



Unravelling the Kremlin's disinformation strategy

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This article analyzes the use of disinformation as a strategic tool in the context of Russia's war in Ukraine. While the origins of modern Russian disinformation efforts go back to the Cold War era, under Vladimir Putin, the way the Kremlin exerts control over major media outlets and the Internet to use them as instruments for domestic and international disinformation campaigns has evolved. In terms of the specific use of disinformation in the Ukraine conflict, the Kremlin's tactics have included denying facts, projecting Russia as a victim, and disseminating false narratives about Ukrainian leadership and Western involvement. The disinformation is tailored to different audiences. In Ukraine, it is intended to undermine the government; in Russia to justify the war; and in the West, to create confusion and doubt as well as fissures amongst partners. While the Kremlin's disinformation campaign has had some success, especially domestically, its effectiveness globally is increasingly diminished. With the support of Western allies, Ukraine has developed counter-disinformation capabilities, which play a crucial role in maintaining its sovereignty and national unity. Continuous vigilance and adaptation are necessary in the ongoing battle against disinformation.

**“IN WAR, TRUTH IS THE
FIRST CASUALTY.”**

—Aeschylus

**“THE MAN WHO LIES TO HIMSELF AND LISTENS TO
HIS OWN LIE COMES TO A POINT THAT HE CANNOT
DISTINGUISH THE TRUTH WITHIN HIM, OR AROUND
HIM, AND SO LOSES ALL RESPECT FOR HIMSELF AND
FOR OTHERS.”**

—Dostoevsky, *The Brothers Karamazov*





INTRODUCTION

As Russia's war in Ukraine trudges on into another winter of uncertainty, both sides are digging in, resupplying, and developing strategies for the coming months. Ukraine, a country many commentators predicted would crumble in a matter of days during Russia's push for Kyiv in February 2022, has shown great tenacity, reclaiming large swaths of its territory and continually putting pressure on Russian forces. The initial bleak predictions about Ukraine's ability to withstand a full Russian invasion are a testament not only to the Kremlin's ability to deceive the world, but also perhaps to the Kremlin's belief that Russia had a well-organized military capable of projecting decisive force regionally. As Russia flounders on the battlefield, it will likely come to rely more heavily on unconventional tools and hybrid tactics, amongst the most notable being sweeping disinformation campaigns that Russia has previously used to great effect both domestically and globally. This article delves into the labyrinth of Russia's disinformation strategy, unearthing its roots, evolution, and the immense challenge it poses. As prominent Russian media analyst Vasily Gatov noted, "If the 20th century was defined by the battle for freedom of information and against censorship, the 21st century will be defined by malevolent actors, states or corporations, abusing the right to freedom of information."ⁱ Winning in the informational battlespace is an essential precondition to winning on the battlefield, and Ukraine must keep rising to meet the challenge.

The Genesis and Evolution of Kremlin Disinformation

The Kremlin's current disinformation playbook evolved from earlier information manipulation techniques developed during the early days of the Soviet Union. Interestingly, the term "disinformation" (*dezinformatsiya* in Russian), which we now understand to mean verifiably false information deliberately spread to mislead, has dubious origins. Supposedly, the term was coined by none other than Stalin and used by the NKVD (the KGB's predecessor) as part of a series of tactics known as "active measures."ⁱⁱ The term was further developed in the 1950s by the KGB's infamous Service A, which was responsible for carrying out clandestine campaigns against the West. The KGB spread the story that the term was French and that it served as "a weapon of informational warfare deployed by the capitalist West against the USSR."ⁱⁱⁱ From the late 1960s to the early 1980s, during Yuri Andropov's tenure as the head of the KGB, disinformation was an important component of the enhanced "active measures" program. The goal was subversion: weakening the West by driving wedges in alliances, sowing discord among populations, and discrediting the United States in the eyes of the people of Europe, Asia, Africa, and Latin America.^{iv}

A product of the KGB, Vladimir Putin rose to power in the 2000s and began developing comprehensive information doctrines with his inner circle as part of a grand strategy for controlling domestic populations and advancing foreign policy objectives.^v During this time, Russia morphed into a disinformation laboratory, with the techniques we are seeing used today being tested and refined on the Russian people, especially its ethnic, national and religious minorities.^{vi} Putin, with the help of his oligarch allies, acquired direct or indirect control of all major television media in the country through a combination of state and private interests. Establishing effective control over television media was paramount to achieving his foremost objective of ensuring the long-term survival of his increasingly autocratic regime while simultaneously eliminating any vestiges of democracy that had emerged during the tenure of his predecessor Boris Yeltsin. This could not be done through control of television media alone, as Putin would discover during the social media-fuelled protests against the regime that occurred from 2011 to 2013. After suppressing the protests, which represented the most serious threat to Putin since he had taken power, he became more ruthless in stifling dissent, establishing control over the Internet through a "Russification" program that pushed, "users to rely on Russian-made platforms and applications such as Yandex (the Russian equivalent of Google) and VKontakte (the Russian equivalent of Facebook)."^{vii} By 2014, the Kremlin's dominion over television media and cyberspace was near total. It is worth noting, however, that many Russians today are perfectly aware that their news is fake: "The Kremlin's power is entrenched not by trying to persuade people that it is telling the truth, but by making it clear that it can dictate the terms of the 'truth' and thus enhancing its aura of power"^{viii}. If reality is whatever the Kremlin decides it to be, one must be pragmatic, shrug one's shoulders, and accept it.



Disinformation as a Weapon in Ukraine

Putin's regime needs war and enemies to survive. As Yale history professor Timothy Snyder noted, Russian foreign policy has long been based on strategic relativism: it cannot become stronger; therefore it must strive to make others weaker.^{ix} In addition to destabilizing other states, war serves as a useful distraction, diverting attention away from domestic problems like economic decline, and has historically boosted Putin's public support. Such was the case in Chechnya in the early 2000s, Georgia in 2008, and finally Ukraine in 2014. The invasion of Crimea, Southern and South-Eastern Ukraine that year involved what General Philip Breedlove, NATO's Supreme Allied Commander Europe at that time, called "the most amazing information warfare blitzkrieg we have ever seen in the history of information warfare."^x The invasion made use of the techniques refined by the Kremlin, with the disinformation campaign working on two levels against both Russian and Western audiences: "First, a direct assault on factuality, denying the obvious, even war itself, second, as an unconditional proclamation of innocence, denying that Russia could be responsible for any wrong."^{xi} To inhibit Western support for Ukraine, the Russian disinformation strategy focused on defeating, discrediting, and falsifying information as a means of convincing or at least sowing the seeds of doubt in the minds of Westerners, many of whom knew little to nothing about the region or its history. Using an expanded network of troll farms, botnets, and foreign mouthpieces, Russia branded Ukrainian president Petro Poroshenko, who came to power after the pro-Russian leader Viktor Yanukovich was ousted in the wake of the Euromaidan Revolution of 2014, as an illegitimate, Russophobic, corrupt neo-Nazi. The Kremlin further pushed the narrative that Russia had special, historically vested interests in Ukraine that the West was seeking to undermine. The disinformation campaign was successful domestically, with Putin's approval rating soaring from 62% to a high of 85%.^{xii} The campaign also conveyed to Russians still harbouring hope for political change within their own country that their desire for freedom would not lead to peace or prosperity but only to war and devastation.^{xiii}

In the prelude to the most recent phase of Russia's war against Ukraine, which began with the Kyiv offensive in February 2022, the Kremlin's disinformation machine once again intensified operations, seeking to "justify military action against Ukraine, mask its operational planning, and deny any responsibility for the coming war."^{xiv} As Russian forces amassed on Ukraine's borders, the Kremlin also published a key piece of disinformation: "On the Historical Unity of Russians and Ukrainians." This rambling, 7,000-word essay purportedly written by Putin asserted that Russians and Ukrainians are historically, culturally and spiritually "one people."^{xv} The essay went on to argue that Ukraine is naturally a part of Russia that Western powers have, historically, sought to coerce away to divide and destabilize the country. The essay dovetailed with other disinformation being released to Russian and Western audiences as troops mobilized and after the invasion began. In Russia, the disinformation exploited a deep-seated fear of losing Kyiv, a city many perceive as their ancient, spiritual capital, as well as the fear that the West will conquer a territory and people that are inextricably linked to Russia. Kremlin propagandists reframed the conflict as a fight between Russia and the West: the "special military operation" was necessary to save Ukraine from being rapidly absorbed into NATO, an alliance that sought to threaten Russia's security by challenging its rightful regional sphere of influence, sovereignty, and cherished Christian values. Russia, propagandists argued, was a peaceful state faced with the threat of NATO armies on its border: it had a clear security impetus to intervene in Ukraine before it was too late and that such intervention was self-defence. At the same time as Russia was mobilizing its troops on Ukraine's borders under the guise of military exercises, the Kremlin published over 2,000 articles pushing the false narrative that Russia was seeking peace and that it was ready and willing to engage in constructive dialogue with Ukraine and its Western allies. Russia announced that escalation would be avoided if the West agreed to "security guarantees" that recognized Russia's right to a regional sphere of influence and guaranteed that Ukraine would never join NATO. These conditions were always "an untenable ultimatum to Ukraine and the West" that only served to reinforce the Kremlin's desire to "appear to be taking the moral high ground." This narrative convinced many in both Ukraine and the West that Russia would not launch an invasion while talks were ongoing. Despite repeated public warnings from Western intelligence agencies, many were still caught blindsided when Russian forces began moving into Ukraine.

As was the case in 2014, disinformation created by the Kremlin was picked up and disseminated by many Western politicians, commentators, and academics, some of whom had ties to the Kremlin. Intentionally or unintentionally, they spread key Kremlin narratives designed to undermine public trust in the actions Western governments had begun taking in support of Ukraine. Pernicious narratives resurfaced, such as the notion that Ukraine might not really exist or that it was destined to be split by internal divisions or controlled by Russia, which had a legitimate claim to its territory.^{xvi} Since 2014, the West has stepped up its counter-disinformation mechanisms and as a result Russian disinformation narratives have been far less successful in influencing Western publics compared to in 2014.



Importantly, in addition to domestic and Western audiences, Russia also actively targeted Ukrainians themselves with the goal of undermining trust in Zelensky's presidency, creating confusion, prompting panic, and generally sowing societal discord. This was done primarily through social media, the medium through which the majority of Ukrainians get their news. The Kremlin's logic was that a divided and frenetic Ukrainian public would be easier to conquer. Since 2014, however, Ukraine has made great strides in building resilience to such attacks. The country developed a counter-disinformation community that can identify and overcome informational threats. In the build-up to the 2022 invasion, Ukraine also created a multi-pronged strategy focused on "educating the Ukrainian public about Moscow's goals in the information space and strengthening citizens' media literacy and resilience to manipulation."^{xvii} After the invasion, Ukraine declared the digital domain one of its frontlines and began setting up teams and processes to verify the facts in all updates posted on official channels to pre-empt any challenges to its credibility.^{xviii} Just recently, Ukraine's military intelligence (HUR) predicted that the Kremlin would begin a disinformation campaign claiming that Ukraine had been directly involved in selling weapons to Hamas for their attacks on Israel. These measures have helped inoculate Ukraine's citizenry, ensuring that societal cohesion and order would be maintained in the face of a deluge of false information coming from Russia. However, while Ukraine was building up its fact-checking capabilities Russia's propagandists went on the informational counter-offensive by creating news programs, and social media channels aimed at debunking Western and Ukrainian news that they presented as fake or biased. While "fact-checking" has been largely co-opted by Kremlin propagandists as a disinformation strategy many Russians, especially younger Russians, use Virtual Private Networks to gain access to credible news from outside the country. Seeking the truth in Russia is not only risky but costly as it is viewed by the regime as a form of unlawful resistance; calling out Russian disinformation now carries a prison sentence of 15 years in prison so few choose to actively speak out or oppose. Currently, as the world's attention shifts to a new war in the Middle East, the Kremlin disinformation machine is pushing new narratives that include the West growing tired of supporting Ukraine, Ukraine's military becoming ineffective to the point of soon being overwhelmed, and Ukraine supporting Hamas. As the war and other major world events continue to shape the information environment, Ukraine must continue developing its counter-disinformation expertise and capacity to stem the propagation of malicious narratives.

Conclusion

The Kremlin's disinformation strategy has had some success, especially in 2014, both domestically and in parts of Ukraine. However, in the context of the current war, the Kremlin's impact globally is diminishing. Russia's goal from the outset of the war was to break Ukraine and divide its allies. However, not only has Ukraine not fallen, but in sharp contrast to 2014, the West has taken a strong stand by disbursing billions in military and humanitarian aid and vowing to do so for as long as it takes. As the war rages on, the Kremlin's disinformation tactics will continue to evolve and will try to exacerbate signs of emerging skepticism in the West's collective commitment to Ukraine. In the face of this threat, Ukraine and its Western allies must maintain continuous vigilance and develop mechanisms to effectively preserve the integrity of information and provide counter-narratives as warranted. Canada, which has also been the target of repeated Russian state-sponsored disinformation, has taken steps to build its resilience through the Rapid Response Mechanism, the Canadian Digital Media Research Network, and the Canadian Centre for Cyber Security. While there is no single solution to counter disinformation, Canada's toolkit should continue to include measures that promote digital literacy, increase pro-democracy messaging transparency, and employ rigorous fact-checking in response to disinformation. By dispelling false claims made by Russia, Canada upholds its commitment to support its ally Ukraine in tandem with its commitment to protect the Canadian public against the threat of pernicious false information. Canada must continue to work alongside its partners in the G7 and NATO, strengthening coordination and building capacity.

In remarks to a recent event sponsored by the uOttawa Professional Development Institute and Information Integrity Lab, France 24 journalist and Russian propaganda expert Douglas Herbert provided a similar analysis of how the Kremlin tailors propaganda to sway domestic, international, and Ukrainian audiences, aiming to influence populations and advance strategic objectives. He underscored the imperative for organizations and governments to sustain vigilance, patience, and persistence in countering Russian disinformation. Indeed, a collaborative, multi-pronged approach is necessary to safeguard Canadian democracy and respond adequately to novel Russian state-sponsored disinformation threats, which are almost certainly going to continue to increase.



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Endnotes

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