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Russia's Information War: Old Strategies, New Tools

How Russia Built an Information Warfare Strategy for the 21st Century

and What the West can Learn from the Ukraine Experience

WORKING DRAFT

The extent of Russian meddling in American politics in 2016 shocked political commentators and journalists and has raised fears of a new kind of information war, but to those who have observed prior Russian behavior, these hacks and media smears appear to be part of a broader information strategy that Russia has been executing against Ukraine, the European Union, NATO, and the United States since the outbreak of the Euromaidan protest movement in 2013. That strategy has its roots in information warfare techniques developed in Soviet times and then adapted for contemporary domestic and international purposes following the election of Vladimir Putin in 2000. Building on Soviet deception strategy, Russia uses a network of freelance cyber warriors and homegrown ideologues to distance itself from actions against Western and Ukrainian interests.

This paper attempts to unearth some of Russia's information warfare strategy and to learn how Ukraine and Western media have responded. By looking at recent Russian military doctrines and considering those in the context of the disinformation campaign waged in conjunction with Russia's invasion and annexation of Crimea and the War in the Donbas, it is possible to better understand how information warfare has developed and to better predict how it

could manifest itself in the future. Drawing on the Ukrainian experience, this paper also aims to document some of the successes and failures of the Western press and post-Maidan Ukraine in responding to this ongoing information war and to analyze the re-emergence of disinformation as a weapon in the 21st century.

This project will pay particular attention to the way Russian media reacted to the Euromaidan protest and the early stages of the war in the Donbas. It will draw on reports from Russian and English-language media and analyze how the Kremlin's narrative influenced the way events were framed in the Western press and how narratives filtered into ideologically charged media outlets—particularly the far right. Examining this phenomenon also reveals how Russian nationalists and the so-called alt-right in the United States formed a productive relationship in recent years. Finally, this project will analyze several notable cases of what has recently been dubbed "fake news" and try to draw lessons from the way Ukraine adapted and responded to disinformation and cyber operations.

Sources of Russia's Information Policy

Russian decision-making is highly hierarchical, centered around the Russian Security Council and President Vladimir Putin's tight inner circle. The Russian president has broad authority to guide military and intelligence policy, commanding the Federal Security Service, or FSB (primarily involved in domestic intelligence), the Foreign Intelligence Service, or SVR (primarily foreign intelligence), and the Main Intelligence Agency, or GRU (primarily military intelligence) (Franke 2015, Carr 2014). The three agencies work mostly independently, but their operations sometimes overlap, with evidence suggesting they are sometimes unaware that they

are working on the same projects. (This phenomenon was most recently observed during the DNC email leaks when both agencies reportedly hacked into inboxes using different software at different times, seemingly unaware of the other's activity.)

The hierarchical and secretive nature of Russian decision-making means it is extremely difficult to determine exactly what considerations go into information warfare policy when put into practice, but Russian military and security documents give some clues as to how media policy and technology is viewed from a military perspective. These documents, which have been revised several times since Putin assumed the presidency in 1999, offers insight into what strategies are prioritized and how the restructuring of the military and the development of new tools has influenced information warfare policy over time.

The origins of Russia's current information warfare strategy can be traced at least as far back as the 1990s, when the Russian National Security Council identified the growing need to address information as a commodity in the digital age. But perhaps the most revealing move was the state's adoption of the Doctrine of Information Security in 2000. This wide-ranging document lays out in no uncertain terms the Russian government's goal of securing what it calls the growing "information sphere," a catch-all term that includes essentially every aspect of communications and means of communications, including information infrastructure, entities engaged in the collection and dissemination of information, and systems governing public relations (Government of Russia 2000). The document articulates the need to promote a positive image of Russia abroad as a key component of foreign policy. It also explains that information security is a high priority for protecting Russian national interests and the interests of Russian society.

Although it declares Russia's intent to protect freedom of speech and other constitutional rights in several short passages, the document identifies a long list of potential threats to information security and to Russian society more broadly. From this document, it is clear that the Russian government in 2000 saw itself in a vulnerable position globally and internally in terms of both its conventional military capabilities and in the growing digital information sphere. The document emphasizes threats to what the state saw as Russian spirituality. For example: "threats to...Russia's spiritual revival; depreciation of spiritual values, the propaganda of specimens of mass culture based on the cult of violence or on spiritual and moral values contrary to the values adopted in Russian society." (Government of Russia 2000). Even before Vladimir Putin's consolidation of power in the coming years, his early government made protecting Russia's "spiritual" culture—a key component of Russia's new nationalism—a priority for information security.

The doctrine also identifies what it terms the vulnerability of Russian citizens in the information sphere, claiming that civil society and the legal system in Russia are weak and that citizens are threatened by "information manipulation" meant to "evoke a negative reaction among people, which in a number of cases leads to a destabilization of the social and political situation in society."[1] It defines information manipulation as disinformation, information concealment, and distortion. It also warns of the influence of foreign media and media owned by foreign companies and identifies the need to address the "uncontrolled expansion of the foreign media sector in the national information space." So while the document declares Russia's intention to protect free speech, it also suggests that the lawlessness of information space is having a negative effect on stability and that the state has a responsibility to respond to this

[1] Government of Russia 2000, pp. 9

threat, foreshadowing repressive measures against domestic mass media that would follow in the coming years.

The threats to Russian society identified in the document are understood to be both internal and external. Coming on the heels of the Second Chechen War and the ensuing insurgency, the document specifically deems it necessary to "not allow for propaganda or campaigning that serves to foment social, racial, national or religious hatred and strife" and the "possible disturbance of social stability...as a result of activities by religious associations preaching religious fundamentalism as well as by totalitarian religious sects." It then moves to external threats, which it identifies chiefly as attempts by "a number of countries toward dominance and the infringement of Russia's interests in the world information space and to oust it from external and domestic markets."

These are reiterated in subsequent policy documents, including the Russian Military Doctrine of 2010. Adopted a decade after the Doctrine on Information Security, the Russian military doctrine identifies a number of "instruments" for protecting Russia's national interests, including information (Government of Russia 2010). Like the 2000 document, it identifies both external and internal dangers but this time specifically names NATO and "the desire...to move the military infrastructure of NATO member countries closer to the borders of the Russian Federation, including expanding the bloc" and "attempts to destabilize the situation in individual states and regions and to undermine strategic stability." This is worth noting because it is strikingly similar to the type of language used by both Russian officials and Russian media in describing Ukraine's 2013-2014 revolution and in the Kremlin's justification for its invasion and

annexation of Crimea in March 2014 (Putin's lengthy remarks in a Russian television documentary about the Crimea annexation are a good place to start[2]).

"Concepts of Foreign Policy of the Russian Federation," a Ministry of Foreign Affairs policy doctrine signed by President Putin on November 30, 2016, explicitly singles out the United States and its allies for trying to "contain Russia by using political economic, information, and other influences to undermine regional and global stability." It again calls for Russia to "strengthen the position of the Russian Federation's means of mass information and mass communication in the global information space and its means of communicating to the international community Russian perspectives on international processes." (Government of Russia (b) 2016). Curiously, both the Information Security Doctrine of 2000 and the 2010 Military Doctrine define information operations as something to be conducted during peacetime and as a prelude to war, rather than just a component of war itself (Heickero 2010). The view of information operations as a peacetime operation and the desire to communicate Russian perspectives on international processes are implemented as policy through Russia's various state-controlled media platforms such as RT and Sputnik, which the Kremlin has tried to position as big players in the conversation over international events.

Finally, in December 2016 Putin signed the latest Doctrine of Information Security of Russia. The document builds on previous military and information security doctrines, this time asserting the need to balance Russians' need for free information and the needs of national information security—further emphasizing the state's policy of putting security ahead of civil liberties. The document also claims that Russian media is "subject to blatant discrimination abroad" and again emphasizes the need to portray a positive image of Russia internationally

[2] Roissiya 24. "Crimea. The Way Home." 15 March 2015. Video with English subtitles available: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=t42-71RpRgI

(Government of Russia 2016). While US media in 2016 focused primarily on cyber operations prior to Trump's election, Russian policy documents make it clear that such operations are understood to be only one piece of information warfare. The obsession with the "information sphere," the influence of foreign news media, and means to promote a positive image abroad show that the Kremlin prioritizes a multi-faceted strategy that emphasizes information as a way to promote political goals.

II. Clues from Domestic Practice: New Nationalism

Russia's domestic media began to tilt toward conservatives during the early- to mid-2000s. Charles Clover describes how Putin's embrace of "information technology" helped rally support for the Putin regime and aided in developing a new nationalism in the country as it emerged from the chaos of the 1990s. According to Clover, the Kremlin was both responding to popular will by constantly monitoring public opinion, which was becoming more nationalist as standards of living rose, and insulating the Kremlin from the public by slowly subduing news media and opposition political parties. Through this activity, social conservatives and nationalist were empowered and became more visible as Putin consolidated power..

Citing conversations with Aleksandr Dugin, a flamboyant political theorist sometimes described as a neo-fascist, Clover describes how Putin aide Vladislav Surkov helped develop a system that simulated pluralism in Russia during the 2000s through the use of shrewd media manipulation and by running "invented" political parties and youth organization. The system amounted to a "postmodernistic pseudo-democracy." He brought together a team of "private

political consultants, pollsters, provocateurs, and pocket politicians" to run a made-for-TV political circus that kept Putin's ratings high.[3] Surkov, who spent time working in the advertising industry, helped develop the Russian media landscape as it is now, using what Clover calls "clever puns and inherently contradictory Orwellian wordplays—such as 'sovereign democracy,' illiberal capitalism' and 'managed nationalism.'" Dugin claims Surkov helped him develop his nationalist political party, Rodina, but made sure to never allow it to grow too large or influential. Surkov, it is worth noting, is believed to be a key architect of the Kremlin's strategy to destabilize Eastern Ukraine and set up the so-called Luhansk and Donetsk People's Republics in 2014.[4] Documents leaked in October 2016 by Ukrainian hackers further implicate Surkov in stage-managing the events in the Donbas.[5]

Aleksandr Dugin is among the most prolific and visible political theorists in modern-day Russia, known especially for his book, *The Fourth Political Theory*. In that book, he rejects what he defines as the first three political theories: Liberal democracy (Atlanticism), Marxism-Leninism, and fascism. According to Dugin, the world has entered a phase of "postmodernity" and Russia and the components of its former empire should adopt a "fourth political theory" as an alternative to the three that characterized the 20th century. To Dugin, Western culture is a "local and contemporary phenomenon" and each civilization should build their societies on their particular "internal values." In this, he asks Russia to embrace a unique "Neo-Eurasian" identity and history. While he is unable to describe exactly what a fourth political theory would entail for

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[3] Clover, pp. 274

[4] Kramer, Andrew E. "Ukrainian Hackers Release Emails Tying Top Russian Official to Uprising." The New York Times. 27 October 2016. Available: https://www.nytimes.com/2016/10/28/world/europe/ukraine-russia-emails.html?_r=0

[5] Vladislav Surkov's leaked emails and their significance are discussed later in this paper in the "Gray Cardinal" section.

his country, it is clearly a rejection of globalism, which he sees as imperialism by the West against the traditional values and interests of Russia and "Eurasia."[6]

It is unclear exactly how influential Dugin's ideas are among Russian policymakers and the Russian public, but his positions tend to be largely compatible with those practiced by the Putin regime, and he has a large following online. Earlier, he was recruited by Gleb Pavlovsky for a role on the First National television channel and he has written editorials in major Russian newspapers.[7] Jolanta Darczewska describes Dugin and his network of online contacts and web projects as groups of "spiritual colonies" that bring together like-minded university students and sympathizers abroad. He describes Dugin's network as one of a number of "swarms" that is able to mobilize and promote the Kremlin's talking points.[8] This phenomon mirrors Russia's cyber strategy, which uses freelancers and outsourced botnets that are not employed directly by the Kremlin for trolling and hacking.[9]

Just days before the vote on Crimean annexation in March 2014, Dugin published an article on his Eurasian Youth Union website entitled, "The Rules of Polemics with the Internal Enemy: A Few Rules of Polemics in New Russia [Novorossiya] (After Crimea)." In the article he writes, "We oppose the US, NATO, and liberalism." He then calls for a "system of synonyms to be used in polemics" to fight "THOSE WHO ARE NOT US." He also calls for new online tactics to be implemented, including "patriotic trolling software, demotivators, memes, and viral videos."[10] Remarkably, his article calls for the very information warfare tactics the Kremlin

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[6] Dugin, Aleksandr. Chapter 6 of *The Fourth Political Theory.* Arktos Media. London, 2012.
[7] Clover, pp. 269-271
[8] Darczewska, Jolanta. "The Anatomy of Russian Information Warfare: The Crimea Operation, A Case Study." Point of View. Centre for Eastern Studies. Warsaw, May 2014.
[9] See Heickero paper on emerging cyber threats for an in-depth analysis of the ways Russia has used non-state actors, including cyber criminals, to execute its cyberwarfare strategy.
[10] Dugin, Aleksandr. "Pravila polemiki s Vnutrennim Vragom: Nekotorye pravila polemiki v Novoy Rossii (posle Kryma)." Yevraziyskiy Soyuz Molodezhi. 11 March 2014. Available: http://rossia3.ru/politics/russia/vrag_polemika

would use that spring during the outbreak of war in eastern Ukraine and during the US Presidential election two years later.

The Eurasian Youth Union offers a glimpse into Dugin's worldview and has served as a source of anti-Ukrainian and anti-Western agitation since Ukraine's Orange Revolution. In the aftermath of that event, the Eurasian Youth Union gathered various nationalist forces, including skinheads and other nationalist groups to march through the streets of Moscow, ostensibly to fend off any potential color revolution[11] The union exists in parallel with other nationalist and pro-Putin groups such as the Night Wolves motorcycle group and the Nashi youth organization, which aren't officially parts of the state but receive its tacit support.

In February 2014, the Eurasian Youth Union website published a blog entry by a Russian nationalist group called "Ataka," calling for volunteers to defend Russians in Ukraine's Donbas: "We can help them! Everyone who is ready to help Russians in Ukraine, we ask you to connect with our coordinator for further action. We especially ask those who live in Donetsk or those who are ready to go there." The article provides a link to a VK page of the group. The post has since been removed from the website but can be accessed using the Internet Archive.[12] Likewise, the VK group no longer exists, although a version of it from July 2013 that has several posts showing "activists" responding to crime in Moscow. It tells readers to contact the group to learn more about it.[13] The group, which is described by Russian neo-Nazi blogger Dmitry Borbov as a Moscow information project that publishes "agitation images" and "agitation propaganda."[14]

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[11] Clover, pp. 278-280
[12] Internet Archive capture of the post:
https://web.archive.org/web/20140305165326/http://rossia3.ru/quotes/all/9015
[13] Internet Archive capture of the Ataka VK page:
https://web.archive.org/web/20130731083600/http://vk.com/ataka_ws?
[14] Borbov, Dmitry. "Deyatel'nost' russkikh natsionalistov segodya." Midgrad-Info. 1 February 2014. Available:
http://via-midgard.info/news/deyatelnost-russkix-nacionalistov-segodnya.htm

Little information about the group remains online. Its social media accounts and website have since been deleted.

By allowing a network of nationalist groups to grow and flourish, the Putin regime is able to distance itself from their activities, maintaining its policy of plausible deniability and obscuring the state's role in mobilization and propaganda efforts.

Disinformation and Weaponized Information: Old Strategy, New Tools

News media have largely settled on the term "hybrid warfare" to describe the Kremlin's strategy against Ukraine over the past three years—first to describe its deployment of unmarked troops, its use of covert operations, and the persistent and disciplined denials of Russian military presence in Ukraine, and then later to describe any act of aggression, including cyber attacks and "weaponized" information, a term used by Peter Pomerantsev and Michael Weiss in late 2014 (Pomerantsev and Weiss 2014). "Hybrid warfare" became a catch-all for Russia's aggression against Ukraine, with one Washington Post article citing Army Gen. Martin E. Dempsey, the chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, warning of future "hybrid conflicts" (Gibbons-Neff 2015). But non-conventional warfare is nothing new, and neither is the idea of "hybrid warfare." As British security expert Keir Giles points out, what we understand today as hybrid war has been used throughout history, especially during various Soviet military campaigns in countries such as Afghanistan, Spain, Egypt, Vietnam, and Korea. He writes that "the blurring of boundaries between peace and war is by now also no novelty" (Giles 2016).

A key component of the news media's definition of hybrid warfare is "weaponized information" or "weaponized media." But information warfare is also not a new concept, and Russia has a long history of waging war by non-military means, especially through the use of

deception and false information. While false and misleading reports from Russian media and government officials confused and distracted the Western press during the early stages of the Russia-Ukraine conflict, a look at Soviet policy can shed light on contemporary information warfare techniques. In many ways, the information war Russia has waged against Ukraine and the West is an old strategy adapted for contemporary technology.

The Kremlin has long sought information dominance inside and beyond its borders using a variety of tools that were adapted for the times. Some of these strategies were employed even during the early days of the Soviet Union. Vladimir Lenin spoke of the power of propaganda and agitation in his revolutionary writings, including in *What is to be Done?* (Lenin 1961). Lenin's texts would be studied and poured over by Soviet citizens for more than 70 years, and his strategies adapted, expanded, and perverted to fit the needs of the state and its foreign and domestic intelligence branches. From the Russian Civil War to the Cold War, acts of political deception were key components of communist foreign policy. Chief among the tools developed by the Kremlin was *disinformation*, a word that has entered the international lexicon but is not always well understood in the West. Disinformation is not the same as *misinformation*, or false information that is deliberately intended to deceive, which is sometimes given as the direct translation of the Russian word *dezinfomatsiya* (дезинформация). Disinformation is a *deliberate* deception technique meant to achieve a political goal (OED Online 2016, Bittman 1985).

Ladislav Bittman, a defected Czech intelligence officer, wrote a revealing account of deception techniques practiced by the KGB during the 1970s and described in detail practical applications of disinformation. In his book he describes disinformation as a complex attempt to manipulate public opinion and the opinion of the decision-making elite through techniques such as spreading rumors, committing physical acts for psychological effect, and using various tools

and technologies to provoke reaction (Bittman 1985, Barron 1974). Bittman describes disinformation as a key component of *active measures*, which Soviet leaders understood to be a variety of tactics meant to advance political goals at home and abroad without resorting to direct military engagement (Bittman 1985). Indeed, disinformation is much broader tactic than simply providing false or misleading information. In Bittman's view, "to succeed, every disinformation message must at least partially correspond to reality or generally accepted views."

John Besemeres refers to Russia's invasion of Ukraine as an application of "political technology," echoing Clover's description of Surkov's strategy to remake the political landscape of Russia under Putin. Besemeres describes disinformation as a "semi-truthful narrative, with large currants of lies embedded in it," similar Bittman's definition (Besemeres 2014). Disinformation in the Russian sense is a key component of psychological operations, and as Jessikka Aro observes in her research concerning Russian online trolls, it is meant principally to "manipulate the receiver's feelings" (Aro 2016). From rumor-mongering news stories on Russian-television channels to abusive trolling online, disinformation manifests itself as more than just false information. It is an attempt to sow doubt and confusion and to use political tools so that the victim is unable to tell truth from reality. In short, Russia's current strategy is a page out of an old playbook adapted for new tools—namely, digital media.

Mass Disinformation: The Rise of RT

While disinformation is not a new strategy, the post-communist period offers numerous avenues for its spread that weren't available during the Cold War. The dominant means of spreading information abroad during the Soviet era was through print and broadcast media,

which were expensive and ineffective at achieving mass penetration in foreign media markets. State-run radio stations such as Voice of Moscow and Radio Comintern as well as publications such as the Morning Star newspaper never posed serious competition to the diverse and competitive press in the US and Europe. But cable television and the internet have helped to democratized information and have made it cost effective to achieve a great deal of exposure in ways that weren't possible before the collapse of communism.

Russia Today, rebanded as RT ~~seven~~eight years ago, launched in 2005 as a major effort to make inroads into foreign media markets and to improve Russia's image among foreign viewers (Yablokov 2015).[15] It was part of a wave of English-language cable news ventures, such as Iran's Press TV and Qatar's Al Jazeera network. Sources differ on exact figures, but the state seems to have initially invested around $30 million, a figure that would grow to more than $330 million by 2012, according to budget proposal documents and Russian online media reports. (Knobel 2005, Lenizdat 2012 and Russian Ministry of Finance 2011). Russia's intent to prioritize its information efforts abroad was underscored in late 2014, when the Moscow Times reported that RT's budget would expand to $400 million the following year, despite a currency that was in freefall and an economic recession that was pinching the state budget. By comparison, in 2014 the US government invested $445 million in the Corporation for Public Broadcasting, which oversees local and national public radio and television stations. Its main foreign broadcasters, Radio Free Europe / Radio Liberty, which broadcasts in 26 languages, had a budget of $102.1 million in 2016, and Voice of America, which broadcasts in 45 languages, had a budget of $211.4 million. (CBP 2014, BBG 2016).

[15] RT. "Putin orders overhaul of top state news agency." 9 December 2013. Available: https://www.rt.com/news/ria-novosti-overhaul-putin-960/

RT's editor-in-chief, Margarita Simonyan, has been quoted as saying that the channel seeks to counterbalance the "information monopoly" of Western media, specifically "Anglo-Saxon" media. (Yablokov 2015, Gabuev 2012). It did this by giving a voice to marginalized political figures who whose only common thread seemed to be criticism of the US government. Ilya Yablokov explains how RT's programming focused on developing a specific type of anti-Americanism that differed from Soviet communist propaganda in that it has no fixed ideological platform.[16] Indeed, prior to the Ukraine conflict, RT made a name for itself as a platform for conspiracy theorists and fringe political figures, with no particular ideological consistency. In its earlier years, the channel had a fascination with 9/11 conspiracy theories, hosting a seemingly endless parade of "experts" who would offer various claims implicating the Bush administration or other groups of perpetrating the 2001 terrorist attacks. Many of these are catalogued on a YouTube channel called "RT - CONSPIRACY FILES."[17]

RT's willingness to host political figures who would have otherwise had trouble finding air time on major US networks helped it build an audience with the politically marginalized on both the right and the left. ~~Libertarian~~ Ron Paul, a libertarian who rose to prominence online during the 2008 presidential election, was a frequent guest, as was WikiLeaks founder Julian Assange, who even hosted his own show in 2012 (Stanley 2012). Jared Taylor, a white nationalist who has been identified as a voice of the so-called "alt-right," was also a frequent guest on RT, where he ~~would~~could be found complain~~e~~ing about being marginalized in the mainstream news media, criticiz~~e~~ing affirmative action, and ~~complain~~ warning of growing racism toward white Americans.[18]

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[16] Yablokov 2015 pp.306

[17] Available: https://www.youtube.com/channel/UCfxlrSu2hZtAa8ZQuxn_cPg/videos

[18] Jared Taylor on RT: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=eVgiiA-UP9Y
and: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=FLhK8LzT2Rg

While Soviet propaganda was limited by its marriage to communist ideology, RT has been happy to host guests from both the left and the right. By providing a platform for fringe political commentary, it was able to establish a reputation as an "alternative" news source, building an audience composed of those who hold political views outside of the mainstream or are who are suspicious of American institutions. The politically marginalized, especially those drawn to conspiracy theories that discredit the prevailing political establishment and sow suspicion of the US government, were fertile ground for RT, and it moved swiftly to exploit them. By targeting their emotions and political preoccupations, RT swallowed whole the Soviet experience of disinformation and adapted it for powerful new tools—cable television and the internet. When Ukraine's Euromaidan revolution erupted on the streets of Kyiv, the channel had been operating for nearly nine years and had a built-in audience to spread the Russian government's position on the events taking place in Eastern Europe.

But Russia didn't limit itself to just RT. As the Ukraine events unfolded, the Kremlin explored other ways to influence the conversation of important international events. In 2013, RT launched Ruptly, a German-based agency that provides news and video content. Like major wire services such as Reuters and the Associated Press, Ruptly sells syndicated video content to broadcast and web news outlets.[19] The short news packages are similar in style to those distributed by Reuters News Express and AP Television News, and the agency appears to be an attempt by RT to access the mainstream television news market by selling content at low rates. A one-minute, 46-second video clip of left-wing French politician Jean-Luc Melenchon praising Fidel Castro at a rally in Paris can be bought and used for broadcast for as little as 50 euros, for example (Ruptly 2016).

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and: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=q9UIjrfTiYg

[19] RT. "RT Launches 'Ruptly' - Full Service Global Video News Agency." 4 April 2013. Available: https://www.rt.com/about-us/press-releases/ruptly-news-agency-launch/

Sputnik, yet another Russian media outlet under the same umbrella agency, Rossiya Segodnya, launched in 2014 to "offer an alternative standpoint." It publishes on social media and its website and provides radio broadcasts in 30 languages (RT 2014, Sputnik 2015)[20]. Since Vladimir Putin was re-elected president in 2012, Russia has sought to diversify its foreign-language media outlets to reach a wider audience and to increase penetration in Western media markets, especially online where social media and low distribution costs have lowered the barrier to entry and have provided easier access to audiences suspicious of US policy.

Competing Narratives, but Reaching the Same Conclusion

Russian media, particularly RT, found a new purpose with the outbreak of anti-government protests in Ukraine in 2013. When students and activists descended on Kyiv's central square in November to protest the corrupt government of Putin ally Viktor Yanukovych, Russian media wasted no time in framing the revolt as a plot by the United States and the European Union to install a government hostile to Russia and incorporate Ukraine into NATO. RT regularly published opinion pieces promoting the theory that the United States, the European Union, NATO, or all three were responsible for the violence in Kyiv, while its news reporting—and the reporting of Russia's domestic channels—tried to frame the revolution and the annexation of Crimea as a classic power struggle between Russia and the West (Bridge 2014, Yuhas 2014).

A leaked phone conversation between US Assistant Secretary of State Victoria Nuland and US Ambassador to Ukraine Geoffrey Pyatt in February 2014, during which the two

[20] RT. "Sputnik launched to news orbit: Russia's new intl media to offer alternative standpoint. 11 November. Available: https://www.rt.com/news/204231-sputnik-news-agency-launched/

discussed the competence of the political opposition leaders and expressed frustration with the European Union's unwillingness to take the lead in discussions between the opposition and the Yanukovych regime, was used to justify Russia's claim that Washington was behind the protest movement, which was nearing its bloody climax. In the leaked conversation, the two diplomats can be heard talking about the three main political opposition leaders—Oleh Tyahnybok, Vitaliy Klitschko, and Arseniy Yatsenyuk, concluding that Yatsenyuk, of the largest opposition party, was the most competent. Nuland is heard at one point saying, "fuck the EU," a private expression of her frustration with the European Union's unwillingness to take a leading role in de-escalating the standoff between protesters and the Yanukovych regime.[21] That quote would be broadcast across Russian media platforms to support Russia's claim that the US was behind the anti-government protest and to demonize the political opposition as fascists who carried out a Washington-backed coup.[22][23] What was a private conversation between two diplomats discussing a growing crisis in Eastern Europe and venting frustration with diplomatic gridlock became fuel for Russian conspiracy theories.

Ukraine's revolution caught Western observers largely by surprise. As the mainstream media scrambled to dispatch reporters and explain what was happening on the streets of Kyiv, ideologically oriented online media outlets provided a fertile platform for the Kremlin to exploit. Russian media outlets, especially RT, used the veneer of balance to present what seemed on the surface to be a messy narrative of the events unfolding in Ukraine. Examining reports coming from Russian media, these outlets seemed to be promoting two competing theories about the

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[21] RT. "F**k the EU': Snr US State Dept. official caught in alleged phone chat on Ukraine." 6 February 2014. Available: https://www.rt.com/news/nuland-phone-chat-ukraine-927/

[22] RT. "Brokering Power: US role in Ukraine coup hard to overlook." 19 February 2015. Available: https://www.rt.com/news/233439-us-meddling-ukraine-crisis/

[23] RT. "Obama openly admits 'brokering power transition' in Ukraine." 1 February 2015. Available: https://www.rt.com/op-edge/228379-obama-power-transition-ukraine/

revolution in Ukraine: The first held that it was a fascist uprising led by the Ukrainian far right and managed by the United States and the European Union. The second suggested that the revolution was a liberal conspiracy by the decadent West. That latter theory had its roots in statements made by Vladimir Putin in the summer of 2013, when he claimed Europe was turning away from Christianity and heading down a path of moral decadence.[24]

So-called "alternative" media proved willing to repeat Kremlin talking points, cherry-picking the aspects of these two competing narratives that best fit their ideological leanings. That the Russian narrative was inherently contradictory when taken as a whole (a globalist liberal effort to support fascist nationalists) didn't seem to matter, as alternative media outlets were willing to run with the parts of the story that advanced their particular ideological goals. Writers from left-wing publications such as Alternet were even featured in more reputable liberal outlets such as Salon, which published an article accusing US Senator John McCain and the State Department of backing neo-Nazis in Ukraine during the Euromaidan revolution (Blumenthal 2014). Left-leaning blogs such as Truthdig also ran with the narrative that the uprising in Ukraine was a far-right conspiracy supported by the west, publishing articles calling the revolt a "US-backed destabilization" and an "American-sponsored coup d'etat" and making false claims that the Ukrainian government replaced regional leaders with radicals from the Right Sector paramilitary group.[25]

Again, Russia was able to tap into marginalized political actors on both sides of the ideological spectrum by advancing stories that worked with their narratives. Bittman, referencing

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[24] Findler, Stephen. "Putin Depicts Russia as a Bulwark Against European Decadence." The Wallstreet Journal. 20 September 2013. Available: http://blogs.wsj.com/brussels/2013/09/20/putin-depicts-russia-as-a-bulwark-against-european-decadence/

[25] Hudson, Michael. "The New Cold War's Ukraine Gambit." Truthdig. 23 October 2014. Available: http://www.truthdig.com/report/item/the_new_cold_wars_ukraine_gambit_20141023
See also: Pfaff, William. "What Ukraine Really Needs." Truthdig. 13 May 2014. Available: http://www.truthdig.com/report/item/what_ukraine_really_needs_20140513

Soviet disinformation efforts in the Third World, writes that the ideologically rigid are most vulnerable: "Extremists on each end of the political spectrum, left or right, are usually the easiest targets for deception...They tend to accept even bizarre accusations and reports of conspiracy reaching them from unreliable sources if the messages are tuned to their political bias."[26] By playing to anti-establishment sympathies, as it had done by inviting fringe political commentators to speak on RT, Russia was able to advance its agenda through ideological "alternative" media outlets by playing to their biases. With social media, it was easier and more cost effective for these narratives to make their way across the internet.

When violence erupted in Eastern Ukraine, RT and Russian officials tried to portray the events as a local uprising by local separatists against the "junta" running the central government, even though many of the "local separatist" fighters were Russian citizens who had come from abroad.[27] By bolstering the image of a country divided between local separatists and the Ukrainian government, the Russian media was successful in perpetuating the narrative that the Ukraine conflict was a local civil war, downplaying its involvement and shifting responsibility to the Ukrainian government (Erdmann 2015). But while it was building this narrative through its main media outlets, Russia used other media tools to distract Western news media for tactical gain.

Meanwhile, right-wing publications took the view that the US under Barack Obama and the EU were waging war against Russia, which was often portrayed as bastion of conservatism and a bulwark against liberal globalist elite. The conflict helped to develop a relationship between the political right in West and Russian nationalists. Aleksandr Dugin proved especially receptive to working with right-wing groups in the United States. Alt-right website Radix

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[26] Bittman, pp. 56

[27] RT "Thousands rally against 'illegitimate govt', raise Russian flags in eastern Ukraine." 1 March 2014. Available: https://www.rt.com/news/donetsk-kharkov-ukraine-protest-365/

republished an article written by Dugin entitled "The War on Russia," in which he portrays the Ukrainian revolution as an act of war by the "liberal" west against Russia (Dugin 2014). Dugin and his Eurasianism, which he sees as a response to Western liberalism, has been welcomed by the far-right in the West.

Dugin has developed an intriguing relationship with Alex Jones, an American conspiracy theorist who rose to prominence during the 2016 US Presidential Election. During an episode of his Infowars show on February 7, 2017, Jones likens Dugin's relationship with Vladimir Putin to his own relationship with Donald Trump, suggesting the "mainstream media" overplays their influence over the leaders, saying, "we are just looking at the same truth...and reading from the same historical piece of music." Dugin appears on the show via video link for an extensive conversation with Jones, during which the two discuss the role of "globalists" and shower each other with praise. They also repeatedly applaud Donald Trump, who Dugin says he supports "with all my heart." During the show, Dugin rejects claims that he is an extremist, saying that he rejects fascism, liberalism, and communism in his book, *The Fourth Political Theory.*[28]

Their worldviews prove exceptionally compatible. During the show, Dugin claims that he wants to protect sovereignty and not allow "globalist elites" to destroy national identities, which he sees as under threat by Obama- and Bush-era policies against Russia. "National sovereignty is core to defend identities," Dugin says during the interview. "Globalists try to make a kind of pacifist dream—killing the country, killing differences. We need to affirm our identities, and that is the way to understand each other. That is the position of Putin as well. He is not an imperialist. He is not a fanatic." Later in the interview, Dugin and Alex Jones attack George Soros, the founder of the Open Society Foundation who has become a frequent target of the alt-right. When

[28] Watch Aleksandr Dugin's appearance on "Infowars:" https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=A9Wppr9d6aA&t=1286s

Dugin claims globalists tried to instigate a color revolution in Russia, Jones interjects, saying that Soros was successful in overthrowing the government in Ukraine and claiming that he is trying to do so in the United States.

In December 2016, Jones rebroadcast a program called "Our Point of View [Наша точка зрения]," which appeared on Russian television channel Tsargrad. The program features a glowing profile of "legendary American journalist" Alex Jones, during which Dugin tells Jones that he had "changed our view of who a real American is." The feature criticizes mass media and claims that in the Western world, the "dictatorship of the liberal paradigm is all too obvious when it comes to the media." It goes on to criticize the media's support of "the war criminal, Hillary Clinton" and its portrayal of Trump. It calls Infowars the only source that covered the election objectively.[29]

Jones's Infowars weighed in during the earlier phases of the Ukraine crisis, portraying the new government in Ukraine as a "junta" (a term commonly used in Russian-language media) and blaming NATO for provoking the Kremlin (Nimmo 2014). Other far-right blogs and information portals are rife with reports supporting Russia's actions in Crimea and the Donbas. White nationalist blogs portrayed Russia's military involvement in Ukraine as a way to contain a world Jewish conspiracy and to stop liberalism (Anglin 2014).

As the internet has made disseminating information easier and more accessible, it has allowed ideologically oriented media outlets, on both the left and the right, to flourish and to reach a broader audience. With the aid of competing narratives coming from Kremlin-owned media, these far-right and far-left blogs and platforms incorporated the components of the Kremlin's competing narratives about the conflict in Ukraine to fit their ideological agendas. In

[29] Watch "Our Point of View" rebroadcast on "Infowars:" https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zEJq749-Qo4

the end, the far left and the far right reached the same conclusion: The West sponsored the revolution in Ukraine and Russia was innocent. It was a win for everyone involved.

Terminology makes its way into mainstream media

The mainstream Western press paid little attention to the events in Kyiv until violence broke out, and media outlets were sent scrambling to find experts to help frame the revolution as it neared its dramatic climax in mid-February 2014. By then, the shear volume of Russian media reports outweighed those by Western reporters, and the Russian terminology began making its way into the US and European press. As European and American press tried to respond to growing interest, mysterious "experts" appeared with bylines in prominent Western media. With editorials headlines such as, "Rein in Ukraine's neo-fascists" and "Ukraine: far-right extremists at core of 'democracy' protest," alarmist reports about the role of far-right groups helped feed the Russian narrative (Speedie 2014, Walker 2014, Whelan 2014).

When war broke out in the Donbas region of Ukraine in spring 2014, RT and other media outlets were steadfast in framing the conflict as a fight between the new "fascist" leaders of the Ukrainian "junta" and local separatists in the east. Reports from Russian media—and what seems to have been general confusion on the part of the Western press—led major news networks to label the leaders of the armed conflict "pro-Russian rebels" or "pro-Russian separatists," despite the fact that many of them, including Igor Girkin—one of the chief architects of the early conflict—were actually Russian citizens.[30]

In one New York Times reported titled, "In Ukraine War, Kremlin Leaves No Fingerprints," the reporter interviews Girkin at length (also known as Strelkov) as well as the then-leader of the Donetsk People's Republic, Alexander Borodai, both of whom were born in

[30] See: List of articles that use "separatist" or "rebel" in reference to foreign fighters

Russia and came to Ukraine specifically to fight in the war. Girkin even had a background in Russian intelligence (Tavernise 2014). This report underscored the international press' inability to call the Kremlin on its insistence that it was not involved in the war.

In retrospect, it is puzzling that Russian fighters could be labelled rebels or separatists while participating in a conflict on foreign soil, but the influence of Russian media and the interest of the Western press to appear balanced and objective seem to have informed the choice of words during the early stages of the conflict. As late as July 2014, reports still appeared in major American news outlets claiming that "pro-Russian rebels" had seized Crimea, even though it was by then widely known that they were in fact Russian special forces. Even RT had by this time reported Putin saying in his own words that it was Russian soldiers who were the unmarked "little green men" who seized Ukrainian military bases in February-March 2014.[31]

How the Kremlin Exploited Human Rights Rhetoric

On March 3, 2014, RT, the Kremlin's English-language mouthpiece, quoted Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov lashing out at the West for invoking the protection of human rights as a pretext for "pursuing geopolitical goals." As Lavrov was speaking to the United Nations Council on Human Rights in Geneva, unmarked Russian soldiers were systematically taking over Ukrainian military bases throughout the Crimean Peninsula while the regional parliament, under the guidance of armed Russian agents, was preparing for a sham referendum on annexation. "Human rights are too important to make it a bargaining chip in geopolitical games, to use it to impose one's will on others; less so to instill regime change," he said.

[31] RT. "Putin acknowledges Russian military servicemen were in Crimea." RT. 17 April 2014. Available: https://www.rt.com/news/crimea-defense-russian-soldiers-108/

Lavrov was referencing the Kremlin's long-held annoyance at US and NATO rhetoric about the protection of human rights in foreign policy. The NATO decision to intervene in the Balkans in the 1990s, especially during the Kosovo War of 1998-1999, was driven largely by what the alliance saw as its obligation to protect the human rights of Kosovars (Phillips and Burns 2012). That intervention and the West's support for Kosovo's declaration of independence from Serbia, was fiercely criticized by the Kremlin and remains a point of contention between the alliance and Moscow.[32]

Two weeks after Lavrov spoke, Putin delivered a speech to the Duma in which he explicitly invoked what he called the "Kosovo precedent" for Crimean annexation, calling it "a precedent our western colleagues created with their own hands in a very similar situation, when they agreed that the unilateral separation of Kosovo from Serbia, exactly what Crimea is doing now, was legitimate and did not require any permission from the country's central authorities."[33]Using NATO's own language concerning human rights against the West was an especially shrewd and pointed move by Moscow, which during the last years of the Soviet Union viewed the issue of human rights as an excuse for the West to meddle in its internal affairs.

The Helsinki Final Act of 1975 provided dissidents in the Soviet Union and the countries of the Warsaw Pact an international forum to document human rights abuses carried out by the communist regimes. The Soviet Union, which had for years sought to entice the US and European nations to sign the agreement as recognition of the border changes that followed the Second World War, did not expect provisions in the document concerning the protection of human rights to be taken seriously. Even Henry Kissinger dismissed the human rights principles, enumerated in Basket Three of the agreement, as "meaningless" and assured Soviet diplomats

[32] Phillips and Burns, pp. 57-60
[33] Text of Putin's address can be found here: http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/20603

that they were unenforceable (Snyder 2013). However, the document empowered dissidents and human right activists in Eastern Europe, and the US Congress and President Jimmy Carter sought to enforce the rules by encouraging Helsinki groups to document human rights abuses throughout Eastern Europe.[34] By the time the Soviet Union cracked down on dissidents and activists, numerous reports of human rights violations were well publicized in the West, and the arrests only served to embolden Western critics.

Given Moscow's history with the Helsinki Final Act and its reaction to NATO's "humanitarian" intervention in the Balkans, it is little wonder that Russia under Vladimir Putin would hold such a cynical view of human rights protection. While Lavrov was admonishing the West for invoking human rights for geopolitical goals, his own country was doing exactly that in Ukraine, exploiting the opportunity for a land-grab in Crimea and implementing a strategy to destabilize Ukraine's eastern regions by installing puppet regimes.

Applied Disinformation: Fake News to Confuse

In the confusion and fast-moving events of that spring, foreign reporters scrambled to figure out what was happening and to investigate the growing number of intriguing and scandalous stories coming from Russian media outlets. Russian television was at the forefront of the most extraordinary reports coming from the Donbas region. In one story, reported by Russia's First Channel, a woman claimed Ukrainian soldiers had crucified a young boy in the main square of the town of Slovyansk after pushing back separatist fighters—a report that prompted outrage in Russia and was then repeated on a number of alternative and pro-Russian

[34] See Snyder's book for an in-depth discussion of how dissident groups were able to wield the Helsinki Final Act as a weapon against repression

English-language websites.[3536] It wasn't until a reporter from Russian independent newspaper Novaya Gazeta was able to reach the village and investigate that the story was proven false. (Nemtsova 2014, Collison 2014). Another persistent feature of Russian media reports in 2014 was a woman named Maria Tsypko, who appeared in numerous Russian television reports as a victim of the Trade Union building fire in Odesa, as "Maria Vykina," the director of a charitable foundation in Donetsk, as a Donetsk lawyer, and as a referendum coordinator in Moscow (Kortunova 2014)[37]

These stories would be repeated on countless "news" websites that popped up seemingly overnight. Suspicious sites such as the "Kharkov News Agency" (new defunct) republished fake Russian reports and rumors about the Ukraine conflict. It turned out to have been bought by a Russian-based agency located at 55 Savushkina St. in St. Petersburg, the same address that was home to the Internet Research Agency, an agency known for housing paid internet trolls (Hamdan 2014, Chen 2015). Sites and YouTube accounts mimicking Ukrainian news portals, such as several fake Ukraine Today accounts, repeated fake stories and repeated Kremlin talking points.[38] This was not a new strategy, however. When residents of Ingushetiya, a federal district of southern Russia, used a site, ingushetiya.ru, to protest Russian policies toward local leaders in 2008, another site mimicking the local one, ingushetiyaru.net, appeared online to display pro-Kremlin talking points and to discredit the official protest site (Lysenko & Desouza 2010).This

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[35] Video preserved on YouTube: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Xf8Gt2Wnv74

[36] Some of these reports are still online, for example: https://slavyangrad.org/2014/07/13/slavyansk-refugee-remembers-brutal-execution/

[37] "Odesskaya gastrolersha rasszkazala o "publichnoy kazni" v Kramatorske." 10 August 2014. Available: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=IfPwxZEcpWM
"Odesskaya tragedia: ekspertiza ostavlyaet bol'she voprosov, chem otvetov." Novosti iz Rossii. 21 June 2014. Available: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=pT6hwBnknJ8
"Maria - zhenskoe litso Novorossii." Sende Roche. 7 December 2014. Available: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=x4jWXVQ-JOg

[38] Ukraine Today [fake account]. YouTube account. Available: https://www.youtube.com/channel/UCBnVFETAttP2-WuJPFM0mCw/about

phenomenon has been observed recently in Latvia, where researchers tracked the appearance of fake news websites that appeared recently and began engaging in a large amount of activity targeting Latvians (Public Broadcasting of Latvia 2016).

The downing of Malaysia Airlines Flight 17 on July 17, 2014 was a major turning point in the narrative of the Russia-Ukraine conflict and stands as one of the most glaring examples of Russia's disinformation strategy. When MH17 was shot down over Eastern Ukraine, initial reports suggested that it was downed by a Russian-made anti-aircraft missile launcher used by Russian-backed militia groups near the town of Torez. The leader of the so-called Donetsk People's Republic, Igor Girkin, posted a gleeful message to social media just after it crashed, claiming that his militias had shot down a Ukrainian military aircraft. By mid-July, a number of Ukrainian military planes had been shot down by the militants, and it appeared that Girkin and his fighters thought they had brought down another. As reports began to surface that a civilian aircraft had gone missing, Girkin deleted his social message post (RFE/RL 2014).

In the coming days and weeks, Russian media would unleash a hailstorm of competing theories about the tragedy. RT was quick to report Russian claims that the aircraft was downed by a Ukrainian anti-aircraft missile or a Ukrainian warplane, a report repeated endlessly in other Russian media outlets. A year later, RT revised this original theory by citing a report claiming it was an Israeli missile fired from a Ukrainian aircraft.[39] Among the more sensational claims, reported by RT's Russian-language website, was that the Ukrainian military shot down the airplane in an assassination attempt, erroneously believing Vladimir Putin was onboard.[40]

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[39] RT. "Ukrainian Buk battery radar was operational when Malaysian plane downed - Moscow." 18 July 2014. Available: https://www.rt.com/news/173784-ukraine-plane-malaysian-russia/
RT. "Israeli-made air-to-air missile may have downed MH17 - report." 16 July 2015. Available: https://www.rt.com/news/310039-mh17-israeli-missile-version/

[40] RT. "Istochnik v Rosavliatsii: Tel'iu ykrainskoy rakety mog byt' bort Vladimira Putina." 17 July 2014. Available: https://russian.rt.com/article/41334

Russia's First Channel broadcast a poorly edited satellite image claiming to show the moment a Ukrainian fighter jet fired on the Boeing, even though Ukraine's fighter jets are incapable of flying at the passenger aircraft's cruising altitude (Seddon 2014). Other conspiracy theories reported by Russian media were that the plane was blown up from within by a bomb and—most ludicrous of all—that the plane actually flight MH370, which had gone missing in the spring over the South China Sea, and that the plane had been filled with dead bodies before it took off from Amsterdam, a theory allegedly fielded by Girkin a day after the tragedy. (Russkaya Vesna 2014, Before It's News 2014).

While the seemingly endless stream of outrageous theories provided Ukrainian and Western bloggers with some much-needed levity after months of tragedy and war, the reports also marked what would be a turning point in the news coverage of the Russia-Ukraine war. Russian state media had fully exposed itself to Western journalists for what it was—a relentless source of disinformation that could not be reasoned with. It also showed a deeply cynical attitude toward newsgathering generally. While more straightforward propaganda is content to bash the audience over the head with one version and one narrative of an event, the 21st century Russian approach was more subtle. Instead of a single voice and a single interpretation, it created several, if not dozens of competing theories. Instead of trying to discredit the version initially reported responsibly in Western and Ukrainian media, it presented the many conspiracy theories as equally plausible in an attempt to sow confusion rather than certainty.

By discrediting the institution of journalism, no theory was more credible than another. It didn't matter who was right. In the minds of the ideal audience, no one was right and no one could be trusted. Since the outbreak of protests in Kyiv in 2013, Russian media had set out on a zero-sum game with the West and the international press to further erode trust in a news media

industry already facing serious challenges at home. But by the time Western news outlets distanced themselves in earnest from their Russian colleagues and began to rely more on their own reporters, the war had been raging for more than three months, and Kremlin media had already left its mark on the narrative perpetuated both in the region and outside Eastern Europe.

By giving legitimacy to Russia's repeated denials of military involvement in Ukraine and by creating distractions for the Western press, Russian media was able to help the Kremlin distance itself from its actions and maintain plausible deniability in the eyes of an international audience. Paula Chertok argues that even the term "Ukraine crisis" rather than "war" created "a kind of distance from the reality of war's violence" (Chertok 2016). By reporting fake news, such as the the crucifixion story, journalists who could have otherwise been reporting on the actual violence taking place in the Donbas were sent on wild-goose chases to debunk nonsense reports. It takes much more time and resources to disprove a fake story than it does to make one up. Russian media was able to stay a step ahead of responsible journalists—maintaining a steady barrage of fake and semi-truthful reports that would keep journalists in Ukraine and abroad distracted and bring a confusing haze to de-legitimize the media.

While Western, Ukrainian, and even many Russian journalists deserve praise for the courage they demonstrated in reporting the events of war and for seeking the truth in a messy situation, the news media industry was unable to fully see through the fog of disinformation in 2014. By presenting conspiracy theories, lies, and Kremlin denials with the same weight as real reporting based on fact-gathering and professional observation, major news outlets fell short of their duty to responsibly convey the events unfolding in Ukraine for the sake of an attempt to appear balanced and objective. It is a fool's errand to give responsible reporting the same benefit of the doubt and reverence as stories from questionable sources based on flimsy or no evidence.

Russian propaganda in that sense was successful at exploiting the Western press and its commitment to investigation.

Prankers or Information Warriors?

Another odd but notable incident that took place during the early information war was a series of alleged prank calls by a Russian telephone pranker who goes by the alias Vovan (real name Vladimir Kuznetsov) and his partner, Lexus (real name Aleksei Stolyarov). The duo posted a number of videos to YouTube that they claimed were Skype conversations between an Stolyarov, who was dressed like DPR leader Pavel Gubarev, and Ihor Kolomoysky, a powerful Ukrainian oligarch whose political clout had grown during the first months following the revolution. Kolomoysky financed a pro-Ukrainian militia to quash any so-called separatist uprisings in the Dnipropetrvosk oblast and was subsequently appointed governor of the region.

In the videos, in which the alleged Kolomoysky often appears drunk, the two discuss the ongoing war while offering to cooperate on certain issues and trash-talking Ukrainian politicians.[41] Kolomoysky sometimes praises the Russian-backed militant groups and in one video offers to fund a separatist election. Even though the sheer volume of conversations posted over several weeks raised suspicions that the man in the video was not in fact Ihor Kolomoysky, Russian media were quick to report them as authentic. LifeNews, a major Russian television channel, as well as countless Russian websites, reported the videos without caveat.

The reports were even initially picked up by Ukrainian news websites, although they would later report them with the disclaimer that the conversations were with a man "who looks like Kolomoysky" and quote the oligarch as labeling the videos "fakes." (Korrespondent 2015,

[41] For example: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=YfyvwzUqnJw&t=1s

Korrespondent 2015 (b), LifeNews 2014). The episode even prompted the real Gubarev to praise the pranker for his work getting information from the oligarch. This prank is significant because it not only portrays Kolomoysky in an uncompromising light, but it also seems to reinforce anti-Jewish conspiracy theories that rich Jews are pursuing nefarious ends by plotting behind the scenes.

It remains unclear whether the man in the video is in fact Kolomoysky, but the videos were convincing enough to grab headlines and further sow suspicion toward the oligarch and his role in the conflict. Kuznetsov would go on to prank other high-profile figures, including Elton John, who thought he was speaking with Vladimir Putin, and reporters from The New York Times, who believed they were speaking with Ukrainian President Petro Poroshenko (Walker 2016). Many of those later conversations proved to be authentic, but the Kolomoysky videos remain suspicious. They are much longer, more in depth, and more damaging than anything that has come since. Most of the later, authentic pranks were carried out either as "news" interviews (such as in a video conversation with Dnipro Battalion leader and parliament member Semen Semenchenko) or phone conversations that reveal little that would be compromising for the victim, such as the prank call to Ukrainian Petro Poroshenko, who thought he was speaking to the Kyrgyz president in a routine diplomatic conversation, or the call from a fake Vladimir Putin to Elton John, who insisted he didn't want to say anything political when pressed about Russian relations and LGBT rights. Prankers contacted Semenchenko a second time,[42] posing as Gubarev and provoking the Ukrainian battalion leader to swear profusely and threaten him—something not entirely unexpected since the two commanded opposing forces.

The Kolomoysky videos, however, remain suspicious and worthy of further investigation. If it is reasonable enough to assume that it is possible to find an actor who looks enough like

[42] Video available: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1z6u3Cn7Wmg

Gubarev to fool Kolomoysky, it seems equally reasonable to assume that it is possible to find an actor who looks enough like Kolomoysky to fool us. In the end, perhaps it doesn't matter whether the videos are authentic. The fact that the Kolomoysky videos were widely shared and hard to discredit are enough to further erode trust and to sow further confusion. Adding to the allure was the ability of Kuznetsov and his partner to connect with high-profile celebrities and heads of state, which has raised suspicions that the pair had help from the Russian Security Service, an accusation they both deny (Walker 2016).

Dozens of YouTube accounts claim to have other leaked phone conversations between Kolomoysky and various Ukrainian figures, including one purportedly between the oligarch and Viktor Yanukovych before his ouster in February 2014.[43] The sheer number of "leaks" and their explosive subject matter casts further doubt on their authenticity. Targeting Kolomoysky in the early stages of the conflict would make sense from a Russian point of view. Unlike rival oligarch Rinat Akhmetov, Kolomoysky immediately sided with the new government in Kyiv and took a firm stance against the Russian-backed insurgency in eastern Ukraine, finding himself an enemy in the Kremlin. The videos also came out just before parliamentary elections in 2014, and Kolomoysky has been a major force in national politics by both bankrolling political parties, including the UKROP Party, which would be announced several months later, and through his 1+1 Media Group, which runs some of the country's biggest television channels.

Ukraine's Response to Disinformation

Ukraine's response to Russian disinformation has been sporadic and has yielded mixed results. Structural challenges and a lack of resources have meant that Ukraine has struggled to find a unified message and to have its voice heard above Russia's. The Ukrainian media

[43] For example: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2ZLEt-8fi_E

landscape distinguishes itself from the Russia's in significant structural ways. While Russia's media is loyal first to the state and the official narrative from the Kremlin, Ukrainian media outlets, with the exception of First National Channel, are loyal to oligarchs and political clans. Major television channels in Ukraine are owned by powerful businessmen such as Kolomoysky, who owns 1+1 Media Group, President Poroshenko, who owns Channel 5, and Dmitry Firtash, who controls Inter (Interfax Ukraine 2015 (b), Fedets 2015). While Ukrainian media is not considered "free" by Western standards and remains largely controlled by wealthy business owners, the competing interests of the political clans makes for a kind of pluralism and competition that no longer exists in Russia (Freedom House 2016). But since these interests rival each other, and there is little state investment in mass media, Ukrainian media outlets do not cooperate in the same way Russian media can. Thus, since 2013, some of the most effective responses to Russian narratives and disinformation have come from independent and internet-based groups.

The first major success for Ukrainian information efforts was probably its innovative use of live broadcasts during the Euromaidan protests. Internet television channel EspresoTV, as well as Hromodske, and Radio Free Europe / Radio Liberty, offered live streams and extensive video reportage at various points during the uprising. Live video from EspresoTV was especially popular abroad during the violent climax of the protests between February 18 and February 22. The dramatic live feed was shared by major news sources, popular internet blogs, and was watched by thousands on social media platforms (Weinstein 2014, Friedman 2014). For example, Google Trends shows spikes in the number of people who searched for "Espreso" and "Ukraine revolution" in mid-January during the first major wave of violence and then a much bigger spike on February 18, when the fires broke out (Google Trends 2016). The success of the

live streams allowed these new platforms to bypass Russian and Western media and broadcast the events directly to viewers.

Among the most recognizable responses to Russian disinformation is StopFake, a web resource that operates in affiliation with Kyiv-Mohyla Academy. Launched in early 2014, StopFake gathers fake news reporting mainly in Russian media and debunks it (Tomkiw 2014). Since March 2014, the website has chronicled hundreds of fake reports and inaccuracies. Its coverage isn't limited to Russian media, though. In one post, StopFake examines a report on Ukraine's Channel 24 that quotes a former defense minister as saying that Canada was offering F/A-18 fighter jets to Ukraine. It then quotes Ukrainian Defense Ministry representative Anton Geraschenko saying that such an offer never took place (StopFake 2014).

Importantly, the Ukrainian response to Russia's disinformation onslaught was not limited to Ukrainian-language publications. StopFake began releasing weekly video roundups of fake news, posting more than 100 in both Russian and English on its YouTube account.[44] StopFake purposely uses the Russian language instead of Ukrainian to reach Russian and Russian-speaking viewers. The US government-funded Radio Free Europe / Radio Liberty also beefed up its web-based features, offering more live streams of events and adding a permanent English-language reporter to its Kyiv bureau.

In August 2014 Kolomoysky, who served as governor of Dnipropetrovsk oblast until his dismissal in 2015 over sending his private militia to a state-owned oil company during a dispute with President Petro Poroshenko, launched Ukraine Today, an English-language television channel that aimed to give a Ukrainian perspective of the war and political situation. [Disclosure: I contributed to Ukraine Today from its launch in 2014 to mid-2015.] The channel, which operates as part of Kolomoysky's 1+1 Media Group, translated Ukrainian news pieces to

[44] StopFake's YouTube Account: https://www.youtube.com/channel/UCCZothtCidIy76HaIrusRfA

rebroadcast for an English-language audience and recorded interviews with Ukrainian officials and cultural figures.

The channel was meant to be a direct response to Russia Today (RT)—an attempt to debunk false Russian news and to present the conflict from a Ukrainian point of view. The channel, which operated on only a tiny fraction of RT's budget and was run as part of a private company, could not compete with the well-funded Russian state operations. The management also seemed to misjudge their audience, focusing their energy on trying to enter a satellite television market with a traditional rolling-news format at a time when the internet was proving a more affordable and effective way to reach an audience interested in what was happening in Eastern Europe. The channel began with a team of 10 people from the UK, the US, and Canada and about two dozen Ukrainian staff. By spring 2016 all of the original foreign staff had left or been laid off as the channel struggled to find an audience and raise money from advertising and donations (author's notes).

The Ukrainian government has also sought to get involved. In December 2014, it launched the Ministry of Information Policy, explaining it was formed to counter Russian propaganda (Recknagel). The Ministry announced in early 2015 announced it would launch yet another English-language television channel. This one, almost unbelievably, was to be called Ukraine Tomorrow (Interfax-Ukraine 2015). That project instead launched in late 2016 as UATV English, as a counterpart to the state's Ukrainian information portal, Ukrinform.[45] As of March 2017, its online footprint is much smaller than Ukraine Today and other English-language services like the Kyiv Post.[46]

[45] English language service of Ukrinform: https://www.ukrinform.net/info/about_agency.html
[46] UATV social media accounts give insight into the service's following

Hromadske, an internet television channel that launched during the Maidan revolution that receives funding from various governments, NGOs, and private corporations, operates a talk show for an English-language audience.[47] The channel, which gained popularity during the revolution and early stages of the war as an independent source of news and commentary, has since faced scandal and conflict with its audience and the Ukrainian government, leading to a high rate of staff turnover while its English-language offerings have struggled to gain a large audience (Luxmoore 2016). An estimated 80 percent of Ukrainians rely on television to get their news, which may explain the enthusiasm for launching English-language channels (Bruce 2015, Nisbet 2015). But that doesn't necessarily translate to a Western audience, where that number is less than 60 percent (Pew 2016).

Social media has also proved a valuable resource for information warriors. Euromaidan Press, an English language publication, produces a steady stream of widely shared pro-Ukrainian articles and opinion pieces by academics, Ukrainian government representatives, and journalists. Ukrainians also began using social media websites such as VKontakte to identify Russian citizens who posted photos and videos of themselves inside Ukraine. In one instance, a Ukrainian blogger geotagged photos by a Russian soldier that he claimed was evidence that the Russian Army had shelled Ukraine from behind the Russian border (Ukraine@War 2014). These stories would be picked up by English-language blogs such as Ukraine@War, which, among others, was an early user of geolocating techniques and would attempt to identify Russian positions and the locations of attacks by comparing photos and videos with Google satellite imagery.

Perhaps the most successful user of the technique has been Bellingcat, founded by British blogger Eliot Higgins. Bellingcat gained attention for its open-source investigation into the MH17 tragedy and has been cited throughout Western media for providing evidence that the

[47] Budgets available on the Hromadske website: http://hromadske.ua/finreports/

fighter jet was downed by a Russian-made Buk anti-aircraft missile launcher. Bellingcat's research would be considered during the official Dutch investigation into the downing of the airliner, to the annoyance of RT[48] and other Russian media (Harding 2016).

Russia's Cyber Offensive

While fake news websites and Russian media have been a staple of the Kremlin's disinformation war, Russia also used its cyber capabilities to wage war on Ukraine and the West. Cyber operations are seen by Russia as a component of information warfare, according to military doctrine. And although both Ukraine and Russia have a highly skilled talent pool of computer users, Martin Libicki writes in "The Cyber War that Wasn't" that "the most notable thing about the war in Ukraine, however, is the near-complete absence of any perceptible cyber war" (Libicki 2015). That was somewhat true for the first phase of the war, when Russia found it easier to achieve its results in places like Crimea by physically cutting internet and telephone cables, but there were signs of increased cyber activity in the wake of the Euromaidan revolution, and cyber operations were used in two notable instances to attempt to achieve real-world results. Security experts first noticed a sharp increase in the use of malware "callbacks" in both Russia and Ukraine in March 2014, the month Russian forces annexed Crimea, suggesting an increase in malicious activity (Geers 2014).

In May 2014 Ukraine held a presidential election to replace Viktor Yanukovych, who fled Kyiv in February during the Euromadian revolution. In the hours before election results were made public, Ukraine's Computer Emergency Response Team (CERT) identified malware

[48] "Russian bloggers slam Bellingcat MH17 investigation for 'falsified evidence.' 15 September 2016. Available: https://www.rt.com/news/359484-bellingcat-mh17-investigation-fake/

that had infected the country's Central Election Commission, deleting files that were needed for vote-tallying. The software was unable to provide real-time updates and temporarily posted incorrect election results to the election commission website. Computer experts were able at the last minute to catch a virus that would have declared Dmitro Yarosh, the leader of the nationalist Right Sector Party, the winner of the election with 37 percent of the vote instead of 1 percent. Hackers then posted that Yarosh had won the election 12 minutes before the polls closed—results that were quickly broadcast all over Russian media (Koval 2015, Clayton 2014).

Cyber Berkut, which derives its name from the notorious Ukrainian riot police that were disbanded following the revolution, have been known to attack NATO websites and leak documents between pro-Ukrainian and pro-Western figures such as George Soros (Rodrigo 2015). The group claims to be made up of volunteer anti-Maidan Ukrainians, but cyber security experts suspect it has ties to Russian security services such as the FSB or GRU (Rodrigo 2015, ThreatConnect 2016).

In addition to Cyber Berkut, a number of other hacking groups with suspected ties to Russian intelligence have become more active in Ukraine and abroad. Two of the most notorious are Fancy Bear (Advanced Persistent Threat 28 or APT28) and Cozy Bear (Advanced Persistent Threat 29 or APT 29). These two were also responsible for separate hacks of the Democratic National Committee emails in 2016.

Prior to the DNC email leaks, these two hacking entities were known as part of a cyber espionage group dubbed "the Dukes." They were primarily involved in producing a variety of malware to target foreign governments and think tanks using spear-phishing emails to infect computers and acquire information. In the lead-up to the Euromaidan protests in 2013, one of the Dukes was reported to have sent infected emails posing as the embassy of the Netherlands to

Ukraine's Ministry of Foreign Affairs in an apparent attempt to gain information—likely about discussions over signing an association agreement with the European Union, one of the triggers of the protests of 2013-2014. (Gallagher 2015).

Fancy Bear has also been known to target journalists and those critical of Russian policy, such as Bellingcat founder Eliot Higgins, whose MH17 report was used in the official Dutch investigation into the MH17 tragedy (ThreatConnect 2016). Due to the nature of its attacks, Fancy Bear is believed to be under the control of the Russian GRU while Cozy Bear is likely under the control of the FSB (Alperovitch 2016). Between 2007 and 2014, the code used by Fancy Bear was largely compiled during workday hours in St. Petersburg and Moscow, and its operations have consistently aligned with Russian state interests (Weedon 2015). These groups and others have also been involved in leaked documents from Ukrainian and Western sources.

Pro-Russian Trolls

Another feature of Russia's cyber offensive was its so-called troll army. American journalist Adrian Chen wrote extensively about paid Russian trolls in an article for the New York Times. He detailed how a building in St. Petersburg housed a mysterious organization called the "Internet Research Agency," which, according to people who worked there, paid dozens of people to troll news websites and blogs with pro-Russian, anti-Ukrainian, and anti-American comments (Chen 2015). Chen also tracked Twitter and Facebook accounts that would post conspiratorial, pro-Russian, anti-American, and abusive content. Many of these accounts, it turns out, would transition from pro-Russian comments to pro-Donald Trump posts during the US presidential election (Chen 2015, Chen 2016). Trolling became such a problem during the war in

the Donbas that the Guardian posted an article responding to readers' complaints of abuse in the comments section and detailing how the newspaper's moderators were overwhelmed with negative comments in articles related to Ukraine (Elliott 2014). The Moscow Times also had to temporarily suspend its comments section due to excessive and abusive pro-Russian trolling (Ukraine Today 2014). When Jessikka Aro tried to investigate the trolling phenomenon, she encountered an avalanche of abuse, with articles and posts appearing online accusing her of being a drug dealer, among other things (Aro 2016).

As Chen notes, trolls don't appear to have been effective at convincing readers of Kremlin positions. However, they were successful at derailing conversations, and as the Guardian experience demonstrated, they interrupted legitimate discussion of a news event. Instead of an attempt to change opinions, the Kremlin's trolling seems to have been another disinformation tactic to target users' emotions and to confuse and distract an audience, shutting down conversations and wreaking havoc on discussion boards and comment sections.

Ukraine Strikes Back: The "Gray Cardinal"

Ukraine's known cyber operations are not well funded, and its cyber warriors are made up largely of volunteers who claim no formal ties to the security services. Ukraine's much smaller budget and economic difficulties are reflected in its reliance on pro-bono hackers and hacktivists. While Russia has spent more than a decade modernizing its military and developing a long-term information warfare strategy for defense against a variety of perceived threats and offense against numerous countries and military blocs, Ukraine has only needed to think seriously about its military capabilities since the spring of 2014. Thus, the main focus has been modernization and expansion. Ukraine's latest military doctrine, signed in September 2015,

specifically identifies Russia as a military threat and priorities preparing for a full-scale invasion (Ministry of Defence of Ukraine 2015). President Poroshenko also adopted a decree in March 2016 identifying the need to bolster cyber defenses. It also calls for empowering the defense and security sectors with the ability to carry out "active cyber defense" and retaliatory cyber attacks, although Ukrainian legal experts point out that Ukraine lacks resources for a serious state cyber defense strategy (Office of the Ukrainian President 2016, Koval 2016).

Like the response to Russian disinformation, Ukraine's responses to Russian cyber operations have been sporadic and not cohesive. Because of the state's lack of resources, much of the major operations against Russian interests have been carried out by volunteer "hacktivists." The most recent and potentially damaging attack against the Russian government came earlier this year. In October 2016 while Hillary Clinton was still dealing with the fallout of the DNC leaks, Inform Napalm, a self-described Ukrainian information warfare project, released a trove of emails from the inbox of Vladislav Surkov, an aide to Vladimir Putin. A group calling itself "Cyber Hunta" claimed responsibility for the email dump. The initial leak included more than 2,000 emails dated between September 2013 and November 2014, the period covering the lead-up to Euromaidan and the early stages of the War in the Donbas. The Atlantic Council's Digital Forensic Research Lab confirmed their authenticity by analyzing header data and comparing some of the emails with real-world events. For example, one email included an invitation to an art exhibit in Moscow, which was confirmed to be a genuine message sent by the Garage Museum of Contemporary Art in Moscow (DFRLab 2016)

Accompanying the Surkov leaks were videos posted to the YouTube account of Inform Napalm, describing the leaks and warning that more were in the works. The videos, attributed to the "Cyber Alliance" of several pro-Ukrainian groups, were made in the style of the Anonymous

hacker group, with the photo of an individual in a Guy Fawkes mask appearing as a computerized voice reads a script.[49] Another video, appearing on the Euromaidan Press YouTube channel, is an interview with two self-proclaimed hacktivists, who also appear in masks and claim to have experience working in information security. The two "hacktivists" say they are motivated to assist the government in causing "collateral damage" to the enemy through information war to preserve Ukrainian independence. They claim to have begun their operations in 2014, gathering intelligence on separatists and hacking Russia's First Channel, among others.[50]

Hackers interviewed claim not to be affiliated with the Ukrainian Security Services, acting independently and handing Ukrainian intelligence agencies information when they see fit. They also rejected claims that US intelligence was involved in the hack of Surkov's email account, saying that Ukrainian hackers were well-equipped to carry out such an operation without the help of outside forces. When asked in the videos why the group didn't give the information to WikiLeaks, one of the hackers interviewed responds by saying they believe that WikiLeaks has lost its "moral-ethical code" and that Ukrainian groups, especially InformNapalm, are sufficient for their purposes.

InformNapalm, an information portal that hosts leaked documents, was founded by a Crimean-born Ukrainian who was opposed to Russia's annexation of the peninsula (Miller 2016) The group has worked with the Cyber Alliance to leak mobile-phone data from various targets, including Arseny "Motorola" Pavlov, a Russian militant who was killed in a bomb blast in the elevator of his Donetsk apartment in October and who has been accused of summary executions

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[49] "SurkovLeaks part 2." Inform Napalm YouTube Channel. 2 November 2016. Available: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=IgAQauIrvp0

[50] "We have no need for CIA help' - Ukrainian hackers of #SurkovLeaks | Exclusive intervew." Euromaidan Press YouTube Channel. 2 November 2016. Available: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=tqhO_Ywxyok

of captured Ukrainian soldiers (InformNapalm 2016). The group publishes in Russian, English, and occasionally other languages. One of its investigations, which accused Russian brigade commander Sergei Mauchkayev of involvement in the MH17 tragedy, was used by Bellingcat in its report submitted to Dutch authorities (Bellingcat 2016).

Ukrainian Hacktivists

Various pro-Ukrainian hacker/hacktivist groups have operated since the beginning of the War in the Donbas, although information about them is limited. There are reportedly only between 10 and 15 hackers who regularly contribute to operations against Russia (Miller 2016). Known informally as the Ukrainian Cyber Alliance, these are the four main pro-Ukrainian hacker groups:

CyberHunta is the group that has claimed responsibility for leaking Surkov's emails. The group's website contains the email dump, accompanied by photos of passports belonging to family members of Surkov. Before the Surkov Leaks, the group seems to have been focused mainly on targeting governing members of the Donetsk People's Republic, leaking contact information as well other electronic documents. They seem to specialize in leaking inboxes. For example, in May 2016 Aleksandr Zakharchenko, the Prime Minister of the self-proclaimed DPR, held a "press conference" with residents from the Kherson Oblast over email, posting answers to questions on his social media accounts. The hackers revealed that the questions he answered publicly were not the ones actually submitted via email when they leaked the full list of messages received.[51]

[51] http://cyberhunta.com/news/nadezhde-savchenko-posvyaschaetsya/

RUH8 operates a site called "VK Leaks," where it publishes information from the hacked VK accounts of what the group terms "terrorists, their supporters, and enemies of Ukraine." Included are thousands of messages sent and received by Russian fighters and "pro-Russian propagandists."[52] The site also provides a link to a biography of nearly every person on a site belonging to the Mirotvorets group. The Mirotvorets site also provides links to each person's known social media accounts and groups he or she is affiliated with. For example, Aleksandr Bovdunov, who Mirotvorets claims is an activist in the Eurasian Youth Union and a recruiter for Donbas militias, is also affiliated with a research group at Moscow State University.

RUH8 in his interview with RFE/RL said Surkov's emails were gathered using "special software" rather than phishing. He claims that operation also allowed CyberHunta to "take the entire [Russian] presidential administration under their control." RUH8, according to RFE/RL, is run by a man who has a "day job as a Kyiv-based security researcher." (Miller 2016). In the interview, RUH8 claims there are only 10-15 volunteers working in the Cyber Alliance. He claims that a common phishing method, sending messages posing as a legitimate company to gain personal information or security information, is effective.

Two other groups, Falcons Flame and Trinity, have also been involved in operations against Russian interests. Unlike RUH8 and CyberHunta, Falcons Flame and Trinity don't operate standalone websites. While they collaborate with the other two groups, their activities seem to be more involved in compromising Russian websites and replacing them with pro-Ukrainian messages. In May, for example, they compromised the website of Anna News, a television channel operated by the Russian-backed separatists in the Georgian breakaway region of Abkhazia, and posted a pro-Ukrainian video message on the front page (Information Army of Ukraine 2016).

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[52] Available: http://ruheight.org/vkd/

Mirotvorets: a Major Misfire

In spring of this year, a Ukrainian website called Mirotvorets (meaning "peacemaker") posted a database of journalists who had received accreditation from the self-proclaimed separatist authorities to report in the militant-controlled areas of the Donetsk and Luhansk oblasts. The database, leaked by Ukrainian hackers, included the contact information for more than 4,000 journalists, including those who worked for major publications like the New York Times and the Guardian. The site accused those on the list of collaborating with terrorists. Anton Gerashenko, a prominent Ukrainian lawmaker, praised the work of the hackers and called for an investigation (Batesman 2016).

The leaks and the accusations of collaboration angered Western journalists and became a major point of contention between pro-Ukrainian groups and reporters covering the war. The misguided attempt to shame so-called "collaborators" became a major PR disaster for Ukraine and its supporters since the documents enraged those who needed press credentials to access the occupied areas to gather information and report on the war. While Ukrainian volunteers have succeeded in shaming and discrediting Russian propaganda outlets through initiatives like StopFake, the Mirotvorets leak went a step too far and alienated many responsible reporters, creating a temporary backlash in Western media.

Conclusion

This paper is a work in progress and is not meant to be a comprehensive analysis of Russian or Ukrainian information warfare strategies but rather as a guide based on recent

examples to add to the discussion of information warfare in the 21st century. By looking at media events related to Euromaidan and the war in the Donbas over the course of three years, especially the first half of 2014, it is possible to see a few patterns that have emerged. Russian military doctrine makes it clear that Russia seeks more control of what it calls the "information sphere," a concept understood to consist of various aspects of communication, including cyberspace and mass media. This strategy is reflected in the Kremlin's increased activities online and its attempts to influence political events through cyber attacks and news reports that give legitimacy to the state's official narrative. Furthermore, these documents demonstrate Russia's concern with finding ways to promote a positive image abroad through its various media projects. The large amount of money the state spends on operations such as RT, Sputnik, and social media trolls reveal an evolving strategy to gain a foothold in Western media markets and point to aggressive aggressive tactics to reach what it sees as important audiences outside its borders. Doing so allows the Kremlin to influence the conversation about major media events, especially Russia's role in the ongoing war in Ukraine.

Russia's ability to exploit ideologically oriented media sources, especially those on the right, allowed it to promote its version of the events in Ukraine. This exercise also allowed Russian nationalists, such as Aleksandr Dugin, to develop a productive relationship with right-wing media in the United States. With the election of Donald Trump, these media projects and personalities, which were once dismissed as fringe, now occupy a more prominent position in Western society and discourse. With their sympathetic view of Russian values, the Kremlin has found a productive outlet to pursue and promote its interests.

Examining various strategies the Kremlin uses to influence audiences domestically and abroad suggests it still follows classic Soviet information strategies but with a higher level of

sophistication and with the advantage of 21st century technologies. By spreading fake news events and offering various, competing theories about certain prominent incidents (such as the MH17 tragedy) through a multitude of platforms, Russia seems to be practicing the disinformation strategy of distraction and confusion. By focusing attention on bogus events, Russian media was able to distract responsible reporters and confuse audiences while it continued its invasion of Crimea and eastern Ukraine in the spring of 2014. Its network of freelance cyber warriors, youth organizations, and militias that aren't official organs of the state provide it with plausible deniability and allow it to pursue its goals in a way that confuses and frustrates NATO and West.

The barrage of reports in the early stages of the crisis forced mainstream media to consider both responsibly reported news events against rumors, nonsense, and conspiracy theories to appear balanced, thus providing the Kremlin room to maneuver and time to further its tactical goals. The Russian strategy of advancing several competing theories and mimicking and perverting Western mass media practices by giving a platform to fringe political figures and conspiracy theorists while presenting an endless stream of "experts" seemed to be aimed at eroding trust in the institution of journalism, sowing doubt about the ability and willingness of mainstream media to report accurately and further confusing casual audiences and those who feel excluded from mainstream politics.

In a recent report, the NATO Strategic Communications Centre of Excellence argues that the perception of the outcome of a modern conflict matters more than the facts (StratCom 2016). Russia has attempted to control perceptions of the events in Ukraine by targeting the emotions of its audiences and using doubt, deception, and confusion as tools to that end. NATO must address these tactics and adapt to 21st century information warfare strategy.

Cyber operations, which have become a major fixation for Western media in the wake of the US presidential election, have played a small but significant role in the Russia-Ukraine war. The Russian strategy, as it was during the US presidential campaign, seemed to be aimed at embarrassing major Ukrainian and Western officials. By leaking phone calls and other information, Russian media intended to discredit these people in the eyes of observers. Relatedly, the attack on the Ukrainian Central Election Commission seemed to be aimed at discrediting the election process and encouraging doubt about the legitimacy of Ukrainian institutions.

The Ukrainian response has been somewhat ad hoc and not well coordinated. Initiatives like StopFake have helped to discredit Russian media in the eyes of an internet-savvy audience by cataloguing the sheer volume of fake news stories and lies reported in Russian media outlets. Other measures, such as television channels meant to compete with Russian propaganda, appear to be a mixed bag. Most Russians and Ukrainians rely on television for news, so attempts to reach a Russian audience might prove more effective than trying to enter a Western media market, where television plays a smaller role and the competition is fiercer. Limited budgets for projects such as Ukraine Today make it difficult for them to compete directly with the lavishly funded RT and Sputnik. The internet provides a more cost-effective way to reach an international audience, but English-language Ukrainian media suffer from poor coordination and a lack of resources. Ukrainian and Western journalists and policymakers would be wise to consider ways to build bridges between the various media experiments in Ukraine to use resources more productively.

In the cyber sphere, Ukraine has relied heavily on volunteer hacktivists due to budget constraints and the lack of a clear cyber defense policy. As Ukraine continues to reform its military and adopt Western systems, its cyber defenses are likely to improve. Ukraine, like

Russia, has a large talent pool to draw from to build a more comprehensive and effective cyber strategy, but a lack of resources makes this a challenge. In the meantime, volunteers have succeeded in publishing documents, such as the Surkov emails, that provide more forensic evidence of Russia's role in stage-managing the leaders of the so-called people's republics in the east.

Finally, it is worth noting that the West and Ukraine have shown themselves to be most effective at countering Russian disinformation when they are able to use innovative techniques to expose events and to outpace Russian media with facts and evidence. Bellingcat and independent bloggers have helped to discredit Russia's official narrative of the conflict by outmaneuvering Russian propaganda with information gathered through social media, geolocation techniques, and images provided by Russian media outlets themselves that expose troop movements, the Russian origins of so-called "separatists," and evidence of war crimes.

As it has become clear over the past few years, countering disinformation presents a particular challenge. Because it is often cheaper to manufacture a lie than it is to disprove one, disinformation risks overwhelming the resources of a responsible press. Some have suggested blocking Russian propaganda. This presents an ethical challenge. The right to a free press and the belief that the truth will win out in the end is a sacred tenet of Western thought and is explicitly protected in the First Amendment to the United States Constitution. Blocking Russian media becomes a slippery exercise in censorship that could further inflame ideological cleavages, which is why the problem calls for a more creative solution. The Ukrainian experience presents a few lessons: Social media and open-source resources can act as tools of fact-checking; Researchers dedicated to filtering through some of the most egregious lies can help improve the reputation of responsible reporters; and independent researchers and journalists

who act responsibly are able to successfully discredit disinformation outlets with fact-based reporting and sober commentary.

As Keir Giles points out, the response to Russian disinformation has not been coordinated. He suggests a state-level response; however, what that would look like seems difficult to imagine. He argues that national-level communication should be strategic and defensive and that support should be given to journalists who are investigating Russian claims (Giles 2016 p.58). This could be part of a broader effort to promote responsible journalism and to encourage institutions that are effective at exposing and calling out sources of disinformation. It is important that responsible journalism be protected and supported both in mainstream media outlets and on the internet, where it is easier than ever for small actors to find an audience. Developing productive relationships with the press without inflaming and empowering ideologically oriented media will prove important and challenging as the debate over fake news and information warfare continues in the coming years.

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Appendix

List of articles where “separatist” or “rebel” is used in reference to foreign fighters:

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