

# Moscow and the World: From Soviet Active Measures to Russian Information Warfare

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## Abstract

Russia under Vladimir Putin has expanded and moved rapidly to improve its ability to employ “disinformation,” or “information warfare,” as an effective instrument to help it to accomplish its specific foreign policy objectives. Although it has only been since direct Russian involvement in the U.S. presidential election of 2016 that this has been an issue of major public political concern in the United States, a flood of research on this topic has now begun to appear. Despite many years of preparation for cyber conflict against critical U.S. infrastructure and military forces, the U.S. government and cybersecurity industry were unprepared for Russian information operations targeting the 2016 U.S. presidential election. It is clear, however, that the Russian propaganda/ disinformation activities in the U.S. are but one part of a policy targeted virtually everywhere across the entire world and that this policy builds upon the earlier propaganda and disinformation activities of Russia’s predecessor state, the USSR. In the present essay, we intend to track the reemergence and development of the information warfare and disinformation component of Russian policy under President Putin, including its largely successful attempt to reintegrate the components of the former Soviet Union and its deep roots in Soviet “active measures,” up until the invasion of Ukraine, when it expanded exponentially. We shall also track the areas of the world targeted, and the increasing breadth of its target audiences and the issues covered.

## Keywords

*disinformation warfare, propaganda, Russia, ussr*

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## 1. Soviet Propaganda and Disinformation Policy<sup>1</sup>

**C**urrent Russian disinformation policy clearly has its roots in what the Soviets termed “active measures” and in which they included both propaganda and disinformation. On the propaganda side, for example, in 1983, the Soviets published books in eighty-four foreign languages mainly for distribution abroad. In English alone 1,200 books and pamphlets appeared in more than 24 million copies [4]. The weekly *Moscow News* appeared in more than 800,000 copies in English, French, Spanish, and Arabic translations at that time [5]. Besides direct dissemination of Soviet propaganda, the Soviets also relied on the wide network of foreign communist and front organisations to distribute Soviet-oriented propaganda.

The purpose of this propaganda network and facilities was to support both general and specific Soviet foreign policy objectives—more specifically to weaken the United States and North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) and to extoll the achievements of the USSR, thereby advancing Moscow’s objectives. The definition of propaganda used in this analysis is based on that developed by Hazan [6] as a preconceived, systematic and centrally coordinated process of manipulating symbols, aimed at promoting certain uniform attitudes, beliefs, values, and behaviour within mass audiences abroad – these expected attitudes, beliefs, values and behaviour are congruent with the specific interests and ends of the propagandist.<sup>2</sup>

Related to, but distinct from propaganda, is disinformation, defined as any governmental-sponsored communication of intentionally false and misleading material (often combined with selectively true information) which is passed to targeted individuals, groups, or governments with the purposes of influencing foreign elite or public opinion and policies [8]; see also [9]. Propaganda differs from disinformation in two important ways. The former is targeted at a mass audience and is not necessarily deceptive, while disinformation is aimed ultimately at foreign policy decision makers and is always purposefully deceptive.

Propaganda and disinformation belong to a category of activities, which the Soviets referred to as “active measures,” including both overt and covert techniques employed for the purpose of influencing events and behavior in foreign countries. “These measures are employed to influence the policies of other governments, underline confidence in the leaders and institutions of these states, disrupt the relations between various nations, and discredit and weaken major opponents” [8]. They were also used to generate abroad favourable

1 — This section of the current analysis draws from [1]. See, also, the articles on Russian propaganda [2] and [3].

2 — See the perceptive discussion of Russian information policy [7].

views towards the Soviet Union and its policies and support for specific policy initiatives.<sup>3</sup>

## 2. The Collapse of the USSR and the Failed Democratisation of Russia

The dissolution of the Soviet Union in 1991 and the emergence of fifteen new states in its place seemingly brought to an end to the imperial tradition of Russian domination over various peoples conquered and absorbed into the Russian/Soviet empire over the period of more than half a millennium. Yet, since the very creation of the new Russian state, political leaders in Moscow have been committed to returning Russia to the status of a great power, including, since Vladimir Putin assumed power more than two decades ago, the reestablishment of much of the imperial political order that seemingly collapsed in 1991, and to using propaganda and disinformation in the pursuit of this and other goals. To a substantial degree, Western policy after the collapse of the former USSR assumed that Russia's demise as a great power would be a permanent characteristic of the international system and, thus "active measures" against the West would cease. Throughout the 1990s and after the turn of the century, Russia's interests and concerns were largely ignored, as both the United States and Western community more broadly moved to fulfill their own political and security objectives in post-Communist Europe – objectives that included the incorporation of most of Central and East European post-Soviet space into Western security, political and economic institutions.

Initially, as the Russian state found itself in virtual political and economic freefall under President Boris Yeltsin, the objective of reestablishing Russia's great power status seemed to be little more than a rhetorical and an unrealistic and unrealisable dream. Even though Russia did employ its greatly reduced military capabilities in the attempt to play a role in those Soviet successor states challenged by internal conflict – conflict often facilitated, if not initiated, by clandestine Russian military interference [13] – the prospect of the Russian Federation's rejoining the ranks of major global actors seemed remote until the domestic rise to power of President Vladimir Putin at the end of the century. However, as the Russian economy and Russian self-confidence and assertiveness were buoyed by the rising price of oil and gas, the revitalisation of other sectors of the economy, and the reassertion of Moscow's control over growing segments of the vast territory of the Russian Federation itself, more sophisticated diplomatic and economic instruments, including what amounts to

3 ——— Ladislav Bittman, the defected former head of the Soviet disinformation unit, described in great detail how he had mixed fact with fiction to create make-believe events and policies [10, pp. 5–6, 11]. For a detailed discussion of the broad disinformation campaign associated with the likely role of the USSR in the assassination of President John F. Kennedy, see [12].

economic blackmail,<sup>4</sup> became a central component of Russia's reassertion of influence within what Moscow views as its traditional, and legitimate, sphere of influence. However, as events in Georgia since 2014 have made clear, brute military power remains an important element in the Russian arsenal. In effect, the Russian political leadership's initial commitment to integration into the "community of civilised states," to use Yeltsin's phrase [15], and its willingness to follow the Western lead on major international political issues, were short-lived. Even before 1995, President Yeltsin and Foreign Minister Andrei Kozyrev,<sup>5</sup> the primary architect of this pro-Western emphasis in Russian policy, were forced to redefine Russian foreign and security policy in a much more realistic and nationalistic direction than they had done initially [17]. Yet, the issue that raised the most serious response in Moscow in this period remained the question of NATO's expansion eastward. Moscow orchestrated a multifaceted campaign that included pressure on the applicant countries and threats that the expansion would, in effect, initiate a new cold war in relations between Russia and the West. In fact, however, when NATO decided to invite the Czech Republic, Hungary, and Poland to join the alliance, Russia reluctantly accepted the decision without any of the retaliatory responses that had been threatened. With Kozyrev's replacement as foreign minister by Georgii Primakov in 1996, Russia proclaimed a formal Eurasian thrust in its policy, one that included active Russian involvement in and primacy over the so-called "near abroad" of former Soviet territory.<sup>6</sup>

After Putin was appointed acting prime minister, and later replaced Yeltsin as Interim President on the last day of 1999, his commitment to reestablishing Moscow's control over domestic politics and to rebuilding the foundations of Russia's great power status, the financial boon resulting from the explosion of oil and gas prices, as well as the shortsighted and counterproductive policies of Washington, strengthened and expanded the range of policy instruments available to Russia, including economic and political leverage, in its ongoing attempts to reestablish its dominant role across post-Soviet space – the creation of a "Greater Russia" – as an integral part of reasserting its role as a great power whose interests could no longer be ignored as they were throughout the 1990s.<sup>7</sup>

### ——— 3. The Return of Imperial Russia

But it was clear in the approach that Washington and its allies took to Moscow's objections to Western policy that Russia was not viewed in the restructured European security environment as an

4 ——— As Nygren [14, pp. 232ff.] demonstrated, economic levers became the most reliable instruments for Russia in its campaign to reassert control over its neighbours – at least until the military operations in Georgia.

5 ——— For an exceptional discussion of the specifics of Russian politics and of relations with the new ex-Soviet states see [16].

6 ——— For an excellent discussion of this shift in Russian policy toward the countries of the CIS (Commonwealth of Independent States) and the increased use of economic and financial instruments of power, see the work of Bertil Nygren [14, 18, 19].

7 ——— For an important collection of perceptive articles that examine the domestic and foreign policy dimensions of Russia's reemergence as a great power see [20, 21].

equal player whose interests had to be given serious consideration. Once it became obvious that their efforts to forestall the expansion of NATO eastward were doomed to failure, the Russians seem to have accepted the reality and attempted to gain whatever benefits they could out of that acceptance. They shifted the focus of their opposition to NATO expansion from East-Central Europe to the Baltics. Moreover, on 27 May 1997, Moscow signed the Russia-NATO Founding Act that was supposed to provide clear parameters for the relationship between Russia and the Western Alliance. In return, Russia was granted membership in an expanded “G-8,” although it was excluded from full participation in those “G-8” meetings at which meaningful decisions concerning international financial matters were likely to occur. Although Russia and the United States cooperated in a variety of security areas, these relationships did not fulfill Russian goals. Moreover, given the disastrous state of the Russian economy at the time, Moscow could have little hope of exercising any real influence within the group. At the same time, the Russia-NATO Founding Act also proved to be unsatisfactory as a model for Russia to pursue its foreign policy interests. Thus, by summer 2001, little more than half a year into the presidency of George W. Bush and one-and-a-half years into Vladimir Putin’s presidency, the US-Russian relations were on an apparent collision course.<sup>8</sup> Russians were increasingly frustrated by Washington’s obvious disregard to their role in world affairs and by the apparent the US lack of concern for Russian interests – as in the NATO bombing of Yugoslavia and in the US efforts to restrict Russian involvement in the development of oil and gas reserves in the Caspian Basin [23, 24]. Before we turn to a discussion of Russian policy in the Putin era – as a prelude to returning to the issue of disinformation as a tool in that policy, it is important to refer to the Chechen war because of its overall impact on many other aspects of Russian policy. Moreover, the ongoing Russian struggle to reassert control over Chechnya and to root out Chechen opposition to that effort brought Moscow into regular conflict with Georgia, whose government the Russians accused of harbouring and supporting Chechen separatists [24].

Therefore, the war in Chechnya was much more than simply an internal challenge to central authority within the Russian Federation; it also had a visible impact on relations with both near neighbours and the West. The Russian Federation’s relations with the West, especially with the United States, were increasingly conflictual. Russia was no longer taken seriously as a major actor in world affairs, and its views and concerns – for example, NATO’s campaign against Yugoslavia for its attempt to expel the majority of the ethnic Albanians from

8 — For a careful analysis of the state of Russian relations with the West at this time see [22].

Kosovo largely ignored Russia, based on the assumption that it was no longer an important or relevant actor.

Thus, when Vladimir Putin took over as interim president on 1 January 2000, he inherited these and an entire series of additional policy disagreements with the United States, and the West more generally, that included the restructuring of the Russian debt, NATO, and European Union (EU) expansion, the US commitment to move forward with a missile defense system, the longer-term future of Yugoslavia and the Balkans, Russia's nuclear relations with Iran, and so on. The general parameters of Russian policy, including policy towards the United States, were set early in Putin's presidency, and derived directly from the policy lines established in Moscow in the mid-1990s. Putin made clear his commitment to reestablishing the place of Russia as the preeminent regional power and as an important international actor. Essential preconditions for the fulfillment of these objectives, as the "Foreign Policy Concept" that Putin approved indicated, were the internal political stability and economic viability of Russia [25, 26].<sup>9</sup> According to this policy prescription, Russia had to overcome all efforts towards and evidence of separatism, national and religious extremism, and terrorism. Putin moved forcefully, and in most cases effectively, in reasserting central governmental control in Russia [27]. The economy, while still not flourishing, had shown strong signs of turning around with growth rates of 4.5%, 10.0%, and 5.0% in the years 1999–2001. In the foreign policy arena, Putin continued to seek allies who shared Russia's commitment to preventing the global dominance of the United States that represents, in the words of the Foreign Policy Concept (2000), a threat to international security and to Russia's goal of serving as a major centre of influence in a multipolar world. Putin's success in dealing with the major problems challenging the Russian state at the beginning of the decade meant that Russia now faced the United States and the West from a position of increased strength. Besides rebuilding the foundations of the Russian state at any cost as a precondition of Russia's ability to reassert itself as a major power, Putin and his associates did benefit greatly, but not exclusively, from the exponential rise in global demand for gas and oil and the ensuing revitalisation of the Russian economy. This, in turn, contributed to Russia's ability to pursue a much more active and assertive foreign policy, as many analysts have noted [28–30].

9 — For an assessment of Imperial and Russian expansionist policy see [27].

### 3.1. Military Intervention, Economic Coercion, and the Rebuilding of “Greater Russia”

Before turning to the role of “information warfare” and disinformation in Russia’s attempt to re-establish its great power status, a discussion of the reintegration of former Soviet space, which some have termed *Greater Russia*, precisely the policy implied by Putin’s negative reference to the dissolution of the USSR, is required. As already noted, despite the rhetorical commitment of Russian leaders to deal with the former Soviet republics as sovereign equals, from almost the very creation of the Russian Federation, Moscow has been directly and indirectly involved in the internal affairs of its new neighbours [27]. Throughout the 1990s, the major instruments used to re-establish Russia’s influence were various types of *de facto* military intervention and efforts to turn the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS) into a meaningful organ of economic and political reintegration. Since at least 2000 Russian policy towards its neighbours in the CIS, as well as to the Baltic states, has become much more sophisticated and complex, though by no means more cooperative and neighbourly, culminating in the unjustified invasion of Ukraine in 2022 – and has relied increasingly, besides military means, on the use of Russia’s dominant position in the energy field and its growing economic leverage vis-à-vis its much weaker and economically dependent neighbours. Most important has been the Russian government’s regaining almost total control over Russian energy production and distribution and its dominating the energy sector of neighbouring countries – often through the semi-coerced purchase of the energy distribution and processing infrastructure of those countries [14, pp. 238–245, 19, 31]. As noted above, the exponential increase in global demand for energy has been the single most important factor fueling the revival of the Russian economy and to growing Russian political influence vis-à-vis neighbouring states [9, 14, 18, 19].<sup>10</sup> In fact, almost from the very inception of the new Russian Federation, Moscow has used its control of energy as a means to “influence” other former Soviet republics to change political positions that they had taken or to follow Moscow’s policy lead. This has been especially true in Russia’s relations with the Baltic republics, with Ukraine, Georgia, and more recently even with Belarus, all post-Soviet states with which Russia has had serious policy differences over the course of the past 15 years. Moscow has in all cases put the blame for the cut-off of energy flows on the other side, or explained them as the result of technical problems, and argued, as well, that the policies of its oil and gas companies were dictated solely by economic, not political, considerations.<sup>11</sup>

10 — The dominant narrative in analyses of Russia’s economic revival that attribute, almost exclusively, to Russian gas and oil exports and to the rise in global demand and, thus, prices for those exports have been increasingly challenged by those who point to the vibrant growth of other sectors of the Russian economy. A recent World Bank report notes, for example, that growth in the Russian economy has been stimulated by sectors other than simply gas and oil. The report noted: “In 2003–04, oil and some industrial sectors drove economic growth, but the subsequent expansion was driven largely by non-tradable goods and services for the domestic market, including manufacturing goods. In 2007, wholesale and retail trade alone accounted for almost a third of economic growth. Booming construction and manufacturing contributed another 30%. Manufacturing expanded by 7.4% in 2007, up from 2.9% in 2006. By contrast, growth in resource extraction virtually stopped, reflecting capacity constraints. The good news, so far, is that high rates of productivity growth underlie this robust growth” [32, p. 4].

11 — It is important to recognise that, with the collapse of the former Soviet Union the Russian Federation decided to continue to supply gas and oil to other former republics—now, new sovereign states – at prices substantially below the world market price. ...

All of these countries are energy poor and almost totally dependent on supplies of petroleum, natural gas, and, in some cases, electricity imported from the Russian Federation [31]. after the opening

Nygren [19] refers to as the “tap weapon” – by stopping the delivery of oil and/or gas to these countries – on various occasions as a means of strengthening its position in policy disputes and negotiating situations. The dispute with Ukraine in 2005–2006, which resulted in Russia’s cutting off exports of gas in the middle of winter – resulted from Gazprom’s decision to more than triple the price of gas. This decision, however, emerged only in the aftermath of the “Orange Revolution,” which had reversed the “victory” of Russia’s preferred candidate in the Ukrainian presidential election a decade earlier. Until that time, Putin’s policy towards Ukraine had been based on pragmatic long-term political and economic considerations. However, with the collapse of pro-Russian political forces in Ukraine, Russia expanded a more coercive approach to demonstrate to the Ukrainians that assertions of independence from Moscow’s influence would have real costs [33, pp. 80–89]. The “gas war” of 2005–2006 between Russia and Ukraine was “resolved” by a complicated settlement in which a majority Russian-owned Swiss company sold gas originating supposedly from Central Asia to Ukraine at subsidised prices, with prices increasing gradually over several years to world market levels.<sup>12</sup>

Ukraine is by no means the only post-Soviet state to have experienced Moscow’s political displeasure and, thus, the effects of the “tap weapon.” Belarus, which for most of the post-Soviet period has pursued a slavishly pro-Russian policy, angered Putin’s government in 2002, thereby leading to 4 years of confrontation between the two countries, with Gazprom taking the lead role in the dispute. Once again, because pipelines to the West crossed Belarusian territory, Belarus had some bargaining power. Eventually, however, the government of President Alexander Lukashenko was forced to capitulate or face the cut-off of Russian gas supplies. Prices were to be increased over a five-year period, while Gazprom gained direct control over the pipelines across Belarus [14, pp. 76–79].

Until the August 2008 Russian invasion of Crimea, the gas weapon, as well as that of electricity, had been the most important instrument in Russian pressure brought against Georgia in order to coerce the latter into policies more in line with Moscow’s interests. Here, these pressures have been employed, along with traditional threats of military intervention in support of Abkhaz and South Ossetian separatists – threats that were realised in August 2008 [34]. In the Georgian case over the past several years Russia acquired substantial

...Thus, as global prices for gas and oil skyrocketed after the turn of the century, Russia was exporting oil and gas to neighbouring countries at subsidised prices one-third or less of the world market price.

12 — Nygren [14, pp. 61–62] provides a detailed discussion of the specifics of the agreements, as well as the relevant sources. Ukraine was in a position to bargain with Gazprom and Moscow because Russia depended upon the secure flow of gas through pipelines across Ukraine in order to fulfill its export obligations to customers in Central and Western Europe. See also [30].

13 — In 2003 the Russian firm UES obtained 75 percent ownership in a Georgian electricity distribution company and management control over several power plants, as well as 50 percent ownership of a nuclear power plant. Gazprom acquired control of Georgia’s main gas pipeline in 2005 in return for a restructuring of the latter’s debt. In other words, Russia now directly controls much of Georgia’s energy production and distribution and still serves as the primary source of gas, even after the opening of the new pipeline from Azerbaijan in late 2006 [37, 38].



ownership of energy production and distribution facilities in Georgia to cover the costs of outstanding debts and as a precondition for continued discounted prices on Russian gas [35, 36].<sup>13</sup> This control, however, did not restrain the Georgian government into accepting Russian dominance in the region – or accepting the *de facto* autonomy of the Russian-backed secessions in South Ossetia and Abkhazia, resulting in military hostilities in August 2008 that in effect wiped out Georgian military capabilities developed in recent years with the US military assistance and training.<sup>14</sup>

Russia's *de facto* control over the energy supplies of other post-Soviet states – Armenia, Moldova, and the Baltic states – has also been used in similar ways to influence the policy positions of these countries, as Nygren [14] has described in some detail. Yet, there is another part of Russia's use of its domination over energy production and distribution that is significant for the drive to re-establishing Greater Russia and re-establishing the Russian Federation as a major world power, namely, attempting to gain control over the distribution of oil and gas from Central Asia in Western markets.

### 3.2. Russian Foreign Policy and Disinformation

As we have already seen, with the turn of the millennium Russian relations with both many newly independent former Soviet republics and the states of the West deteriorated appreciably, some to the point of warfare. Military and economic tools were increasingly the means used by Moscow to gain its objectives. However, propaganda and disinformation, as had been the case with the USSR, also emerged as important instruments with which to achieve foreign policy goals. We, therefore, examine the Russian conception of disinformation and the institutional framework within which it is carried out as well as the most important targets and themes emphasised recently.

In post-Communist Russia various academic views of information warfare have emerged that, in fact, define the same activity: “The process of undermining a legitimate government by manipulating the information domain in order to influence political elites and instill political dissent, separatism, and social strife within a given system” [42].<sup>15</sup> This concept describes, in the view of the Russian analysts, a Western technique to subvert its adversaries. In the opinion of Aleksandr Dugin, for example, the West (mainly the United States) has been waging an offensive against Russia throughout the 20th and early 21<sup>st</sup> century. Two directly political actions have been justified because of these views entering the political realm: The passage

14 — In early August 2008—after weeks of mutual verbal attacks between Moscow and Tbilisi and apparently with encouragement from political elements in the United States—President Saakashvili of Georgia, reportedly responding to rocket attacks from locations inside the breakaway region of South Ossetia, sent forces into the region to reincorporate the breakaway republic. The Russians, who had apparently massed troops on the Russian-South Ossetian border in advance, almost immediately overwhelmed Georgian forces in the republic, as well as in a second breakaway region of Abkhazia, and advanced far into Georgia territory proper [39, 40]. Among the most salient analyses of the Russian intervention is that of George Friedman [41], who points to the importance in Russia's calculations of what Moscow perceived—not without reason—as a U.S. policy of containment in which Georgia and Ukraine were important elements.

15 — In what well may be the best introduction to the topic available, along with that of Ofar Fridman [42] discusses the conceptual narratives for understanding information warfare: ‘subversion-war’ developed by Evgeny Messner [43], ‘net-centric war’ [44] and ‘information warfare’ developed by Igor Panarin [45]. These concepts all mean basically the same thing and underlie these authors' views of information warfare/ disinformation. ...

of domestic laws to limit the possibility of Western influence in Russia itself, and also the development of what have become global disinformation and other techniques of information warfare.<sup>16</sup>

By the middle of the first decade of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, Russian relations with much of the “near abroad” and with the West had already deteriorated significantly and Russian disinformation began to rise significantly. The outbreak of conflict with Ukraine in 2014 resulted in what Van Herpen [50, p. 1] calls “the Kremlin’s most massive propaganda offensive in the past seventy years.”<sup>17</sup>

### 3.3. Russian Information Warfare

Although “information warfare,” or “disinformation policy” never disappeared completely after the demise of the USSR, it began to expand appreciably after Putin came to power and relations with both much of the “near abroad” and the West began to deteriorate as described by President Vladimir Putin, “We must take into account the plans and directions of development of the armed forces of other countries. Our responses must be based on intellectual superiority, they will be asymmetric, and less expensive” [57]. In his *Handbook of Russian Information Warfare*, Giles [58, pp. 4, 22] explains the following:

*Information warfare can cover a vast range of different activities and processes seeking to steal, plant, interdict, manipulate, distort, or destroy information. The channels and methods available for doing this cover an equally broad range, including computers, smartphones, real or invented news media, statements by leaders or celebrities, online troll campaigns, text messages, vox pops by concerned citizens, You Tube videos, or direct approaches to individual human targets. Recent Russian campaigning provides examples of all of the above and more... Russia seeks to influence foreign decision-making by supplying polluted information, exploiting the fact that Western elected representatives receive and are sensitive to the same information flows as their voters. When disinformation delivered in this manner is part of the framework for decisions, this constitutes success for Moscow, because a key element of reflexive control is in place.*

*However, even if disinformation is not successfully inserted into the policy-making chain, and only spreads in mass and social media, the effect can be to create a permissive public opinion environment where Russian narratives are presented as factual. Moscow’s potential gain at this level of influence is to win public support in adversary nations, and thereby attenuate resistance*

...For a broad discussion of the general aspects of information theory see [46]. For more on the issue, without sole regard to Russia, see [47].

16 — For an overview of the Putin government’s gaining control over the internet at home, while also attempting to control it internationally, see [48]. For a broad survey of Russian policy views, see [49].

17 — For some excellent discussions of the breadth and importance of disinformation policy since Russia’s invasion of Ukraine, see [51–56].

*to actions planned by Russia, in order to increase their chances of success and reduce the likelihood of damaging adverse reactions by the international community.*<sup>18</sup>

The range of targets is broad. Subversion campaigns can aim, as noted by two Russian analysts, primarily the mass media and religious organisations, cultural institutions, non-governmental organisations, public movements financed from abroad, and scholars engaged in research on foreign grants. All these institutions and individuals may be involved in a distributed attack and strike damaging point blows at the country's social system with the purported aims of promoting democracy and respect for human rights [60].

Obvious targets for distributing disinformation are the media, and a direct link is seen between media campaigns and society's capacity to resist. Social media are also an important tool in Russia's campaign [61]. The Russian analysts, Chekinov and Bogdanov, note that the

*mass media today can stir up chaos and confusion in government and military management of any country and instill ideas of violence, treachery, and immorality, and demoralize the public. Put through this treatment, the armed forces personnel and public of any country will not be ready for active defense* [62].

However, organisations other than the media can also be targeted.

### 3.4. Russian Information Warfare in the Post-Communist World<sup>19</sup>

We shall now briefly examine some of the examples of Russian "information warfare" in the post-Communist world and the responses of the target states to the attacks. Among the first major campaigns orchestrated by Moscow was that against Estonia in 2007, when the Estonians had the audacity to move a Soviet World War II statue from the centre of the capital to a military cemetery on the edge of the city, resulting in the Bronze Soldier conflict [65]. Given that about 26% of the population of the country – significantly more in urban areas – consists of ethnic Russians (slightly more including all Russian speakers), this was an issue that greatly divided society. The Estonian government responded to widespread Russian actions by pursuing a policy and establishing an agency committed to an active approach to integration of non-Estonian speakers into the broader society and a response to Russian "information warfare" policy [63, pp. 49 ff.]. Also, among the most active and invasive programmes in post-Communist Europe and much of the

18 — As already noted above, the treatment of Russian "information warfare" is exceptionally perceptive. For a more general discussion that places Russian policy in the context of disinformation more generally, see [59].

19 — One of the most comprehensive treatments of Russian information warfare against former Communist states is the examination of information wars against Estonia, Georgia, Poland, Ukraine, and the Czech Republic [63]. As noted in [63], the primary purpose of information warfare is to drive political wedges between competing population groups in target countries. This is very often accomplished by projecting information that is largely, or fully, true but is likely to contribute to political conflict in target countries. Moreover, Stengel [47] places Russian policy in the context of that of China and others. For another comprehensive study, see [64].

rest of the world has been its campaign for support of its policy in Crimea. Linked to quite tense relations between the two countries, sometimes Western opposition to Russian policy has been tied to the latter's engagement in a major disinformation and propaganda campaign to support its intervention and seizure of territories in Crimea [46],<sup>20</sup> but backed it up with continued military pressure, as well as propaganda, against Georgia [67]. Similarly, Russia mounted major disinformation campaigns targeted across Eastern Europe, especially against Ukraine [68].

The question arises, what one can do to respond to and counter Russian disinformation? "Western countermeasures have raised awareness of Russian activities, but their impact on Russia's efforts has been uncertain, and Russia appears undeterred" [61, 69, 70]. In the cases of Estonia and the Czech Republic, both countries recognised Russian information warfare and have been quite effective in countering it by establishing government agencies to detect and counter Russian efforts, and by engaging think tanks and citizen volunteers in countering it, among many other approaches [71], including an attempt by Estonia to get the EU to create an agency to deal with the issue. Elsewhere in Europe, Sweden has invested heavily in a comprehensive approach to combating foreign interference in their democracy, and their efforts have largely been successful. This begins to occur in other post-Communist states [72]; moreover France successfully prevented Russian interference in its elections and in Putin's attempts to divide the French society [70]. The Russian Internet Research Agency (IRA) had a role in the very close election held in the United Kingdom to leave the EU [73].

The most comprehensive answer to the question of how to respond, however, is given by Vilmer [74], who provides a list of policy recommendations that he views as useful – or necessary – to counter Russian disinformation, from distinguishing disinformation and propaganda from public diplomacy to defending European values<sup>21</sup>. Many of the suggestions on this list are derived from the experiences of European countries [75].

### 3.5. Russian Disinformation Policy in the Developing World

The Russians have also been very active to – generally successful – disinformation tactics in the developing world, possibly with special focus on Africa, but also on other regions. They have extended their global disinformation campaign to Africa, where they promote pro-Russian and anti-Western attitudes through

20 — For a discussion of various means to counter Russian "information warfare" see [66].

21 — The entire list of Vilmer's [74] recommendations includes the following:

1. Distinguish disinformation and propaganda from public diplomacy
2. Do not engage in Russophobia or demonising Putin
3. Note publicly that the issue is important
4. Recognise that there is a continuum between military actions and information warfare
5. Understand the subject well by re-enforcing research on the subject
6. Recognise the limits of a solely governmental response and the need for a global one
7. Recognise the limits of refutation and that pointing out the truth is insufficient
8. Create the largest and youngest and the most educated audience possible that thinks critically
9. Promote a journalistic ethics charter signed off by the media of all countries
10. Adapt response to the listener
11. Encourage the development of independent Russian media that is not state-financed
12. Translate and promote the work of independent Russian journalists
13. Invite the most promising of independent to join a programme
14. Point out the old witnesses of Russian disinformation that expose the methods used
15. Use the technology available for fact-checking and to identify trolls, including Facebook and Twitter

propaganda and disinformation. After each disinformation campaign, Moscow assesses its efforts and then tweaks tactics, accordingly, adapting to new countermeasures as necessary. This campaign is centred in and focused on numerous African countries and has been a blending of Kremlin propaganda and local content. Disinformation campaigns in Africa have been elevated to a centerpiece of Russia's foreign and security policy [76].

As Grossman [77] demonstrates, the Russians have been employing social media in Africa to support local regimes and to oppose Western interests and policies. Russia is also running some of its campaigns against the United States and Western Europe out of Africa [78]. Comparable campaigns have been carried out in Latin America, where Twitter and other social media accounts have been very active in supporting accounts that Russia has been "playing a geopolitical role in this hemisphere against what they consider its main enemy – the United States," noted Carlos Vecchio, the Venezuelan envoy in Washington [79].<sup>22</sup> The overall importance of the media – and of the ability to project the Russian "story" – can be seen in the fact that Russia has announced the commitment of a million dollars for the expansion of "independent" media in developing countries [80].

### 3.6. Russian Disinformation Policy in the West

As pointed out early in this article, although Russian disinformation policy has expanded dramatically across the world in recent years, the one focused on the West – on Europe and the United States – has remained by far the most extensive campaign. Cosentino [81] and many others have shown in some detail that even the US and other elections have not been beyond the reach of the Russian Internet Agency (IRA),<sup>23</sup> although the overall impact of their involvement is not clear. The Russians have attempted, both during and outside election cycles, to support candidates whom they favour and to contribute to the political divisions that exist in Western societies [71, 86].

These Russian attacks involve transparently false stories, as well as partially true ones that are meant to cause dissension and political chaos in the target states.<sup>24</sup> Across Western Europe, the Russians have established radio stations and other communications facilities in Germany, Switzerland, and elsewhere that broadcast to West European audiences and thereby, as the Russians hope, have an impact on them [91]. Moreover, there is clear evidence in the United States that many of the vitriolic exchanges supposedly between domestic political factions in reality stem from Russian sources – via

16. Re-enforce the European task force by providing sufficient funds and personnel

17. Encourage European states to develop national means for the fight against disinformation

18. Re-enforce cooperation among states, the EU, and NATO in this area

19. For each false information not only correct the content but also expose the method used

20. Point out the source of financing

21. Create an international organisation dedicated to fighting disinformation

22. Consider more restrictive countermeasures, such as fines and sanctions

23. Counter not only disinformation but also its intent and potential effects by strengthening what it seeks to weaken

24. Communicate more effectively in Russian, especially on social networks

25. Assume and defend European values and develop a positive discourse.

For another list of actions to thwart Russian policy, see [70].

22 — For a general discussion of Russian policy in Latin America, including disinformation policy, see [84].

23 — See [82] concerning the role of the Internet Research Agency (IRA) in carrying out Russian disinformation policy; see also [48, 83–85].

24 — See [73, 89] for the different aspects of Russian disinformation activities in the EU; in German, see [90].

Facebook, for example, by which an estimated 140 million Americans a month were reached via Russian trolls prior to the US election in 2020 [82, 92].

Among the more important issues addressed in this Russian campaign to undermine, or at least cause disruption, even chaos, in Western political systems have been those associated with the global COVID 19 pandemic [93]. Russian disinformation sources have questioned the efficacy of the vaccines developed to deal with the disease and, thus, have contributed to the concern about them and the refusal to take them in the West – especially in the United States [94, 95].

A study of disinformation in the United States concluded that the most affected audience has been a politically conservative one [96].<sup>25</sup> The result is an undercutting of mainstream views and the emergence of opposition to government policy on masks, vaccines, political issues, and related matters. The finding that there is more impact of Russian policy on the political right is borne out by the position taken on numerous international political issues by conservative commentators such as Tucker Carlson [99], formerly of Fox News and Senators like Ted Cruz of Texas [100], who basically opposed President Biden and supported Putin of Russia on his threat to invade Ukraine, a US ally. For Tucker Carlson [99], Cruz [100], and others, such as Representative Marjorie Taylor Green on the far right, the United States has pursued policies in Central and Eastern Europe since the demise of the USSR that have challenged Russia's regional interests and, thus, Putin can be expected to and is justified in challenging Ukraine and indirectly the United States, as it is currently doing. Thus, the US support for Ukraine should be downplayed, even eliminated.

#### 4. Towards the Future

What is now clear across most of the globe is the fact that Moscow is involved on a massive scale in the attempt to manipulate the views of the populations and elites of other countries on all sorts of political issues – from the local ones to issues of Russian – Western confrontation. In some cases, the objective is to justify Russian intervention, as in Georgia and Ukraine. In others, it is to support local political elites that favour Russian positions on global or regional issues.<sup>26</sup> In yet other cases, it is to drive a wedge between developing countries and the West. Additionally, as in the disinformation campaign on the ineffectiveness of the Western anti-COVID 19 vaccines, it is meant to contribute to political chaos in other countries to weaken opposing governments.

25 — In 2022 a growing portion of the right wing of the Republican party de facto supported Russia in its war against Ukraine [97].

26 — This position is widely held among those of the political center and left for the U.S. presidential elections of 2016 and 2020 and borne out by much official intelligence [95, 101].

As proposed by the Russian academic theorists of information warfare, Moscow must use all means possible to weaken and to contain the impact of disinformation of its opponents and project its own while systematically denying engagement in such activity [42]. One advantage that other states now have learned, compared to a decade ago, the fact that Russian disinformation policy is well known and some states – especially in East-Central Europe and Scandinavia – have developed effective means to limit the impact of Russian information warfare. Other states, therefore, can learn from them. Yet the costs, in terms of alertness and in devoting substantial effort to containing the impact of propaganda and disinformation, remain very significant.

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