CEPA INFOWAR PAPER No. 1

Information Warfare: What Is It and How to Win It?

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THE ISSUE

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Unlike Soviet propaganda, Russia's information warfare does not crudely promote the Kremlin's agenda. Instead it is calibrated to confuse, befuddle and distract. In the words of Peter Pomeranzev and Michael Weiss, modern Russia has weaponized information, turning the media into an arm of state power projection.[1] Their nihilistic approach is best summed up by the motto of the Kremlin's premier TV arm, RT (formerly Russia Today): "Question more." Russian disinformation does not aim to provide answers, but to provoke doubt, disagreement and, ultimately, paralysis.

Weaponized Information

This weaponized disinformation erodes public support for Euro-Atlantic values, impeding and distorting U.S. and European decision-making. It is a force multiplier for Russia, which in terms of economic heft and military might is far weaker than the countries of the EU or NATO. It intensifies geopolitical, economic and ideological competition in areas that are crucial to U.S. interests (e.g., the Baltic north and Black Sea south). It supports radical anti-establishment groups throughout the West, extending their reach and giving them a spurious appearance of legitimacy.[2]

While Russia's use of disinformation long predates the current Ukraine crisis, its sophistication, intensity, reach and impact are increasing. But policymakers in the United States and Europe, distracted by other issues such as migration, economic upheavals, wars in the Middle East and tensions with China, do not understand information warfare and rarely appreciate the scope and depth of the Russian threat. When they do, they do not know how to counter it. They all too readily turn to the old techniques and methods, such as boosting Russian-language programming on surrogate broadcasters, without realizing that these have become largely ineffective.

If Europe and North America do not urgently respond to this challenge, the West risks increasing public discontent, ill-informed decision-making, the rise of radical challengers, setbacks in the front-line states and a fatal blow to Euro-Atlantic solidarity. Also at stake is the future of the West's ability to manage crises and to guarantee the long-term future of the European security order and America's role as a European power.

Information warfare is central to Russia's understanding of modern geopolitics. According to the Russian military doctrine, approved in December 2014, the key characteristics of modern conflicts are military force; information, political and economic measures; the use of the "protest potential" of the local population; and the use of special forces.[3]

Those are exactly the techniques Russia used in Ukraine in 2014: successfully in Crimea, less so in eastern Ukraine. They appear to be the techniques Russia is now using in Syria, with the deployment of special forces, the initial denial of their involvement, and a high-powered diplomatic campaign whose effect has been to cause confusion and paralyze decision-making.[4] They are the techniques Russia can be expected to use in any confrontation with the EU or NATO, especially in the CEE region.

But while the doctrine is monolithic, the implementation is highly segmented, using different tools and techniques against different states in the region. For example, in the Baltic states, Russian-owned media outlets exploit fears of U.S. abandonment among the titular population while stoking Soviet nostalgia and feelings of alienation among ethnic Russians – a classic example of leveraging the "protest potential" of the population.[5] In Romania, they erode public faith in democratic institutions by creating the impression that EU accession was a failure; and they portray anti-corruption and reform initiatives as foreign interference. In the Czech Republic and Slovakia, they play up local environmental and anti-war themes, particularly among the "millennial" generation, to cast an unfavorable light on Western energy activities or U.S./ NATO reassurance measures.

Russia's carefully orchestrated, sophisticatedly targeted, generously funded, and professionally produced disinformation campaign has met little effective resistance.[6] The skills and knowledge gained during the Cold War in Western countries have been largely lost. The West has been dialing down its own government-supported counter-propaganda infrastructure, journalism is struggling to support itself in even the wealthiest countries and media have been co-opted by vested interests in countries such as Ukraine, Moldova and even the newer EU and NATO states. Such defensive efforts as have been made are either useless (clunky television programs with negligible ratings) or counterproductive (such as Lithuania's ban on Russian television).

This is far more than a *problem specific to the CEE region.*

Russian foreign-language television (notably the multilingual RT) and the self-styled news agency Sputnik also operate in "old" Europe, the Americas and Asia. The content is a mixture of generic "soft" anti-Western propaganda, highlighting shortcomings and perceived hypocrisies in Western society (corruption, abuse of power, infrastructure breakdowns and natural disasters). It uses a combination of government officials, notionally independent journalists, self-styled experts and commentators, and paid-for Internet trolls (cyber-mercenaries) to penetrate and influence our mainstream and social media, and thus our policymakers and public opinion.

Nor is Russia the only hostile government turning to disinformation in a bid to prevent reform at home and weaken opponents abroad. It is being employed aggressively by neo-authoritarian states and non-state groups across the world. China is using its "Three Warfares" to challenge the international order in the South China Sea, while it pushes aggressively into the Arctic – another much-disputed body of water. Venezuela is emulating Russia's rhetoric and approach to information; Iran is, if anything, more aggressive still.[7] ISIS is reaching into Western households with tailor-made propaganda, grooming the vulnerable for radicalization.

Across the world, the weaponization of information is becoming a major trend and a significant threat. The West has been slow to develop responses.

Yet the challenge is not insuperable. The main message of RT and similar outlets in other countries is both simple and simply flawed: that the United States is engaged in a self-interested and ruthless bid for world domination, and that by implication anything that Russia, or any other country, can do to resist this is commendable and justified. It portrays the foundations of Euro-Atlantic security, such as NATO enlargement to the former communist countries, as hypocritical and unjust. These countries are the puppets of the United States, run by unscrupulous elites, hysterically Russo-phobic, who do not have their peoples' interests at heart. The propaganda rejects any criticism of Russia's behavior as either invented or the result of double standards, prejudice and self-interest. Co-author Ben Nimmo has characterized these tactics as:

> **Dismiss the critic;**

> **Distort the facts;**

> **Distract from the main issue; and**

> **Dismay the audience.**

Simplicity is the strength of these techniques, but it is also their weakness. Russia's propaganda is both repetitive and predictable. It is neither too sophisticated to challenge, nor too effective to disrupt.

Targeting the Message

At present, however, the full-spectrum information campaign is all but unchallenged.[8] Using the above maxim, the Kremlin is gearing its messaging to specific audiences in Russia and the CEE and Nordic regions. Kremlin outlets accuse Finnish authorities of child abduction (arising from disputes over child custody when Finnish-Russian marriages break up) and Sweden of state-sponsored sexual decadence. The Baltic states and Ukraine are portrayed as failures – blighted by disorder, emigration and poverty – and run by a sinister elite of Western puppets with ill-disguised fascist sympathies. Finland is threatened with World War Three if it joins NATO, Sweden with "retaliatory actions"; Denmark is told it will become a nuclear target if it joins NATO's missile defense.

In the international arena, Russia makes great play of the fate of its "compatriots" – a loosely defined term that includes those who speak Russian as a first language, or identify themselves as Russian by ethnicity. It claims that these segments of the population have been denied citizenship in Latvia and Estonia and face discrimination or outright persecution because of their ethnic, civic and linguistic affiliations.[9] These claims are largely baseless: Russians in the Baltic states enjoy more political freedoms than Russians in Russia do. Those who moved to Estonia or Latvia during the occupation era were not made to leave; they are free to learn the national language and apply for citizenship if they wish. If not, they have permanent residency and are able do almost anything that a citizen can do except serve in the armed forces or in senior government roles and vote in national elections.

But Russia's rhetoric, even if factually incorrect, is of deep concern: the Kremlin showed in Crimea how it could incite and exploit "the protest potential of the populations" to create a prelude for a land-grab.[10] The heavily Russian-speaking cities of Narva (in Estonia) and Daugavpils (in Latvia) are often cited as potential targets for similar tactics, though there are also significant Russian-oriented segments of the population in Estonia's capital, Tallinn, and the Latvian capital, Riga. Russia sponsors organizations that claim to protect human rights but in fact act as channels for subversion, intimidation and espionage. The reports of the three Baltic counterintelligence services in past years provide a lively selection of material illustrating such activities.

More subtle influences on public opinion can work in Russia's favor too. Russian propaganda has stoked anti-Lithuanian feeling among the Polish-speaking minority in Lithuania. This has in past years threatened serious damage to Polish-Lithuanian security cooperation.

Russia's main propaganda vehicle in the Baltic states is television – the First Baltic Channel (PBK in its Russian acronym). Russian programming is slick and entertaining, and consequently widely watched even by people who do not feel politically drawn to the Kremlin. Russian-language programming run by the local television broadcasters is dry and unattractive.[11] Online, the Regnum.ru site has been active in spreading Russian disinformation for more than a decade. Lately Russia has launched the semi-clandestine Baltnews site, which publishes anonymously produced "news" in Estonian, Latvian and Lithuanian. Russian trolls also infest the comments sections of the main Baltic media. Russian cyberattacks regularly disable or slow down access to genuine Baltic news sites, such as Delfi.

The overall aim of these propaganda efforts is to undermine a rules-based multilateral security order in Europe that Russia regards as unfair and unsustainable. Russia believes it is entitled to a "grey zone" along its borders in which other nations' sovereignty is constrained and in which it enjoys privileged economic and political status. It regards the post-1989 settlement as both deplorable and temporary. It sees democracies and open societies as a threat: they may infect Russia. It regards Western talk of human rights and the rule of law as either cynical propaganda or naïve and delusional.

In this conflict, known inside Russian parlance as "information-psychological war," the aim is to "disorganize and demoralize" the enemy, to achieve victory without the need of full-scale military intervention. The concept has gained so much currency inside Russian policy circles that there is even a useful 495-page reference guide written specifically for "students, political technologists, state security services and civil servants."[12] Russian techniques employ a mixture of media, psychological, economic and cultural means, as well as espionage, cyberattacks (seen in Estonia in 2007, alongside another Kremlin-inspired outburst of local protests), subversion, corruption, and targeted kidnapping and
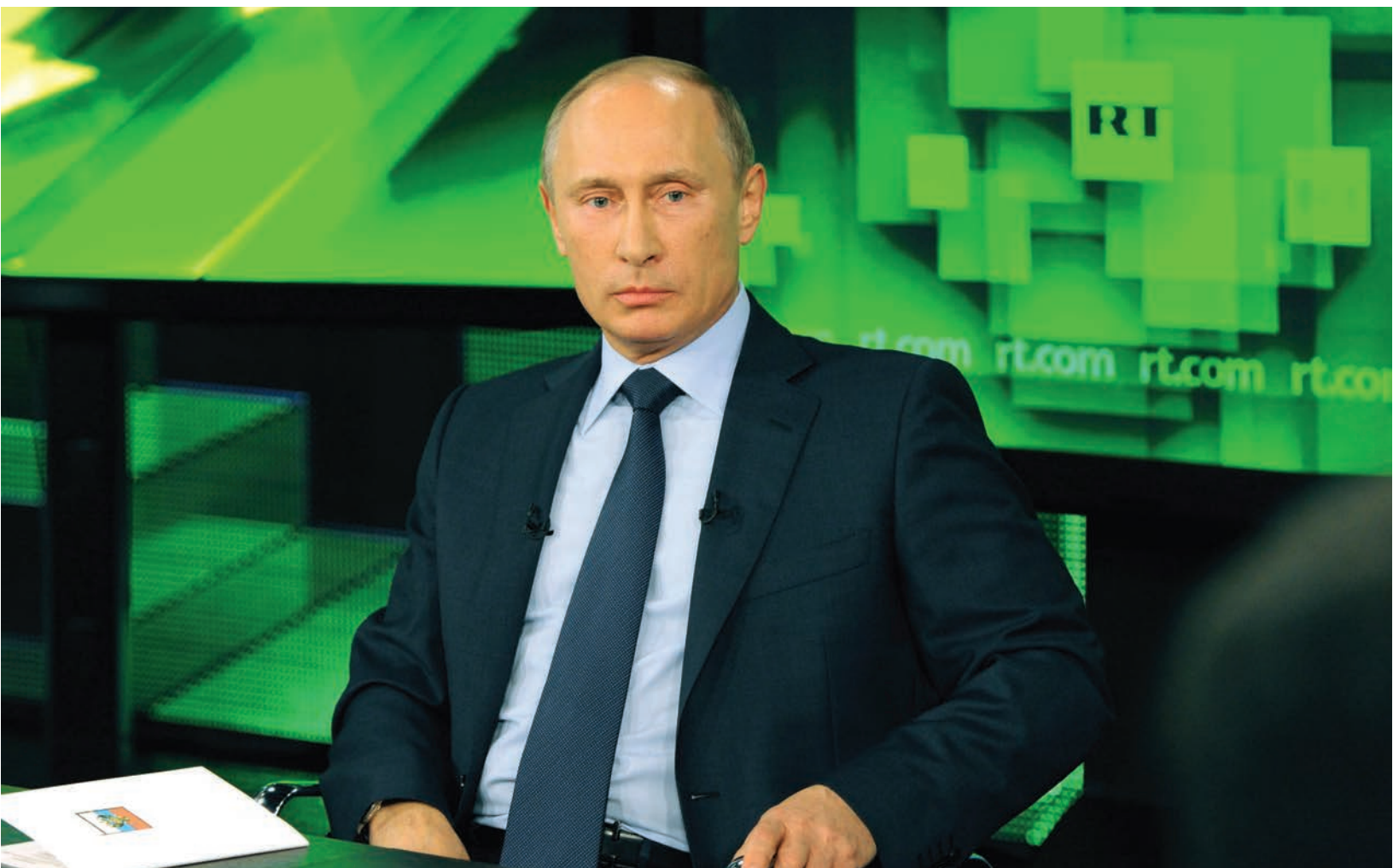
assassination.[13] Sometimes these elements are paired with covert military intervention, as in the case of Ukraine.[14] Most times, however, it represents a "contact-less" conflict that is fought in the realms of perception and the human mind. It continues through both official peace and wartime. Russia is exceptionally good at it.

By contrast, Western liberal democracies are singularly ill-equipped to deal with this type of warfare. The West believes in categories and boundaries. Its intelligence officers do not talk to journalists. Its defense chiefs do not talk to the criminal justice authorities. Its media owners do not talk to financial supervisory bodies. The West believes in, and practices, the separation of powers. Its adversaries do not. A hostile Russian entity may be a business, an intelligence-collection operation, a money-laundering front, a propaganda outfit and a means of distributing bribes, all at the same time.

Information war also exploits the natural openness of democracies. Crucial elements in an open society such as TV channels, civic groups and NGOs, as well as the funding of political parties or economic actors, can serve as the Kremlin's weapons in a belligerent foreign policy. At the same time, the democratic West is going through a crisis of confidence itself, particularly after the Iraq war and financial crash. Even if the West had the means through which to tell "our story," what would we tell? What do our alliances, whether the EU or NATO, actually stand for?

The Kremlin's media machine has made a particular effort to reinforce radical anti-establishment parties and individuals as metaphorical moth grubs in the fabric of democracy. As they burrow into the political system, the fringes benefit at the expense of mainstream, centrist, established forces and institutions. This is not the normal process of political dispute-settling, evolution and renewal: it is an artificial process instigated and stoked from outside. To take a historical example, pre-war Czechoslovakia had authentic German parties that took legitimate exception to the exclusionary linguistic and cultural policies of some ethnic Czech and Slovak politicians. But they had nothing to do with the Hitlerite front organisations. When Czechoslovakia was forced to surrender the German-speaking Sudetenland, the democratic German leaders fled into exile for fear of persecution at Nazi hands.

Russia's approach, unlike Nazi Germany's ethnic and ideological one, is deeply nihilistic: it does not matter what the parties in question stand for, as long as they are against the West. Thus RT has amplified the messages of ultranationalists in France and former Communists in Italy; it has shown clear bias in political events such as Scotland's independence referendum and the election of the leader of the UK Labour Party.[15] The unifying factor behind those it supports can be summed up in the word "anti": they are anti-NATO, anti-EU, anti-nuclear and anti-American, as well as being, in many cases, anti-each other. Strengthening them weakens the West.

So far, much effort in policy circles has been devoted to conceptual questions and buck-passing. Should the West be involved in the business of "propaganda"? Can societies that revere free speech even contemplate restricting the rights of hostile countries' media organizations? What is the role of the vestigial publicly funded foreign-language broadcasters left over from the Cold War, such as RFE/RL and the BBC World Service? How far should we concentrate on "offense" – pushing back into Russia's information space – and how far on "defense" – rebutting Russian propaganda and disinformation in the West? Whose job is it to push back: NATO, the EU, nation-states or NGOs? These discussions are important, but their lack of focus indicates the organizing policy problem set: what is missing in our understanding about information war, and how do we beat it?

Much of the Western response to Russian propaganda has been cerebral, cautious and complicated. It has attempted to preserve the niceties of diplomatic debate and the nuances of careful (not to mention confused) policy. The West stands up for Ukraine, but does not want to antagonize Russia; it stands up for the post-Cold War security architecture that Russia has comprehensively violated, but wants Russia to remain part of that architecture; it wants to punish those responsible for the annexation of Crimea, but has not sanctioned Putin, even after he claimed credit for the whole affair in a TV hagiography.

Russia's narrative, by contrast, has been *undiplomatic, unsophisticated and effective.*

It is a black-and-white epic of injustice, fear, glory and solidarity. It also has numerous subplots, based on specific fears and grievances in discrete segments of the population.

The Western approach struggles to cope with this.[16] The West's claim to the moral high ground has been dented, partly by genuine shortcomings in our economies and political systems, partly by a lack of self-confidence among opinion-formers, and partly by the lack of a perceived existential threat (the West was in a far worse mess during the Cold War, but most people reckoned Communism was even worse). Factual rebuttal of Russian claims is ineffective: Russian propaganda does not seek to win factual arguments, but merely to spread confusion.[17] Even if Western audiences only come to believe that there are two sides to the story — say, on Russia's aggression in Ukraine — then the Kremlin has already won an important victory. The West finds it hard to engage in micro-messaging.

At a moment when Western societies are unsure of their own message, Russia is putting forward a well-coordinated, well-financed information campaign. Worse, it is inspiring copycats. Around the globe, it is apparent that other authoritarian powers and rogue groups are adopting—and even improving upon—Russia's information war techniques. This can be seen in China's concept of "Three Warfares," which uses a mixture of media, legal and psychological warfare to stamp its authority in Asia.[18] ISIS's use of media has transformed the Middle East.[19] In Latin America Bolivarian regimes are deploying a similar approach to entrench their power in the region.[20] Increasingly, anti-Western regimes are banding together to create international networks of information-psychological operations. Meanwhile in Russia, Vladimir Putin speaks about information as a "formidable weapon that enables public opinion manipulations."[21]

If Putin succeeds, then the age of information will truly have become the age of disinformation. In this way, the Kremlin is not so much conducting an information war as it is waging a "war on information."[22] By destroying the information space with disinformation, Russia seeks to destroy trust and the possibility of a reality-based political discourse in the democratic West. This is most keenly felt in the countries of the CEE region. As new research by NGOs like Telekritika in Ukraine and Open Estonia Foundation in Tallinn show, audiences who receive both Kremlin and non-Kremlin media end up not trusting anyone—although they do lean toward Kremlin sources because they "look better" (i.e., are more expensive-looking).[23]

Our Response

The West needs a far stronger analytical capability than it has mustered so far. Without a proper database of Russian propaganda, segmented by media, topic, target audience, reach and other characteristics, only limited quantitative analysis is possible. A seasoned consumer of Russian media may notice that Syria, say, has suddenly turned from being a neglected topic to a headline grabber. But how big and how sudden is that shift? Does it apply to all languages and all media? Or is it only or principally noticeable (for example) in domestic news, or in output directed to some foreign audiences. BBC Monitoring provides a valuable daily (if expensive) transcription and translation of Russia's mainstream media output. But nobody, to the authors' knowledge, compiles comprehensive transcripts of the output of RT or Sputnik. Reliance on Internet search engines and news alerts is no substitute. The most interesting (and to the Kremlin embarrassing) evidence may be taken offline at the click of a mouse.[24] Nor is anyone measuring on a systematic basis the impact of the many channels of output: this is rather like worrying about the capabilities of a new gun or tank, without knowing how many have been manufactured and where they have been deployed.

Reliable and comprehensive data, preferably available for free or nominal charge, will greatly improve the work of all analysts studying Russia's weaponized information. Solid quantitative and qualitative studies are the best basis for planning and implementing countermeasures. To be sure, there is plenty that we at CEPA and others can do in the meantime, based on our case studies and own analytical expertise. But we should be under no illusions about the limitations of such efforts. Intuitive or reflex reactions based on selective appreciation of the threats, or remembered past experiences, may be partially effective, useless or outright harmful.

For a start, it is not enough simply to respond to Russian myths with "facts."

Rebutting disinformation through press releases works well in front of a fair-minded audience where our side has credibility. But the core focus of Russian propaganda is to pollute the information space so that no stable idea of truth is possible. Russia does not need to establish its own version of the facts as 100 percent true. It just wishes to create doubt and cynicism in the public mind.[25] Responding to disinformation with heavy-handed official rebuttals may even serve Russia's purpose. An official denial, in the hall of mirrors that the Kremlin seeks to create, is proof that the allegation has weight. The old maxim "Never believe anything until it has been officially denied" fits neatly into the Russian playbook.

If we analyse Russian weaponized information correctly, we may well conclude that some parts of it are best ignored. An investigation by the Daily Beast in September 2015 suggested that RT has hugely exaggerated its audience reach.[26] To take a hypothetical example, if nobody is listening to, say, the Ruritanian-language output of Voice of Russia, then it makes no sense to do more than monitor it. By attacking it, we give it free publicity. Simply monitoring it frees our resources to concentrate on the output that is reaching real people and doing real damage.

Another mistake is to assume that what we know how to do is what we should do.

Already there has been a superficial instinct to turn to the techniques of Hollywood or advertising—areas where the West has huge expertise and capability—for lessons in countering Russian disinformation. But is it advisable to use the same kinds of methods in Russia's tool-kit to also manipulate emotions or erode critical thinking?

RT Outreach

3.12 Million   **1.63 Million**   **1.42 Million**

Over 100 Countries

Social statistics collected
November 2015

A more sophisticated, though so far embryonic, effort focuses on crafting strategic "counternarratives" to Russian propaganda. As Mark Laity, the head of Strategic Communications at NATO, has identified, a "narrative" in itself contains many stories.[27] More importantly, it is an explanation of events in line with an ideology, theory or belief, and one that points the way to future actions. Narratives make sense of the world. They put things in their place according to our experience and then tell us what to do. A strategic narrative aligns the strategy and the narrative so they become mutually supportive and integrated.

Again, better analytical capability based on better data will help. Russian narratives have profound though often understudied strengths and weaknesses. The "anti-fascist" mantle that Russia claims as a legacy of the Second World War sits oddly with its support for far-right (and even overtly neo-Nazi) parties in Europe.[28] The policy of strict noninterference in other countries affairs (used to lambast the West for its policies in ex-Yugoslavia, Iraq, Afghanistan, Libya and Syria) is undermined by Russia's robust disdain for Ukraine's territorial integrity and sovereignty.[29] If properly implemented, a counternarrative could prove useful. However, many policymakers are ill equipped to implement them. As Steve Tatham, the former head of Information Operations at the UK Ministry of Defence, has stressed, policymakers can be tone deaf to the audiences they are trying to reach.[30]

Often, they operate on the principle "'This is the message – send it out'; invariably that message is crafted by European or North American men in suits [sitting] behind a computer in an office. But one cannot help but wonder how that man in a suit knows what messages will resonate with the man in the shalwar kameez in Pakistan, the miner in East Ukraine, the young Muslim ISIS fighter in Syria?"[31] Tatham argues for a completely fresh approach to narrative, one based on listening to local populations and responding to their concerns.[32] The development and delivery of micro-narratives will require a huge cultural leap for officials and policymakers who have grown up in the stage-managed world of press conferences, set-piece speeches, and the journalistic conventions of the traditional mass media.

Most of these challenges still lie ahead. The West's response to Russia's weaponized information is still in its infancy. But it is a battle worth fighting.

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The Center for European Policy Analysis (CEPA) is the only U.S. think-tank dedicated to the study of Central and Eastern Europe. With offices in Washington and Warsaw, it has grown rapidly over the last decade to become the leading voice for strengthening security and democracy in the countries of post-Communist Europe. CEPA is at the forefront of the transatlantic policy debate on issues of defense, energy and democratic reform in Central and Eastern Europe. Its mission is to promote an economically vibrant, geopolitically stable and politically free Central and Eastern European region with close and enduring ties to the United States.

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