

Improving the Western Strategy to Combat Kremlin Propaganda and Disinformation

MAY 2018 ANTON BARBASHIN

Since Russia's annexation of Crimea and military aggression in Donbas—and especially since the 2016 US presidential election—the spread of Russian propaganda and disinformation has become a central subject of discussion and debate in the West. Academic research, investigative journalism, government inquiries, and nongovernmental organization (NGO) activities have drawn back the curtain on the Kremlin's efforts to meddle in and distort the Western information space.

This work has created widespread awareness of the issue in NATO countries and Russia's immediate neighbors to the west and south, but difficult questions remain regarding appropriate countermeasures. For example: How can these countries target Russian disinformation and propaganda without diminishing fair criticisms of Western structures of government? What is an appropriate response that also preserves the freedoms that distinguish the West from Russia and other authoritarian states? How can countries in Central and Eastern Europe strengthen democratic values when their societies are the most vulnerable to disinformation campaigns?

How Russia Views Its Propaganda and Disinformation

The Kremlin's current attitude toward press freedom and the media's informative and propagandist functions originated in the early 2000s with Vladimir Putin's rise to power.¹ The so-called "kompromat wars"²—the extensive use of propaganda to help Boris Yeltsin win the 1996 presidential

The **Eurasia Center's** mission is to enhance transatlantic cooperation in promoting stability, democratic values and prosperity in Eurasia, from Eastern Europe and Turkey in the West to the Caucasus, Russia, and Central Asia in the East.

1 Olga Irisova, "A Lie Is the Truth," *Intersection*, June 3, 2015, <http://intersectionproject.eu/article/society/lie-truth>.

2 Vladimir Razuvayev, "A Compromising War," *Moscow Times*, January 9, 1997, <http://old.themoscowtimes.com/sitemap/free/1997/1/article/a-compromising-war/313833.html>.

election—and what the Kremlin viewed as harmful coverage of the fighting in Chechnya convinced Putin to rein in the media's power over the masses.

From the early days of his presidency, he carefully and systematically implemented rules to control and exclude anti-Putin and anti-government messaging. By “cleansing” the media of contrary viewpoints, he ensured his presentation as an infallible, untouchable leader. Any perceived mistakes were the fault of bureaucrats or enemies—never of Putin and his cronies. Independent media were tolerated only insofar as they offered ostensible evidence of freedom of speech and a necessary outlet for critical thinkers to express discontent online (instead of in the streets).

This stage-managed environment created a modified and superficial “fourth pillar of democracy” that is, in reality, a farcical sham, a Potemkin village built to propagate pro-Kremlin messages and advance Russia's political agenda. This requires nearly total control by the state; a monopoly on information is a prerequisite for propaganda to work on Russia's own citizens. Any attempts to penetrate this information bubble—whether by the United States, the European Union, or unsanctioned domestic media—is viewed as a hostile offense against Russia's government. New means of communication, such as social media, require constant vigilance by the Kremlin to monitor and update its policies to prevent the uncontrolled spread of information.³

To the Kremlin, Western support of independent media and NGOs caused the revolutions in Georgia, Kyrgyzstan, and Ukraine (twice) as well as the Arab Spring. Especially in the case of Russia's near neighbors, pro-democratic revolts were considered anti-Russian at their core.

In other words, the Kremlin believes that but for Western meddling, those uprisings would not have occurred and neighboring countries would not have pivoted away from Russia. The takeaway for Moscow was that the flow of information and news, if not checked, could lead to similar revolts at home. In the Kremlin's view, the West commenced a large-scale information war against Russia (and Putin personally) long before Russia mastered the art of disinformation and deployed it in the West.

The 2008 war with Georgia, in particular, convinced the Kremlin that its foreign messaging capabilities were outdated and inefficient, and thereafter, Moscow doubled its efforts. Three key strategies should be noted.

1. “Question more.”

RT, the Kremlin's multilingual news channel, and Sputnik, a network of smaller Russian-funded and/or -supported media outlets, target and disseminate misinformation to Western audiences as a way to maximize the effect of “fake news” and sow distrust. Their main role is to highlight the shortcomings of Western societies and magnify their problems, thereby galvanizing viewers into questioning the soundness of democratic principles and values. (RT's slogan: “Question more.”) This includes pushing an anti-capitalist and anti-globalist agenda by highlighting purported failures of multiculturalism and open migration policies and stressing the social and economic imbalance in globalist societies.

Russian media operate with a veneer of professionalism and transparency, but in actuality they cherry-pick topics that fit the overall narrative that the West is greatly flawed. Buttressed by Kremlin funding, they need not chase sponsors or advertisers and are unbound by any of the financial or ethical limitations that might affect a traditional media business. This permits a reportorial approach that traditional media ordinarily avoid due to conflicts of interest or limited appeal for the target audience.

By masking its agenda—which can be formulated as, “Make the West hate the West”—Russian media are able to deliver a message aimed at already-marginalized groups within any given society. Targeting the most radical, conspiracy-theory-driven, and anti-establishment elements, Russian outlets fuel discontent across the West and occasionally peddle outright disinformation that galvanizes their viewers to further distrust, and to vote against, moderate politicians and a moderate agenda.

It must be noted that RT and its peers are hardly responsible for creating such an audience. They target existing “weak links” of society that are susceptible to manipulation and exacerbate this audience's pre-exist-



Russian President Vladimir Putin attends an exhibition honoring Russia Today's 10th anniversary with editor-in-chief Margarita Simonyan, December 10, 2015. Photo Credit: Official Internet Resources of the President of Russia.

ing antagonism toward their governments in particular and liberal democracy in general.

2. Amplify the destructive elements.

A major aspect of the Kremlin's strategy is directly and indirectly supporting “destructive elements” within Western societies. Moscow creatively engages in a number of information campaigns aimed at the far right, the far left, secessionists,⁴ and other anti-government movements. The goal is to weaken the West through anti-establishment groups and self-styled revolutionaries who seek to gain political power or simply attack the existing political framework.

Such campaigns are often impossible to link directly to the Kremlin—they could be executed by independent or quietly Kremlin-affiliated entities—but Moscow boosts their profile and importance through financial support, information amplification, and popularization via social media. Whatever destabilizes Western soci-

eties or weakens transatlantic unity, the EU, and the West as a whole is potentially worth the Kremlin's time and resources.

These Russian entities are not necessarily fake-news farms, and they do not necessarily produce outright lies. Rather, they spread misinformation in misleading contexts to undermine the credibility of mainstream media. (Their modus operandi is similar to that of Breitbart, which operates as an “amplifying network” for conservative websites devoted to attacking mainstream media, spreading misleading content that ends up gaining considerable traction.⁵) Unlike with RT and other obvious Kremlin actors, linking this type of action to Moscow requires a degree of research and investigation—and perhaps a little luck.

3. Unleash the trolls.

Arguably Russia's most notorious method of spreading disinformation is by using so-called trolls. The Kremlin

³ Olga Irisova, “Who Gets to Speak in ‘Post-Crimea’ Russia?” in *A Successful Failure: Russia After Crimea*(a), eds. Olga Irisova et al. (Warsaw: The Centre for Polish-Russian Dialogue and Understanding, 2017), http://intersectionproject.eu/sites/default/files/books/final_a_successful_failure_russia_after_crimea.pdf, 203-218.

⁴ Casey Michel, “California Secessionists Retain Russian Connection,” Eurasianet, August 3, 2017, <https://eurasianet.org/s/california-secessionists-retain-russian-connection>.

⁵ Vasily Gatov, “Fake news: The truth behind the lies,” Riddle, April 18, 2018, <http://www.ridl.io/en/fake-news-the-truth-behind-the-lies/>.

initially weaponized trolls at home, using them to amplify pro-Kremlin and anti-democratic messages through domestic media. Once their effectiveness became apparent, Russia unleashed them abroad. There are dozens of proven instances of Russian trolls wreaking havoc in the United States,⁶ Germany, Spain, and other NATO countries.

Trolls are the most direct, crudest, and cheapest way to seed disinformation in online debates, amplify a particular message, and overwhelm facts that might be unpleasant for the Kremlin. Since 2016, awareness of these trolls has increased significantly, somewhat reducing their effectiveness and making it trickier to spread outright disinformation. When dozens of journalists, investigators, and even security agencies search for this type of content, they can combat early-stage disinformation efforts and diminish a campaign's effectiveness. Still, this work does not solve but merely mitigates the aforementioned challenges presented by Russian propaganda outlets and their (often unwitting) brothers in arms within the United States and Europe.

How Should the West Respond?

One obvious, though obviously difficult, approach would be attempting to address issues that fuel discontent within Western societies: fighting unemployment, regulating financial markets, attacking corruption in politics, implementing sensible immigration programs, advancing social and economic justice. Each country need only look at the issues highlighted and actions criticized by Russian propaganda to know which hot-button issues to address. Even incremental improvement in certain areas could cause a shift in cultural consciousness large enough to stem anti-democratic sentiments and prevent the potential rise of authoritarianism.

The West should also promote the benefits of universal democratic values and identify and emphasize specific success stories. For example, the East StratCom Task Force,⁷ established by the EU in 2015 to combat Russian disinformation, began outlining the benefits of European integration, explaining in a transparent and comprehensible way what the EU does and what it is.

⁶ Andrei Soldatov and Irina Borogan, *The Red Web* (New York: PublicAffairs, 2015).

⁷ Questions and Answers about the East StratCom Task Force," European Union, External Action, November 8, 2017, https://eeas.europa.eu/headquarters/headquarters-homepage/2116/questions-and-answers-about-east-stratcom-task-force_en.

associate with Western societies. Both are deprived of Russian-language domestic outlets of similarly high production value that not only engage them in covering international affairs but also speak to them directly about issues at home—highlighting the successes as well as the problems of Germany and Georgia.

Some outlets, like the Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty news network Current Time,⁸ reach the wider Russian-speaking world, but thus far they have not been able to report with the same granularity and depth as Russian channels simply because they have to cover the entire region. Gluing together reporting from Ukraine and Turkmenistan is hardly an easy job. Like other such outlets, Current Time needs more money to solve these journalistic deficiencies and improve its content both qualitatively and geographically. If the goal is to support quality journalism that covers a wide range of complex issues, that requires significant financial contributions from private parties.

Support local independent media and information projects.

From Poland to Ukraine to Hungary to Moldova, local media are most attuned to local circumstances, social mores, and political cultures. They are uniquely suited to produce and present content that addresses the complexity of liberal democratic development in ways that resonate with their audience. There are a number of ongoing initiatives to support these media, but the public funds available for them is significantly lower than what Russia provides its state-run and state-sponsored outlets.

If we recognize access to critical information as key to combating disinformation, local media must be adequately funded and supported. Given technological realities and generational differences, that support must extend beyond traditional outlets and formats. Blogs, vlogs, infotainment, memes—these are crucial means for reaching younger generations.

Support transnational investigative journalism.

Political cronyism, corporate lobbying, the wealthy stash- ing riches in offshore banks—such signifiers of corrup-

⁸ "Current Time TV," accessed May 6, 2018, <https://www.currenttime.tv/p/6018.html>.

⁹ Organized Crime and Corruption Reporting Project, accessed May 5, 2018, <https://www.occrp.org/en>.

tion and economic inequality fuel public anger on both the left and the right. Initiatives like the Organized Crime and Reporting Project⁹ (OCCRP) have proven invaluable for uncovering corruption and bringing back the kind of accountability liberal democracy desperately needs to survive. Supporting the OCCRP and similar efforts would help ease the discontent that drives voters to populists and makes them particularly susceptible to Russian propaganda and disinformation.

“When opportunities present themselves, the West must be ready to communicate to the people of Russia a new hope for a brighter future.”

Invest in Russian studies.

The Kremlin's actions over the last few years have brought back the need to invest in Russian studies, both to help bolster Western understanding of how Putin's system operates and to fight for the minds and hearts of the Russian people. Russians' historical embrace of strongmen and imperial sentiments will endure beyond Putin's reign, and, clearly, attempts to convince them of the virtues of liberal democracy have largely failed to this point. That does not mean the West should stop trying. When opportunities present themselves, the West must be ready to communicate to the people of Russia a new hope for a more promising future. This cannot be accomplished without prioritizing and investing in Russian studies.

Promote media literacy.

Technology coupled with media illiteracy opens pathways for the spread of disinformation and propaganda, and Western societies are far from immune. Even if

some adults are past the proverbial point of no return, we must stress the importance of educating the younger generation by incorporating media literacy into courses on critical thinking in Western schools. We already have enough examples of how bots, memes, and fake news are being used by various actors, including Russia. It is only a matter of political will to include at least basic tools to recognize disinformation as part of regular educational curricula.

Conclusion

To combat the Kremlin's propaganda and disinformation campaign, the West should take measures to stimulate content development and quality journalism. An outright ban of Russian media entities would not resolve the issue; to the contrary, it would leave the disfranchised in Western societies even more skeptical of their governments. Rather, the West should aim to overwhelm the Kremlin with renewed investment in local media and media-literacy education while simultaneously defending, and promoting, freedom of speech and the liberal democracy that protects it.

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Reasserting Democratic Values in the Post-Soviet Space:

To ensure that Eurasia's path toward reform continues, civil society leaders from Armenia, Azerbaijan, Georgia, Moldova, Russia, and Ukraine met with European and US policy leaders in Tbilisi. The group worked to develop recommendations to reinvigorate the European project with a view toward Eurasia. Some policy recommendations from the second of three workshops are outlined in this brief; however, this final brief and formal recommendations are solely the work of the author.

The views expressed in this paper also are solely those of the author and do not necessarily reflect the views of the Atlantic Council, its staff, or its supporters. The Atlantic Council would like to thank the National Endowment for Democracy for funding this important work.

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