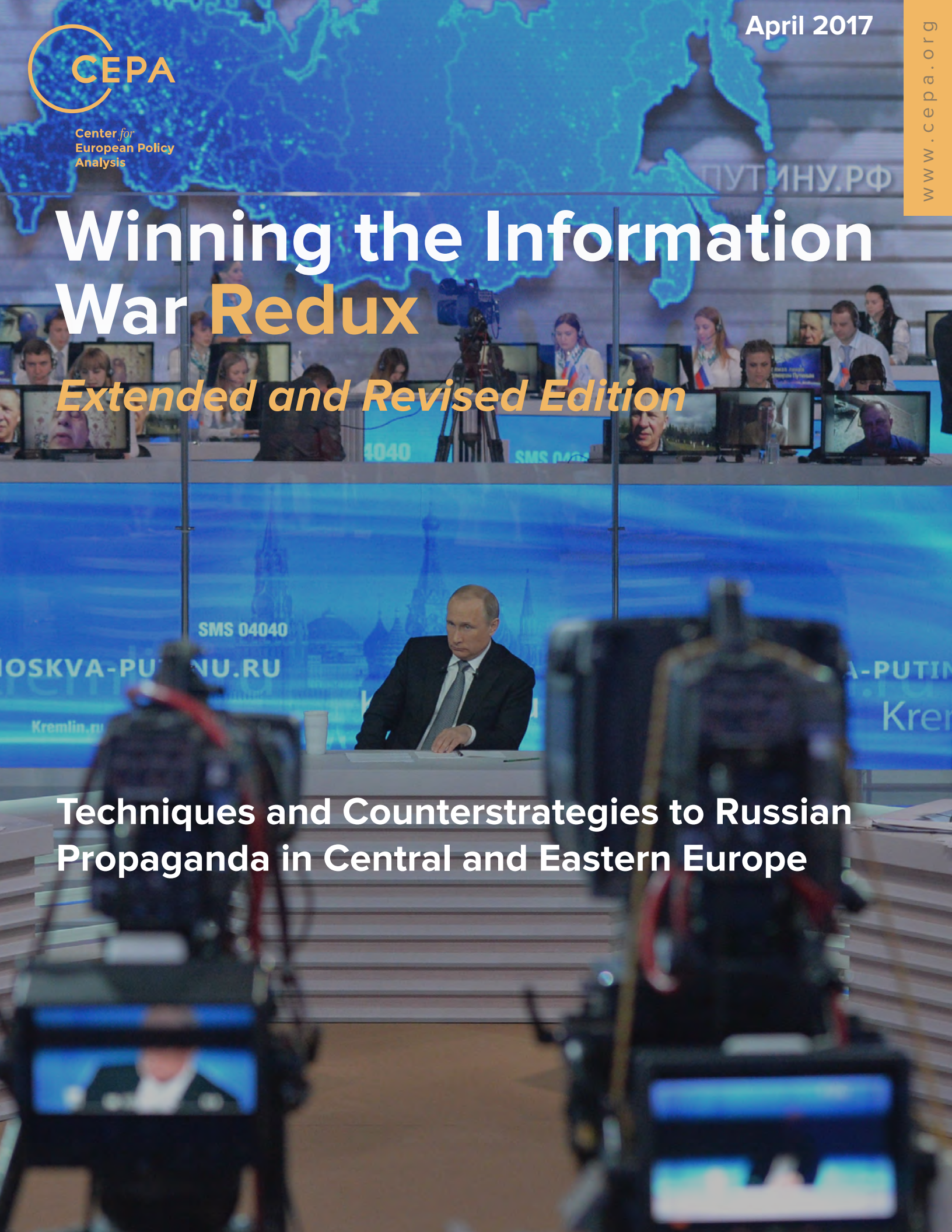

Winning the Information War Redux

Extended and Revised Edition

Techniques and Counterstrategies to Russian Propaganda in Central and Eastern Europe

Center *for*
European Policy
Analysis

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Forward

This updated report, "Winning the Information War Redux" follows an earlier one published in July 2016.[1] Both were produced under the auspices of the Center for European Policy Analysis' (CEPA) StratCom Program. Co-authored by CEPA Senior Vice President Edward Lucas and Peter Pomerantsev, it is part of an ongoing effort at CEPA to monitor, collate, analyze, rebut and expose Russian propaganda in the countries of Central and Eastern Europe (CEE).

Previous publications in this series provided an analytical foundation for evaluating the methods and aims of Russian propaganda. This report extends that research, examining how Russian propaganda is being employed across the CEE region, the perils it presents and actionable counter-strategies for addressing it. In preparing this report, the authors conducted an extended assessment of the existing record of Russian, English and Baltic language literature on the subject of information warfare. They solicited written inputs from, and conducted interviews with, members of the scholarly, academic and expert community who are investigating specific dimensions of Russia's "new" propaganda. Additionally, the authors solicited written and conceptual inputs through practitioner workshops with CEE media specialist, area experts and journalists – individuals who are on the frontlines of the Western response to Russian disinformation campaigns.

This updated version condenses material from the first report and adds new detail and analysis about Russian information warfare efforts against the West.

The Center for European Policy Analysis

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Analysis

INTRODUCTION

Russia's use of information as a weapon is not new, but its sophistication and intensity are increasing at an accelerating rate. In the original report by the Center for European Policy Analysis (CEPA), "Winning the Information War," the authors wrote that Russian information warfare posed a serious threat to the United States and its European allies, "primarily the 'frontline states'—Poland, the Baltic states, the Czech Republic, Slovakia and Ukraine." Since then, the picture has changed. The use of "hacking and leaking" and other propaganda techniques in Western elections have intensified fears of similar interventions in upcoming votes. This makes Western democracies a new frontline in the information war. It now runs not along the eastern frontier of the Euro-Atlantic region, but through its heart—in Berlin, London, Paris and Washington, D.C.

Across the Western world, the Kremlin promotes conspiratorial discourse and uses disinformation to pollute the information space, increase polarization and undermine democratic debate. Russia's actions accelerate the declining confidence in international alliances and organizations, public institutions and mainstream media.

The StratCom Program at the Center for European Policy Analysis (CEPA) analyzes the impact of Russian disinformation by drawing on dozens of case studies, both those directly commissioned by the authors and those made available by allied organizations. This paper synthesizes those works and analyzes the tools of Russian information warfare—overt propaganda channels such as RT, proxies disguised as mainstream media outlets and social media—as well as the political forces, civil society actors, businesses and public figures who use them. It also looks at several examples of Russian policies which have been enacted using disinformation: Specific interventions in decision-making (such as Lithuania's planned but now-abandoned nuclear power plant); fomenting insurrection (eastern Ukraine); general denigration of a country's international reputation (Latvia); the development of native pro-Kremlin media (the Czech Republic and Estonia); and support for far-right and ultranationalist movements and sentiments (Poland).

This revised edition of the report also considers propaganda and disinformation attacks on other countries, including France, Germany, and Sweden.

Recommendations

The Russian government uses disinformation, incitement to violence and hate speech to destroy trust, sap morale, degrade the information space, erode public discourse and increase partisanship. Our ability to respond is constrained by the mainstream media's loss of reach and impact. Its myth-busting and fact-checking reaches only a limited audience—and probably not the one the Kremlin is targeting. The response involves a contradiction: our approach must be tailored to different audiences, yet must also seek to build trust between polarized groups.

Our recommendations include tactical, strategic and long-term priorities, targeted partly at Kremlin disinformation and also aiming to strengthen media in democracies and educate audiences.

1. Systematic analysis

Currently, no dedicated agency or systematic effort analyzes the effect of Russian (or any other) disinformation. Who really watches RT? Where? For how long? And why? Nor do we have the means to systematically track the content: How does the Kremlin's message in Germany differ from the line in Sweden or Poland? Our case studies, combined with an ongoing effort at CEPA to identify and monitor Russian propaganda in parts of Central and Eastern Europe (CEE) show the variety of Russia's means and messaging. But the lack of a coherent picture constrains our ability to respond in both quantitative and qualitative terms. We recommend:

- Regular, targeted analysis of the reach and impact of Russian propaganda;
- Greater analysis of the media environment to detect disinformation campaigns and understand what sources shape public awareness;
- Monitoring of social media, identifying trends and personalities that are popular among polarized social groups and who could be engaged to build trust.

2. Ensuring media quality

Even with the strongest free-speech protection, broadcast media is regulated (for example with rules on nudity) and criminals and terrorists are kept off the airwaves. Political advertising, correcting mistakes and the boundaries of hate speech may also be regulated. However many non-EU frontline states have weak or inexperienced regulators. **An international commission under the auspices of the Council of Europe** along the lines of the Venice Commission—which monitors adherence to the rule of law and democratic standards—could **advise fledgling regulators**, ensure their independence and help communicate their decisions, and **act as a broadcasting badge of quality.** If an official body cannot be created, then an NGO could play a similar advisory role.

3. New agencies, new cooperation

Western governments need to find a constructive way to interact with media and NGOs, fostering a community of transnational critical inquiry and trust. Governments should show more willingness to share evidence of financial crimes, video of covert military operations and audio intercepts. It is particularly important to learn from the experience and example of countries which have been dealing successfully with Russian propaganda attacks: notably Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania, Poland, the Czech Republic, Slovakia and Ukraine.

4. Deconstruct disinformation

A counterpart to organizations such as Global Witness, Transparency International and the OCCRP could **investigate** Russian (and other) disinformation and hybrid campaigns and **myth-bust** for key audiences who are receptive to fact-based argument. It could use technology to automate fact-checking and troll-busting, educate media professionals and provide "disinformation ratings" to call out those media outlets which have fallen victim to (or collude in) Russian propaganda attacks.[3]

5. A working group on historical trauma

One of the most effective Kremlin propaganda themes exploits the heroic legacy of World War II. This employs false syllogisms, such as "Stalin fought the Nazis, therefore everyone who fought Stalin was a Nazi," and then links these to the present: "Everyone who opposes Russia now is a fascist." A working group of psychologists, historians, sociologists and media specialists should create an "ideas factory" to develop ways of approaching historical and psychological trauma and highlighting other narratives.[4]

Recommendations

6. Targeted interaction

Facebook technology is already used to try to de-radicalize far-right extremists and jihadists.[5] Similar initiatives should be undertaken with those who have fallen victim to Kremlin propaganda.

7. Reinvent public broadcasting

In a fragmented media landscape, a strong, independent public broadcaster could grow to be the most trusted medium available, not only setting journalistic standards but also engaging in social and civic issues on the lines of Ukrainian broadcaster Hromadske.

8. Bloggers' charter/exchanges

Signatories would signal their adherence to ethical standards, qualifying for exchange programs between core Western and frontline states to create transnational communities of trust and critical inquiry.

9. Russian-language content factory

Viewers in Ukraine, the Baltics and the Caucasus tune into Kremlin TV because it is glossier and more entertaining. Britain's Foreign Office has commissioned the BBC to develop a blueprint for a "content factory" to help EU Association and Baltic countries create new Russian-language entertainment programming. Other donors should support this initiative.

10. A Russian-language news wire/hub

No Russian-language outlet provides consistently reliable and comprehensive news. The European Endowment for Democracy suggests a proto-news agency for news outlets across the region. Free Press Unlimited, a Dutch media development organization, received a grant from its government to develop a cooperative Russian-language independent regional news agency.[6] This initiative should be encouraged and further supported.

11. Media literacy

Educating media consumers to spot disinformation is an important long-term priority. Facebook, Google, Twitter and other platforms should signpost "fake news" sites which do not meet simple tests of credibility such as real-world contact addresses.

12. Boycotts and ostracism

People working at websites that violate elementary journalistic practices and principles (such as attempting to provide balanced reporting, and dealing fairly with complaints) should not enjoy the social and professional privileges—access to press conferences, media credentials—enjoyed by real journalists. Western production companies should not sell content to channels which propagate hate speech or disinformation. Slovakia's konspiratori.sk/ website has demonstrated how easily and effectively reputable advertisers can be encouraged to take their customers elsewhere. It could easily be replicated elsewhere.

The Dangerous Age of Disinformation

CEPA
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INTRODUCTION

The age of information is fast becoming the age of disinformation. As revisionist, autocratic states like Russia sharpen their use—and abuse—of state-sponsored propaganda, liberal democracies are failing to keep pace.

Unlike Soviet disinformation and propaganda, Russia's contemporary methods of information warfare do not crudely promote the Kremlin's agenda. Instead, they are calibrated to confuse, befuddle and distract. Russia aims to erode public support for Euro-Atlantic values in order to increase its own relative power. It exploits ethnic, linguistic, regional, social and historical tensions, and promotes anti-systemic causes, extending their reach and giving them a spurious appearance of legitimacy. Consequently, information warfare intensifies geopolitical, economic and ideological competition in areas that are crucial to U.S. interests. These include not only the "frontline states" of northeastern Europe, and the fragile security environment of the Black Sea region, but core U.S. allies such as France, Germany and the Netherlands.

Russia has also shown itself capable of intervening in U.S. domestic politics—something most observers would have regarded as impossible in the first half of 2016, when the initial version of this report was being written.

Russia has two aims. It believes it is entitled to a "gray zone" along its borders, an area in which the sovereignty of other nations is constrained and in which its politicians and its companies enjoy privileged economic and political status. It regards the post-1989 settlement of Europe as both deplorable and temporary. It sees democracies and open societies as a threat, because they may "infect" Russia with their ideas. It regards Western talk of human rights and the rule of law as deliberately misleading, naïve or delusional.

More broadly, it aims to undermine a rules-based multilateral transatlantic security order that it regards as unfair and unsustainable. Western unity constrains and challenges Vladimir Putin's regime: the West has a population, broadly stated, of one billion; Russia's is 140 million. The West's combined GDP is around $40 trillion; Russia's is $1.5 trillion. By contrast, in a world of bilateral relations, Russia—as a big country—has a potentially decisive advantage.

As this report demonstrates, Russian propaganda efforts form an important part of its hybrid approach to the projection of power. Although the Ukraine crisis first drew Western attention to the significance of Russia's information campaign, the Kremlin's use of disinformation long predates that crisis. It has been growing in sophistication, intensity, reach and impact. Russian efforts are carefully orchestrated, thoughtfully targeted, generously funded and professionally produced.

So far, they have met little effective resistance. Although the West may have the military and economic edge over Russia, it does not have the same level of focus or control. Western democracies do not—and will not—exert the same power over media, business and intellectuals as does Russia. At the same time, policymakers in the United States and Europe—distracted by other issues such as migration, economic upheaval, Middle East wars, Britain's departure from the EU[7]—are only beginning to appreciate the scope and depth of the Russian threat.[8] When they do, they do not know how to counter it because they have largely forgotten the skills and knowledge gained during the Cold War. The West has diminished its counter-propaganda infrastructure, for example by abolishing the U.S. Information Agency and winding down the Cold War-era Active Measures Working Group.

But if Europe and North America do not promptly respond to this challenge, the result may be dramatic. Russia is radically challenging Euro-Atlantic solidarity and adding to widespread public discontent. At stake is the West's ability to manage crises and guarantee the long-term future of the European security order and America's role as a European power.

Nor is Russia unique. Neo-authoritarian states and non-state groups across the world aggressively employ disinformation. China is using its "Three Warfares" policy to challenge the international order in the South China Sea.[9] ISIS reaches Western households with tailor-made propaganda, grooming the vulnerable for radicalization. If the West can learn to deal with Russian disinformation, then it will be better prepared for further challenges in the future.

WHAT IS INFORMATION WARFARE?

The threat

The Russian government's use of information warfare—"disinformation"—differs from traditional forms of propaganda. Its aim is not to convince or persuade, but rather to undermine. Instead of agitating audiences into action, it seeks to keep them hooked and distracted, passive and paranoid. Inside Russia, this concept is known as "information-psychological war." It is a tactic used to disorganize and demoralize an opponent. It is fought in the realms of perception and the minds of men. It continues through both official peace and wartime.

Alex Younger, the head of Britain's Secret Intelligence Service, outlined the problem in stark terms, in a rare public statement: "The connectivity that is at the heart of globalization can be exploited by states with hostile intent to further their aims deniably. They do this through means as varied as cyber-attacks, propaganda, or subversion of democratic process." He added: "The risks at stake are profound and represent a fundamental threat to our sovereignty; they should be a concern to all those who share democratic values."[10]

Russian disinformation is disseminated both overtly—though foreign-language television (notably the multilingual RT) and the self-styled news agency Sputnik—and covertly, using notionally independent journalists, experts and commentators (many of whom lack legitimacy or status elsewhere) as well as through anonymous websites and Internet trolls (paid propagandists).[11] It operates in many languages and regions including Europe, the Americas and Asia.

The underlying message is simple: the West is decadent, hypocritical, ill-run and tyrannical. In particular, the United States has long been engaged in a selfish, ruthless bid for world domination. By implication, anything Russia or any other country can do to resist this is commendable and justified. It portrays the foundations of modern Euro-Atlantic security—including NATO enlargement to former communist countries and Western support for Ukraine—as a cynical betrayal of promises made to the Soviet Union to do no such thing, fueled by the greed of the Western military-industrial complex and the hysterically Russophobic elites in the CEE countries.

This message is customized for particular markets, varies from country to country, and includes both local and foreign policy themes. The Polish analyst Wiktor Ostrowski notes in a report for the Krzyżowa foundation in Poland that the themes used by Kremlin "trolls" are various, but the aim is similar.[12]

Supporters of the French right wing are sent content referring to the defense of Christianity; the post-communist German left is sent memes that refer to pacifism and how American militarism endangers peace; Slovakia gets content speaking about German domination of the EU, etc. The aim here is not to convince all customers of a single, cohesive set of content. The primary purpose of trolling is the disorganization and manipulation of the adversary's public opinion and to disorganize his society.

Kremlin outlets accuse Finnish authorities of child abduction in disputes arising over child welfare and custody battles following the breakup of Finnish-Russian marriages.[13] In Sweden, the security police force, Säpo, notes that Russia has "flooded the news arena with nonsense" as part of psychological warfare efforts. A report by Martin Kragh and Sebastian Åsberg for the Swedish Institute for International Affairs argues that:

Since 2014, Russia has moved towards a preference for active measures towards Sweden. Forgeries in Swedish information space have been amongst various tools Russia has used there, for example false evidence of misbehavior or incompetence of the West or the Swedish politicians and decision-makers. The level of detail suggests that the originators of the documents have access to comprehensive intelligence on Swedish society. As we have seen in different parts of Europe, Sweden also has its far-right and far-left populist movements and projects with connections to Russia, for example the Nordic Resistance, a fascist organization which has cooperated with Rodina party and the Russian Imperial Movement, or the interlocutor of a pro-Kremlin left narrative, tabloid called Aftonbladet.[14]

The Russian authorities have also applied other types of active measures, from military threats to agents of influence. The overarching goal of Russian policy towards Sweden seems to be the preservation of the geostrategic status quo identified with a security order minimizing the presence of NATO in the region.[15]

In Germany, a recent propaganda campaign featured the (invented) sexual assault by migrants

on “Lisa,” a young woman of Russian heritage.[16] As the Czech analyst Jakub Janda notes:

This fabricated story was supposed to fit into the current Kremlin narrative which stresses the inability of Europe to cope with the refugee crisis while implicitly communicating that Russia is the strong and stable power in comparison with the “weak” and “soft” Europe. Since the German government was structurally unable to swiftly react to the unfounded allegations, the case got disproportionate national and international attention.[17]

This follows a series of cyber-attacks which are the likely preludes to information operations: the notorious “hacking-and-leaking” which is at the center of controversies around the 2016 U.S. presidential election. In particular, Germany has accused Russian state-sponsored hacker group APT 28 of breaching the computer networks of two political parties and the lower house of parliament. The same group was responsible for similar efforts in the West.[18] The attacks are thought to be part of a broader and long-running Russian operation—code-named Pawn Storm by Western analysts—with aims ranging from reconnaissance and potential sabotage through to theft and manipulation of data.[19]

In France, the Kremlin-run Sputnik website carried an interview saying that the anti-Kremlin presidential candidate, Emanuel Macron, was an American stooge backed by an influential gay lobby. His campaign manager blamed Russia for interfering in the election.[20] (In April 2015, a Russian hacking group took the television station TV5Monde off the air). Russia threatens Finland with World War III and Sweden with “retaliatory actions” if either country joins NATO, and warns Denmark that it will become a nuclear target if it joins NATO’s missile defense program.[21] As noted in the first edition of this report, in Poland, Russia’s message is that the West undermines national values. The Baltic states and Ukraine are portrayed to their own people as failures—blighted by corruption, disorder, emigration and poverty—and run by a sinister elite of Western puppets with fascist sympathies.

As this report’s case studies on Ukraine, Estonia and Latvia show, Russia can promote a message of unifying the “Russian world” and work through compatriots’ organizations with a strong nationalist message. Historical trauma and nostalgic memories of Soviet greatness are skillfully preyed upon to increase a sense of grievance in the new host countries. In Lithuania, propaganda plays on social and cultural sensitivities; in Germany, energy companies are used to lobby the Kremlin’s cause.[22] One moment the Kremlin can back left-wing, anti-imperialist (i.e. anti-American) movements in Western Europe, and the next, social conservatism and fascist movements in the same countries. As we will see in the cases of Slovakia and the Czech Republic, the Kremlin does not need to itself create movements against immigration or the EU. All it needs is to fan the flames of existing campaigns.

Internal issues in one country can become a foreign policy theme in another. Russian propaganda in Western Europe makes great play of the supposed plight of its “compatriots” in the former Soviet area—a loosely defined term that includes those who speak Russian as a first language, or identify themselves as Russian by ethnicity. It falsely claims that these segments of the population face discrimination or outright persecution because of their ethnic, civic or linguistic affiliations.[23] The “Enhanced Forward Presence” of NATO allies in the Baltic states and Poland has sparked renewed information attacks. In Lithuania, Russian media wildly exaggerated reports of a minor fracas involving Czech soldiers who were turned away from a nightclub in the port city of Klaipeda.[24] The Russian news website Interfax quoted, as a legitimate source, the Baltnews website, which gives no contact information. Prosecutors have launched a criminal investigation into false claims that a German soldier raped a 15-year-old Lithuanian girl from a foster-care home.[25]

Security sources in the region also expect NATO’s Enhanced Forward Presence to spark another vector in Russian information warfare: damaging the frontline states’ image in the eyes of the allied countries sending troops there. One theme is likely to be racism, based on real, provoked or invented clashes between the visiting soldiers and locals. Another will be to portray decision-makers as politically extreme, as reckless nationalist hotheads, or as bigots on issues such as LGBT rights.von “Lisa,” a young woman of Russian heritage.[26]

Kremlin propaganda also rebuts and deflects any criticism of Russia’s own behavior. All negative commentary about Russia is portrayed as either invented or unfair: the result of double standards, prejudice and self-interest. In a CEPA research paper, information warfare expert and former NATO spokesman Ben Nimmo has characterized these tactics as dismissing the critic, distorting the facts, distracting from the main issue and dismaying

the audience.[27] Nimmo also suggests an "ABC" (Accuracy, Balance, Credibility) test for disinformation.[28] He argues that the defining feature of disinformation is the combination of false information and the intention to mislead, and this can be detected by three criteria: the accuracy of factual statements, balance in reporting, and credibility of the sources chosen.

What is propaganda?

Eight tests

1. Avowal: Explicit identification with one side of a controversy.

2. Parallel: The content of a given channel is compared with the content of a known propaganda channel. The content is classified according to themes.

3. Consistency: The consistency of a stream of communication with the declared propaganda aims of a party to a controversy. The aims may be official declarations or propaganda instructions.

4. Presentation: The balance of favorable and unfavorable treatment given to each symbol (and statement) in a controversy.

5. Source: Relatively heavy reliance upon one party to a controversy for material.

6. Concealed source: The use of one party to a controversy as a source, without disclosure.

7. Distinctiveness: The use of vocabulary peculiar to one side of a controversy.

8. Distortion: Persistent modification of statements on a common topic in a direction favorable to one side of a controversy. Statements may be omitted, added, over-emphasized or under-emphasized.[29]

In short, Russia's disinformation campaign constitutes a formidable offensive and defensive weapon. It is being deployed with increasing success, on an ever-wider scale. It also has deep historical roots.

HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

NEW WINE IN OLD BOTTLES

Information warfare is a new threat with an old history. As the British expert Keir Giles points out in a report for Chatham House:

"Russia's practice of information warfare has... developed rapidly, while still following key principles that can be traced to Soviet roots. This development has consisted of a series of adaptations following failed information campaigns by Russia, accompanied by successful adoption of the Internet."[30]

Modern Russian information warfare theory directly derives from spetspropaganda, first taught as a subject at the Soviet Military Institute of Foreign Languages in 1942, but with origins lying deep in Marxist-Leninist ideology. Agitprop—the combination of agitation (speech) and propaganda (words)—dates back to the years immediately following the Russian Revolution.[31] Propaganda and *dezinformatsiya* [disinformation] efforts were familiar features of the Cold War, and, despite the contrary conviction in Western policy-making circles, they did not stop when it finished.[32] Andrei Soldatov, who studies the Russian security and intelligence apparatus, observes that the evolution of the old KGB into the new Russian intelligence service, the SVR was a smooth one:

When the First Chief Directorate was renamed the Foreign Intelligence Service, its Section A was renamed the Section of Assistance Operations. In the early 1990s, the CIA had asked the foreign intelligence service to stop carrying out "active measures" that undermined the national security of the United States. As a result, the section was given a new name, but its methods, structure, and employees were retained.[33]

Far from being disbanded, in the years following the collapse of the USSR, the old Soviet propaganda apparatus was carefully refurbished. Valentin Falin, head of the Novosti Press Agency and later head of the International Department of the Central Committee of the Soviet Union's Communist Party, was one of the architects of this system reboot. He was the first to describe the main elements of the current system, including the creation of RT and Sputnik International.[34] Falin's plans were frustrated by the collapse of the USSR, but modern Russian propaganda is still based on the principles he described.

Many have observed the continuities with the past. In the *Estonian Journal of Military Studies*, the Ukrainian journalist and media analyst Yevhen Fedchenko, highlights in particular the continued deployment of **fakes and forgeries**—manufactured and distributed on a centralized and systematic basis—to coincide with and reinforce Kremlin policies and talking points, as in Soviet times.[35] In its "Fog of Falsehood" study, the Finnish Institute for International Affairs also identifies the persistence of the concept of "**reflexive control**."[36] This is a form of warfare in which an attack does not destroy the enemy from the outside but rather leads him to self-destruct, though "self-disorganization" and "self-disorientation." Practitioners of reflexive control seek to find a weak link in the opponent's "filter"—the concepts, knowledge, ideas and experience that are the basis of its decision-making – and to emphasize and exploit it. In 1985, KGB defector Ladislav Bittman wrote of "a carefully constructed, false message that is secretly introduced into the opponent's communication system to deceive either his decision-making elite or public opinion."[37] Such messages can take the form of rumors, forgeries, manipulative political actions, agents of influence or front organizations, among other means.

A third element in the Soviet (and now Russian) toolkit is "active measures"—direct intervention by clandestine means in the politics of another country. Active measures may entail the following:

- **Influencing the policies of another government;**
- **Undermining confidence in its leaders and institutions;**
- **Disrupting its relations with other nations;**
- **Discrediting and weakening governmental and nongovernmental opponents.**

At times, for example, the Kremlin's expanded media presence operates in coordination with activists on the ground, either by paying them directly (in the case, for example, of some Latvian NGOs)[38] or aiding them through formal association. Some local activists independently identify with the Kremlin's audience-tailored narratives and give these views an (apparently) independent platform in their home country.

Though the tools are similar to those used in the past, the approach is different. Modern Kremlin propaganda no longer focuses on the left-wing, anti-colonial and labor causes that it cherished during the Cold War. It promotes communism even less.[39] In place of those highly articulated ideologies is a post-modernist denial of the whole liberal concept of Western society. Democracy is a sham; politicians are crooked and ridiculous. This is not a coherent message, and the narratives often clash. Russian propaganda supports far-left and far-right movements, and any form of protest in between. The only unifying characteristic is hostility and mistrust towards the system. As the Finnish "Fog of Falsehood" study points out, "Soviet propaganda was anchored in ideological truth claims, whereas the contemporary Russian variant can be compared to a kaleidoscope: a light piercing through it is instantly transformed into multiple versions of reality."[40]

As Yevhen Fedchenko notes:

Both the contemporary Russian propaganda system and Soviet system have the same objectives, borrow the same techniques from the active-measures playbook—anti-Americanism, [...] moral superiority and falsified history—yet [are] different in terms of the quantity, quality and instruments [they use].

Modern Kremlin propaganda has subverted and appropriated the Western concept of liberal values, meaning that it can present its propaganda not in terms of proletarian internationalism (always a hard sell) but as a minority point of view, particularly deserving of attention because of presumed marginalization or even persecution by the political and media establishment. Sputnik International, for example, states on its website that its mission is "to point the way to a multipolar world that respects every country's national interests, culture, history and traditions." Yet Ukrainians, Georgians, Estonians and others would argue that the Kremlin's approach to their countries is characterized by the exact opposite of this sort of respect.

As in Soviet times, *dezinformatsiya* operations are aimed at the "pollution of the opinion-making process in the West."[41] By using false or forged information in international media, spreading defamatory "news" through social media and broadcast networks, or degrading the credibility of an opponent, the purpose of this method is ultimately to "cause the adversary to reach decisions beneficial" to the aggressor.

The great difference today is that the Kremlin no longer needs to pretend its forgeries are real. When the Soviet Union created a fake story in the 1980s alleging that the CIA invented AIDS, it went to great lengths to prove the validity of the story.

Today, when the Kremlin claims that the United States is spreading the Zika and Ebola viruses as weapons, it disseminates this information through barely credible conspiracy websites or by discredited spokespeople. Myth-busters try to keep up, but the Kremlin is soon pumping out even more ludicrous stories. The aim is not so much to convince "mainstream media," but to play to audiences who already mistrust their own systems, who believe, *a priori*, in conspiracy theories and are looking for any information, however ridiculous, which confirms their biases. The nature of online media—especially social media—allows the Kremlin to work inside "echo chambers," online media worlds where facts and fact-checkers cannot penetrate. The Kremlin did not create the "post-fact" world which has affected everything from Western elections to ISIS propaganda, but it is well positioned to exploit it.

The sheer quantity of available media also means that many audiences are confused and may not always be able to discern fact from fiction—or do not care either way. Research by the Open Estonia Foundation shows that ethnic Russians who live in Estonia and follow both Kremlin and Estonian media end up disbelieving everyone and are unable to form an opinion.[42] If anything, they are more drawn towards Kremlin sources because they are more emotional and entertaining, and because they offer fantasies: invented tales of Russian children crucified by Ukrainian militants, for example, or discussions of nuclear war.[43] Respondents in focus groups among ethnic Russian audiences in Latvia said that news on Russian TV channels is "emotionally attractive, because some news you watch as an exciting movie. You don't trust it, but watch it gladly."[44] If there is a competition between different versions of reality, in other words, the side which is *less* constrained by the truth may be more likely to win.[45]

Modern Russian propaganda is cleverly targeted, technically adept and cynically fact-free. It is also enjoyable. The Kremlin's Cold War-era propaganda was often stiff and dull. Today the content is emotionally engaging, combining glossy entertainment formats and production values with a strong sense of patriotism and nostalgia. Russian news paints today's Baltic and Ukrainian governments as reincarnations of historical Nazis and rebrands Russian aggression in the region as a continuation of World War II. Russian films and drama series, meanwhile, reinforce nostalgia for wartime victories and exalt the role of Russian security services in history. Channels owned or controlled by the Kremlin also attract viewers by making Russian versions of popular Western talent shows and by mimicking the format of reality TV. This content is even sometimes sold to them and made by Western production companies. Such entertainment helps bring in viewers, who then stay tuned for the current affairs.

Technological change has made all of these tactics easier. Whereas the Soviet Union relied on traditional media, modern Russia has embraced the digital age. It exploits the anonymity, ambiguity, ubiquity and flexibility of the Internet, in particular social media, which was unavailable—indeed, unimaginable—during Soviet times. Digital propaganda efforts have three main elements, all of which will be examined in more depth later. They are: "bots" (automated accounts), "trolls" and "fakes" (websites or social-media accounts that imitate genuine ones in order to spread confusion). Overall, the Soviet Union was never able to implant its own messages and narratives into mainstream Western media on a large scale. Now the Kremlin can easily and persistently reach Western consumers, and thus deliver its messages directly.

"Troll farms," for example, spread pro-Kremlin messages on the web, attack Russia's opponents and drown out constructive debate. Ukrainian researchers have also discovered Russian social media accounts posing as Russian-hating Ukrainian nationalists, who climb inside the Ukrainian discourse and push it towards a new revolution against the pro-Western government. In countries such as the Czech Republic, Bulgaria and Slovakia, dozens of websites of anonymous origin have sprung up, pushing a mix of xenophobic, anti-EU, anti-American and pro-Kremlin views.

In Poland, much of the disinformation is retweeted and shared by Poles with no direct links to Russia. That these individuals choose to share this content (often without realizing that it has links to Russia) is a testament to how the Russian disinformation campaign is able to capitalize on local politics for its own gain. By co-opting local actors as disseminators, the Kremlin becomes both harder to track and easier to believe.

Russia claims that its use of disinformation is merely in response to much greater Western capabilities. But this is disingenuous. It is true that the West in general has enormous assets, ranging from broadcasters such as CNN and BBC to news agencies like Reuters, to the might of the entertainment industry—Hollywood and the music business—quasi-media sites such as YouTube, WhatsApp, Instagram and Twitter.

But these are autonomous and uncoordinated actors in the information space. In Russia's centralized system, a single decision from the Kremlin ripples out to broadcasters, news agencies, social media, websites and individual journalists. Russia gets bad press in the West not because NATO orders it, but because this is what myriad journalists and editors decide this kind of coverage merits (while many others, in contrast, disagree and produce more Kremlin-friendly content).

HYBRID WAR: PARTS AND THE WHOLE

Information as part of Russia's 'asymmetric' approach

As a concept, information warfare 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."[46] But it is best understood as part of a broader spectrum of tactics, also including espionage, cyberattacks, subversion, corruption and targeted kidnapping and assassination. In Ukraine, a number of these elements were paired with covert military intervention. The chief of the General Staff of the Armed Forces of Russia, Gen. Valery Gerasimov, has spoken of a "combination of political, economic, information, technological, and ecological campaigns."

In the West, this joined-up policy—simultaneously military, economic, political and informational—is sometimes labeled "hybrid warfare." The term itself is the subject of a vigorous academic debate. One academic article published in 2015 bore the headline "Hybrid warfare—does it even exist?" It concluded that "NATO, and other Western decision-makers, should forget about everything 'hybrid' and focus on the specificity and the interconnectedness of the threats they face. Warfare, whether it be ancient or modern, hybrid or not, is always complex and can hardly be subsumed into a single adjective."[47]

While intellectuals debate the term hybrid warfare, it is useful in that it highlights the multifaceted nature of Russia's strategy, including elements that the West routinely ignores. It also highlights the immense weight Russian strategic thinkers give to information and psychological warfare. As Latvian scholar Jānis Bērziņš details in his account of Russia's "Next Generation Warfare," Moscow foresees moving from "direct clashes to contactless war," from "war in the physical environment to a war in the human consciousness and in cyberspace."[48,49] Information and disinformation campaigns have to be viewed as part of a broader strategic aim to break down Western alliances and disrupt Western states.

According to this way of thinking, "kinetic" warfare is violent and decisive, yet limited in its effectiveness. Its purpose is to achieve a quick *fait accompli* in a geographically circumscribed area, often by paramilitary units followed by the deployment of regular forces. "Non-kinetic" warfare is largely nonviolent but no less effective. Utilizing a combination of economic, cyber and information warfare, its purpose is to stoke psychological subversion and increase uncertainty or attrition in a target country or region. The authors of the *IISS Military Balance 2015* write of "sophisticated campaigns that combine low-level conventional and special operations; offensive cyber and space actions; and psychological operations that use social and traditional media to influence popular perception and international opinion." Meanwhile, FIIA describes the Kremlin approach as:

"a combination of tools perfected during the Soviet period and reactivated, first in the context of domestic power struggle and later in that of Russian foreign and security politics. Using a full spectrum of means from political, informational, economic, financial and military spheres, the adversary is put into a defensive posture and off balance, and thus, conditions are created for (military) surprise."

A non-exhaustive list of the elements of this non-kinetic spectrum would include:

- The targeted use of corruption, both to buy influence and to blackmail;
- Putting money into political parties, think tanks, media and academic institutions;
- Cyber-attacks, including denial-of-service, corrupting data, attacking critical infrastructure;
- Propaganda, overt and covert;
- The use of organized crime gangs, to collect information, intimidate and deter adversaries, funnel money to and away from particular groups, and to delegitimize and demoralize targeted populations and organizations;

- Coercive economic means such as sanctions, preferential access to markets, differential pricing (especially in energy exports);

- The exploitation of ethnic, linguistic, regional, religious and social tensions in the targeted society.

Each of these tactics can contribute to the impact of the others. The threat of kinetic war, for example, can intimidate and demoralize. The use of economic weapons to immiserate a society makes corruption more appealing. A particular advantage for Russia is that hybrid warfare can achieve the same objectives as a traditional military operation while remaining below the threshold that would otherwise invite an overwhelming and decisive armed response. NATO did not respond to the 2007 cyber-attack against Estonia. The limited invasion of Georgia in 2008, and the large-scale incursion into Ukraine, brought sanctions, but not at a level that reversed Russia's gains.

Writing for NATO's in-house publication *NATO Review*, Peter Pindják, a Slovak diplomat, describes "multilayered efforts designed to destabilize a functioning state and polarize its society. Unlike conventional warfare, the 'center of gravity' in hybrid warfare is a target population. The adversary tries to influence policy-makers and key decision-makers by combining kinetic operations with subversive efforts. The aggressor often resorts to clandestine actions, to avoid attribution or retribution."

Pindják describes NATO's focus on a rapid military reaction as having "three potential weaknesses. First, member states may find it difficult to agree on the source of a conflict, creating a significant barrier to prompt collective action. Second, to counter irregular threats, hard power alone is insufficient…Finally, a deterrent built upon military force alone will not be credible. To deal with irregular threats, NATO cannot simply revive the strategy of massive retaliation, or rely exclusively on one course of action."[50]

Russia is getting better at hybrid war, as can be seen by the increasing sophistication of its tactics—from the Baltic states, Caucasus and Moldova in the 1990s, to Estonia in 2007, Georgia in 2008 and Ukraine since 2014. Russia's approach to warfare is best illustrated by its military doctrine, updated on December 25, 2014. Paragraph 15 of the doctrine states the following as among the characteristic features and specifics of current military conflicts:

"integrated employment of military force and political, economic, informational or other non-military measures implemented with a wide use of the protest potential of the population and of special operations forces…"[51]

Russia clearly has the initiative. We do not know whether the intensification of espionage activity, threatening military maneuvers or a propaganda blitz is the prelude to another conflict, or just an exercise to try our strength. Like the old Cold War, this new contest is primarily a war of nerves.

But if hybrid war is a joined-up threat, we in the West do not have a joined-up response. We do not perceive promptly what is happening when we are attacked. We do not respond across national borders, or across professional silos. We lack the military-civilian links that are the foundation of a security culture: the shared attitudes, habits and procedures that enable individuals and organizations to combine against a common threat. Dealing with Russian information warfare is hard, because it exposes a deep weakness that makes us vulnerable to other threats too.

The combination of kinetic and non-kinetic methods has three features:

- ***1. Aggressive nature:*** given that European countries are not politically conditioned to launch wars of aggression around their borders, it is to be assumed that any hybrid conflict involving the EU and/or NATO will focus on a hybrid attack.

- ***2. Temporary advantage:*** it is not necessary to take and hold ground on a permanent basis, only to influence events on the ground by violence until a political exit favorable to the aggressor can be concluded.

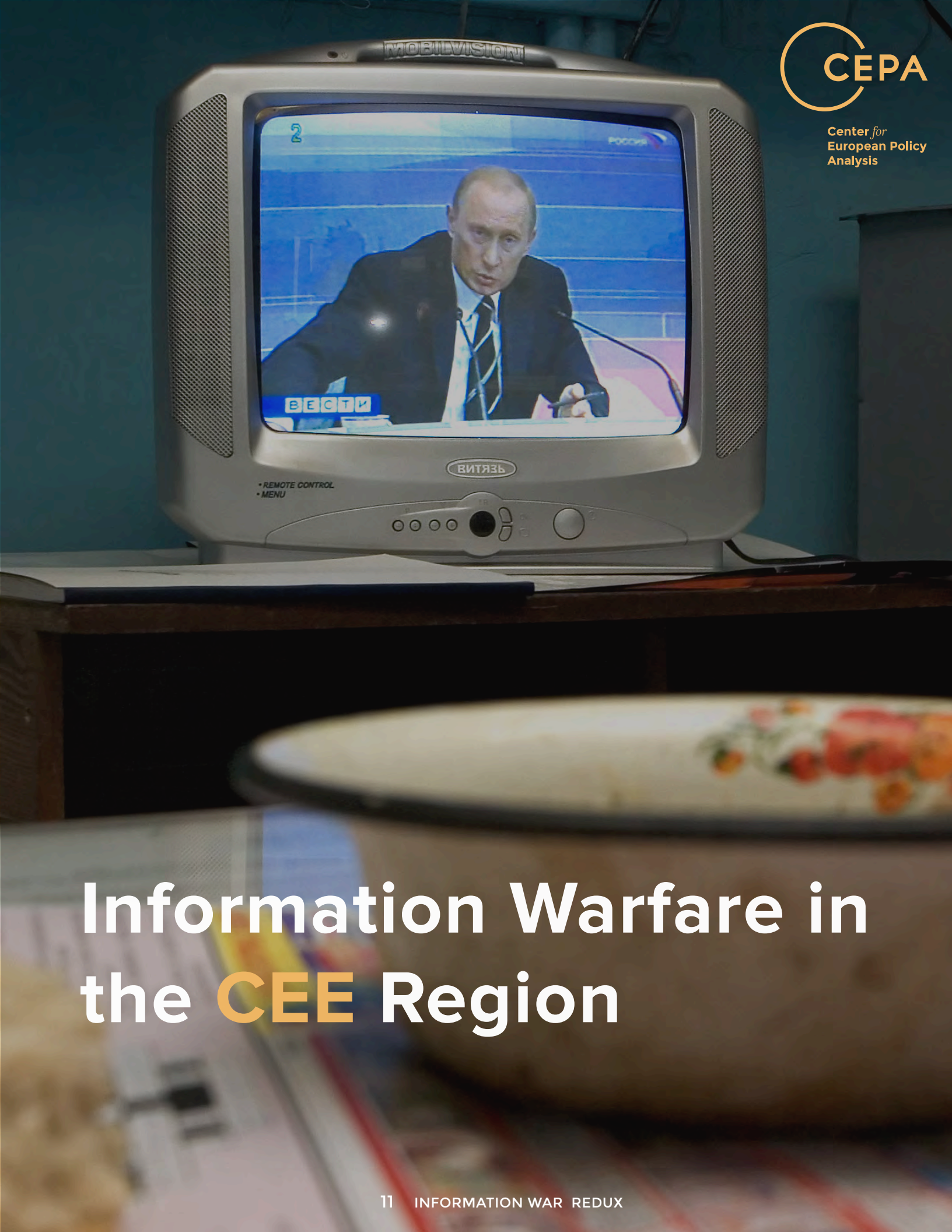
world, with its reliance on Internet links and instant information, creates far more opportunities for unconventional tactics. And the information war component of hybrid warfare, once a matter of propaganda and counter-propaganda, is now far more sophisticated.

3. Local advantage: practitioners of hybrid warfare are adept at using their non-kinetic tools to create a battlefield situation in which their kinetic forces have an overwhelming advantage over their opponents at a chosen place. The fact that the opponent has greatly superior forces on paper is neutralized by the fact that the hybrid warfare practitioner is able to prevent their use on the ground.

Finally, it is important to stress that, just as Russian disinformation is the descendant of Soviet propaganda, the term "hybrid warfare"—though coined in 2002—describes a much older form of strategy.[52] Unconventional forces have long been used to create an asymmetric advantage for the side that is militarily weaker.[53]

The geographical focus of Russia's hybrid warfare efforts is, for now, NATO's northeastern flank. As the 12 northern European states wrote in 2015:

"Hybrid operations seek to weaken our domestic and international resolve. They complicate the management of borders, mass media, critical infrastructure, and networks and information systems, whilst using civil and political interference to influence our domestic, foreign and defense policy decision-making."[54]



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Information Warfare in the CEE Region

INFORMATION WARFARE IN THE CEE REGION

Information as part of Russia's 'asymmetric' approach

This section considers Russian techniques for conducting information warfare in the CEE region. The analysis that follows is based on case studies from eight countries. Each one explains and illustrates different facets of the objectives, target audiences, content and organization of Russian disinformation. The case studies draw on sensitive as well as published information, and the sourcing in a few respects is therefore necessarily opaque.

CASE STUDY: UKRAINE

Several important studies have already been made on the techniques of Russian information war in Ukraine. Few, though, have sought to chart, analyze and explain the numerous examples of Russian propaganda in any meaningful way. This case study draws on the work of Stopfake.org, an online myth-busting initiative set up by teachers and students at Kyiv-Mohyla University.[55] Stopfake.org has analyzed, fact-checked and debunked more than 500 stories from Russian TV, print and Internet media as well as social media, both government-controlled and private. Once collected, Stopfake.org categorizes these stories depending on the themes of the fakes, forms of output (text, photo, video, meme) and the target audiences.

Objectives

In Ukraine, Stopfake.org has identified two major narrative "themes" used by Russian disinformation. The first interprets the Euromaidan protests as a coup d'état in which a Western-backed junta seized power from Ukraine's rightful rulers. This plays into aforementioned wider narratives about a supposed Western–mostly American–plot to dominate the world. The second attempts to define the emerging democratic regime in Ukraine as "fascist." This dual narrative has "cultivated unrest inside the country by sowing enmity among segments of Ukrainian society and confusing the West with waves of disinformation." Against this backdrop "…Russian proxy forces and covert troops launch just enough military offensives to ensure that the Ukrainian government looks weak."[56]

The ultimate objective of both narratives is to destabilize Ukraine psychologically and to advance a conviction that the country is a failed state. With this pessimistic view of the country, Russia hopes to destroy both domestic and international support for reforms that would make Kyiv more independent from Moscow.

Target audiences

By associating the pro-democracy movement in Ukraine with fascism and an anti-Russian, Western-backed coup, Russia hopes to galvanize its own domestic audience behind its assertive foreign policy. Similarly, it hopes to radicalize potential supporters in eastern and southern Ukraine to bolster its military campaign there. Finally, Russia hopes to discredit the Ukrainian government in the eyes of Europe and NATO.

In addition, the Kremlin seeks to reach a wide range of potential supporters. For that reason, the major narratives are backed up by tactics designed to targets those with little appetite for complex politics. "Human interest stories" that act as "clickbait" have accused the United States of deploying the Zika virus and other diseases as a weapon to attack its enemies (see Box, below). These human-interest stories perpetuate the same narratives—that the United States seeks to dominate the globe or that the Ukrainian government is fascist—but do so by targeting individuals with different levels of education as well as regional audiences.

Content and organization

Three terms are particularly useful in understanding Russian disinformation in Ukraine. Of course, these categories are not mutually exclusive.

Provocation: The term "provocation" belongs to the traditional repertoire of distraction. It works upon the assumption of a threat from outside that may manifest itself in a series of provocations targeted against the regime's stability. The term is rooted in Soviet political language, which sought to denounce potential critical voices by framing them as provocations or instances of sabotage by foreign agents or fifth columnists. This type of narrative construction is particularly well suited to consolidating a narrative of an active West provoking a passive Russia to defend itself. Consequently, the dynamics of the conflict are turned upside down: the attacker becomes the victim and the victim is accused of starting the conflict.

Humanitarian catastrophe: To conceal the presence of Russian armed forces in the region, a more subtle deception scheme was needed. The "humanitarian catastrophe" narrative provided a convenient cover for action: the delivery of humanitarian aid and Russian weaponry to the region. On August 5, 2014, the Russian Foreign Ministry announced that Russia was going to organize "an international humanitarian mission for the southeast of Ukraine." By March 2016, altogether 50 convoys, consisting of over 100 trucks each, had crossed the border into Ukraine, allegedly delivering humanitarian assistance to the locals, but reportedly supplying illegal military groups and Russian regular troops with weapons and ammunition.

Russophobic: The terms anti-Russian and Russophobic have become part of the official parlance. The Russian Foreign Ministry condemned the dismantling of war monuments in Ukraine and described it as "barbaric Russophobic action." Ukrainian researcher Alexandr Osipian has argued that the framing of Maidan activists as anti-Russian and Russophobic has been made on purpose to render "any attempt to carry out similar protests in Russia unthinkable" and to automatically classify anybody speaking in support of Ukraine's Maidan as a traitor. Thus, in the Russian domestic context, a citizen who is critical towards the official line or expresses sympathy for countries in conflict with Russia is now deemed a "Russophobe." This is important, since the "stigmatizing effect" created by the constant use of political slogans, labels and clichés is extended from the purely domestic sphere to the outside world.

Case in point: Human-interest stories

Old propaganda redux

Shocking human-interest stories were a mainstay of Soviet *dezinformatsiya*. A classic was Operation *Infektion*. In 1983, the Indian KGB-sponsored newspaper The Patriot broke a story accusing the U.S. military of creating the AIDS virus and releasing it as a weapon. This story appeared first in minor Soviet-controlled outlets. In 1985 it was picked up by the Soviet weekly newspaper, *Literaturnaya gazeta* and then mushroomed in many other outlets: In 1987 alone, it appeared more than 40 times in the Soviet-controlled press and was reprinted or rebroadcast in more than 80 countries in 30 languages. The AIDS virus was terrifying and not well understood at the time, so this piece of Soviet disinformation was especially damaging to the U.S. image.

At the time, the U.S. government put a lot of pressure on the Kremlin and Gorbachev to stop the Soviet Union disseminating this myth. Today, the story has been resurrected but using different diseases. The website Pravda.ru ran a news item claiming that 20 Ukrainian soldiers died and 200 were hospitalized with the deadly California flu virus outside the eastern Ukrainian city of Kharkiv. "Doctors have recorded an unknown virus causing extremely high temperatures which cannot be brought down with any medicine," claimed DNR separatist spokesman Eduard Basurin. On January 22, the same Basurin announced at a press conference that Ukrainian soldiers were admitted to a Kharkiv hospital suffering from a virus "that leaked from an American laboratory located in the village of Shelkostantsia." None of these fake stories were accompanied by facts or photos. Ukrainian medical and military authorities reported no mass illness or viral infection. Regardless, the story had taken a life of its own, and by reporting these lies, the Russian disinformation campaign has galvanized support both at home and in eastern Ukraine.

Russian disinformation campaigns are easily spread. As seen in Ukraine, the initial outlet is unimportant; the point is for many nominally independent organizations to run a story so that it is eventually repeated by outlets that have no connection to Russia and appear, at least to some readers, to be real.

In this new information sphere where nothing is true, everything is equally believable.[57]

Conclusion

The Kremlin's disinformation campaign targeting Ukraine uses a wide variety of techniques. It adapts its messages to different audiences, whether in eastern Ukraine or Western Europe. It brazenly seeds disinformation, but ensures that its lies are entertaining and emotionally engaging, and fits them into a strategic narrative tailored to match the preconceptions and biases of its audiences, linking Ukrainian nationalism and German fascism in Russia and encouraging anti-U.S. and anti-EU sentiment in Europe. In order to make this content appealing, Russia is prepared to fabricate stories entirely, using photos and video footage to suit Russia's needs. A full range of media, from cinema to news, talk shows, print and social media are engaged in promoting official Russian narratives. weapons and ammunition.

The "coup d'état" narrative in Ukraine

The evolution of the "*coup d'état*" narrative in Ukraine illustrates the dynamic where nothing is true and everything is equally believable.

After the Euromaidan revolution of 2014, Russia harbored Ukrainian leaders who had fled their country for further propaganda use. They made numerous media appearances in the Russian media and were subsequently proclaimed as the "Ukrainian government in exile."

In 2014, the Russian broadcaster NTV produced a "documentary" entitled *Ordinary Fascism: Ukrainian Variant*.[58] It closely echoed a Soviet propaganda effort from January 1991, a 40-minute documentary called *Faces of Extremism* that mixed shots of terrorism in Lebanon, Northern Ireland and Spain with film clips of U.S. military operations in Grenada, Panama and Libya, followed by scenes of a rally held by Rukh (then the democratic party in Ukraine], riots in Central Asia, fighting in Azerbaijan, and demonstrations in Lithuania.[59] The narrator suggested that the U.S. government would soon try to organize underground political movements in Central Asia in order to cause the collapse of the Soviet Union.

Both "documentaries" blame the U.S. government and Western NGOs for committing direct and indirect actions to disrupt Soviet and/or Russian influence. StopFake.org found numerous stories supporting this same argument: faked photos titled "Kyiv Residents Kneel Before Biden" and "Ukrainian Soldier Kisses American Flag," and a fake news story titled "Biden Proposes to Federalize Ukraine."[60] All these stories were originally hosted by different online sites and then circulated by a core group of known disinformation outlets; by reposting and circulating each other's content, these sites created an illusion of veracity.

As a result of the alleged *coup d'état*, Russian propaganda now depicts Ukraine as having been transformed into a de facto fascist state. The "fascist narrative" is important, because it connects Ukrainian events with the narrative of World War II, a heroic chapter in Soviet, and then Russian—and Ukrainian—history. Valentin Zorin, a well-known Soviet propagandist, stated that the American *coup d'état* narrative drew on historical allegations about Ukrainian "extreme nationalistic forces, Banderites who swore allegiance to Hitler and committed atrocities against Russians, Jews and Poles."[61] According to evidence coming from text messages hacked by Anonymous International, the story of a "U.S.-backed junta of radicals and banderites"was initially launched from the Kremlin by Alexey Gromov, deputy chief of staff of Russia's presidential administration, and pushed to different media outlets by Timur Prokopenko, the head of the Kremlin internal affairs department.[62,63,64]

As KGB defector Ladislav Bittman explained, all the Kremlin has to do is release a story that hits historically relevant talking points. The story will then spread with little further effort:

Anti-American propaganda campaigns are the easiest to carry out. A single press article containing sensational facts of a 'new American conspiracy' may be sufficient. Other papers become interested, the public is shocked, and government authorities in developing countries have a fresh opportunity to clamor against the imperialists while demonstrators hasten to break American embassy windows.[65]

By telling Russians that, as in 1941-45, they are fighting fascists, the Kremlin aims both to galvanize its own population but also to delegitimize any dissenters: to speak against the war is to betray Russia itself. The conflation of a confusing reality with an idealized past closes the political space for either dissent or nuanced discussion.[66]

The main narrative is backed up with fake news stories connected to World War II, including the alleged demolition of war memorials and lists of alleged slights and injustices experienced by veterans in Ukraine: the supposed curtailment of benefit payments and bans on celebrations and gatherings. In some cases, Russian media has even reported physical violence against veterans. On April 20, 2015, Russia's Lifenews TV channel falsely reported that the head of the Kharkiv Regional Council forbade World War II veterans from wearing St. George ribbons and flags (commemorating the Red Army's victory) during a May 9 Victory Day march.[67,68] On September 3, 2015, Russia's REN TV and Channel 5 falsely reported that unknown persons had destroyed

memorial plaques commemorating Soviet soldiers in Kharkiv. Amateur video, published on YouTube, supposedly showed two men dismantling memorial plaques and taking them away to an undisclosed location. When asked for comment, a speaker for the Kharkiv city council said the plaques had been removed for renovation.[69]

Crass comparisons to Nazi Germany are increasingly commonplace, and are provoked and created. On the night ofApril 8, 2014, swastikas appeared on the walls of the Jewish cemetery in Odessa accompanied by the words "Right Sector" and "Kill Jews." This act of vandalism seemed to prove that the new Ukrainian government was fascist and the right-wing nationalist group Right Sector was anti-Semitic. Russian and Russian-backed media then reported on the story with the explicit aim of discrediting the Ukrainian rebels.

While no one was ever arrested for the crime, no pro-Ukrainian groups were ever proved to have carried it out either. The chief rabbi of Odessa, Avraham Wolf, told journalists that he believed local pro-Russian separatists were behind the vandalism. The rabbi and a leader of Right Sector, Valeriy Zavgorodniy, were careful to show unity; together, both men painted over the swastikas. This photo opportunity and accompanying press release from the pro-Ukraine factions ultimately received far more media attention—including international media—than the original Russian campaign. Nevertheless, the original story remained popular on Russian-linked sites. Some Russian sites even used images of the repainting of the swastikas to allege that Right Sector had only made these overtures to the Jewish community in order to attract Western support.

In this case, pro-Russian actors were willing to create entirely fake content in order to further the "fascist state" narrative. They were aware of local historical tensions as well as the international context, and they deliberately tried to create a scandal related to these issues. News organizations then used these images to give their propaganda the façade of truth. Once shared online, relatively few people checked the origin of the pictures. It required a significant and coordinated effort by Right Sector and the local Jewish community to mitigate the damage caused by the vandalism and the broadcasts.

Russian media have also used manipulated video footage. On June 30, 2015, the Russian LifeNews TV channel reported on the celebration of the anniversary of the declaration of Ukrainian independence in Kherson. The broadcast video depicted a small event in the city center, where young people had gathered to read the declaration aloud and to sing the national anthem. The manipulated story was framed: "Nationalists Swear Allegiance to Hitler in Kherson."[70]

The Baltic States

From the beginning of the 2000s, it was clear that the Russian regime opposed the Baltic states' integration into the EU and NATO. But because conventional military means could not be used to preserve Russian influence, disinformation was deployed instead. The so-called "Bronze Night" in Tallinn, Estonia, was an excellent example of a carefully prepared and executed Russian disinformation campaign, though it illustrates the limitations of disinformation as well as the possibilities.

CASE STUDY: ESTONIA

In Estonia, the main goal of Russian disinformation is to increase polarization and hostility between Estonian-speakers and the Russian-speaking minority.[71] Often this is done using historical themes. A recent example occurred in May 2016, when the mainstream Russian Vesti-Rossiya 24 TV station depicted a gigantic Victory Day march in the Russian-speaking Estonian town of Sillamäe. This event never took place; the program was entirely invented. Its goal was to delegitimize the Estonian state by depicting the Estonians as closet Nazis and Holocaust supporters, while at the same time reminding audience of the heroic struggle against them by local Russian "liberators." The broader intention was not to persuade audiences that the Soviet version of history is wholly correct, or that Estonia is a fascist redoubt. That would contradict the daily experience of Estonia's Russians, who can see firsthand that the country is a success story in which they earn more money, enjoy better public services and have more political freedom than they would otherwise experience in Russia. The point was rather to create so much confusion that audiences consider all information they receive as possibly untrue.

Target audiences

In the first instance, Russian narratives are aimed at the Russian-speaking minority. Russian state media portrays the Baltic region as a whole, including states like Estonia, as xenophobic, intolerant and hostile in an attempt to soften outside international support, particularly from American and European allies. The wider goal is to legitimize Russian influence in the region by demonstrating that Baltic allies are "different" from the rest of Europe. Finally, these messages aim to increase nationalist sentiment inside Russia and justify a revanchist foreign policy by propagating the narrative that neighboring governments mistreat their Russian-speaking minorities. The net result is to create a situation in which future aggression against a Baltic ally like Estonia might be accepted as 1) warranted by the Russian public; 2) justified to the international community; and 3) received with resignation by local governments and their populations.

Case in Point: The "Bronze Night"

The "Bronze Night" of April 26-27, 2007 deserves particular scrutiny as a defining moment in the development of information operations as a tool in Russia's hybrid warfare kit. As the most serious security crisis in Estonia's post-occupation history, it combined an ethnic Russian riot with a heavy disinformation campaign and cyber attacks directed against the Estonian state.

The incident began when the Estonian government decided to relocate a Soviet war memorial, nicknamed the "Bronze Soldier," from its location near a bus stop at Tõnismägi in central Tallinn to the military cemetery on the outskirts of the Estonian capital. The remains of Red Army soldiers buried by the monument were to be reinterred there as well.

The decision was immediately interpreted as an "insult" to the local Russian-speaking population. At the beginning of the 2000s, the Bronze Soldier had become an increasingly significant symbol of unity for ethnic Russian. Celebrations near it on May 9,—the date in 1945 when the Soviet Union declared victory over Nazi Germany—grew larger from year to year. In 2006, an Estonian flag was torn down during a May 9, celebration.

The Estonian Internal Security Service (EISS, or KAPO in Estonian) believed that Russian agents were working to encourage this unrest.[72] In early 2007, Russia's central FSB apparatus developed several action plans for events around the Bronze Soldier.

The embassy became more active: it held a series of meetings with local Russian leaders, and helped create an organization—*Nochnoi Dozor* or Night Watch— to "defend" the monument. Russian media played an important role in encouraging conflict too. Research by the University of Tartu revealed that inhabitants of Estonia who do not speak Estonian do not follow Estonian media – not even the Russian-language Estonian media. Instead, nearly 75 percent of Russian-speakers in Estonia were watching Russian state TV. Since television was then, and still is, the chief source of information for Estonians over 20, Russian TV was playing a substantial role in shaping the views of Russians living in Estonia.

In April 2007, when the Estonian government said it would move the Bronze Soldier monument, Russian channels portrayed that as an attack against Russia's cultural values, the Russian language, human rights, religious beliefs and the nation's sacred origins. In February 2007, well-known Russian ultranationalist Alexander Prokhanov went on the RTV show *Difference of Opinion* to argue this case:

"Our Duma has to answer this metaphysical attack against our homeland [meaning the relocation of the Bronze Soldier]. The members of the Duma have to clearly say that Estonia is a hostile nation that has been formed at the border of the Russian state. The Estonian state is not a real state, it's a bastardized state. Narva is a Russian town...The Estonian nation has actually never existed. The Duma has to declare Estonia to be a hostile state and start the process of reclaiming Narva, which is historically a Russian territory. I am planning on doing that in the Duma."

About a month before the Bronze Night, anti-Estonian narratives in Russian media intensified. Estonians were described as having a "fascist mentality," and accused of violating human rights. The Estonian government was said to be attempting to destroy the memorial and desecrate the memory of the Russian soldiers who fought the Nazis. By mid-April, some Russians, including Dmitri Rogozin, a member of the Russian Duma and leader of the patriotic movement *Rodina*, were calling for sanctions against Estonia, and even making demands for war.

At the same time, the Kremlin tried to undermine Russian-language media in Estonia by portraying it as unreliable and manipulated by the Estonian government. At an international conference funded by the Russian Embassy on "Russian Information Area in the Baltics" an RTR journalist (Russian state television) attacked Russian newspapers published in Estonia as "stooges" if they refused to follow a pro-Kremlin line.

During the Bronze Night

On April 26, when the excavation of the statue began, some 1,500 people gathered at the memorial. Some of them attacked policemen, civilians, public institutions and private property. In the early hours of April 27, the government decided to move the monument immediately. Windows were broken, shops were robbed and hundreds of people were arrested during the unrest. The riots continued, though authorities restored calm throughout the day and night of April 28. One Russian, Dmitri Ganin, died of stab wounds in an unrelated incident that took place during the violence. This rioting—the worst civil unrest in Estonia's post-1991 history—was preceded and accompanied by Russian diplomatic pressure on Estonia and cyber-attacks against Estonian government agencies, media outlets and critical infrastructure.

For a few days, the events in Tallinn made world headlines. Aggressive statements from Russian authorities, extensive propaganda and misinformation in Russian media made Estonians fear that Russia's interpretation of events would prevail in the West. The Kremlin position was that Estonian fascist vandals had desecrated a holy monument, and that discrimination against Russians was rampant in Estonia. The Russian media reported distortions, half-truths and outright lies alongside images from Tallinn. By combining disinformation with footage from the city (even if the footage was staged), the programs gave a veneer of veracity to their content. Russian youth gangs that went on a rampage of vandalism were called peaceful demonstrators, while Russian TV avoided airing footage of looting. Instead it aired fabrications about police brutality. Russian media asserted that the Bronze Soldier, far from being relocated, had been sawn into pieces by Estonian authorities. Many Russian media outlets portrayed Ganin—the Russian stabbing victim—as having died in a clash with police while protecting the Bronze Soldier.

These distortions were supported by custom-made, and faked, footage from Tallinn. According to KAPO, RTR journalist Yekaterina Zorina arranged for Night Watch to stage demonstrations at Tõnismägi in order to get more "powerful" shots for Russian national TVs. RTR's reporting excluded other viewpoints in favor of local Russian-speaking leftists. RTR journalists also tried to spark a spontaneous demonstration at Ganin's funeral.

In this context of half-truths and distortions, rumors spread easily and widely. For example, it was alleged that the bones of the buried soldiers had been dug up and thrown away; that Estonian police had killed three people including Ganin; and that ethnic Russians who gathered to defend the Bronze Soldier were tortured.

Online articles supported this TV and video-based disinformation, lending credibility to the cause. In an article titled "The Police and the Army in War with People"—published by the Internet portal dozor.ee on 8 November 2007—an RTR journalist compared events in Georgia and Estonia, saying that whereas in Georgia police and the army merely confronted their own nation, in Estonia the police beat and tortured a foreign nation (i.e., Russians).

After the Bronze Night

The Russian assault continued from April 27, to May 18, with DDoS (distributed denial-of-service) attacks on the computer networks of Estonian state authorities and public services. This had the effect of hampering the government's ability to coordinate responses to the physical threat on Tallinn's streets while at the same time making the government look incompetent to its Western allies.

Actions in Moscow followed. From April 27, to May 1, members of the pro-Kremlin youth movement "Nashi" (Ours) blockaded the Estonian Embassy in Moscow, causing alarm and protests among Estonia's Western allies. The blockade threatened Estonian Ambassador Marina Kaljurand—now minister of foreign affairs—changing the way Europe viewed the situation. Protests from the West and international pressure—coupled with the decisive actions of Estonian law enforcement—forestalled further attacks on Estonian sovereignty or political stability.

Though the Bronze Soldier incident could be seen as unsuccessful from a Russian point of view—the West did, after all, rally behind Estonia—it was a sign of what was to come. Similar "hybrid warfare" tactics were used against Georgia in 2008 and again in Ukraine in 2013-15. In Estonia, Russia achieved a remarkable level of narrative dominance that transformed the political sphere of Estonian politics; the statue became supercharged with political meaning, and it is still brought up in debates today. For example, during Estonia's 2015 parliamentary elections, European Parliament member Jana Toom (Center Party) called on everyone to oppose the "Bronze Night coalition"–meaning the government led by the Reform Party. To this day, a large part of the Russian-Estonian population believes moving the statue from the city center was unjustified.

Conclusion

The Russian disinformation campaign relied on a pre-existing network of Russian-speaking Estonians who looked to Russian-produced content for their news. Combating Russian disinformation will require the breakup of these information monopolies. Russian TV crews clearly operated according to a pre-determined narrative. In the future, organizations concerned with facts should watch Russian content more closely to criticize exaggeration and "fact-check" outright lies.

It is worth noting that this crisis did not escalate into a disaster. A combination of swift action by security forces, robust counter-narrative measures and, ultimately, Kremlin over-reach, limited the campaign's impact.

CASE STUDY: LATVIA

Russia's propaganda attack on Latvia aims to divide Latvian society, to highlight a supposed "double standard" in Europe's approach to human rights and to stoke support for the Putin regime. It portrays Latvia as a place where Nazism is enjoying a revival. Yet the only evidence for this is a small, unofficial annual military commemoration that is covered with notable distortion in Russian media.

Objectives

A principal aim of the Kremlin's disinformation narrative in Latvia is to encourage the country's population of Russian Latvians to support local political parties and politicians that favor closer ties with Russia and oppose EU sanctions. Examples include Nils Ušakovs and Andrejs Mamikins from the Harmony Party or Tatjana Ždanoka from the Russian Union of Latvia (for their part, all these politicians strongly deny any improper links with Russian state agencies).[72] A second objective is to legitimize Russia's revanchist foreign policy. To this end, news stories about the purported rebirth of Nazism in Latvia help strengthen one of the Kremlin's most important narratives: that Russia is a "besieged fortress." Putin emerges in this context as the standard-bearer of the victorious Soviet Union over Nazism, carrying on the great task of the Russia's wartime generation.

Target audiences

World War II is still very much alive in a great part of Russian society. It can be conveniently used to direct the public's natural patriotism against the Kremlin's perceived "external enemies." This dynamic is present in parts of Latvian society too, where the social memory of many ethnic Russians in Latvia has developed separately from that of ethnic Latvians. For example, the latter fondly remember the pre-war independent state of Latvia, which was occupied by the Soviets in 1940. By contrast, Russians in Latvia tend to embrace an old Soviet narrative, which claims that Latvia voluntarily joined the USSR. These differences in collective memory create fertile ground for Russian propaganda, which predictably escalates each year around March 16, and May 8-9,. These dates commemorate the "Western" and "Soviet" anniversaries of V-E Day.

The two main targets of Kremlin disinformation are thus the Russian minority in Latvia and the Russian government's domestic audience inside Russia. The former can be further subdivided as such:

- "Compatriots" (a term used in the Kremlin lexicon to mean ethnic Russians) and "Russian speakers" (Ukrainians, Belarusians, etc.) who are loyal to idea of the "Russian world"—a Kremlin notion, which encompasses Russian language, culture, history and religion;

- "Neutral" Russians, or those who do not consider themselves as compatriots, but are critical of the Latvian government;

- "Integrated Russians," namely those who are loyal citizens of Latvia, and who associate themselves with Latvia and enjoy the privileges of being a part of Europe.

In this breakdown, "Neutral" Russians are the main target group of Kremlin disinformation efforts. Indeed, it is from this audience that Russia seeks to draw support for its actions in Ukraine, for example, and elsewhere.

Case in point: The Latvian Legion

A typical topic for Russian propaganda aimed at Latvia focuses on the Latvian Legion, a unit of primarily Latvian volunteers who fought with the Germans in World War II. Russian TV coverage does not deal with the serious historical issues surrounding the Latvian Legion, which include the Soviet occupation that preceded the Nazi invasion, resistance, and collaboration in war crimes under both regimes. Instead, Russian broadcasts offer obfuscation, disinformation, incitement and smears.[73] In this coverage, no actual veterans of the Legion or expert Latvian historians are interviewed. Russian channels commonly present Latvia as a country plagued by resurgent Nazism, in which "anti-fascist" organizations—namely pro-Kremlin groups—represent the only opposition to the "brown plague" (a reference to Nazism). The fact that the vast majority of Latvians find Nazism and neo-Nazism abhorrent, and that neo-Nazi parties are (unlike in Russia) a negligible political force in Latvia, is never mentioned.

On March 16, 2015, Russian TV channels Rossiya (accessible in Latvia as a rebroadcast of Rossiya RTR), Perviy Kanal (as First Baltic Channel in Latvia) and NTV (NTV Mir in Latvia) aired footage of Latvian Legion veterans laying flowers at Riga's Freedom monument to commemorate fellow soldiers who had died in World War II.[74]

In Latvia, March 16, is not an official holiday but rather a private initiative of the veterans and their supporters. While most ruling coalition politicians try to disassociate themselves from it, some individual MPs, however, take part in the event. Annually, Russian TV uses scenes from this event to illustrate the narrative that Nazism is alive and well in Latvia. On March 16, Rossiya RTR's news program *Vesti* interviewed representatives of so-called "anti-fascist" organizations supported by the Russian government. Josifs Korens, for instance, a supporter of the Kremlin-backed "World without Nazism" organization, claimed that among the veterans involved in the event were murderers and criminals who had taken part in the Holocaust.

German Dvorzhak of the European Social Forum also stated that the legionnaires committed crimes during World War II. Italian politician Dante Cataneo told the program that, although he had believed that Nazism was defeated in 1945, unfortunately it was still alive in some places. Similarly, on March 16, NTV Mir described the event as a "march to honor Nazism," thus distorting its essence. The presenter claimed that Latvian authorities did not counter the march of "fascist followers" and only local anti-fascist organizations dared oppose it. The broadcast also claimed that the parade went through the entire city of Riga, while in reality it was just 700 meters, from the Occupation Museum to the Freedom Monument.

The disinformation campaign is not restricted to television. News about March 16, and related historical issues appear frequently on social networks like Facebook, Twitter, and Draugiem.lv. Quite often they are taken from Russian-language portals in Latvia such as rus.delfi.lv, rus.tvnet,lv rus.apollo.lv and mixnews.lv; Russian TV channels and websites like lenta.ru, gazeta.ru, or state-run agencies such as ITAR-TASS and RIA Novosti. Thus social media acts as an amplifier for the Kremlin's messages.

Often, "troll" armies aggressively target what they deem to be anti-Russian opinions online and flood message boards with pro-Putin comments. The effect is to put anti-Putin commentators on the defensive. These trolls receive their instructions from the Kremlin. According to the Russian news website "The Insider," the Department for Internal Policy at the Russian Presidential Administration controls the activities of these trolls and bloggers. According to media reports the head of the Kremlin-linked catering company Concord, Yevgeniy Prihozhin, owns one such "troll factory" in St Petersburg. In a report distributed by NATO's Strategic Communications Centre for Excellence, and prepared in 2015 by the Latvian Foreign Policy Institute ("Internet Trolling as Hybrid Warfare Tool: Case of Latvia"), the authors found that Internet trolls thrive in Latvia's online media, operating in both the Russian and Latvian languages.[75]

In addition to "trolls," Russian-affiliated NGOs in Latvia are an important tool in the dissemination of Kremlin narratives. Latvia is a particularly unique case, in that the Russians residing in Latvia are both its target group and the tool for spreading disinformation. The involvement of Russian NGOs in activities related to the March 16, events is part and parcel of Russia's foreign policy. Russia finances these NGOs, giving them credibility—and a voice—to this propaganda. According to the Rebaltica consortium of Latvian investigative journalists, this financing flows through several channels, including the Russian Embassy and the Coordination Council of the Russian Compatriots in Latvia. Other funders are foundations such "*Russkiy Mir*," the Gorchakov Foundation of Public Diplomacy and the Foundation for Support and Legal Protection of Russian Compatriots Abroad.[76]

Some NGOs receive financing from Russia regularly. Others get funds for specific projects, and the rest lack overseas funding. Normunds Mežviets, chief of Latvia's Security Police, said that in 2015, the Foundation for Support and Legal Protection of Compatriots Abroad granted €25,000 (about $27,500) for activities relating to March 16, transferring the funds to an NGO based in Belgium. This network of individual supporters—indispensable to the disinformation campaigns—links with Kremlin broadcasting and online activities in a coordinated whole.

Conclusion

In Latvia, historical myths play a large role in Russian disinformation. They contribute to the notion that Russia is a "besieged fortress" surrounded by pro-Nazi countries. In the logic of this narrative, Russia has a historical duty (dating to World War II) to actively oppose neo-Nazism and fascism. By perpetuating myths of Latvia's wartime past, Russian disinformation simplifies Latvian society—falsely dividing it into "us" (anti-fascist) versus "them" (fascist) camps. The danger for Latvia arises not only from the creation of these divisions, or from the disinformation campaigns themselves, but also from being wrongly framed as an enclave of Nazism.

Such a country must therefore, as the reasoning goes, have no place in the EU. If this narrative were to gain traction on a large scale, the effect could be to isolate Latvia from its European neighbors—an opportunity that Russia might exploit for geostrategic advantage. Conversely, such myths can likewise lead Russian citizens to wrongly believe that Nazism either endures; or it is undergoing a revival in Europe. Such a belief is neatly compatible with a related Kremlin narrative that Europe is hostile to Russia. This too advantages the Kremlin, since it can strengthen domestic political support by reinforcing the popular image of Russia as a "besieged fortress."

CASE STUDY: LITHUANIA

A key difference between Lithuania and its Baltic neighbors is that the country is not home to a large ethnic Russian population. However, Lithuania's relative military weakness vis-a-vis Russia leaves its vulnerable to the dangers of hybrid war (considered earlier) and the associated use of "new propaganda." Russian disinformation and propaganda is partly directed at Western audiences, hoping to alienate them from Lithuania by portraying it as unreliable and not worth defending.

Target audiences

The main external audience for Russian propaganda related to Lithuania is Poland—its close ally. Such narratives portray Lithuania as vindictive and oppressive towards the country's Polish-speaking minority. Ethnic Russian politicians in Lithuania are reaching out to the country's ethnic Polish politicians in a bid to create a joint minority party, potentially increasing the Kremlin's access to the Polish minority and further stimulating Lithuanian suspicions of this community.

As a previous CEPA analysis demonstrates, Kremlin disinformation campaigns directed at Lithuania highlight flaws in the West: bad faith towards Russia, alleged militarism and recklessness and the cost to Lithuania of being in the front line of a future east-west conflict.[77] These themes are not specific to Lithuania and repeat common tropes used in Russian propaganda elsewhere in the CEE region.

To a lesser extent Russian propaganda also plays on domestic weaknesses. Lithuania was badly hit by the 2007-08 financial crisis, and has yet to recover growth rates or optimism. Salaries are low, workplace relations and conditions unpleasant, and emigration high. Opinion polls show a high level of dissatisfaction with public services, economic prospects and the country's political leadership. Social, economic, regional, linguistic and other fissures in Lithuanian society offer opportunities for Russian provocations and disinformation campaigns.

Objectives

Like most propaganda attacks, Russian ones typically contain elements of truth. The easiest avenue is Lithuania's tragic wartime history, in which nearly the entire pre-war Jewish population perished at the hands of German occupiers and their local collaborators. Russian propaganda typically portrays Lithuanians as ardent Nazi accomplices who obfuscate the country's role in the Holocaust and glorify nationalist leaders and resistance leaders who were, in truth, merely Nazi stooges. This echoes Soviet-era propaganda, which portrayed Lithuanian émigré leaders as war criminals.[78] Russian propaganda highlights, for example, the annual "Nationalist March"—in truth a minor event attended by extremists. It also highlights Lithuania's ongoing disputes about the restitution of pre-war Jewish-owned property. Notably, this matches similar propaganda themes used in Estonia and Latvia.

In terms of values and deeply held beliefs, Lithuania is still closer to other post-Soviet and post-communist

states, including Russia. Some traditional values like respect for authority, institution of family with traditional gender roles and national pride appeal to a considerable part of Lithuanian population.[79]

Equally, most political parties follow a socially conservative agenda—even the ones that could be associated with the center left, such as the Lithuanian Social Democrat Party. This increases the potential attraction of Putin's socially conservative agenda. It appears to be designed to broadly appeal to beliefs that are still highly prevalent in Russian society and elsewhere in Europe, including post-Soviet and post-communist states.

On the question of values, Kremlin propaganda describes Lithuania as inherently different to Western countries and civilizationally closer to Russia. As an Open Society Foundation report points out, most Latvians feel sentimental and nostalgic for the Soviet era. "More than half would support a pragmatic, neutral or 'softer' approach to Russia and maintaining close political and economic ties," it said.[80]

Conclusion

Kremlin disinformation in Lithuania is different from other the Baltic states. This reflects Lithuania's relatively small Russian minority. The familiar "us versus them" narrative is common, but instead of being directed at ethnic Russians, Kremlin propaganda seeks to draw a line between traditional Lithuanian values and the rest of Europe. Simultaneously, this propaganda attempts to stoke anxiety among Lithuanian audiences over the country's perceived security and economic weaknesses.

Case in point: Mixing messages

Dalia Bankauskaitė, CEPA's StratCom contributor in Lithuania, has illustrated how Russian propaganda derives from multiple narratives and is deployed in her country.

In February 2016, the Rubaltic.ru website used the meeting between Pope Francis and the Russian Orthodox Patriarch to argue that Lithuania is culturally closer to Russia than to the West, and to highlight allegedly negative aspects of Poland's historical influence on Lithuania.[81] In the same week, Russian websites spread conspiracy theories about the massacre in Lithuania on January 13, 1991, the day Soviet tanks tried to support a putsch by pro-Kremlin hardliners. The websites argued that attempts to bring the perpetrators to justice were a politicized sham, and that the killing of the protesters was actually carried out by snipers under the command of the pro-independence authorities.[82]

In May, the Belarusian website used the death of a young member of the armed forces (in fact from a severe meningococcal infection) to that Lithuania's armed forces were testing biological weapons on the country's own soldiers.[83] As CEPA reporting notes,

Other pro-Kremlin news sites in Lithuania broadly commented on the soldier's death, claiming that poor hygiene standards in the army's canteens has sickened many conscripts; that his death exposed major health issues in the Lithuanian army, and that the conscript's death reflects deficiencies in the army itself. This disinformation attack is aimed at diminishing the reputation of the Lithuanian army and NATO, to weaken citizens' trust in Lithuania, and to sow doubt and fear about Western intentions. It is likely timed to coincide with the military exercise Open Spirit 2016 held on May 13, with NATO forces, and with Flaming Sword 2016, a three-week exercise in May involving special operations forces from Lithuania, Denmark, Georgia, Latvia, Norway, Poland, Sweden, Ukraine, the UK and the United States training together in the Baltic region.

CASE STUDY: POLAND

The largest of NATO's frontline states might seem immune to Russian information attacks. A strong cross-party consensus about the danger of Russian revanchism applies also to most of the media. Public and elite opinion is also strongly pro-NATO, pro-EU and Atlanticist in sentiment. Yet as a case study by Wiktor Ostrowki and Kazimierz Woycicki of the Krzyżowa Academy makes clear, Russian information warfare operations have nonetheless had some success.

Objectives

The goal of Russian propaganda aimed at Poland is social disintegration. As with the Czech Republic and Slovakia (below), Russia promotes toxic memes that do not create new messages, but aim to accentuate existing tensions and divisions in Polish society. When the space for a democratic, public discourse and open society is broken down, a society becomes atomized and is easier to manipulate through a policy of divide and conquer. Ultimately, the Kremlin looks to undermine faith in democracy, increase xenophobia and make Poles feel they are unlike Western Europeans.

Kremlin narratives also seek, paradoxically, to promote extreme Polish nationalism—even anti-Russian nationalism—with the goal of making Poland seem unreliable and "hysterical" to its Western allies. It is important to note that official Russian policy—for example Russia's refusal to return the wreckage to Poland—has helped to feed speculation over the Smolensk air disaster, which claimed the life of (then) Polish President Lech Kaczynski. Poland's openly pro-Russian Polish party, Zmiana, also makes use of "far-right" nationalist language. So do the followers of Janusz Korwin-Mikke, the leader of the Polish Euroskeptic fraction in the European Parliament.

Target audiences

Russian propaganda is mainly aimed at fringe audiences—both far-left and far-right— in Poland, though it hopes to use them to affect the mainstream as well. By focusing on anti-Western, nationalist sentiment and anti-Ukrainian propaganda, Russian information campaigns hope to embolden political organizations already on the fringe of the political spectrum in Polish politics, and to sow doubt in the existing political order. They often work in tandem with elected Polish politicians on the right and far right who may or may not be aware that their actions help the Kremlin.

Much of the work is done not by Kremlin agents of influence but by Poles pursuing what they believe are legitimate political objectives. If the "toxic meme" is addressed to the correct recipient, they might disseminate it freely. These memes appeal particularly to Internet users who already feel marginalized and disempowered.

This target audience lacks confidence in democracy. Many of its members might be inclined to believe that the world is manipulated—by big capital, American imperialism, the political elite, world Jewry, mafias, the Vatican, etc. They are therefore eager to know what is 'really going on,' and will react readily to anyone who provides what appears to be privileged information.

Evidence of this includes the translations of texts by the theorist of Eurasianism, Aleksandr Dugin—both on pro-Russian sites such geopolityka.org and on nationalist portals such as usopal.pl or rebelya.pl. These do not directly praise his ideas, but instead decry the gulf between Russian patriotism and (supposed) Polish paralysis.

In general, pro-Putin propaganda plays on an existing weakness—and existing fringe political groups—in Poland.[84] Neo-pagans may find pan-Slavism attractive. Monarchists will readily agree that democracy has its weakness. Anti-Semites will believe that the Jews rule Ukraine. Those traumatized by past Western betrayals of Poland will be open to scaremongering that it will happen again. Those consumed by ill feelings toward Germany will accept that Russia is at least a less-bad option. Overall, belief in conspiracy theories encourages an atmosphere in which trolls can speak and act without being spotted for what they are.

Conclusion

Russian disinformation in Poland is funneled through local actors who are trusted by others in their social network who share the same political views. This means that the content is more likely to be read, understood and shared. The key to counter this will be in understanding the dynamics of these echo chambers, the concerns of their members and how to penetrate their underlying worldview.

The anti-West trope in Poland

In Poland, anti-Westernism is a recurring trope in Russian disinformation. The West is portrayed as decadent and duplicitous: Western leaders have betrayed Poland in the past, and will do so again. Russia is not particularly friendly, but it offers a better chance for peace and security than the treacherous West.

Another element is the exploitation of nationalist sentiment and its direction against the West.[85] Websites such as falanga.org.pl- the name is a reference to a pre-war fascist movement – have supported extreme Serbian nationalism and the Assad regime in Syria.[86] The site did not directly host pro-Russian content, but it did use terminology developed by Russian ultranationalist philosopher Alexander Dugin.[87]

Some Polish nationalist sites imply that Russian nationalism is at least admirable for its lack of constraint and political correctness: "At least over there they can tell the truth." The konserwatyzm.pl site, for example, mixes the writings of pre-war nationalist conservative Roman Dmowski—a hero for many on the Polish right—with communist nostalgia, anti-Semitism, ultra-Catholicism and other anti-democratic ideologies. Such sites promote Poland's withdrawal from the EU and NATO and neutrality in what they portray as a forthcoming war, in which a Russian defeat would lead to American hegemony and vassal status for Poland. The aim here is not to promote the Kremlin's foreign policy agenda directly, but to undermine Poland's pro-Western stance and belief in the value of its alliances.

More recently, some more mainstream nationalist magazines and websites in Poland have also adopted harsh anti-EU rhetoric of a kind previously unknown in Poland. Knowingly or unknowingly, right-wing outlets now use language and symbols that are very common on Russian state-run media and in Russian social media. *Gazeta Polska*, historically a conservative but not extreme magazine, in early July 2016 ran a cover showing a swastika tearing through a hole in the European flag—exactly the kind of image hitherto promoted in Russia, but not Poland. *Do Rzeczy*, a far-right magazine, ran a cover story asking whether Poland could fight back against Europe's "homosexual empire," echoing another important Russian theme.[88]

Anti-Ukrainian propaganda has a particularly strong historical resonance in Poland too. Parts of present-day Ukraine belonged to Poland before World War II, and some Ukrainians did collaborate with the Nazis to massacre Poles in the Volhynia region.[89] From a Polish nationalist point of view, Ukraine is easily portrayed as a temporary and illegitimate construction. Brutal Ukrainian behavior in World War II is linked to present-day politics. As Ostrowski notes: "Images from the past are transferred to the present day and to the current situation in Ukraine." The blogger Konrad Rękas, for example, wrote a diatribe entitled "How the Kiev junta violates human rights" which—though written from a Polish nationalist viewpoint—echoed Kremlin memes.[90]

At times, political support for Ukraine is presented as irresponsible warmongering by outsiders, in which Poles—who have understandable national traumas about war—will be the collateral damage. A blogger writing under the name Marek Błaszkowski wrote on Salon24, a widely read website, that "Poland's *raison d'état* is to mind its own business, not supporting different fighters, not pushing the front line towards Russia, not supporting genocide."[91] Polish anti-Semitism can be exploited, too: film director Gregory (Grzegorz) Braun argues that "the war in Ukraine is the work of Jews, who are helping Americans to maintain influence in Central Europe."[92]

As in other countries, Russian proxies in Poland have also created seemingly authentic websites that carry mixed messages. Their propaganda content is diluted; most of it is not associated with Russia, Putin or politics. But they link to sites with a stronger propaganda quotient. Some of these have names that are artfully chosen to deceive. For example, the Polish term "cursed soldiers" would normally be associated with the anti-communist resistance.[93] But it has also been used on websites run by extremist pro-Putin organizations such as the ultranationalist Falanga.[94] In this way, marginalized target audiences may read and internalize Russian-generated content without necessarily being aware of the source of that information.[95]

CASE STUDY: CZECH REPUBLIC AND SLOVAKIA

This chapter draws on contributions from Ivana Smoleňová's study: "The pro-Russian disinformation campaign in the Czech Republic and Slovakia: types of media spreading pro-Russian propaganda, their characteristics and frequently used narratives"(published in June 2015 by the Prague Security Studies Institute).[96]

Though the Czech Republic and Slovakia have no historic Russian minorities and only a handful of Russian-language media outlets, pro-Kremlin disinformation still finds its way into both countries through local voices in their native tongues. In February 2015, Slovak activist Juraj Smetana published a list of 42 websites that "intentionally or unintentionally help to spread Russian propaganda in the Czech Republic and Slovakia." That list continues to grow. Over the past two years, several pro-Russian print periodicals have also begun to appear. Disinformation campaigns in all of these publications repost the same articles, use identical arguments, cite Russian sources and refer to the same Kremlin-approved public personalities.[97]

Objectives

In both countries, the goal of the pro-Russian disinformation campaign is to shift public opinion against the West. Pro-Russian media and platforms tell of a world where the United States intends to overrun the globe, every West-leaning politician is corrupt, all media outlets not of their persuasion are biased and the future is bleak, hopeless and full of conflict. In such a world, Russia emerges as, at worst, no more objectionable than any other country and, at best, a "savior and moral authority, the guarantor of political stability and peace."[98]

Target audiences

In both Slovakia and the Czech Republic, the original target audiences were politically "fringe" audiences—on both the far left and far right—who are already "anti-government." Increasingly, more mainstream audiences are targeted via trolls and anonymous comments using the message that "no one can be trusted," especially not the media and intellectual elites.[99] At the same time, senior Czech and Slovak politicians, including senior figures such as Czech President Miloš Zeman, make pro-Kremlin statements that echo the pro-Russian press.

"Alternative" media

Disinformation "memes" are particularly hard to combat due to their multiple origins. In the Czech Republic and Slovakia, the most visible and frequent disseminators of pro-Russian disinformation are pro-Russian websites, informal groups and communities on social media, printed periodicals, radio broadcasts and NGOs. In addition, the aforementioned media sources amplify these messages through extensive social media activity and the organization of public events.[100]

Often these groups have ties, through project cooperation and joint events, to Russian embassies, centers of Russian science and culture, or local branches of the Federal Agency for CIS, Compatriots Living Abroad and International Humanitarian Cooperation, NGOs established by the Russian government in 2008.[101] Examples include a protest that was recently initiated by the Institute of Slavic Strategic Studies, public discussions regularly organized by Zem & Vek magazine, and anti-NATO demonstrations supported by the Slovak-Russian Association.[102]

The advent of the pro-Kremlin media and organizations in these two countries predates the outbreak of the 2014 Ukraine crisis, as many were founded in 2013 or earlier. But their rhetoric and activities hardened and intensified with the conflict.[103] In most cases, their motives, origins and organizational and financial structures remain unknown, although there is much circumstantial evidence of links to Russia. Curiously, the pro-Russian platforms with no overt Kremlin links are more straightforward in delivering their anti-Western messages. Organizations such as Czech Sputnik News, published openly by Russia, use a more informative and descriptive journalistic style, often citing experts or official sources.

Examples of Russian-affiliated media in Slovakia and the Czech Republic

Zem & Vek

The Slovak periodical *Zem & Vek* (translated as Earth and Ages) was founded in May 2013. The 138-page print magazine has since published and distributed about 20,000 to 30,000 copies monthly. According to the *Zem & Vek* official website, more than 7,200 people have subscribed to the magazine. In addition, it runs the website "www.zemavek.sk" (with an average reader count of 2,000–7,000 people per article) where all previous issues are free to download. The magazine also runs various social networking profiles, on Facebook (with more than 21,000 followers), Twitter and Google+, as well as a YouTube channel (*Zem & Vek* 2015).

The periodical is known as a conspiracy magazine and is now considered to be part of the pro-Russian propaganda in Slovakia, mainly for its frequent assaults on the West and defense of Russia. Since its website appeared on the list of pro-Russian websites, published by the Slovak activist Juraj Smatana in February 2015, there has been much discussion about the magazine, especially in connection with multiple *Zem & Vek* event cancellations by libraries and universities in Slovakia.

Aeronet

Aeronet, a Czech-language website, was founded by aviation enthusiasts in 2001. Owners of the domain have since changed several times and the website underwent its last transformation in May 2014, when the first pro-Kremlin articles began to appear on it. Aeronet contains many anti- US, anti-NATO and pro-Russian articles and is now considered to be one of the leading online voices of pro-Putin propaganda in the Czech Republic. With few exceptions, Aeronet's authors generally publish articles anonymously or use pseudonyms. According to its website, the domain is owned by American European News, B.V., a company based in the Dutch city of Eindhoven. In February 2015, the Czech magazine *Respekt* conducted an investigation and found no such company or its representatives at the address provided in Eindhoven.

Vědomí

Vědomí is a new Czech journal distributed in both the Czech Republic and Slovakia. It has been published by the company AC24 s.r.o since February 2014. AC24 s.r.o. has also operated a popular news website of the same name (AC24.cz) since 2011. According to its website, AC24 was established to provide an alternative to the "Czech media scene which is yielding to the propaganda of power circles, mental laziness and a simplified depiction of the world... a world that is going through a revolution at all levels". The website produces around five articles a day and runs active platforms on Facebook (over 67,000 likes), Twitter, Google+ and YouTube.

Czech Sputnik News

Czech Sputnik News is an international media platform launched by the Russian government in November 2014. It has since expanded to 34 countries and is available in 30 languages. The Czech branch was registered on 17 November 2014, and the first Czech-language articles were published in March 2015. About 12 articles appear on this site per day; they are written under real names as well as pseudonyms.

Conclusion

The most important role of these new pro-Kremlin media outlets—and especially their social media channels—is to facilitate platforms where like-minded criticism and discontent can be shared and amplified, creating echo chambers which are hard to penetrate with facts or rational arguments. Their success is built on an already existing and growing public distrust towards Czech and Slovak mainstream media, as well as politicians who are constantly portrayed as corrupt and aloof. Until the institutions themselves address the credibility crisis, such platforms of criticism and discontent will flourish.

Beyond the fringe in Slovak and Czech mainstream media

In a number of cases, this network of publications has been used to promote fringe ideas and bring them into the center of debate. In 2013, a Slovak online campaign titled "Juvenile Justice" posted a 32-minute YouTube video that accused France, Germany and the Nordic countries of "the most brutal tyranny in human history."[104] The video decried a "multinational system that brutally steals and unjustifiably takes children away from normal and healthy families. Using physical violence, the state social authority abducts children from their homes or kindergartens." The video, later posted on Slovak portal Stopautogenocide.sk, appeared to be of Russian origin, using the Cyrillic alphabet and referring to Russian sources. Along with a petition, the video soon spread throughout other websites and finally reached the mainstream media in May 2013, when the Slovak TV station Markiza reported on the story.[105]

A year later, "fringe" views penetrated the Czech mainstream media in a similar manner, this time in support of President Miloš Zeman, an advocate of close Czech-Russian relations. In 2014, Zeman's frequent pro-Kremlin statements led to protests in Prague and other Czech cities.[105] In the days following the unrest, pro-Russian Czech websites were quick to accuse the U.S. Embassy in Prague of having organized the demonstrations. The story—or in many cases just the idea of the embassy's involvement—was reposted by some more respected media outlets. Both the U.S. Embassy and the protest's organizer, Martin Přikryl, had to repeatedly rebut these false claims.[1-6]

The weakness of Slovak and Czech mainstream media help explain the success of these blatantly false stories. Media are thinly stretched in both countries. Pay and conditions are poor, prospects are bleak, and as a result it is hard to hire and retain good editorial staff. Editors and owners worry about declining or absent profits and try to satisfy advertisers by increasing their presence on social networks, which is where pro-Russian views proliferate. A year ago, Czech Television (CT) warned about a rising number of complaints regarding its foreign news coverage. "The pressure is enormous. I don't think the pressure on domestic coverage is different from what we are used to, [but] this new phenomenon is placing pressure on our foreign affairs department," Michal Kubal, head of CT's foreign news department, said in April 2015. "It appears that somebody is purposefully trying to search for errors made by CT that fall in line with Russian propaganda. You don't have to trust the Kremlin, just don't trust anybody."[107] The lack of transparency in media ownership is one of Russia's strongest assets in the media spaces of the Czech Republic and Slovakia too, since it enables pro-Russian owners to camouflage themselves.[108]

Politicians also promote pro-Kremlin messages that set the national agenda and which mainstream media are obliged to repeat. Zeman's closest adviser is Martin Nejedlý, who represents Russian companies in the Czech Republic. Zeman's pro-Russian utterances have repeatedly sparked controversy.[109] In February 2015, Slovak Prime Minister Robert Fico said there was a risk of major war over Ukraine. The comments caused panic, and more than 12,000 people sent letters to the government saying they would not enlist in the army in the case of a war in Ukraine (an especially implausible idea, considering that Slovakia has a professional army).

That same month, a group of activists led by former Prime Minister Jan Čarnogurský began collecting signatures for a referendum on whether to leave NATO. These activists received considerable media coverage by websites that spread Russian disinformation, though their actual demonstrations attracted only a few dozen people. The movement tried to persuade the public that NATO is an aggressive organization, and was the reason behind the Russian invasion of Ukraine. Čarnogurský is director of the Slovak-Russian Society, and is frequently cited and interviewed by pro-Russian media outlets such as *Zem & Vek* and *Vědomí*. He also writes for various websites and has spoken at pro-Russian public discussions.

CASE STUDY: SPUTNIK

Sputnik was launched in November 2014 as a subsidiary of the state-owned Rossiya Segodnya enterprise, which had itself been created a year before. Rossiya Segodnya consists of three main elements: the once-respected Russian-language RIA Novosti news wire, the Voice of Russia radio service and Sputnik. Despite the fact that Rossiya Segodnya translates as "Russia Today," the enterprise is not officially linked to Russia's main foreign-language TV arm, RT (formerly Russia Today). But the two organizations share a common chief editor, Margarita Simonyan, indicating a clear coincidence of views and methods. Sputnik is a web-based news wire working in 35 languages ranging from Abkhaz to Vietnamese. This study provides an initial overview of how the Sputnik tabloid news site contributes to the flow of disinformation and pro-Russian messaging.

Objectives

Sputnik offers a platform to pro-Russian voices. It amplifies narratives that are critical of the West and uses these narratives to undermine support for democracy abroad. In other words, what counts for Sputnik in its choice of commentators is not balance, but the exact opposite: one-sided hostility to the mainstream.

Target audiences

Sputnik is aimed at already disenfranchised audiences that are not looking for balanced coverage but rather for confirmation of their own biases. Its tone is unashamedly tabloid and partisan, with anti-Western reports and heavy-handed editorial sarcasm its leitmotif. (It is also marked by linguistic incompetence, with one particularly striking headline claiming, with unintentional honesty: "Further probe into MH17 crash useless until investigation biased." RIA Novosti now plays a similar role in the Russian-language market.

Propaganda in a new orbit

Sputnik describes itself as a "provider of alternative news content"—a telling phrase that implicitly exonerates it from the need to offer balanced coverage or to report mainstream events, actors and opinions. Based on a study of its online publications, its modus operandi in reporting on each country in the CEE region is to select a small number of anti-establishment politicians and give them substantial coverage, while reporting little or nothing about the representatives of other parties or points of view.

For example, a search of the phrase "Polish MEP" on Sputnik's English-language site turned up 15 results over the past 12 months.[110] Poland has the largest number of members of the European Parliament (51) of any of the CEE states. Of those, 23 belong to the center-right EPP group and five to the Socialists, the two most important groupings in the legislature; 19 belong to the Euroskeptic ECR.

Given this number and diversity of representatives, and the tendency of MEPs to scatter quotes like confetti to interested (and uninterested) journalists, it would be legitimate to assume that Sputnik could find numerous Polish MEPs to cite on issues of importance.

Yet 10 of its 15 reports referred solely to Janusz Korwin-Mikke, a conservative politician who founded his own party (called "Korwin"), and who is not a member of any of the European Parliament's political groupings. Korwin-Mikke polled just over 3 percent in Poland's presidential election on May 10, 2015.[111] As a non-aligned MEP, he is out of reach of all the main levers of influence in the legislature. Nevertheless, Sputnik published a commentary calling his election to the parliament in 2014 "the greatest sensation" of the poll, and said that the anti-EU protest movement to which he belongs in Poland is "one of the fastest growing parties in Poland, appealing to both young and old people."[112]

By contrast, Sputnik's coverage of rival presidential candidate and former rock star Pawel Kukiz—who polled six times more votes than Korwin-Mikke—was limited to just two quotes: one from his Facebook page accusing the media of bias, the other from a TV interview lashing out at refugees from Syria.[113]

The journalistic decision to give Korwin-Mikke such disproportionate coverage is striking. However, in terms of propaganda, its logic is clear. Over the past year, Sputnik has variously quoted Korwin-Mikke

as opposing EU "totalitarianism," saying that the snipers who shot anti-government demonstrators in Kyiv during the protests of late 2013 and early 2014 were trained by the CIA in Poland; accusing the United States of wanting to start a war of aggression against Russia; saying that Russia should be Poland's ally against Ukrainian extremists; and claiming that only Russia can end the conflict in Syria.

Equally significantly, a number of these quotes were given directly either to Sputnik or to its sister Russian-language agency, RIA Novosti. This coverage did not include balancing quotes from other, mainstream sources, leaving Korwin-Mikke's quotes to stand unchallenged as assertions of an alleged truth. Sputnik has presumably used Korwin-Mikke as a regular source of anti-Western and pro-Russian quotes, despite his lack of political importance, precisely because his comments reflect the Kremlin's chosen narratives; and it has chosen not to balance his comments with other points of view because that would weaken its impact.

Sputnik's Polish-language wire gives Korwin-Mikke similar exposure, quoting him 15 times in the past 12 months, on issues including U.S. hostility to Russia and Ukrainian hostility to Poland.[114] One particularly striking piece reported on a petition to Ukraine demanding that it investigate the detention of "political prisoners," which Korwin-Mikke had signed.[115]

His co-signatories on that occasion included the late Czech Communist MEP Miloslav Ransdorf: another go-to source of anti-Western quotes for Sputnik. Over four months in 2015, this politician was quoted six times by Sputnik's English service, three times in the shape of interviews given directly to the wire. His comments included a claim that NATO has lost its reason for existence, criticism of the EU's response to the refugee crisis, accusations that the Ukrainian government is undemocratic, and the claim that Europeans are "useful idiots" used by the United States for its own ends.

In five of the six reports, he was the only source of commentary; the sixth concerned the petition, which was quoted at length, without any balancing comments. Of the Czech Republic's 21 MEPs, Sputnik has quoted five others at various times. Christian Democrat Jaromir Stetina was the focus of one highly critical article after he invited the leader of Ukraine's Azov Battalion to address the legislature. Sputnik's reporting balanced two paragraphs of indirect Stetina quotes with two paragraphs of direct quotes from an analyst calling Stetina "the kind of man who always root(s) for radicals of every hue, from neo-Nazis to Islamic fundamentalists."[116]

Euroskeptic Petr Mach fared better, having been quoted three times: twice attacking the euro, and once attacking the EU's plan to share out refugees among member states. Mach, like Korwin-Mikke, is the founder of his own anti-EU protest party and its only representative in the European Parliament, where he sits in the euroskeptic EFDD group. Like Korwin-Mikke, stories quoting him at length did not provide counter-quotes from any other lawmakers. Also like Korwin-Mikke, he was approached directly by Sputnik for comments, this time in an anti-euro interview.[117]

Three others—Christian Democrat Pavel Svoboda, Liberal Martina Dlabajová and Socialist Jan Keller—were quoted once each as criticizing the EU's refugee policies. Thus, of the 12 Sputnik reports in 2015 quoting Czech MEPs, six quoted the Communist Ransdorf, three the Euroskeptic Mach, two quoted Christian Democrats, and one quoted a Socialist and a Liberal together. Sputnik approached three for interviews: Ransdorf, Mach and Dlabajova.

This almost perfectly inverts the weight of the MEPs' respective groupings in the parliament. The Christian Democrats are the most numerous, followed by the Socialists, Liberals, Communists and extreme Euroskeptics, in that order.

Again, the decision to prefer politicians from small parties—especially protest ones— over mainstream commentators from larger parties can only realistically be explained by a desire to promote their anti-establishment opinions. This is particularly clear given that Ransdorf belonged to the hard left and Mach to the hardline Euroskeptic right, with their only uniting factor being their opposition to the mainstream.

In other words, what counts for Sputnik in its choice of commentators in the Czech Republic and Poland appears to be not balance, but the exact opposite: one-sided hostility to the mainstream.

A similar pattern applies across CEE. Of Estonia's six MEPs, Sputnik has mentioned only two of them. One, former foreign minister Urmas Paet, was one of a number of commentators quoted

as criticizing a racist arson attack linked (at least by Sputnik) to an Estonian military officer. The other was independent politician Indrek Tarand, quoted at length and without countervailing voices as calling President Toomas Hendrik Ilves "irresponsible" for his portrayal of Russia.

Of Latvia's eight MEPs, Sputnik has only interviewed one, the left-wing Tatjana Ždanoka, who is barred from public office in her homeland because of her opposition to Latvia's restoration of independence from the USSR in 1991. It has, in fact, interviewed her twice recently. One interview, picked up from RIA Novosti, focused on her prediction that the parliament would condemn Russia in a resolution. The other headlined her as saying that the Baltic states are promoting Russophobia in Europe; it did not provide any quotes to represent an alternative point of view. Yet again, Ždanoka is the only member of her party—listed by the Parliament as the Latvian Russian Union—to be represented in the Parliament, where she sits with the Greens, one of its smaller fractions.

The only one of Lithuania's 11 MEPs to be mentioned at all is perhaps an unusual choice: center-right politician Gabrielius Landsbergis, an outspoken critic of Russia. As a regular critic of the Kremlin and a member of a mainstream party, he appears an unusual choice for Sputnik. However, yet again, the content is more important than the speaker. Of his four mentions—all from public comments, none from direct approaches by Sputnik—one was a criticism of Ukraine for failing to implement reforms, while one was a suggestion that Georgia, Moldova and Ukraine form a joint army unit before considering an application to join NATO. Both these comments could be construed as in line with Kremlin preferences for portraying Ukraine as ineffective and corrupt, and opposing any rapid NATO expansion.

The other two concerned the resolution that Landsbergis launched on EU relations with Russia. While he was quoted, his report was glossed over by Sputnik—in an ostensible news report, rather than an opinion piece—as "non-factual, anti-Russian, senseless" and "trying to undermine the possibility of a future dialogue between the EU and Russia." As such, his inclusion can hardly be presented as an attempt at journalistic balance.

Cases such as these are only the tip of the iceberg. Initial research suggests that Sputnik's policy of providing a platform for anti-establishment and pro-Russian politicians by repeatedly coming to them for comments—while all but excluding mainstream voices—reaches well beyond Central and Eastern Europe (CEE), and beyond the European Parliament. However, further research lies beyond the scope of this paper.

What is clear is that Sputnik does grant disproportionate coverage to protest, anti-establishment and pro-Russian MEPs from CEE, that it does so systematically, and that even when it quotes mainstream politicians, it chooses comments that fit the wider narrative of a corrupt, decadent and Russophobic West.

As such, at least in a European Parliament context, Sputnik embodies the Russian military doctrine of making "wide use of the protest potential" of the legislature to promote the Kremlin's chosen messages of disinformation.

Conclusion

Russia's campaign of disinformation in CEE reaches across linguistic and political barriers, utilizing anti-establishment, protest politicians from both extremes of the political spectrum to discredit Western governments, policies and institutions such as the European Union and NATO, while simultaneously validating the Kremlin's own message. This study provides an initial overview of how one piece of the Kremlin's media machine—the Sputnik tabloid news site—uses this technique to contribute to the flow of disinformation and pro-Russian messaging.

What counts for Sputnik is not balance, but the opposite: one-sided hostility to the mainstream. Sputnik grants disproportionate coverage to protest, anti-establishment and pro-Russian MEPs from CEE; it does so systematically; even when it quotes mainstream politicians, it chooses comments which fit the wider narrative of a corrupt, decadent and Russophobic West.

In a European Parliament context, Sputnik embodies the Russian military doctrine of making "wide use of the protest potential" of the legislature to promote the Kremlin's chosen messages of disinformation.

Recommendations

CEPA
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Analysis

RECOMMENDATIONS

Will disinformation destroy democracy?

Defending and ultimately defeating Russia's disinformation techniquess

The Kremlin uses disinformation campaigns, incitement to violence and hate speech to undermine neighbors, break Western alliances and, in Ukraine, pave the way for kinetic war. The aim is to destroy trust, sap morale, degrade the information space, help destroy public discourse and increase partisanship. Russia's tactics draw on Soviet traditions of "active measures" and *dezinformatsiya*. But in an age of transnational broadcasting and a global internet, the potential for sowing chaos, distrust and polarization has become much greater. As we consider responses, it is important to appreciate that:

- Today's media and information environment is deeply fractured. Each echo chamber has its own dynamics. During the Cold War, it was enough to win the argument in a limited information space. Now it is necessary to communicate in different ways with different people, even within countries. Transborder broadcasting, blogs and social media mean that whole audiences can no longer be reached by "mainstream media." During the Cold War it was also enough to prove to major newspapers and broadcasters that the Kremlin was spreading disinformation about, for example, the CIA having designed the AIDS virus. But now myth-busting and fact-checking conducted by mainstream newspapers will only reach a certain audience and probably not the one the Kremlin is targeting anyway.

- If there is one common thread in the Kremlin's many narratives it is the use of conspiratorial discourse and a strategic use of disinformation to trash the information space, break trust, increase polarization and undermine the public space for democratic debate: This is a war on information rather than an "information war." In this regard the Kremlin is going with the flow of changes in Western media, politics and society, where there is less trust in public institutions and mainstream media, where previously fringe movements are gaining strength and the space for a public discourse is shrinking.

- Unlike the Cold War, when Russia promoted itself as an attractive, communist alternative to the West, today's Kremlin focuses on exacerbating existing fissures in the West, using anti-immigration, anti-U.S. or anti-EU sentiments to further its own goals. Russia does sell itself as an attractive alternative to Russian speakers in former captive nations in Ukraine and the Baltics, but even in those cases the motivations of audiences in, shall we say, Luhansk and Narva can be very different.

These factors mean that in considering how to confront the Kremlin's challenge, we face a paradox: on one hand the need to talk to different audiences and echo chambers in different ways; on the other to build trust between polarized groups to build overall trust. With that in mind, we have divided our recommendations into:

- Recommendations aimed at strengthening the quality of the information space and strengthening trust;

- Recommendations aimed at "neutral" and "mainstream media" audiences in EU and EU Association countries;

- Recommendations aimed at Russian-speaking audiences in EU and EU Association countries;

- Recommendations aimed at "disenfranchised" audiences in EU and Association countries; far-left and far-right groups, etc.

We have also divided our recommendations into:

- **Tactical** (short-term, reactive)
- **Strategic** (medium term, pro-active)
- **Long term**

Throughout our document we look at what attempts, if any, have been made to deal with the latest disinformation threats, and extrapolate broader lessons. Many of the examples of preliminary responses are from Ukraine, which is at the frontline of these challenges.

1. Tactical, short-term

Broad tactical recommendations aimed at strengthening the quality of the information space and building trust.

i) A European-wide network of targeted audience analysis, media environment and social network analysis centers: More than ever before, countermessaging is about listening rather than talking. Understanding local needs and motivations—particular media environments and social networks—holds the key to success. Audiences are more fractured than ever, but up-to-date sociology and big-data analysis also allow us to understand more about audiences than ever. Simply "blasting" single messages at audiences is naïve and could well be counterproductive.

Currently, there is no dedicated agency analyzing the impact of Russian (or any other) disinformation in either Eastern or Western Europe on different audiences. A pro-Kremlin supporter in Narva, Estonia, might be motivated by something quite different than a pro-Kremlin supporter in Odesa, Ukraine. Our understanding of the impact and patterns of Internet echo chambers, information cascades and social networks remains at a very early stage. Deeper research is needed into the way echo chambers grow and how one can penetrate them, the impact of computerized "bots" and trolls on audiences, and the ways in which information can be manipulated by different groups with concrete goals.

This means that all response efforts right now are speculative; we simply do not know what works. This is a striking failure. We know almost nothing about consumption of disinformation, when we know a great deal about most other products and services people consume. A market research firm will give a breakdown of habits and attitudes in, say, dental hygiene products, broken down by age, sex, socio-economic category and so on. Focus groups can provide qualitative information about brand loyalties. Companies need to know why people choose a particular brand of toothpaste, how they use it, and what would change their choice and pattern of use. We should do the same with media: who watches RT? What is the reach and impact of other forms of Russian disinformation? Why do people consume this form of media? What would make them switch away from it?

As a first priority, funding should be directed at setting up or strengthening existing centers conducting:

- Regular, targeted audience analysis, using straightforward commercial market research techniques;
- Analysis of the local media environment to detect disinformation campaigns and understand what sources shape publics;
- Monitoring of social media, identifying trends and personalities who are popular among different polarized social groups and who could be engaged with to build trust.

These centers would then communicate insights to each other, governments, donors and public broadcasters.

ii) A "Venice Commission" for media: A strong regulator is key to ensuring broadcasters maintain journalistic standards. To be effective, regulators need clear guidelines about when to sanction channels for violating laws on "hate speech," "incitement to violence" and inaccuracy. Regulators in EU Association countries are often weak or captured by vested interests, and have little experience in imposing sanctions.

Take the example of Ukraine. Following Russia's 2014 annexation of Crimea, Kremlin-controlled media openly tried to provoke civil war in the rest of the country. In response, Ukraine's television and broadcasting regulator (the National Council for TV and Radio) appealed to the Ukrainian courts to suspend the broadcasting of seven Russian channels in the country.[118]

The courts agreed to the suspension while they considered the evidence presented by the regulator regarding hate speech, war propaganda and other alleged infringements by Russian broadcasters. Two years later, evidence has been presented regarding three of the channels. Four more are still under scrutiny. According to members of the National Council and others close to the process, the main difficulty has been defining "hate speech", "war propaganda" and "threats to national security." Ukraine has no previous case history to rely on. The process of examining the cases is slow.[119] Without "solid grounds and arguments in the national courts to stop, block and ban propaganda," writes the OSCE High Representative of the Media for Freedom of the Media, the Ukrainian government has resorted to a more "familiar instrument—drafting restrictive legislation targeting, under different pretexts, Russian media and journalists as a class."[120]This has damaged its international reputation and created a climate where the rules are unclear.

Explaining why a channel has been sanctioned is a key part of the "information war." Existing legislation, such as Article 6 of the EU Charter of Fundamental Rights, already stipulates that "member states shall ensure by appropriate means ...media service providers under their jurisdiction do not contain any incitement to hatred based on race, sex, religion or nationality."[121] This directive informed the 2015 EU decision to support Lithuania's three-month ban on RTR Planeta, on the grounds that the Russian state channel instigated discord and a military climate, demonized Ukrainians, used hate speech, and incited tension and violence between Russians and Ukrainians and also against the EU and NATO states.[122]

The Lithuanian case shows how it is possible to use existing legislation to clamp down on broadcasters. A strong regulator is key. In the UK, the regulator Ofcom has repeatedly reprimanded the English-language Russian broadcaster RT, but has focused on specific examples of breaches in impartiality and accuracy—and threatening fines without resorting to blanket bans.[123]

To help guide countries where there is no strong regulator, where the domestic journalistic broadcasting standards are low and where pro-Kremlin media attempt to spread hate speech and disinformation, a strong case exists to create an international commission under the auspices of the Council of Europe that would evaluate channels for hate speech, disinformation and other faults. The commission would guide weak regulators, help them communicate their findings and ensure their independence, while setting standards for the whole continent and driving a broader discussion of these issues. An international "Venice Commission" for media, under the auspices of the Council of Europe, would be able to:

- Advise fledgling regulators; ensure their independence and help communicate their decisions.
- Act as a badge of quality for broadcasters, allowing donors to guide support for the creation of new content to broadcasters who have high journalistic standards. Aid to EU Association countries and others in this area is a unique opportunity to use Western leverage to improve the overall quality of media.

iii) Enhance government strategic communications: Do the threats posed by 21st century information warfare require new government institutions to manage them? In the United States, some are calling for the reconstruction of the U.S. Information Agency, an institution abandoned after the end of the Cold War. A bill co-sponsored by Senators Chris Murphy and Rob Portman has expanded the mandate of the State Department's Center for Global Engagement to address state sponsored propaganda.[124] Clearly, Russian information warfare efforts should be a focus of this effort as well as an established framework for the integration of critical data into national strategy. This would assist decision makers in better developing, planning and synchronizing responses across different government bodies that would expose foreign information operations, and pro-actively advance fact-based narratives.[125] In Europe, other think tanks and organizations are making a strong case for the stand-up of strategic communications departments throughout the EU to rapidly gather evidence, analyze and respond to disinformation campaigns.[126]

Western governments and international organizations could certainly improve how they communicate their policies. However, democratic governments will never be as effective in this area as are authoritarian regimes, which can dictate themes to all of their country's media. Instead, democratic governments should focus on the areas where they do have an advantage. In the information field, the strength of democracies is their diversity—the rich mix of civil society, media and individuals all involved in media and communication. Western governments need to find a constructive way to interact with media and NGOs. Former NATO press spokesman Ben Nimmo has suggested Western governments invest in exchanges between NGOs and journalists in front line areas to foster a community of transnational critical inquiry and trust able to withstand disinformation attacks.[127] Governments also have an advantage in obtaining proof of financial crimes, video of covert military operations and audio intercepts. To date there has been a reluctance to share these. In an age of skepticism towards governments, the more open the interaction between government and other players, the more effective it can be.

It is particularly important to learn from the experience and example of countries that have been dealing successfully with Russian propaganda attacks: notably Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania, Poland, the Czech and Slovak Republics, and Ukraine.

Tactical recommendations aimed at "neutral"/ mainstream media audiences

iv) An equivalent to OCCRP/Transparency International/Global Witness to combat disinformation: The Panama Leaks show that an international consortium of journalists and activists can be extremely effective in confronting international corruption. A similar approach is needed to combating disinformation campaigns and active measures. Imagine the counter-disinformation equivalent of Global Witness, Transparency International and the OCCRP. Such an organization would include a range of activities, including:

- **Investigate Russian (and other) disinformation campaigns.** It is impossible and counterproductive to try and deflect every Russian falsehood. Instead of sporadic and disjointed research, we need international, linked investigations and campaigns that understand how the Kremlin's "soft power" toolkit fits into Moscow's broader strategic aims. Coda Story, a journalism NGO based in Georgia and dedicated to covering stories in depth "after the rest of the media has moved on," and Re:Baltica, an investigative journalism outfit in Riga, have been doing pioneering work in this field focusing on the Kremlin's anti-LGBT and "family values" campaigns.[128]

- **Targeted Myth-Busting:** Fact-checking and myth-busting work when they are targeted at key audiences who are receptive to fact-based argument. We are now seeing a fact-checking movement emerge around the Ukraine crisis: from the growing presence of StopFake through to the EU External Action Service's Disinformation Review. To be truly effective, this research needs to be targeted towards media and policy makers and made relevant to their agendas. Whether reacting rapidly to disinformation repeated by mainstream media, or contributing to policy debates, myth-busting sites battling Kremlin disinformation need to be strengthened and honed to achieve clear aims.

- **Pioneer the latest in myth-busting online technology in Europe.** The technological possibilities are only just being explored, largely in the United States. ClaimBuster, for example, was invented by computer scientists at the University of Texas-Arlington with students at Duke and Stanford. It automatically scans texts and finds factual claims that fact-checkers should check, thus saving on the work currently done by college interns. Duke and Google's think tank Jigsaw are also currently designing a widget that allows fact-checkers to easily share their material in larger text. These and other technological innovations need to be introduced in CEE.

- **Educate journalists and editors.** Journalists continue to fall for the Kremlin's bag of "*dezinformatsiya*" tricks. An NGO could deliver workshops and training to help journalists learn to identify how the Kremlin manipulates context, framing, agenda-setting and language (see Urve Eslas in previous papers for full list of tricks).

- **Create "disinformation" ratings for media.** This refers to an index that would rate media according to their reliability and accuracy. Such a rating would put peer pressure on media to improve content. In countries such as Ukraine and Moldova where broadcasters are soliciting financial help from the West for new content, the index would act as a guide for donors when deciding which media are worthy of support.

Tactical recommendations aimed at Russian-language audiences

v) A working group on historical and psychological trauma

One of the powerful and effective Russian narratives when reaching out to Russian speakers abroad revolves around the historic legacy of World War II and the Soviet era. Over and over again, Russian books, films and TV programs describe the heroism of ordinary soldiers, the triumph of Hitler's defeat and the vindication that victory brought to the Soviet system. Most of these stories emphasize Russian leadership, downplay the role of other nationalities and ignore the war's less savory aspects, such as major Soviet errors of judgement. Most of all, these stories squarely identify Ukrainian and Baltic nationalists of the era—those who refused to fight with the Red Army—as "fascists" and draw a link between them and Ukraine's current government.

By contrast, the national memory in other countries is more complex. In Ukraine, for example, people fought on multiple sides of the conflict. Most were part of the Red Army, but others did fight for the Ukrainian resistance, believing that to do so would lead to an independent Ukraine. At one point, some joined the Nazis in order to fight against Soviet power. Especially in western Ukraine—which the USSR annexed in 1939—many remember the war's end as the beginning of a new era of

repression. One person's May 9, Victory Day is another's May 9, Occupation Day.[129]

To reflect these mixed memories—and also to counter the Russian narrative about the nature of the war—the Ukrainian government has changed the national holiday, celebrating it on both May 8, and May 9, and renaming it "Remembrance Day" instead of Victory Day.[129] The symbol for the holiday has also been changed from the Kremlin's orange-and-black ribbon to the poppy, an international symbol of mourning war dead, thus bringing Ukraine's commemorative celebrations closer in line with those held in other parts of the world.[130]

In 2015, the government also launched an advertising campaign featuring well-known Soviet actors of Ukrainian origin as well as iconic films of the period. The ads linked Ukraine's victory against Nazi Germany to the ongoing conflict with Russia, and turned the Russian narrative on its head: Putin's Russia, not the new Ukraine, are now portrayed as the modern incarnation of the wartime fascists. The campaign was carefully planned: "The May 8-9, 2015, coverage was agreed and coordinated between government and key media outlets. There was a will to work out a coordinated campaign" says Zurab Alasanya, director of the National TV and Radio Company of Ukraine.[131]

History as used by the Kremlin is not about facts but about psychological effect. The Ukrainian red poppy and war ads show how to use historical themes for a positive effect, helping heal divisions and move on from past traumas. Floriana Fossato, a media researcher who specializes in the post-Soviet space, has suggested the creation of a working group consisting of psychologists, historians, sociologists and creative media experts to develop a permanent factory of ideas about how to engage with historical and psychological trauma, which would then create promotional activities such as lecture tours, video and books around these ideas.[132]

Tactical recommendations aimed at niche and disenfranchised audiences in CEE

vi) Targeted online video and one-on-one online interactions: Social media and online search engines allow marketing and advertising companies to gather highly specific information about target audiences, and to tailor their products accordingly. The same technology could and should be used by countermessaging organizations creating content aimed at radicalized and alienated audiences. The London-based Institute for Strategic Dialogue (ISD) has undertaken pioneering work in this field. The ISD has created short videos targeted at potential violent extremists in the United States, Great Britain and the Middle East. One of ISD's products, for example, was "Average Mohamed"—a cartoon aimed at introducing at-risk youngsters in the United States to more moderate forms of Islam. Another project, One-to-One, is even more targeted. Former Islamic radicals and far-right extremists use Facebook technology to reach out directly to individuals who are currently following a radical path.[133] Similar initiatives should be undertaken with radicalized, pro-Kremlin supporters, those on the far left and the far-right, and Russian speakers.

2. Strategic, medium-term recommendations

Broad strategic recommendations aimed at strengthening the quality of the information space and building trust.

vii) Reinventing public broadcasting for the 21st century: Solutions-aimed journalism: Support for the development of public broadcasting is included in the EU Association Agreement with Ukraine and is a high priority for other Association countries and EU member states with weak media. The challenge facing public broadcasters in fractured countries such as Ukraine or Moldova—as well as many in Western Europe—is not merely to "set standards" but to actively unite and build trust in the country. In a fragmented media landscape, a strong, independent public broadcaster could set standards and grow to be the most trusted medium available.

In Ukraine, for example, as in much of Europe, audiences dwell in small media bubbles and echo chambers, reinforced by social media. Odesa alone has 44 local TV channels, not all of them active. Trust towards any media, whether Russian, Ukrainian or other, is low. The public broadcaster will always be poorer than oligarch-owned or Kremlin-sponsored channels, and it won't be able to fully compete by reeling in audiences with big-money entertainment shows. But it can be more clever. A key way to build trust is to prove one's relevance to people's daily lives and to involve disparate groups in common activities. For a public broadcaster, this will mean moving from merely setting journalistic standards to creating activist projects around social causes. Whether it is improving roads, health care or corruption in the judiciary, such a "solutions-aimed" journalism will highlight issues through investigations and citizen journalism; build

campaigns to lobby for change and win people's trust by effecting change. A 21st-century public broadcaster is an activist broadcaster, providing a "public service" in the sense of helping to create better "public services." The content around these campaigns can include everything from reality shows to comedy and protest actions; the point is they will help deliver real solutions and "news you can use." It will also need to employ the latest in social media analysis to ensure its relevance online.

In countries where there is no political will to strengthen the public broadcaster, attempts should be made to create a "public-spirited" broadcaster from the bottom up. Hromadske TV, an online TV and news portal, is trying this in Ukraine. Established in November 2013, Hromadske TV is an ambitious attempt to build—from scratch—a public broadcaster free of any political and business interests or government propaganda influences, and funded only by donors and public donations. Employing just 20 full-time journalists, it strove to produce impartial journalism, becoming especially well-known for its live reports from demonstrations on the Maidan. Hromadske is currently in talks with the reformed public broadcaster to create a multimedia network to educate, unite and inform the country.

viii) A "blogger's charter" and international exchanges for information activists: Information activists are a new breed of actors transforming the information space. They can have both a positive and negative effect. In Ukraine, for example, the Euromaidan used the Internet as a major tool to mobilize, organize and provide information support. Livestreaming and video blogging allowed people to follow events in real time, while social networks promoted a new breed of opinion-makers, bloggers and civil society activists and shattered the hierarchy of established media and pundits. On the other hand, social media has also empowered far-right groups such as Right Sector—a paramilitary formation fighting outside state defense structures in eastern Ukraine—and the Azov nationalist battalion, now integrated into state defense structures. The propaganda campaign promoted by these groups played a major role in shaping a militaristic sub-narrative in Ukraine. Some "patriotic" bloggers and activists began to accuse any government critics of *zdrada* (betrayal).

In order to create international networks while simultaneously encouraging best practices, information activists could be encouraged to sign up to ethics charters. Such charters could be jointly written and of course voluntary, but they could be used to distinguish between actors. Those who sign up should be supported by governments and foundations to take part in regular exchange programs among journalists, information activists, NGOs and academics, operating between core Western and frontline states, to create transnational communities of trust and critical inquiry. Currently, domestic audiences in countries like Spain often view information about Ukraine or the Baltics through the distorted lenses of Russian propaganda. Bringing academics, journalists and activists to and from the Baltics, the Caucasus or Ukraine will help build networks able to withstand disinformation attacks. This is what analyst Ben Nimmo calls "information defense."

Strategic, medium-term recommendations for Russian speakers

ix) Russian-language entertainment content factory: Kremlin propaganda is powerful because it mixes entertainment, emotions and current affairs. Viewers in Ukraine, the Baltics and the Caucasus tune into Kremlin TV because it's better made, glossier and more entertaining. Even Georgian and Lithuanian speakers tune in for the serials and talent shows, and they often end up staying for the current affairs.[133] Russian programming dominates Moldovan media as well, yet making alternative Russian-language or domestic content is expensive and the advertising markets of these regions do not appear profitable the foreseeable future. Governments can use laws to help stimulate local production, imitating the French or other models where a certain percentage of content must be domestically produced. But for the moment Western governments, NGOs and other donors can help by creating content at reduced rates. The British Foreign Office, for example, is currently developing a 'content factory' to help EU Association and Baltic countries create new Russian-language content: BBC Media Action, a media development agency of the BBC, has been tasked with producing a blueprint for such an entity. Other donors should support this initiative.

This should be seen as a unique opportunity to improve journalistic standards in Association Countries. Guided by the judgments delivered by the commission for regulating media standards described earlier in this document, or by media watchdogs and NGOs, Western donors could emphasize support for channels with better journalistic standards, thus creating a virtuous

circle between better entertainment TV and better journalism. Donors should, of course, be allowed to use their discretion when choosing which channels to work with. But the hallmark of a media regulator modeled on the "Venice Commission" can serve as an important compass.

x) A Russian-language news wire/hub: Since the demise of the Medvedev-era Ria Novosti in 2012, no quality news wire providing a steady, reliable flow of news exists in the Russian language. Ideally one would build a Russian-language Reuters or AP, but this is expensive. The European Endowment for Democracy has proposed a more affordable alternative: the creation of a **hub or exchange** to serve as a proto-news agency for regional news outlets. Pooled newsgathering efforts, where appropriate, would ease cost pressures on individual outlets and fill the gap created by Russia's monopoly on Russian-language news content. Free Press Unlimited, a Dutch media development group, received a government grant to develop a news exchange—a Russian-language independent regional news agency working as a cooperative. Supported by a central news desk, its members will be able to access "high-quality local, regional and international news and analysis."[134] This initiative should be encouraged and further supported.

3. Long-term recommendations

xi) Popularize media literacy for the 21st century: TV and Internet entertainment that incorporate media literacy lessons: As governments and NGOs search for a response to the rise of sophisticated propaganda and information warfare, more and more are calling for increased media literacy. For example, a 2015 OSCE report, *Propaganda and Freedom of the Media*, lists in its "tool box" of responses "putting efforts into educational programs on media and Internet literacy."[135] Likewise, a 2016 NATO Stratcom report, *Internet Trolling as a Tool of Hybrid Warfare*, advises governments to "enhance the public's critical thinking and media literacy."[136] Yet neither report suggests what those efforts should be or how to achieve them.

The concept of media literacy has long been seen as synonymous with education—but what media literacy education means is changing: it is moving out of the classroom and into communities. In Ukraine, the Washington-based International Research & Exchanges Board (IREX)—a global nonprofit "providing thought leadership and innovative programs to promote positive lasting change globally"—has broken new ground in stepping outside the education system to promote media literacy.[137]

In 2015 and 2016, IREX ran courses through its own parallel educational network of more than 440 "trainers" in central and eastern Ukraine, including in or near conflict zones. These trainers, who had long worked for the NGO, delivered IREX's "Media Literacy Curriculum" to as many people from all walks of life as they could persuade to sign up. Unlike other media literacy curricula, this one was meant to be both fun and full of practical tools which anybody—with or without a college degree—could apply to the media they consume. "We basically tried to get away from anything academic" said Myahriban Karyagdyyeva, IREX Ukraine's program director. "Rather developing practical tools targeted at different types of people so that the next time they have an emotional reaction to a piece of 'news' or other media, they take a step back."[138] The curriculum was distributed to trainers along with a flash drive packed full of videos, games and props such as cards and stickers—all designed to make the course fun and relevant. The trainers then enrolled as many as possible into a two-day course following the curriculum, which was essentially a thorough grounding in the key principles of media literacy, with special emphasis on the Ukrainian context.

By the time the project came to an end in March 2016, a total of 14,803 people had taken part. Of these, 64 percent were women. In addition, 79 percent had some kind of higher educational qualification. This was a more female and better-educated demographic than IREX had ideally hoped for: anecdotally, it seems that because most of the NGO's trainers were teachers, librarians or university lecturers, they recruited the kind of people they knew. But soldiers, police officers, doctors, nurses and journalists also participated in the training.[139]

While those trained by IREX are likely to have influence in their home communities, the demographic reached still falls short of truly "making media literacy popular." Indeed, 14,803 people is still a tiny fraction in a country of 42 million inhabitants.

The next stage for rolling out media literacy could very well be to use the media itself to spread the message. This means drawing upon the skills of content producers who know how to win—and keep—a mass audience. This is the final stage of media literacy's journey from the classroom and university lecture hall into the public domain. It also

turns the tables on the propagandists by taking a leaf out of their book; if they've used the storytelling techniques of TV, the Internet and other mass media to make their messages cut through, then surely we can, too.

Of all the ways to reach a mass audience, the two most powerful are TV and online. That's not to say other forms of media are irrelevant; IREX uses billboard advertising to promote media literacy in Ukraine. But TV is still the world's most popular and widespread medium, as well as the one capable of making the most emotional impact. And the Internet is the most dynamic, fastest-growing medium with the lowest transmission costs.

To promote media literacy through the media itself, we can take a mix-and-match approach to TV and the Internet, choosing the best platform available for the audiences we want to reach, and making use of both established "broadcasters" and "viral" social media. If communicated correctly, media literacy can make for good TV and online content; it offers lots of opportunities for humor, fun, liveliness and other qualities that audiences like—as well as relying on a desire to learn or be informed. To reach the most at-risk audiences, media literacy should be included in the structure of mainstream programming rather than as a separate "news" show or video game. The challenge is how to introduce media literacy themes into breakfast talk shows, sitcoms, popular dramas, kids' programming, celebrity online news and YouTube cartoons. A series of dedicated pilot programs could explore what works in each territory.

xii) Boycotts and ostracism. People working at websites that violate elementary journalistic practices and principles (such as attempting to provide balanced reporting, and dealing fairly with complaints) should not enjoy the social and professional privileges—access to press conferences, media credentials—enjoyed by real journalists. One of the great ironies of today's so-called "information war" is that Western advertisers fund Kremlin hate speech, demonization of LGBT people, incitement to violence and so on. Western production companies also sell entertainment formats to the same channels, helping them become popular and attract viewers to their hate speech programs. A sustained campaign is needed to raise awareness among the general public about how advertisers and production companies directly help fuel attacks on minorities and incite violence.

In a parallel initiative, the Slovak initiative konspiratori.sk advises ad agencies and their customers to avoid advertising on a list of websites that promote xenophobia, pro-Kremlin disinformation, health conspiracies and other inaccuracies. The argument these agencies make is that appearing on these sites damage their clients' brands. This is an interesting development driven by profit motives rather than morals.

Further awareness raising and campaigns are needed on this topic, with the ultimate aim of discouraging media outlets that promote hate speech and disinformation from attracting advertisers, thereby preventing them from purchasing the best Western entertainment formats. We need to move towards a virtuous cycle where watchdogs award media with the best-quality news a seal of approval, in turn stimulating Western donors to support these outlets in buying the best entertainment formats, which in turn attracts advertising.

AFTERWORD

The information revolution has opened up opportunities for Russia and other states like China and Iran with obvious information agendas to buy and influence the TV programs people see in Western countries—and the articles they read—on a scale bigger than anything seen during the Cold War. The Kremlin's aim is not so much to win an ideological debate, though it can use a variety of ideologies when it needs to, but to use the radical changes in the media environment and fissures in society caused by the information revolution to undermine the public space, well-informed debate and trust on which democracy depends. In some senses, the situation resembles previous moments in history like the 1930s, when the then-new medium of radio was beginning to reach public audiences and change the way they understood politics, as well as the 1950s, when TV first came into wide usage. But both radio and TV proved susceptible to regulation. Regulators who made the rules could also grant access to bandwidths. Some of those rules can be used today, as in Ukraine, to block excessive distortion of the news.

But as this paper makes plain, today's challenges are in other ways unprecedented. Government has very limited impact on the Internet. Civil-society groups and media are better poised to battle disinformation online, but they are not able to reach all audiences. In general, public awareness of the problem is still very low.

No silver bullet will solve this problem, and the answers won't be the same in every European country. Governments, concerned citizens and journalists will have to work together to fashion a response that neither promotes censorship nor hampers intellectual freedom. Europe will require a range of policies to help voters and citizens get access to an accurate and balanced understanding of the world. Without better information, democracy will quickly become difficult—if not impossible.

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30. Disinformation campaigns continued through the perestroika and glasnost eras of the late Soviet Union. According to a report to Congress by the U.S. Information Agency, 'Soviet Active Measures In The Era Of Glasnost,' published in March 1988:

"Since the December 1987 summit, state-controlled Soviet media have falsely claimed or suggested that: the United States manufactured the AIDS virus in a U.S. military facility at Fort Detrick, Maryland [Radio Moscow, Feb. 13, 1988]; the United States is manufacturing an ethnic weapon that kills only non-whites [TASS, Jan. 9, 1988; January 1988 Novosti Military Bulletin; Radio Moscow, Feb. 5, 1988; the FBI assassinated Rev. Martin Luther King Jr. [Literaturnaya Gazeta, Jan. 20, 1988]; the head of the U.S. delegation to the UN Human Rights Commission conference in Geneva, Armando Valladares, was jailed in Cuba for bombing stores [Izvestia, Feb. 6, 1988]; the CIA assassinated Swedish Prime Minister Olof Palme and Indian Prime minister Indira Gandhi, and attempted to assassinate Pope John Paul II [Moscow Television, Feb. 9, 1988].

'Soviet Active Measures in The Era of Glasnost," (U.S. Information Agency Report to Congress, Washington, D.C., 1988), 2-3, http://insidethecoldwar.org/sites/default/files/documents/Soviet%20Active%20Measures%20in%20the%20Era%20of%20Glasnot%20March%201988.pdf.

The Active Measures Working group stopped publishing its annual reports in 1989. But another report to Congress, "Soviet Active Measures Forgery, Disinformation, Political Operations," predicted: "There is every reason to believe that the Soviet leadership will continue to make heavy investments of money and manpower in meddlesome and disruptive operations around the world. While Soviet active measures can be exposed, as they have often been in the past, the Soviets are becoming more sophisticated, especially in forgeries and political influence operations. Unless the targets of Soviet active measures take effective action to counter them, these activities will continue to trouble both industrialized and developing countries."

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32. After the Comintern was dissolved in 1943, the Central Committee established the International Department of the CPSU Central Committee, or ID, which became the coordinating agency of active measures abroad. It was estimated at the time that the ID was even more important than the Soviet Ministry of Foreign Affairs. The Soviet Union operated both open and hidden channels to deliver its messages. Propaganda was mostly delivered via open influence agents, which were often so-called front organizations. Many of them, such as the World Peace Council, the World Federation of Teachers' Unions and the Prague-based International Organization of Journalists. operated internationally. A wide network of local front organizations, ranging from press clubs to various Soviet friendship societies, supported their work. Parallel to these overt activities, networks of covert local influence agents were used as well, mostly to spread disinformation, as well as to directly or indirectly strengthen the propaganda messages delivered by the overtly operating influence agents. It is important to note that, at the strategic level of active measures, the KGB was an executive agency of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union. While the KGB had considerable autonomy in managing the operations of its local agents, strategic guidance was provided by the Politburo. The main difference now is that the old barrier between "domestic" and "foreign" information operations—the Iron Curtain—has been replaced by a new one: the Russian language. And, as the FIIA study surmises: "The presidential administration has retained the former responsibilities of the Politburo and Central Committee, including the coordination of information influence operations domestically and abroad."

Katri Pynnöniemi and András Rácz, Fog of Falsehood: Russian Strategy of Deception and the Conflict in Ukraine, Helsinki, *Finnish Institute of International Affairs*, 2016, 47, http://www.fiia.fi/en/publication/588/fog_of_falsehood/.

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The Soviet concept of active measures (aktivnyye meropriyatiya) refers to operations intended to "affect other nations' policies, as distinct from espionage and counterintelligence." Soviet active measures included: Written or spoken disinformation, efforts to control media in foreign countries, use of communist parties and front organizations, clandestine radio broadcasting, blackmail, personal and economic and political influence operations.

"Soviet Active Measures: Forgery, Disinformation, Political Operations," (US Department of State Bureau of Public Affairs, Washington, D.C., 1981), 2, http://insidethecoldwar.org/sites/default/files/documents/Soviet%20Active%20Measures%20Forgery,%20Disinformation,%20Political%20Operations%20October%201981.pdf.

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Frank J. Cilluffo and Joseph R. Clark of the George Washington University Homeland Security Policy Institute define hybrid warfare as being chiefly characterized by a "principal actor (finding) exogenous entities who can act as agents supplying the desired skills, materials, and/or access." They use as examples Iran's ability to hire criminal hackers and use Hezbollah's guerrilla skills to conduct non-kinetic and kinetic operations that it could not carry out on its own. As a response, they recommend the reinvention of the early modern war council as a "threat council"— an ad hoc body of public and private stakeholders at the federal or state level connected to an inter-agency committee that would analyze the threat and seek ways to break the link between the principal actor and its agent(s). Frank J. Cilluffo and Joseph R. Clark. "Thinking About Strategic Hybrid Threats - In Theory and Practice." Prism 4, no. 1, 2012.

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52. The pioneering writer on this is William J. Nemeth, who analyzed the 2001 conflict in Chechnya as his thesis at the U.S. Naval Postgraduate School. He presents hybrid war as "the contemporary form of guerrilla warfare, is a continuation of pre-state warfare that has become more effective because it employs both modern technology and modern mobilization methods. ... The components of hybrid strengths are: Ideas; individuals, the charismatic leader; society and military can absorb tremendous punishment; strong belief in their cause; decentralized tactics, swarming being one example." His recommendations focus on changes to the U.S. military's organization, force structure, doctrine and training, but also acknowledge that "true effectiveness will most likely mean the assignment of military officers as integral members to deployed cells from State or Justice Department, Central Intelligence Agency and Federal Bureau of Investigation, and the assignment of members of other departments to lower levels within the Department of Defense." William J. Nemeth. "Future War and Chechnya: A Case for Hybrid Warfare." Master's thesis, Naval Postgraduate School, Monterey, 2002. Another important writer on the subject from the "minimalist" school is David Kilcullen: A specialist in counterinsurgency (and former advisor to Gen. David Petraeus), he presents hybrid war as the combination of irregular conflict—including civil war, insurgency operations and terrorist attacks— with regular warfare. He recommends a military response based on securing and succoring local

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52. populations—an approach which substantially informed the U.S.-led concept of "population-centric counterinsurgency" in Afghanistan. Kilcullen, David. The Accidental Guerrilla: Fighting Small Wars in the Midst of a Big One. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009. Nathan Freier, formerly a lecturer at the U.S. Army War College, presents hybrid warfare as the combination of multiple threats including "traditional, irregular, catastrophic terrorism and disruptive technology," the purpose of which is to negate the military superiority of Western armies. He defines it as a mixture of military and non-military threats, but he adds that "nonmilitary status, however, only implies that their principal origins are not related to the armed forces of enemy states. It does not mean the new challenges are always nonstate or prevalently nonviolent, purposeless, disorganized, or nonthreatening... Non-military hybrids can take form as irreducible combinations of violence and human insecurity. Some emerge as purposeful acts focused specifically against the United States or its interests—e.g., insurgency, terrorism, and strategically significant criminality. Other non-military hybrid threats emerge without specific anti-U.S. purpose—e.g., foreign insurrection, civil war, or unrest; state weakness and failure; and natural or human catastrophe." His recommendations focus on institutional and doctrinal changes within the Department of Defense, including an improved ability to work with civilians. Nathan Freier, "The Defense Identity Crisis: It's a Hybrid World," Parameters, Autumn 2009. Frank Hoffman is a former U.S. Marine, and widely represented as the father of the maximalist interpretation of hybrid warfare, he presents it as "a full range of different modes of warfare including conventional capabilities, irregular tactics and formations, terrorist attacks including indiscriminate violence and coercion, and criminal disorder... conducted by both states and a variety of non-state actors." Significantly, he identifies "what may be the most significant change in the character of modern conflict, the exploitation of modern media to reach out to wide masses and mobilize them to support one's cause." His recommendations, however, are primarily military, suggesting that the U.S. in general, and the Marines in particular, focus on adaptations in eight areas: Military force planning, intelligence, civilian-military cooperation, organizational culture, doctrine, training, planning, and information operations. Frank Hoffman, "Conflict in the 21st Century: The Rise of Hybrid Wars," Potomac Institute for Policy Studies, December 2007. Alain Bauer, a professor of criminology at the National Conservatory for Arts and Crafts in Paris, views hybrid conflict as a manifestation of "gangsterrorism"—a blend between classic gangsterism and terrorism in which criminals and terrorists exchange techniques, methods and ideologies. This is a departure from "classical" terrorist groups such as ETA and the IRA, which were more akin to paramilitary forces whose goals were restricted to a certain geographical and/or political entity. Gangs and terrorists are a key source of manpower and revenue for quasi-military forces such as Somali pirates, Colombia's FARC rebels and al-Qaeda in Mali and Niger. To counter it, we must adapt our bureaucratic preferences and preconceptions. Alain Bauer. "Hybridization of Conflicts." PRISM 4, no. 4,(2014): 57-66.

53. In the Peloponnesian War, outmatched Athens opted for a drawn-out campaign that used its defensive fortifications and sea power to deal with a far stronger Sparta. Other classic examples include the Anglo-Spanish campaign against Napoleon in the Peninsular War (British regulars, Spanish guerrillas) and the British Expeditionary Force's drive on Jerusalem and Damascus in World War I (in tandem with the Arab Revolt). More recently, the Vietnam War combined the insurgency operations of the Viet Cong with the conventional maneuvers of the North Vietnamese Army. In each of these examples, leaders adapted the inherent asymmetries in their own force structure to blunt the relative advantages of an adversary.

55. Launched in March 2014 by faculty, students and alumni of the Mohyla School of Journalism in Kyiv, the team was later joined by journalists, editors, programmers, translators and others. The StopFake team does not represent and is not supported by any political party or commercial organization, or by the Ukrainian government.

56. Letter of the Defense Policy Directors of 10 Northern Group nations to EEAS DSG Maciej Popowski, February 17. 2015.

57. Forthcoming: summarized here: Yevhen Fedchenko "Kremlin Propaganda: Soviet Active Measures by Other Means," StopFake.org, March 21, 2016.

58. Forthcoming: summarized here: Yevhen Fedchenko "Kremlin Propaganda: Soviet Active Measures by Other Means," StopFake.org, March 21, 2016.

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60. See:"Photo Fake: Kyiv Residents Kneel Before Biden," StopFake.org, last modified December 12, 2015, accessed February 22, 2016, http://www.stopfake.org/en/photo-fake-kyiv-residents-kneel-before-biden/.

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63. Ibid.

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64. Ladislav Bittman, The KGB and Soviet Disinformation: An Insider's View, (Washington: Pergamon-Brassey's, 1985), 23.

65. Ibid

66. Putin. War," Putin. Results, accessed February 27, 2016, ed. Ilya Yashin and Olga Shorin, http://www.putin-itogi.ru/putin-voina/.

67. Kharkiv Forbids Veterans from Wearing St. George Ribbons," StopFake.org, Last modified April 21, 2015, Accessed February 27, 2016. http://www.stopfake.org/en/kharkiv-forbids-veterans-from-wearing-st-george-ribbons/.

68. Fake: Memorial Plaques to Soviet Soldiers Destroyed in Kharkiv," StopFake.org, last modified September 3, 2015, accessed February 27, 2016, http://www.stopfake.org/en/fake-memorial-plaques-to-soviet-soldiers-destroyed-in-kharkiv.

69. *Fake: Memorial Plaques to Soviet Soldiers Destroyed in Kharkiv," StopFake.org, last modified September 3, 2015, accessed February 27, 2016, http://www.stopfake.org/en/fake-memorial-plaques-to-soviet-soldiers-destroyed-in-kharkiv.*

70. Fake: Nationalists Swear Allegiance to Hitler in Kherson," StopFake.org, last modified July 4, 2015, accessed February 27, 2016, http://www.stopfake.org/en/fake-nationalists-swear-allegiance-to-hitler-in-kherson/.

71. The term "Russian-speaking" is convenient but should be used with caution. Almost all people living in the Baltic states speak Russian to at least some extent. The use of Russian is not inherently a political signifier. People may speak Russian as a mother tongue but have been educated in another language that they speak more proficiently, or vice versa. They may use Russian at home but not at work, or vice versa. They may use Russian in conversation with some family members but not others. Ethnicity, linguistic preference, names, family connections and national identity do not coincide neatly. The best test is self-identification; people who describe themselves as "Russians"—with whatever prefix, suffix or other qualification they like—are entitled to that label. And those who reject it should be allowed to do so, too. "Russian-speaking" in this piece refers to that segment of the population that predominantly identifies with Russian language and culture, and the historical outlook promoted by the Kremlin.

72. With the exception of Nils Ušakovs, these politicians do not take part in the end of World War II commemoration events on 8 May, together with the Latvian president and government ministers. Instead, they attend a 9 May event at the Soviet monument to the liberators of Riga, accompanied by the ambassadors of the CIS countries.

73. In this context, 9 May symbolizes the USSR's legacy and its historic traditions.

74. The Latvian Legion consisted of two Waffen-SS divisions created on Hitler's orders in 1943. Most were conscripts, though 15 to 20 percent were volunteers. Non-Germans could be conscripted under Nazi occupation but were not allowed to serve in the Wehrmacht. The Nuremberg Tribunal exempted conscripts from its designation of the Waffen-SS as a criminal organization. Both Germany and the USSR illegally conscripted Latvians in their armies; as result the Latvians fought on both sides of the front line; March 16, was the day in 1944 when both parts of the Latvian Legion fought side by side for the first time against the Red Army.

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84. This emphasis on pre-existing political tensions is explored in more detail in Heather Brooke, *The Revolution Will Be Digitised: Dispatches from the Information War*, London: William Heinemann, 2011.

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87. See, for example, this excerpt from falanga.org.pl, which is close to the pseudo-intellectual style of Dugin's writings: "We are living in a post-modern era, and this brings far-reaching consequences for the purposes and function of holding a discourse. The immanent truth, so hard to capture, gives way to various truths derived from each, even the most original view, creating an infinitely large grid of equal positions which— despite contradiction—can exist along each other, or even penetrate each other. The deconstruction of all "absolute truths" (including liberal truths) in the post-modern spirit creates good conditions for establishing a "laboratory of ideas" of sorts, where various points of view can confront each other and exert mutual influence to create, sometimes, a new whole."

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