier propaganda narratives that „Romania has faced blatant violation of its legal rights by the Kyiv regime before. It was not so barbaric and savage back then. There was an infringement of rights to language, culture and political views. Now there is a real round-up of the population”⁴⁷.

⁴⁵ Интервью Министра иностранных дел Российской Федерации С.В.Лаврова телеканалу «Аль-Джазира», Москва, 2 марта 2022 года, Министерство иностранных дел Российской Федерации, 2022, https://www.mid.ru/ru/foreign_policy/news/1802485/ [dostep: 2.04.2023].

⁴⁶ Источник: Украина провела операцию по дискредитации Румынии перед Европой. Силловые структуры России: СВРУ провела операцию по дискредитации Румынии перед ЕС, РИА Новости, 2022, <https://ria.ru/20220511/diskreditatsiya-1787815981.html> [dostep: 5.04.2023].

⁴⁷ Брифинг официального представителя МИД России М.В.Захаровой, Москва, 1 февраля 2023 года, Министерство иностранных дел Российской Федерации, 2023, https://www.mid.ru/ru/foreign_policy/news/1851724/#20 [dostep: 6.04.2023].

As mentioned earlier, the second line of Russian propaganda for worsening relations between Romania and Ukraine is aimed at the grain crisis generated by the Russian invasion. A telling example illustrating Russian propaganda is the statement of Mikhail Mizintsev, head of Russia's National Defence Management Centre. Even in the early stages of the grain crisis, when some grain began to be transported through Romania, Mizintsev said that Ukraine supplies daily food to Romania in exchange for arms despite a shortage of products for its population. According to Mizintsev, by April 2022, Ukraine has already exported around 20 million tonnes of grain, maize, oilseeds, and farm animals, receiving from Romania „foreign weapons and ammunition” in return⁴⁸. One of the leading Russian propaganda TV channels, Channel One, promoted the same narrative. In a May 2022 report, Russian propaganda claimed that Ukraine „pays for weapons with the grain” and the West is „stealing” Ukrainian wheat through the Romanian port of Sulina, which would be the „largest illegal Ukraine's grain exchange”⁴⁹.

Even if it is a new propaganda narrative generated by the context of the war, we can see that Russia does nothing but misinform on sensitive issues that exist in reality, such as the issue of minorities in Ukraine or the export of Ukrainian grain. In other words, Russia is misinforming on sensitive issues on the Romanian-Ukrainian bilateral agenda to sow the seeds of discord between the two countries, both politically and among the population.

V. ROMANIA IS A „WESTERN COLONY” USED BY THE USA AGAINST RUSSIA

The geopolitical reality of the last decades (especially after the beginning of Russian aggression toward Ukraine in 2014) made Romania one of the most important NATO allies on the Eastern flank. In terms of military presence, Romania hosts NATO bases and a large number of NATO

⁴⁸ Минобороны: Украина поставляет Румынии продовольствие в обмен на оружие. Минобороны: Украина ежедневно поставляет Румынии продовольствие в обмен на оружие, РИА Новости, 2022, <https://ria.ru/20220430/ukraina-1786393252.html> [dostęp: 6.04.2023].

⁴⁹ И. Благой, Запад ворует украинскую пшеницу, обвиняя при этом Москву в ведении зерновой войны, Первый канал, 2022, https://www.1tv.ru/news/2022-05-22/429416-zapad_voruet_ukrainskuyu_pshenitsu_obvinyaya_pri_etom_moskvu_v_vedenii_zernovoy_voyny [dostęp: 7.04.2023].

forces compared to the other countries in the region⁵⁰. Also, in comparison to the other states from the former communist bloc, Romania has one of the most significant professional military personnel⁵¹. Furthermore, Romania is among the few NATO members who meet the required 2% of GDP spent on defence⁵², has a solid pro-Atlantic position, shares a vast border with Ukraine⁵³, and views Russia's politics as a „major security concern at the national level”⁵⁴. So, it is unsurprising that Russian propaganda tries to undermine NATO's popularity in Romania. Even before February 2022, Putin's Russia constantly portrayed Romania as the leading lobbyist of anti-Russian policies in South-Eastern Europe and one of the US tools used against Russia. In 2019, President Putin spread this narrative: „I think it is clear to everyone that NATO is just a US foreign policy tool. [...] Another trick is that once countries join NATO, they have no say over the arms that are installed on their territory. This was the case in Romania with missile defense. [...] It will be really close to our border. It is certainly a threat to us. We see it as an attempt to neutralize our strategic nuclear capabilities”⁵⁵.

⁵⁰ Poland hosts the largest number of NATO's troops on the Eastern Flank (11.600), while Romania is in second place with 4.700 troops: *NATO's Eastern Flank: Stronger defence and deterrence*, NATO, 2022, https://www.nato.int/nato_static_fl2014/assets/pdf/2022/3/pdf/2203-map-det-def-east.pdf [dostęp: 9.04.2023].

⁵¹ On Eastern Flank, Poland has the most significant military personnel (122.500), Romania is in second place with 75.000 troops with a big gap between following Bulgaria (27.400), Hungary (21.400), Lithuania (17.200) and others, *ibidem*.

⁵² In 2014, all NATO members agreed to spend at least 2% of GDP on defence. Currently, NATO has 30 state members, but only 10 of them spends required 2% of GDP on defence, Romania (2.02%) is among them: *NATO Spending by Country 2022, World Population Review, 2022*, <https://worldpopulationreview.com/country-rankings/nato-spending-by-country> [dostęp: 9.04.2023]; From 2023, Romania will increase its military budget to 2,5% of GDP: Cristian Andrei, *Decizii CSAT | Iohannis: Majorăm cheltuielile pentru apărare la 2.5% din PIB, România devine hub al ajutorului umanitar*, Europa Liberă România, 2022, <https://romania.europalibera.org/a/decizii-csat-iohannis-cheltuielile-pentru-aparare-l2-5-din-pib/31730305.html> [dostęp: 9.04.2023].

⁵³ The Romanian-Ukrainian border has a length of 649 km. Also, it is just about 400 km on the straight line between Crimea and Constanța (the biggest Romanian port) and less than 200 km between Romania and Russian-controlled Transnistria.

⁵⁴ *National Defence Strategy 2020–2024*, Presidential Administration of Romania, 2020, s. 23, https://www.presidency.ro/files/userfiles/National_Defence_Strategy_2020_2024.pdf [dostęp: 10.04.2023].

⁵⁵ *Interview with Al Arabiya, Sky News Arabia and RT Arabic*, Kremlin, 2019, http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/61792?fbclid=IwAR1Y25j9YFkInn6_echX8E1A3lvW-Ci_nSjoDHau5-q0x7A1CRSznLZeYHH8 [dostęp: 12.04.2023].

After the full-scale Russian invasion of Ukraine, Russian propaganda regarding Romania became more consistent. At the official level, we can highlight Maria Zakharova's declarations, the spokeswoman for the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation. Commenting decision of Romanian prosecutors to launch an investigation of crime against humanity done by Russians against Romanian citizens in Ukraine, Zakharova said that this action was „absolutely obviously dictated solely by political considerations, the meaning of which is the disciplined development of Western so-called allied obligations”. Furthermore, she pointed out this was not an „independent initiative of the Romanian authorities”⁵⁶.

One month later, Zakharova repeated the same narrative commenting decision of Romanian authorities to expel a Russian diplomat in August 2022. In this case, she told the press that Bucharest actions are „intended to demonstrate their full loyalty to the West's corporate directives” and that Romania has no national interest in this matter⁵⁷. Several weeks after that, also Zakharova declared that Bucharest „is serving the interests of Washington” and undertaking the „Russophobic” actions dictated by „neo-colonial” interests of the USA⁵⁸.

Besides, the more aggressive declarations were made by so-called Russian experts. For example, in September 2022, political scientist Yevgeny Satanovsky declared on a famous Russian talk show, Soloviov Live, that to ensure its security, Russia must „denazify” not only Ukraine but also the „NATO platforms” in Europe. „How can we avoid military actions in Europe when the Americans are not just pushing it, but driving it? And for them it's good. The more Europe goes bankrupt, the deeper we get stuck, and the better for the Americans. In Ukraine, we are not stuck – that means Moldova and the Baltic states, which means Poland and Romania (will be attacked by Russia – our note). You can't get away from it”⁵⁹. This is a typical situation when Russia portrays itself as a vic-

⁵⁶ *Комментарий официального представителя МИД России М.В.Захаровой в связи с решением Генпрокуратуры Румынии расследовать «преступления против человечности», якобы совершенные в отношении румынских граждан в ходе СВО на Украине, Министерство иностранных дел Российской Федерации, 2022, https://www.mid.ru/ru/foreign_policy/news/1822287/ [dostęp: 13.04.2023].*

⁵⁷ *Комментарий официального представителя МИД России М.В.Захаровой в связи с недружественными действиями Румынии, Министерство иностранных дел Российской Федерации, 2022, https://www.mid.ru/ru/foreign_policy/news/1826944/ [dostęp: 13.04.2023].*

⁵⁸ *МИД РФ заявил, что русофобские действия США угрожают работе практически всех средств связи, ТАСС, 2022, <https://tass.ru/politika/15848719> [dostęp: 13.04.2023].*

⁵⁹ *Е. Сатановский, Всё нормально, Германия вошла в боевое состояние. А куда ей деваться: эту зиму Германия не переживёт..., Telegram Соловьёв, 2022, <https://t.me/SolovievLive/124860> [dostęp: 15.04.2023].*

tim of the „imperialist ambitions” of NATO and completely ignores the fact that, in reality, the Kremlin’s aggressive politics are the cause of the strengthening of NATO’s members. Several other pro-Kremlin „experts expressed the same message”. For example, political scientist Valery Korovkin wrote for RT that „the buffer zone between Russia and the West” needs to be moved west from Moscow in Romania, Poland, the Czech Republic, Slovakia, and the Baltic states. In Korovkin’s opinion, those need to be „calm and quiet” counties and not „aggressive puppets” controlled by the SUA⁶⁰.

As far as we can see, this narrative is present in the official discourse in Moscow and is strongly fuelled by the authorities, through official statements, and by the Kremlin’s „experts”. Moreover, the dimension of the narrative exceeds Romania because other countries in Europe and beyond are portrayed by Russian propaganda as „slaves of the USA”. These messages are part of the Kremlin’s attempts to demonise the United States and its NATO allies.

CONCLUSIONS

Analyzing Russian propaganda about Romania from February 2022 to February 2023, we determined the key narratives of it: „Romania seeks to annex parts of Ukraine”, „Romania seeks to annex the Republic of Moldova and Transnistria”, „Romania promotes unreasonable Russophobia”, „Discrediting Romanian aid to Ukraine”, and „Romania is a «Western colony» used by the USA against Russia”.

From the above, we can see that Russian propaganda creates a negative image of Romania. Russian officials and their controlled media portray Romania as a weak and insignificant state controlled by Washington. Nevertheless, this control, Russian propaganda shows, is not exploitative, but on the contrary, desired by Romanians subservient to Western interests. Moreover, Russian propaganda wants to induce the idea that the Romanian political elite and ordinary people are unfounded Russophobes and want to be used by the West against Russia. Last, the Kremlin propaganda creates the image of a revisionist Romania orchestrating invasions and planning annexations of neighboring territories and countries.

In this regard, in the last year, Russian propaganda used some established narratives, specifically that „Romania is a colony of the West” and that „Romania wants to annex Moldova (with or without Transnistria)”.

⁶⁰ В. Коровин, *Соучастники преступлений*, RT, 2022, <https://russian.rt.com/opinion/1020226-korovin-ukraina-posledstviya-evropa-politik> [dostęp: 15.04.2023].

Both are narratives that have been present in the public space for decades. Their continued use demonstrates that Russian propaganda believes in their effectiveness. On the other hand, last year, Russian propaganda widely used relatively new narratives against Romania; namely, „Romania seeks to annex parts of Ukraine”, „Romania promotes unreasonable Russophobia”; in addition to that, it sought to discredit the Romanian aid provided to Ukraine. Thus, the war in Ukraine has led to the concentration of Russian propaganda efforts, specifically in the context of the war, which seems natural.

Next, we conclude that Russian propaganda during this period has been persistent but opportunistic, generated by recent events. The media and Russian officials try to exploit certain actual events (such as the accident at the Russian embassy in Bucharest) and fold them into the big themes of Russian propaganda about Romania, in this case, Russophobia. The same happened with the export of Ukrainian wheat through Romanian ports and railways.

At the same time, we notice that the propaganda themes that present Romania as a potential aggressor of the states and regions that Russia considers its sphere of influence (Republic of Moldova, Transnistria, Ukraine) have intensified. This shows the concern that those countries could leave Moscow's orbit. It should be noted here that three of the five significant narratives identified in this study, namely „Romania seeking to annex parts of Ukraine”, „Romania seeking to annex the Republic of Moldova and Transnistria”, and „Discrediting Romanian aid to Ukraine”, are not only narratives directed against Romania, but rather against Moldova and Ukraine. In this sense, the role attributed by the Kremlin to Romania is that of a scarecrow. This role is further highlighted by the fact that in contexts where Russian propaganda talks about Romania being the „slave” of the West, it is ridiculed and presented as a weak and insignificant country.

On the other hand, in contexts concerning Romania's foreign policy towards its neighbors, Russian propaganda creates the image of an aggressive Romania, capable (military but also politically) of annexing territories and countries. The role of the scarecrow invented by Russian propaganda also demonstrates that Moscow hardly succeeds in directing its propaganda on the Romanians, which proves that Moscow does not have enough tools to influence the political climate in Romania. Consequently, the Kremlin's propaganda is trying to isolate Romania from its neighbors (Ukraine, Moldova, Hungary, Serbia and Bulgaria). Thus, the spread of anti-Romanian narratives by Russian propaganda constitutes a challenge to the foreign policy promoted by Bucharest.

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Iurie Rotari – has a bachelor's degree in journalism and a master degree in Management of International Relations and Cross-Border Cooperation. He is currently pursuing a PhD study in History at Stefan cel Mare University of Suceava. His thesis is entitled *Russia and the Slavic world in the post-Cold War era. The policy of the Russian Federation towards Serbia, Northern Macedonia and Bulgaria*. His main interests are Russian foreign policy in South-Eastern Europe.

NOTA O AUTORZE

Iurie Rotari – posiada tytuł licencjata w dziedzinie dziennikarstwa oraz tytuł magistra w zarządzaniu relacjami międzynarodowymi oraz współpracy międzygranicznej. Obecnie student studiów doktoranckich na kierunku historia na Uniwersytecie Stefana cel Mare w Suceavie. Jego praca doktorska jest zatytułowana *Rosja i słowiański świat w epoce pozimnowojennej. Polityka Federacji Rosyjskiej wobec Serbii, Północnej Macedonii i Bułgarii*. Jego zainteresowania naukowe koncentrują się wokół rosyjskiej polityki zagranicznej w Europie Południowo-Zachodniej.

