

Why Russian Disinformation Matters

Fred Hoffman¹[0000-0003-0876-3013] and Svet Di-Nahum²[0009-0009-6679-0483]

¹ Mercyhurst University, Erie, PA 16546, USA

² Bulgarian Academy of Sciences, Sofia, Bulgaria
fhoffman@mercyhurst.edu

Abstract. Disinformation is false information that is knowingly and willfully created and disseminated to achieve a desired effect in one or more target audiences. While an increasing number of countries and non-state actors have been accused of disseminating disinformation in recent years, the Russian Federation is arguably the world leader in this information warfare methodology, which originated in Moscow over a century ago. While disinformation narratives are lies, the true purpose of the disinformation narrative is not necessarily to convince the target audience to believe the lie. Rather, the purpose of disinformation is to erode the target audience's belief over time in anything its government and once-trusted media and personalities have to say about anything. Disinformation originated in former Soviet times, but there are four important ways in which Russian and Soviet disinformation differ. There are a variety of reasons why the Kremlin has used disinformation in the past, and continues to use it today: It's low-cost, low-risk, impactful, and consistent with both gray zone strategy and current Russian military doctrine. Amplifying the impact of Russian disinformation narratives are changes in the ways Westerners receive and perceive their news.

Keywords: Disinformation, information warfare, propaganda, news media

1 Russia and Disinformation

1.1 What exactly is disinformation?

Disinformation refers to false information that is knowingly and willfully disseminated by its creator to achieve a desired effect in one or more target audiences. Bennett and Livingston define disinformation as, “intentional falsehoods or distortions, often spread as news, to advance political goals such as discrediting opponents, disrupting policy debates, influencing voters, inflaming existing social conflicts, or creating a general backdrop of confusion and informational paralysis.”¹ The purpose of disinformation is not necessarily to make the target audience believe a particular lie, but rather to convince the target audience that “learning the objective truth is virtually impossible” and that *no* information source can be believed.² “The disinformationists don’t necessarily want you to believe them—they don’t want you to believe anybody.”³

1.2 How disinformation differs from propaganda

Disinformation is far more insidious than *propaganda*, the latter term dating back to the 1600s which refers to “the selective use of information aimed at producing some desired political effects.”⁴ Propaganda is aimed at the heart, rather than the mind, of its audience – to agitate people, and cause them to react emotionally, rather than cognitively, to information.⁵ Propaganda deliberately and systematically “attempts to achieve a response that furthers the desired intent of the propagandist.”⁶ Propaganda can be characterized as *white*, *gray*, or *black*, the distinction determined by “acknowledgement of its source and its accuracy of information.”⁷ *White* propaganda conveys true information meant to influence a target audience and shape its perceptions. It “comes from a source that is identified correctly, and the information in the message tends to be accurate.”⁸ In *gray* propaganda, the source of the information “may or may not be correctly identified, and the accuracy of the information is uncertain.”⁹ In *black* propaganda, “the source is concealed or credited to a false authority and spreads lies, fabrications, and deceptions.”¹⁰ Disinformation’s closest historical antecedent is black propaganda because it, too, “is covert and uses false information.”¹¹

1.3 Who disseminates disinformation?

The term *disinformation* actually came from the name of the “KGB black propaganda department responsible for producing false information with the intention of deceiving public opinion.”¹² Today, the Russian Federation is not the *only* entity to use disinformation; other authoritarian countries, such as China and Iran, have also made increasingly effective use of disinformation.¹³ Even sub-national actors like ISIS have proven especially adept at disinformation, demonstrating “sophistication and craftsmanship...like nothing we’d ever seen from al Qaida.”¹⁴

1.4 How and why Putin’s Russia engages in disinformation

The Soviet Union that would ultimately exist for seven decades, beat back and defeat Nazi invaders in World War II, and become a global superpower, literally owed its early survival as a fledgling country to a successful disinformation campaign called “the Trust” that the Kremlin waged for five years in the 1920s.¹⁵ A declassified CIA analysis of the Trust, released in 1988, revealed how several hundred Soviet Chekists managed to craft an elaborate lie about a non-existent White Russian counterrevolutionary organization that not only managed to deceive White Russian leaders-in-exile, but also Western intelligence agencies as to the military strength and capabilities of the early Soviet Union.¹⁶ On 11 January 1923, the GPU, one of the Soviet security organs that would ultimately evolve into the KGB, established the original *dezinformatsiya* (disinformation) office.¹⁷ “The actions of the Trust...would shape the future of disinformation. It was spectacularly successful.”¹⁸

The depth of Soviet (and Warsaw Pact) fascination with disinformation, and the extent of KGB involvement in it, is evident from an interview Thomas Rid conducted with Ladislav Bittmann, a Czechoslovakian intelligence officer who defected in

1968. Bittmann explained how “entire bureaucracies were created...for the purpose of bending the facts.”¹⁹ Bittman knew what he was talking about; he had previously served as deputy chief of the Disinformation Department of the Czechoslovakian intelligence service.²⁰ A KGB defector, Yuri Bezmenov, asserted that only around 25% of the KGB’s time and effort was spent on espionage; the other 75% was spent on active measures like disinformation, which kept 15,000 people employed inside and outside the Soviet Union.²¹ Like all his fellow KGB officers, then-Lieutenant Colonel Vladimir Putin was required to spend fully 25% of his time concocting disinformation storylines and other so-called active measures.²² Although it is possible to take a man out of the KGB, it is apparently not as easy to take the KGB out of the man: As Vladimir Putin himself said in 2000, in the first year of his presidency, “There is no such thing as a former KGB man.”²³

Arguably the most well-known Soviet-era disinformation campaign was Project Denver, a KGB attempt in the 1980s to push the lie that the AIDS virus had been created by the U.S. Army at Fort Detrick, Maryland for the purpose of killing off blacks and homosexuals.²⁴ Project Denver, which began in 1983 with the KGB publishing a little-noticed article in an English-language publication it owned in India, culminated on 30 March 1987 with *CBS Evening News* reporter Dan Rather reporting on how a “Soviet military publication” claimed the AIDS virus “leaked from a U.S. Army laboratory conducting experiments in biological warfare.”²⁵

KGB disinformation ranged from elaborate, sophisticated, multi-year efforts like Project Denver to the use of so-called *agents of influence*, which involved the recruitment of foreign agents to spread disinformation.²⁶ “In France there were more KGB agents of influence than in any other NATO country during the Cold War, usually at least fifty in government alone.”²⁷ “The aim of Soviet disinformation in the Cold War was to undermine the confidence of people in the West in the open nature of their ‘free’ society and in the probity of the men who ran it.”²⁸

In late February 2014, masked men in unmarked uniforms appeared at strategic locations in Ukraine’s Crimea and began seizing control of military bases, government offices, and television stations. Russian President Vladimir Putin “vehemently denied” that these were Russian troops, “claiming instead they were patriotic local militias defending the rights of ethnic Russians in Crimea.”²⁹ One month later, after Crimea had been seized and illegally annexed into the Russian Federation, Putin publicly acknowledged that these had, in fact, been Russian soldiers.³⁰

Russian information warfare (of which disinformation is just one component) has undergone “two strategic shifts”, one after the 2008 invasion of Georgia, and the second after 2014, when Russia “went from being risk-averse and stealthy to increasingly aggressive and risk-taking.”³¹

1.5 Four differences between Soviet-era and modern Russian disinformation

Under Vladimir Putin, Russia has shown itself willing to employ military means in and against former Soviet Republics like Georgia (2008) and Ukraine (since 2014). However, Russia seems disinclined to engage in a military conflict with NATO, preferring

instead to use disinformation as a “gray zone” strategy that enables the Kremlin to incrementally achieve its strategic objectives while avoiding armed conflict.³² In this way, Russian and Soviet disinformation strategies are very consistent.

Although the Russian Federation and the former Soviet Union have both made use of disinformation, there are some significant differences in how the Kremlin has used disinformation, first in Soviet times and more recently under Vladimir Putin. First, while the former Soviet Union, its policies, and actions were guided by Marxist ideology, Vladimir Putin’s Russia “is not ideologically restricted” in its disinformation messaging, and in fact has “demonstrated its ability to side simultaneously with parties across the entire political spectrum.”³³

Another significant difference between Soviet and modern Russian disinformation has been the proliferation of the internet, mobile telephony, and social media, which have given purveyors of disinformation much greater range, speed, and impact, enabling them “to influence popular and elite opinion on a frightening scale.”³⁴

A third way that disinformation conducted by Putin’s Russia differs from that disseminated during Soviet times is in the level of sophistication of those in Russia responsible for identifying opportunities for influencing foreign target audiences and then devising, developing, and disseminating disinformation in response. As Stengel pointed out, “the creators of disinformation use all the legal tools on social media platforms that are designed to deliver targeted messages to specific audiences. These are the exact same tools—behavioral data analysis, audience segmentation, programmatic ad buying—that make advertising campaigns effective. The Internet Research Agency in St. Petersburg uses the same behavioral data and machine-learning algorithms that Coca-Cola and Nike use.”³⁵

A fourth difference between Soviet-era and modern Russian disinformation is the apparent centrality of disinformation in the Russian Federation’s current military doctrine. The importance of disinformation in the Russian approach to warfare is evident in a February 2013 article in Russia’s *Military-Industrial Kurier* written by General Valery Gerasimov, Chief of the General Staff of the Russian Federation. In that article, Gerasimov wrote about the evolution of warfare and the role played by “non-military means”, saying that they “in many cases, they have exceeded the power of force of weapons in their effectiveness.”³⁶ “All this is supplemented by military means of a concealed character, including carrying out actions of *informational conflict*.”³⁷ Although Galeotti (2014) himself originated the term “Gerasimov Doctrine,” he later discouraged its use on the grounds that while Gerasimov articulated and advocated this strategy, Gerasimov himself had not personally originated it.³⁸

2. Why Russian (And Other) Disinformation Should Alarm Us

2.1 Disinformation: One of the most pressing problems in the civilized world

A generation ago, longtime American journalist Walter Lippmann asserted there was a strong linkage between the quality of news and the strength of a democratic society.³⁹ Now threatening that linkage is disinformation, which researchers in 2021 said was

“one of the most pressing” problems in the civilized world.⁴⁰ That same year, in its Interim National Security Strategic Guidance document, the Biden Administration referred to Russia’s determination to “play a disruptive role on the world stage”⁴¹ and asserted that, “Anti-democratic forces use misinformation, disinformation, and weaponized corruption to exploit perceived weaknesses and sow division within and among free nations, erode existing international rules, and promote alternative models of authoritarian governance.”⁴² One of the reasons disinformation is so effective against target audiences in democratic countries is because of a phenomenon some researchers refer to as “post-truth politics,” or “a political phase in which people are inclined to accept arguments based on their consonance to their own emotions and beliefs rather than based on facts.”⁴³

2.2 Factors contributing to the susceptibility of audiences in democratic countries to disinformation

The rise and proliferation of the internet and social media, the decline of print media and the traditional news media, the rise of cable news and the 24/7 news cycle, mainstream news media reliance on stringers (rather than their own, full-time journalists), the deregulation of media ownership in the U.S., the consolidation of media ownership, and an increase in partisan (and increasingly polarized) reporting are all factors that have converged and created this “post-truth politics” phenomenon.⁴⁴ *Fake news*, a term that entered the vernacular around a decade ago, refers to false, often sensational, reporting disseminated as news reporting.⁴⁵ As Hollingsworth said, “The impact of fake news on the human mind is profound. The mind creates mental maps and finds it hard to redraw them once they are settled.”⁴⁶ The power of mental maps was revealed in a 2016 study by researchers from Princeton, Dartmouth, and the University of Exeter, which showed that while 25% of Americans visited a fake news website during a six-week period around the 2016 presidential election, “10% of the readers made 60% of the visits.”⁴⁷

“Before these communication technologies appeared, citizens knew where the messages they received came from...the audience knew who was speaking to them.”⁴⁸ Now, however, “people move in a disordered, chaotic, fragmented and non-hierarchical environment in which they are not aware of who is the author of much of the content they consume.”⁴⁹ As a result of these factors, “democracies aren’t very good at fighting disinformation. We are too open. We value free speech and debate. In most ways, that is a strength, but it can be a liability in an information war.”⁵⁰ This liability, well-known to the Russians, is now the target of Kremlin disinformation campaigns.

Disclosure of Interests. The authors declare that they have no known competing financial interests or personal relationships that could have appeared to influence the work reported in this article.

References

- ¹ Bennett, W., Livingston, S.: A brief history of the disinformation age. In: Bennett, W., and Livingston, S. (eds.). *The Disinformation Age: Politics, Technology, and Disruptive Communication in the United States*. Cambridge University Press (2021), p. 3.
- ² Bokša, M. Russian Information Warfare in Central and Eastern Europe: Strategies, impact, countermeasures. JSTOR. (2022), p. 4
- ³ Stengel, R. *Information Wars: How We Lost the Global Battle Against Disinformation & What We Can Do About It*. Grove Press (2019), p. 305
- ⁴ Giusti, S., Piras, E. Introduction: in search of paradigms: Disinformation, fake news, and post-truth politics. In *Democracy and Fake News* (pp. 1-16). Routledge (2020), p. 2
- ⁵ Jowett, G., O'Donnell, V. *Propaganda and persuasion*. Sage. (2015).
- ⁶ Ibid., p. 1
- ⁷ Ibid, p. 20
- ⁸ Ibid, p. 20
- ⁹ Ibid, p. 24
- ¹⁰ Ibid., p. 21
- ¹¹ Ibid., p. 28
- ¹² Giusti and Piras, p. 2
- ¹³ Filipova, R., Shopov, V. Authoritarians on a media offensive in the midst of war: The informational influence of Russia, China, Turkey, Iran, and the Gulf States in Southeast Europe. Konrad Adenauer Stiftung (2022)
- ¹⁴ Stengel, p. 91
- ¹⁵ Rid, T. *Active Measures: The Secret History of Disinformation and Political Warfare*. Picador (2020)
- ¹⁶ Ibid, p. 24
- ¹⁷ Ibid, p. 25
- ¹⁸ Ibid, p. 30
- ¹⁹ Rid, p. 4
- ²⁰ Jowett and O'Donnell, p. 28
- ²¹ Hollingsworth, M. *Agents of Influence: How the KGB Subverted Western Democracies*. Simon & Schuster (2023), p. 66
- ²² Ibid., p. 10
- ²³ Ibid., p. 11
- ²⁴ Rid, p. 306
- ²⁵ Jowett and O'Donnell, p. 33
- ²⁶ Hollingsworth
- ²⁷ Ibid., p. 49
- ²⁸ Ibid., p. 66
- ²⁹ Stengel, p. 86
- ³⁰ Ibid.
- ³¹ Bokša, p. 1
- ³² Kormych, B., Malyarenko, T. From gray zone to conventional warfare: the Russia-Ukraine conflict in the Black Sea. *Small Wars & Insurgencies*, **34**(7), 1235-1270 (2023)
- ³³ Bokša, p. 4
- ³⁴ Hollingsworth, p. 13
- ³⁵ Stengel, 2019, p. 305-306.
- ³⁶ Galeotti, Mark. The 'Gerasimov Doctrine' and Russian non-linear war." In: *Moscow's Shadows*. <https://inmoscowsshadows.wordpress.com/2014/07/06/the-gerasimov-doctrine-and-russian-non-linear-war/> (6 July 2014)
- ³⁷ Ibid
- ³⁸ Ibid
- ³⁹ Lippmann, 1997

⁴⁰ Ablazov and Karmazina (2021), p. 65.

⁴¹ Biden, J. R. *Interim National Security Strategic Guidance*. Washington, D.C. (2021), p. 8

⁴² Ibid., p. 7

⁴³ Giusti and Piras, p. 5

⁴⁴ Ibid., p. 5

⁴⁵ Ablazov, I., Karmazina, M. Disinformation as a form of aggression: Ukraine and its partners amidst the Russian fake news (early 2021). *Political Science and Security Studies Journal* 2(2), 65-72 (2021), p. 66

⁴⁶ Hollingsworth, 2023, p. 66

⁴⁷ Giusti and Piras, p. 8

⁴⁸ Hernández-Escayola, P. Journalistic approaches to information sources, Fact-checking, verification, and detached reporting. In Arcos, R., Chiru, I., and Ivan, C. (eds.). *Routledge Handbook of Disinformation and National Security*. Taylor & Francis (2024). p. 239

⁴⁹ Ibid., p. 239

⁵⁰ Stengel, p. 304