



EU MONITOR

Putin's Disinformation & Misinformation Campaign



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Abstract

Disinformation and misinformation have been amplified in the digital age. In order to combat their increasing presence in our everyday lives, we have to first educate ourselves on what disinformation is. In this post, Jakub Ferencik looks at this question in some detail, primarily by analyzing Vladimir Putin's usage of disinformation in politics. He first demarcates between disinformation and misinformation, points to some examples in Putin's early tenure as the President of Russia, and compares them with the use of disinformation during the pandemic in order to show why people lose trust in traditional media sources. Finally, Ferencik addresses the two most avid producers of Russian disinformation, RT and Sputnik, and briefly discusses why they have become so prominent.



Introduction

False and misleading claims have always been a part of politics. They function as a useful political tool in a world where media attention can only entertain a limited amount of topics in any given moment. In modern history, the sheer volume and speed of the information stream has enabled public actors, most notably many politicians, to capitalize on the corresponding shortening of attention span that the deluge of (dis)information has facilitated. While some politicians have therefore resorted to purposefully erroneous arguments in order to bolster support for their campaigns, others are an unfortunate product of their time and reality; in a society in which empirical evidence, complex studies and nuances are giving way to the latest headlines, politicians follow suit.

The war in Ukraine is by no means the first in which the information warfare features prominently, but it is arguably the first in which the tools of the digital age are fully brought to bear amongst major geopolitical players, and with corresponding major geopolitical implications. Hence, this paper will examine Vladimir Putin's modus operandi with regards to disinformation and the implications of his attempts to sow discord in Ukraine and the West.

A Firehose of Falsehoods

In order to sow divisions in society, Putin has utilized what has been dubbed a "firehose of falsehoods." This methodology does not necessarily portray fake claims as true, but instead spreads enough false discourse into the media space to make it difficult to distinguish between true and false statements.¹ Spreading falsehoods in this way is highly effective in dissuading the public and breaking down trust in authorities and expertise.

More recently, we were all made aware of the spread of disinformation and its effect on our families and neighbors during the COVID-19 pandemic. Indeed, according to one report by the European External Action Services (EEAS), in the first four months of 2020, more than 300 examples of disinformation were documented in the EU relating to the pandemic with ties to Russian authorities.² This is likely a conservative estimate; each of these incidents in turn spawned and empowered other disinformation actors.

A similar firehose of falsehoods concerning the US federal election of 2020 used by former US President, Donald Trump, resulted in the eventual storming of the US Capitol on Jan 6, 2021. Trump was notorious for his use of alternative facts and ended up making 30,573 misleading claims during his tenure in the Oval Office, according to a *Washington Post* report.³ Other populist leaders used

¹ Richey, Mason. 2017; 2018. "Contemporary Russian Revisionism: Understanding the Kremlin's Hybrid Warfare and the Strategic and Tactical Deployment of Disinformation." *Asia Europe Journal* 16 (1): 101-113.

² "The Disinformation Virus." 2020. GLOBSEC. April 24, 2020. <https://www.globsec.org/2020/04/24/the-disinformation-virus/>.

³ Kessler, Glenn, Salvador Rizzo, and Meg Kelly. 2021. "Analysis | Trump's False or Misleading Claims Total 30,573 over 4 Years." *Washington Post*, January 24, 2021. <https://www.washingtonpost.com/politics/2021/01/24/trumps-false-or-misleading-claims-total-30573-over-four-years/>.



similar methods with fruitful results, from Hungary's Viktor Orbán and Poland's Jarosław Kaczyński to Brazil's Jair Bolsonaro and India's Narendra Modi.

Putin indubitably supports many of these political candidates, which makes the narrative force of disinformation more cogent. Indeed, many of the far-Right parties in Europe have received some form of financial backing from the Kremlin, including France's Front National, Hungary's Jobbik, Austria's FPÖ, and Great Britain's UKIP.⁴ In order to assess why these methods are so effective in dissuading the populace, we have to first briefly analyze the term disinformation and how its usage became so prominent in the age of social media.

What is Disinformation?

In order to define disinformation, it will be useful to delineate it from misinformation. As briefly mentioned above, disinformation is a type of purposeful and false propaganda meant to influence the opinion of others. The difference between disinformation and misinformation is straightforward then, as misinformation is commonly assumed as unintentional, whereas disinformation is the active misleading of the population. The "four Ds" of disinformation campaigns—Dismiss/Deny, Distort, Distract, Dismay—further help delineate the two from one another.⁵ But there is more to it. As Richey Mason helpfully explains in his article, "Contemporary Russian Revisionism," in a hybrid-war context, Russian propaganda in particular serves four goals:

1. "dissuading rival political entities;"
2. "generalizing cynicism about domestic and international politics," including global governance guided by international law, and instead promoting Russian policy agendas internationally;
3. "legitimizing artificially constructed facts on the ground;"
4. "causing dissension within and among states allied against a given Russian action."⁶

Some examples of dismissal and denial might include the Russian shooting down of the flight MH-17 in July 2014 over Ukraine, or the bombings in Moscow in 1999 which may have been tied to the Kremlin and subsequently blamed on Chechnyan rebels in order to justify the destruction of their capital, Grozny. Other examples also include the Kremlin's denial of the assassinations of Alexander Litvinenko, Boris Berezovsky, and Anna Politkovskaya, the 13th Russian journalist killed under Putin's regime. There was some public outrage over these assassinations, especially in the UK where the Russian elite are often found dead in the mansions of Oxfordshire or the parks of

⁴ Fredrik Wesslau, "Putin's friends in Europe," European Council on Foreign Relations (10/19/2016). (http://www.ecfr.eu/article/commentary_putins_friends_in_europe7153)

⁵ Richey, Mason. 2017; 2018;. "Contemporary Russian Revisionism," 102.

⁶ Richey, Mason. 2017; 2018;. "Contemporary Russian Revisionism," 109.



London. But after a few months and some sanctions, the media attention wanes and the deaths are sadly forgotten with the next Russian controversy already in the news. The most international outrage came from the Salisbury Novichok poisonings in 2018, when Sergei Skripal, a former double agent for MI6, and his daughter, Yulia Skripal, were found dead in the city of Salisbury. In response, the UK, US, and 22 other western governments expelled more than 100 Russian diplomats.⁷ Russia continues to deny their involvement and instead accuses the West of “Russophobia”; these denials were highly effective in Russia, where a Levada Centre poll in 2018 showed that, of the 1,600 participants, only 3 percent believed Russia was behind the poisonings.⁸

Another notable example worth mentioning is the Beslan school siege in North Ossetia, where more than 1,100 people, including 777 children, were taken hostage by the Islamic Chechen and Ingush terrorists in response to the Kremlin’s war on Chechnya in 1999. Because of the highly criticized storming of the area, 330 hostages died, 184 of which were children. In response to the crisis, Russian disinformation attributed the high death toll to the fire that grew in the theater. On the other hand, critics claim that the high death toll could have been avoided if the operation was conducted as “hostage-rescue” rather than a “military-style assault.”⁹ Because of the scale of the killing, Putin had to launch both international and domestic disinformation campaigns to amend the critical narrative.

There are many more cases to choose from. In all of this we see a broad overlap. When the Kremlin wants to minimize a mistake or “peacekeeping mission,” they primarily dismiss the event, then they distort the details, which then distracts from the original story, leading to dismay and disbelief over the ability to know what happened in the first place. Among the vast array of fake news, it’s difficult to discern which news source is trustworthy.

The Importance of Disinformation in Russia & Putin’s Disinformation Channels

Since at least Vladimir Lenin’s time, propaganda functioned a pivotal role in Russian state affairs. In Lenin’s memorable phrasing, the press and media were “not only collective propagandist and collective agitator, but collective organizer.”¹⁰ For Lenin, and those who followed him in Russia, the press was used to subdue, control, and *mobilize* the populace. Unsurprisingly then, upon Putin’s inauguration, one of his first steps was to take control of state media from the oligarchs who profited from them.¹¹ In fact, Vladislav Surkov, Putin’s deputy head of the presidential

7 “How a Novichok Attack Sparked an International Incident in Salisbury.” The Independent, 21 Sept. 2021, www.independent.co.uk/news/uk/crime/salisbury-novichok-attack-skripal-russia-suspects-b1923898.html.

8 “How a Novichok Attack Sparked an International Incident in Salisbury.”

9 Richey, Mason. 2017; 2018;. “Contemporary Russian Revisionism,” 106.

10 Mona Elswah, Philip N Howard, “Anything that Causes Chaos”: The Organizational Behavior of Russia Today (RT), *Journal of Communication*, Volume 70, Issue 5, October 2020, Pages 623–645, <https://doi.org/10.1093/joc/jqaa027>

11 Ioffe J. (2010). What is Russia Today? *Columbia Journalism Review*. Retrieved from https://www.cjr.org/feature/what_is_russia_today.php.



administration, monitored Russian television so closely that he held weekly meetings with their chiefs of staff.¹² Russian leaders have long realized the importance of controlling the narrative domestically, but even abroad. This is why the Press Freedom Index 2010 placed Russia 140th out of 178 countries.¹³

Putin has a number of state-funded domestic and foreign media channels that propel his messages forward. Both RT (formerly known as Russia Today) and Sputnik have a wide viewership across the Globe, including India and Latin America. However, it's difficult to provide accurate data on the number of people watching these distorted news sources. RT started broadcasting internationally in December 2005, when it was still known as Russia Today. On the other hand, Sputnik is a more recent news source, launched in November 2014. It is no secret that there is substantial evidence that both have been orchestrated and manipulated by the Russian government.¹⁴

But Russian disinformation channels have not always been this prominent. During RT's first year, an annual budget of only U.S. \$30 million was allocated to its efforts, making it much smaller than the budget of *Al Jazeera*, for example.¹⁵ By 2011, the Kremlin was allocating approximately U.S. \$300 million to it, with more than 1,000 employees and 22 bureaus.¹⁶ Presently, RT transmits in English, Spanish, and Arab. Prior to the full-scale invasion, it was accessible via satellite or cable in 100 countries.¹⁷ RT also permits access via their streaming service online. However, much of that budget has over the years become obscured.

RT's intended purpose was not always to sow disinformation both domestically and internationally. In fact, RT's purpose gradually shifted from its genesis in the 2000s. After Russia invaded Georgia in 2008, RT staff realized that they could influence foreign policy as well.¹⁸ This report is also consistent with claims made from anonymous RT journalists, who had to remain anonymous due to the signing of non-disclosure agreements with RT, which threatened stiff fines and penalizations if they were to share information following 2014. According to one such source:

"[W]hen RT was founded, it was founded to give a positive image of Russia. The broadcast was all about culture, and much more of what is great about Russia, not what is bad about you [the West]. That strategy happened later."¹⁹

From the USSR to Yeltsin and now Putin, Russians have repeatedly shown that in politics, perception is much more important than reality. It may be true that Putin is clearly aging and perhaps even suffering from a terminal illness, but, for some, his image of a 'strongman' remains

¹² Pomerantsev P. (2015). Authoritarianism goes global (II): The Kremlin's information war. *Journal of Democracy*, 26(4), 40–50. doi:10.1353/jod.2015.0074.

¹³ Borchers N. S. (2011). "Do you really think Russia should pay up for that?"

¹⁴ Mona Elswah, Philip N Howard, "Anything that Causes Chaos."

¹⁵ Mona Elswah, Philip N Howard, "Anything that Causes Chaos."

¹⁶ Rutland P., Kazantsev A. (2016). The limits of Russia's 'soft power'. *Journal of Political Power*, 9(3), 395–413. doi:10.1080/2158379X.2016.1232287

¹⁷ Borchers N. S. (2011). "Do you really think Russia should pay up for that?" *Javnost - The Public*, 18(4), 89–106. doi:10.1080/13183222.2011.11009069

¹⁸ Mona Elswah, Philip N Howard, "Anything that Causes Chaos."

¹⁹ Mona Elswah, Philip N Howard, "Anything that Causes Chaos."



unchanged; it may also be true that Putin has been sympathetic to neo-Nazi groups in Europe and elsewhere, but his image as the “de-Nazifier” of Ukraine was still unironically enforced and seemingly believed throughout Russia. Throughout Putin’s career as the President of the Russian Federation, he has shown great efforts to install an image of being the strongman of Russia, whether that is by playing ice hockey and scoring more goals than the entirety of his team combined,²⁰ by finding precious artifacts while scuba diving,²¹ or by standing in the rain at a commemoration that marked the day Nazis invaded Russian occupied territory.²²

In order to make these narratives of himself more persuasive, Putin has utilized history to instill memories of great sacrifice, patriotism, and nationalism. Putin’s recollection of the Second World War, or “The Great Patriotic War,” as it’s known in Russia, leaves out the sexual violence and pillaging of Eastern Europe and Germany as the Red Army was on their way to Berlin to “liberate” Europe. In fact, the three history textbooks issued by the Russian Ministry of Education in 2016 all failed to mention Stalin’s war crimes or his alliance with Nazi Germany. Igor Torbakov explains in his article “History, Memory and National Identity,” that Putin pursues this politicized and instrumentalized narration of history for two reasons: (1) to establish a “massively cohesive national identity” and (2) to eschew “the problem of guilt.”²³ Granted, the Red Army was largely responsible for defeating the Axis forces in Europe, but in retelling history we do not have to manufacture events that leave out the truth. And Putin has gone to great lengths to keep the truth as far from the public as possible. In fact, Memorial, an NGO in Russia that collected and archived crimes against humanity in the Soviet Union, paying particular attention to Stalin’s purges, was broken into and prosecuted – a common occurrence for critics, dissidents and, more fundamentally, citizens engaging in critical thinking and the pursuit of truth.

The Influence of Disinformation

The next question worth addressing at more length is if Russian disinformation is effective. There are a number of reasons to believe it is. According to a study, published in February 2021, which traced if American voters are affected by Russian disinformation even if they knew it was a Russian state-funded enterprise, more agreed with the statement that Americans should withdraw from its geopolitical presence in the world than disagreed.²⁴ And as we saw from some of the examples mentioned above, from the take down of MH-17 to the Beslan school siege or the Salisbury Novichok poisonings, Putin’s disinformation channels use disinformation to distort events until the

20 “Vladimir Putin Scores Eight Goals during a Hockey Game.” n.d. Dailycaller.com. Accessed July 19, 2022. <https://dailycaller.com/2021/05/12/vladimir-putin-hockey-eight-goals-highlights/>.

21 “Vladimir Putin Discovers 6th Century Artifacts While Scuba Diving.” 2011. Gizmodo Australia. August 11, 2011. <https://www.gizmodo.com.au/2011/08/vladimir-putin-discovers-6th-century-artifacts-while-scuba-diving/>.

22 “Putin Gets Drenched Honouring Russia’s War Dead.” 2017. Pleasance, Chris. Mail Online. June 23, 2017. <https://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-4631732/Putin-gets-drenched-honouring-Russia-s-war-dead.html>.

23 Torbakov, Igor. 2011. “History, Memory and National Identity.” *Demokratizatsiya* (Washington, D.C.) 19 (3): 210.

24 Carter, Erin Baggott, and Brett L. Carter. 2021. “Questioning More: RT, Outward-Facing Propaganda, and the Post-West World Order.” *Security Studies* 30 (1): 49–78. <https://doi.org/10.1080/09636412.2021.1885730>.



news event is no longer trending and important to the general viewer. And poll results reveal that when Putin denies involvement, Russians are prone to trust their leader.²⁵

Mistrust of traditional news was once again fomented during the pandemic, when those who usually advocate for alternate sources of news pointed to the World Health Organizations (WHO) mishandling of the precautions citizens should take during the first wave. In retrospect, it is clear that the WHO told citizens that surgical masks will not help against the spread of what was according to most virologists a clear airborne disease, because of a concern for a shortage of surgical masks. This utilitarian analysis ultimately cost the WHO – the organization responsible for preventing pandemics – a considerable amount of trust with the public. From *Fox News* to Joe Rogan, many cited this as the primary reason they did not trust any of the public health mandates issued in the following months and, now, years. Mistakes like these inadvertently fuel anti-establishment rhetoric which discredits expertise, especially concerning virology and epidemiology. However, science by nature is constantly developing, refining previous hypotheses when tested against facts; scientific statements cannot and should not be judged on its ability (or lack thereof) to provide immutable facts.

One of the other counterintuitive aspects of disinformation, and the reason it has become so effective, is that when you engage with it, by responding positively *or* negatively, despite your intentions, it inadvertently fuels the popularity of the content. The algorithms on social media promote content that has a lot of engagement; it does not demarcate between positive or negative engagement. Blatantly and purposefully outrageous posts will therefore receive a disproportionate amount of attention because of our instinctive desire to correct the claim or call it out as misleading. The primary reason right-wing pundits like Candace Owens, Donald Trump Jr., and others gain popularity on *Twitter*, for example, is by posting controversial and, often, purposefully erroneous claims in order to garner engagement. In a similar way, claims about the West's illiberalism or NATO expansion may have gained a disproportionate amount of attention during the initial stages of Putin's large-scale invasion because they are contested issues.

Increasingly, not only individual actors are realizing the negative side effects of disinformation, but also state actors. Indeed, the Czech government describes disinformation as a form of terrorism. Similarly, Estonia and Ukraine have extensive TV programming that actively debunks disinformation in order to promote critical thinking and media literacy. More can be done, of course. Despite their many flaws countering disinformation domestically, these Central Eastern European and Eastern European countries provide a possible preliminary model for social media engagement in the early 21st century.

Taking Finland as an example of a country that tackles fake news narratives, we see that disinformation-related education is effective in establishing some resistance to its effects. Since 2014, the Finnish government enacted a pedagogical training after evidence of increased disinformation campaigns in the region. Such efforts have placed Finland at the top place in the

²⁵ The point of reference here is particularly to the previously mentioned Levada Centre poll conducted in 2018, which revealed that of the 1,600 Russian participants polled, only 3 percent believed that Russia was involved in the Salisbury Novichok poisonings. See, "How a Novichok Attack Sparked an International Incident in Salisbury," 2021.



European Media Literacy Index in 2019.²⁶ They achieved this by "the quality of the education, free media, and high trust among people."²⁷ In other words, education is an integral part of the solution, albeit not a swift one. Without an educated populace, democracy cannot thrive in the way we want it to. Regulation is also important, but education tackles the problem at the root of the issue. In pragmatic terms, this would mean teaching citizens the importance of fact-checking, peer-reviewed sources, comparing news channels, and aiming for bipartisan media reports.

Putin has utilized Russian disinformation throughout his tenure in order to influence both the domestic and international perception toward his actions. If we are to continue to engage with social media, we will have to take the many ways foreign actors influence its content seriously for the sake of our democracies. We may not be able to change the fact that politicians use false claims for political gain, but we could prevent their popularity online. We could do this by educating the populace about the presence of disinformation and misinformation online and the harm it causes to our ability to see political events clearly. Needless to say, false and misleading claims are not going away. That is why learning how to live with them in this digital age is the only path forward for the flourishing of our democracies.

²⁶ Lessenski, Marin. *Just Think about It. Findings of the Media Literacy Index 2019.*

²⁷ Lessenski, Marin. *Just Think about It. Findings of the Media Literacy Index 2019.*



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