

Commentary, January 19, 2017

MEANS, GOALS AND CONSEQUENCES OF THE PRO-KREMLIN DISINFORMATION CAMPAIGN

EU EAST STRATCOM TASK FORCE

There is no doubt that the pro-Kremlin disinformation campaign is an orchestrated strategy, delivering the same disinformation stories in as many languages as possible, through as many channels as possible, and as often as possible. Our conclusion is based on 15 months of daily collection of data¹ on disinformation: more than 2,500 examples in 18 languages of stories contradicting publicly available facts, multiplied in many languages and repeated on a daily basis.

This is also the conclusion of many experts in this field, such as journalists from StopFake², who regularly catalogue fake news and expose how a particular piece of disinformation gets spread and multiplied via various channels and languages (see a case study³ of this phenomenon).

The disinformation campaign is a non-military measure for achieving political goals. Russian authorities are

explicit about this, for example through the infamous Gerasimov doctrine⁴ as well as through statements by top Russian generals⁵ that the use of "false data" and "destabilising propaganda" are legitimate tools in the tool kit. The Russian Minister of Defence describes⁶ information as "another type of armed forces". Russian journalists were awarded Presidential medals⁷ for misrepresenting events in Crimea.

The aim of this disinformation campaign is to weaken and destabilise the West, by exploiting existing divisions or creating artificial new ones. Those divisions can be on the strategic level: for example the EU versus NATO/US (where NATO/US is frequently described as an occupying power in European countries⁸), or differ-

¹ "One Year – Disinformaton Review" *Disinformation Review*, Issue 36, 26 July 2016.

² M. Dyczok, *How Ukraine Was The Testing Lab For Russia's Information War Against The United States*, Ukraine Calling, 13 January 2017.

³ "Three thousand fake tanks", Digital Forensic Research Lab, 12 January 2016

⁴ "The 'Gerasimov Doctrine' and Russian Non-Linear War", In *Moscow's Shadow, Analysis and Assessment of Russian Crime and Security*,

⁵ J. Bērziņš, *Russia's New Generation Warfare in Ukraine: Implications for Latvian Defense*, Policy National Defence Academy of Latvia Center for Security and Strategic Research, Policy Paper no. 2, April 2014,

⁶ Interfax, *Shoigu: Information becomes another armed forces component*, 28 March 2015.

⁷ RadioFreeEurope RadioLiberty, *Putin Awards 300 Journalists For "Objective" Crimea Coverage*, 5 May 2014.

⁸ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=fkPjcYCLWHk&feature=youtu.be&t=41m56s>

*** This paper contains the expert view of the East StratCom Task Force and does not reflect official EU policies**

ences between EU Member States (typically on the issue of Russian sanctions⁹). They can also be on a local level, exploiting minority issues or the fear of refugees¹⁰. Among the artificial divisions, a conflict between basic human rights and traditional values is often used.

Often, outright lies are deployed, aimed at denigrating a particular person¹¹, political group, government¹² or intergovernmental organisation¹³, as well as NGOs, mainstream media, elites, experts, the "establishment", and those taking initiatives to counter disinformation¹⁴.

⁹ <http://us11.campaign-archive2.com/?u=cd23226ada1699a77000eb60b&id=4b5e8206a4>

¹⁰ Disinformation Review, TRENDS OF THE WEEK, 12 January 2017.

¹¹ See e.g. fake stories and conspiracy theories not only about particular politicians: https://www.buzzfeed.com/albertonardelli/hyper-partisan-sites-and-facebook-pages-are-publishing-false?utm_term=.ek8aj2oOkY#.uqBW5GBYPo, Disinfo Digest 02/09/2016, Disinfo Review 33, or Disinfo Review 29; but also about investigative journalists uncovering facts unpleasant to the Kremlin: Disinfo Digest 28/10/2016 or Disinfo Digest 30/09/2016. See more on www.euvsdisinfo.eu; also in http://www.europeanvalues.net/wp-content/uploads/2016/06/How-Russian-Propaganda-Portrays-European-Leaders_v41.pdf

¹² E.g. Ukraine: Disinfo Review 50 or Disinfo Review 45; Baltic states: Disinfo Review 49; Disinfo Review 12/01/2017; Poland: Disinfo Review 48; Finland: Disinfo Review 47; Austria: Disinfo Digest 11/11/2016 and Disinfo Digest 04/11/2016; Hungary: Disinfo Review 46; Denmark: Disinfo Digest 28/10/2016; US: Disinfo Review 41 or Disinfo Review 39.

¹³ See e.g. fake stories about Ukraine and/or EU building/funding concentration camps for Russian speaking people in Ukraine: <http://www.stopfake.org/en/fake-concentration-camp-for-separatists-under-construction-in-donetsk-region/>; <http://www.stopfake.org/en/the-ministry-of-internal-affairs-of-ukraine-rebuts-the-information-about-construction-of-concentration-camps/>; <http://www.stopfake.org/en/russia-s-top-lies-about-ukraine-part-3/>; pro-Kremlin disinformation in Georgia targeting the EU and NATO: Disinfo Digest 23/09/2016; EU accused of granting visas based on skin colour: Disinfo Review 31; EU accused of forcing people to become gays: Disinfo Digest 17/06/2016; NATO regularly being accused of planning an invasion of Russia: Disinfo Digest 08/07/2016, or Disinfo Review 31.

¹⁴ "Fake news is free speech?", Disinformation Review, Issue 52, 20

Another strategy is to spread as many conflicting messages as possible, in order to persuade the audience that there are so many versions of events that it is impossible to find the truth¹⁵. Particularly obvious examples include the clear obfuscation over the downing of flight MH17¹⁶, Boris Nemtsov's assassination¹⁷ and the bombing of a humanitarian convoy in Syria¹⁸.

What are the tools of disinformation? We do not have a complete overview, as there is still not enough systematic research. What we do know, thanks to our own *Disinformation Review* as well as local activities like StopFake and Kremlin Watch, is that not only big media outlets like RT or Sputnik are deployed, but also seemingly marginal sources, like fringe websites, blog sites and Facebook pages. Trolls are deployed not only to amplify disinformation messages but to bully those, like Finnish journalist Jessikka Aro, brave enough to oppose them¹⁹. And the network goes wider: NGOs and "GONGOs" (government organised NGOs); Russian government representatives²⁰; and other pro-Kremlin mouthpieces in Europe²¹, often on the far-right and far-left²². In all, literally thousands of channels are used

December 2016.

¹⁵ "So many stories that you must not trust anything!", Disinformation Review, Issue 42, 4 October 2016.

¹⁶ "Nine ways to confuse us about MH17", Disinformation Digest.

¹⁷ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=fkPjeYCLWHk&feature=youtu.be&t=43m29s>

¹⁸ "Syria: What about the Americans?", Disinformation Digest.

¹⁹ J. Aro, "My Year as a Pro-Russia Troll Magnet: International Shaming Campaign and an SMS from Dead Father", Kioski, 9 November 2015.

²⁰ E. Higgins, "The Russian Defence Ministry Presents Evidence They Faked Their Previous MH17 Evidence", *bellingscat*, 26 September 2016

²¹ "Nine ways to confuse us about MH17", Disinformation Digest, cit.

²² To read more about multiple tools of the pro-Kremlin disinformation campaign in Europe and its links to Russia, see e.g. O. Lutsevych, "Agents of the Russian World", Chatham House, 14 April 2016; M. van Herpen, *Putin's Propaganda Machine*, Rowman and Littlefield, Maryland, 2016; "Mechanisms of Influence of the Russian Federation", *European Values*, 5 September 2016; AA. VV., *The Bear in Sheep's Clothing*, Wilfried Martens Center, July 2016.

to spread pro-Kremlin disinformation, all creating an impression of seemingly independent sources confirming each other's message²³.

The impression we have – though again, more research is needed - is that different tools have a different degree of importance in different regions. Targeting the Russian speaking minority seems the most important tool in the Baltic states, whereas in Central Europe it seems to be the use of dozens of "alternative" websites, while trolling seems most prevalent in Scandinavia.

What is the influence of the disinformation campaign? Again, we cannot be sure, without looking inside the heads of individual citizens and voters and seeing what influenced their opinions and decisions. But a disinformation campaign, just like any other PR campaign, works over time by building familiarity with and acceptance of its messages, through multiple channels; sowing mistrust in mainstream media, authorities, or any solid sources of information in general.

Looking ahead to 2017, both Germany and France²⁴ are already warning of the threat of disinformation attacks on their elections, while several European security services have spoken openly about the threat of hostile Russian disinformation activities.

Is the disinformation campaign successful? Definitely yes. Just as the purpose of a campaign run by a car brand is not to make the consumer like their advertisement in this or that magazine, but to buy the car, similarly the purpose of a disinformation campaign is not to make consumers like the outlets but to buy the disinformation

message as credible information. And many of us are buying. If we look at those few focused opinion polls measuring how many people accept an obvious disinformation planted in pro-Kremlin media²⁵, we have to conclude that the disinformation campaign is extremely successful. It's incumbent on us all to be more careful what we consume.

The EU's East StratCom Task Force was set up by EU High Representative Federica Mogherini in 2015, in response to a request from all 28 EU Heads of Government to "address Russia's ongoing disinformation campaigns". It is a team of eleven communications and Russian language experts, who also seek to improve communication on EU policies towards the Eastern Neighbourhood and to strengthen media plurality in the region, especially in the Russian language.

The Task Force's flagship products are its weekly [Disinformation Review](#) of pro-Kremlin disinformation stories and its social media accounts [@EUvsDisinfo](#) and [EU vs Disinformation](#).

To read more about the links between European extremists and Kremlin, see e.g. L. Diamond, *Russia and the Threat of liberal democracy*, The Atlantic, 9 December 2016, or follow the works of Political Capital (http://www.politicalcapital.hu/index_gb.php), or Anton Shekhovtsov (<http://anton-shekhovtsov.blogspot.com>).

²³ C. Paul, M. Matthews *The Russian Firehose of Falsehood* "Propaganda Model. Why It Might Work and Options to Counter It", RAND Corporation.

²⁴ *Germany sees rise in Russian propaganda, cyber attacks*, Reuters, 8 December 2016; N. Hirst, *France braces for election cyberattacks*, 8 January 2017.

²⁵ See https://www.buzzfeed.com/craigsilverman/viral-fake-election-news-outperformed-real-news-on-facebook?utm_term=.mLn14XQw6#.ibyDVq2La5, https://www.washingtonpost.com/business/economy/russian-propaganda-effort-helped-spread-fake-news-during-election-experts-say/2016/11/24/793903b6-8a40-4ca9-b712-716af66098fe_story.html?postshare=3851480055188585&tid=ss_tw-bottom&utm_term=.e093aa6964d5, <https://interaktivni.rozhlas.cz/dezinformace/>, http://nymag.com/selectall/2016/12/why-people-believe-obama-encouraged-illegals-to-vote.html?mid=twitter_selectall.