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Anton Shekhovtsov

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Essays on Kremlin Propaganda in Europe  
and the Neighbourhood, 2020-2023

With a foreword by Nathalie Loiseau

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*To fallen defenders of Ukraine*



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# Foreword

I started to hear about Anton Shekhovtsov's work as early as 2020. Europe was facing the brutal surge of the COVID-19 pandemic and in parallel another unprecedented epidemic, the Infodemic, as it was rapidly being called by the few who really cared.

It was obvious that fear had allowed the weirdest of all conspiracy theories to circulate at full speed and that the massive development of social media, accelerated by the diverse episodes of lockdown, had allowed unverified opinions to spread faster than ever. All of this could have been spontaneous and mirrored the high level of anxiety among European public opinions. But there was more in it that needed some analysis: there was a deliberate effort to manipulate European audiences, coming from two state actors working in parallel and using similar narratives: China and Russia. On information manipulation, Russia was the master and China was learning, and learning fast.

This was the moment when the European Parliament decided to set up a special committee on foreign interferences in our democracies. I was already chairing the Subcommittee on Security and Defence, but decided to get involved as a whip for my political group, Renew Europe, in the new special committee as soon as it was established. For me, foreign interferences were simply another sort of warfare, a hybrid one, that was being fought against different countries, mainly democracies, by a handful of authoritarian regimes.

This warfare was taking many forms, approximately everything but direct military confrontation: manipulation of information was an obvious one, and interference in electoral processes was starting to be investigated both in the US and the UK. Elite capture had been going on for decades, through direct relations with both individuals and political parties. Cyberattacks were on the rise.

I met with Anton Shekhovtsov and rapidly discovered that we were interested by the same phenomena. Still, he had something

that I was missing: a first-hand experience of Ukraine. His reasons to be fighting Russian influence in Europe were existential. He understood long before the Russian war of aggression of 2022 what hybrid warfare was able to achieve. From the Russian annexation of Crimea, to the blurring of the downing of the MH-17 flight, to the complacency of so many European politicians towards Russian propaganda, he had every reason to be concerned and to share his knowledge.

His knowledge was very significant. On the strong relations between the Russian regime and far-right political parties in Europe, he had documented contacts, links, trips, joint events. On unexpected aspects of Russian interference in Europe, he had brilliant research, such as on the role of the Chechen leader Ramzan Kadyrov in the aftermath of the assassination of a French schoolteacher, Samuel Paty. But his research was – and is – going much further and digging much deeper than hints and pieces of evidence related to Russian interference in Europe. Where some commentators only see anecdotes, Anton Shekhovtsov analyses patterns of influence and hybrid warfare. Where many in Europe still do not realise that the objective of manipulation is to weaken and divide our democracies, he knows from experience that Ukraine is a lab: what took place in 2014 was not met with sufficient reactions by the West. The reality is that we allowed the 2022 full-scale aggression against Ukraine to happen, because too many among us wanted to believe that the annexation of Crimea had taken place voluntarily and that the destabilising of Donbas was only the responsibility of Ukrainian separatists. All this was pure manipulation, but too many in Europe were ready to accept it at face value.

Since 2022, we realise that hybrid warfare is just the first step in a serious confrontation. We have come to learn that new instruments can be used to try to blackmail developing countries, such as energy dependency, food safety or the weaponisation of migrants.

I am convinced that Anton Shekhovtsov still has a lot of research to carry out. But I am delighted that he managed to gather some of his most recent and interesting pieces into this book. I hope

it will help bring about the necessary eye-opening of public opinion in Europe with regards to the war, which is hitting our continent hard, though with too little attention to the nature of Russian political warfare.

Nathalie Loiseau  
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