Key steps for countering Russian propaganda

A toolkit for journalists

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I. The goals of Russian propaganda

Russian propaganda activities are self-admittedly aimed at supporting Russian foreign policy in both the domestic and foreign mass media, and conveying reliable information to Russian citizens abroad. Furthermore, the Russian Federation – keeping up with the traditions of the Soviet era – seeks to weaken its adversaries through the use of information. In addition, General Valery Gerasimov, the chief of the general staff of the Russian Armed Forces, explained that the role of nonmilitary means to achieve strategic goals have exceeded the power of weapons in many cases. In Russia's view, influence spread by propaganda can dramatically alter the battlefield.

⇨ One of the primary geopolitical goals of Russia is achieving world power status once again and, as a part of this effort, to re-establish its influence over former USSR-dominated territories.

⇨ Russia identifies NATO as a main threat to its national security. The Putin-regime is generally averse to international organisations and it prefers that every nation fends for itself in the international system. As a consequence, weakening the EU is one of the main objectives of Russian propaganda as well. In a disunited Europe, Russia could use a divide and conquer strategy to extend its influence in Europe and, moreover, it would have a considerable advantage over any individual European nation militarily.

⇨ Russia aims at blocking further colour revolutions from taking place in former Soviet republics. These constitute the "near abroad" area in Russia, which the Putin-regime considers to be its own sphere of influence. The "Russkiy Mir" concept implies that national borders are of secondary importance to ethnic ties, the phrase describes Russia not as a country but as a community of people. This concept has been revived by the current Russian administration as a tool in its relations with the countries of the former USSR. The ethnic boundaries of the Russkiy Mir align with the Kremlin's perceived sphere of influence.

II. Core values and means of Russian disinformation

⇨ Illiberalism is both a state ideology and a tool of foreign policy for Russia. Internationally, the defining elements of this ideology are authoritarianism, law-and-order policies and a form of nationalism and "post-communist neo-conservatism".

⇨ Russian soft power is used to alter the behaviour of other actors to achieve the desired outcome benefiting the Russian Federation without using direct force or coercion. The core values of Russian soft power, upon which Russian propaganda activities are built, are ultraconservatism, traditionalism, family values, and the moral superiority of Russia over the West and extreme nationalism.

⇨ Pro-Kremlin propaganda is part of the so-called "active measures". 'Active measure' was a Soviet term for the actions of political warfare conducted by the Soviet secret services to influence the course of world events. These tactics are currently used by the Russian Federation, which has more effective tools at its disposal to spread propaganda, e.g. social media.

⇨ Active measures in the 21st century include proactively taking political initiatives, NGO-diplomacy and support for friendly media enterprises.

⇨ Russian propaganda exploits the existing weaknesses and vulnerabilities of its enemy, focusing more on anti-Western sentiments than the promotion of pro-Russian stances. Weaknesses include declining trust in institutions and traditional media, anti-American feelings, ethnic or religious conflicts and welfare chauvinism, prejudices. The Kremlin tailors its narratives to local peculiarities in every case, every country's propaganda is different in either minor or major ways. For example, the pro-Kremlin narrative is vastly different in Estonia with a 25-percent-strong Russian minority living on its territory and in Lithuania, where the share of Russian-speakers is considerably lower.

⇨ Even in the Soviet era, propaganda efforts were organised centrally, which is not different in contemporary Russia either. Most likely, the SVR is responsible for propaganda activities aimed at the foreign audience, but evidence and interviews with opposition MPs in the Duma suggest that Putin's presidential staff and members of the ruling United Russia party are also involved in issuing orders to journalists.

⇨ The Russian Federation spreads its propaganda through channels of public diplomacy, pro-Russian and Russian state-owned media, and its political allies and NGOs in former Soviet republics and EU member states alike. In the EU, these are mainly far-left or far-right parties.

⇨ Russian propaganda, compared to Soviet times, has no ideological basis and it does not seek to offer an alternative to Western capitalism as Soviet communism did. Its purpose is to create confusion among the population and to create divisions in society.

⇨ Russian propaganda has no value or credibility-related restrictions, it does not want to convince the audience, it just wants to offer an alternative reality. This means that open propaganda, blatant lies and various, often contradictory versions of the same events can easily be featured in the pro-Russian narrative. Thus, Russian propaganda wants people to dismiss the official narratives of events.

⇨ Russia uses several sources to disseminate its propaganda to foreign audiences. Its official, state-owned channels that were never intended for the domestic Russian audience, such as RT and Sputnik International, which have various local-language variants in, for instance, the Czech Republic and Germany, have a seemingly more professional writing style to convey the official stance of the Russian government. In addition, there are various websites spreading pro-Russian propaganda. Some of them are allegedly controlled directly by the Russian government, while some are operated by "useful idiots". It is generally impossible to distinguish between paid agents and useful idiots who simply spread pro-Russian messages because they believe the Kremlin is right.

⇨ The use of social and non-traditional media is also an integral part of the Russian propaganda machine. People usually seek short, simple information that re-assures their pre-existing beliefs. According to surveys, almost 60% of articles shared on twitter are never read and 70% of Facebook users only read the headlines of science stories before sharing them. Therefore, social media is an optimal platform for spreading fake news. Since Russian traditional media has largely failed to generate adequate effects in the West, propaganda efforts received another impetus for moving onto non-traditional media. This group includes "alternative" news portals, Facebook groups, Twitter-networks (often managed by bots) and coordinated trolling. These sources often support and quote each other to amplify their own voice.

⇨ Although the audience of pro-Russian propaganda sites is rather small, news spread relatively quickly on social media. In addition, traditional mainstream outlets sometimes take over the stories shared by propaganda sites, which extends the reach of the pro-Kremlin media. In Soviet times, one objective for propaganda was to leak the manipulated stories into mainstream media. Contemporary Russian propaganda has failed to systematically penetrate mainstream Western discourse. The Russian Federation can only do so successfully if their narrative is co-opted by, for instance, pro-government media, which is what happened in Hungary.

III. Identifying Russian propaganda

⇨ The official Russian state-owned mouthpieces, such as RT and Sputnik International, are useful to determine what the official Russian narratives are in any given period. These sites are more professional in their writing styles, but they are just as biased as non-traditional propaganda sites. Sputnik and RT amplify the voices of anti-EU, pro-Russian MPs and MEPs, who are featured on their programmes and in their articles disproportionately to their weights in their respective national assemblies and the European Parliament. Even in case the content featured on RT or Sputnik includes quotes from mainstream politicians, they usually take their words out context. The views of politicians opposed to the Kremlin's stance rarely make it into the broadcasts of Russian state-owned channels. Interviews on RT or Sputnik are the privilege of pro-Kremlin politicians. Later, various "alternative" websites, Facebook pages quote these interviews, although they sometimes even falsify these.

⇨ Russian propaganda websites were generally established in late 2013 – early 2014 or changed their tones considerably around that time. For example, the Czech Aeronet website was established by aviation enthusiasts in 2001 and has since had several owners, but in May 2014 pro-Kremlin articles started to appear on it. Having an up-to-date list of the most important and visited propaganda websites, blogs, Facebook pages, NGOs and, if possible, twitter users aimed at influencing the domestic audience is advisable.

⇨ Russian propaganda websites usually deal with a number of common topics: Ukraine, Syria, migration, the EU and NATO, liberalism and the liberal media. Alternative sites usually justify and legitimise the Kremlin's actions and views, although they sometimes offer parallel narratives on the same events to create confusion. The toolkit of these propaganda sites is highly diverse.

⇨ Pro-Russian propaganda sites spread conspiracy theories. Conspiracies are events in which a number of actors join together in a secret agreement to achieve a hidden goal that is perceived to be malevolent or unlawful. They are theories of illegitimate control reflecting the perceptions of power relations. People generally believe they are resistant to such theories, however, in reality they represent a temptation for all.

⇨ Russian alternative propaganda sites tend to use clickbait titles for the abovementioned reason, namely that most people only read the titles of articles before sharing them. For instance, sometimes they declare that a baseless claim is "official" or use a title that does not correspond to what is in the article.

⇨ Fake news sites often use fake photos, videos. The photos and videos are usually manipulated by some kind of image or video editing software. In addition, it is common

that the sites upload images or videos showing events not connected to the content of the article, taken in other locations or on earlier dates. It is also possible that they mislead readers by translating the video's original language (e.g. Arabic) into English or any other language incorrectly. It is always important to verify the originality of the digital content in such articles.

⇨ In addition, pro-Russian sites falsify or manipulate statistics, volumes, surveys to justify their viewpoint. They also regularly and deliberately draw the wrong conclusion from the results of public opinion polls.

⇨ Furthermore, it is essential to try to establish the credibility of the sources and witnesses referred to in an article.

  - With regards to Western sources, fake news sites often refer to anonymous blogs, other pro-Kremlin propaganda sites, Facebook posts, well-known extremist websites written in a Western European language. In these cases, the article would claim "Western media" was their source. Moreover, when pro-Russian outlets refer to "official information", their source often has no connection to any official bodies.

  - Pro-Kremlin media's witnesses sometimes appear in several different roles, it is possible that their words are taken out of context or the translation of what they said is deliberately incorrect. There are allegations that pro-Kremlin media outlets pay for witnesses to say whatever is needed for a report, although this is hard to prove.

⇨ First Draft News, a news verification agency, identifies seven types of mis- and disinformation that pro-Kremlin media can potentially turn to:

  - The first type is *false connections*, when headlines, visuals or captions do not support the content of the article.

  - The second is *false context*, when genuine content is shared with false contextual information.

  - The third is *manipulated content*, when genuine information or imagery is manipulated to deceive readers.

  - The fourth variant is *satire or parody*, these do not intend to do harm but they have the potential to fool readers.

  - *Misleading content* contains information used to frame an issue or individual deceivingly.

  - The sixth type is *imposter content*, when genuine sources are impersonated.

  - Finally, *fabricated content* is 100% false, designed to deceive and do harm.

⇨ Pro-Russian propaganda thus often contains pieces of accurate information mixed with lies. Genuine information is manipulated, taken out of context or analysed in a way that depicts an inaccurate picture of events. This is important for fake news outlets to establish some form of credibility. Nevertheless, it is not uncommon that a piece of news is completely fabricated.

IV. The main narratives and the general arguments of pro-Russian propaganda

⇨ The fact-checker organisation Stopfake identified 18 topics regularly occurring in pro-Russian propaganda:

- The following topics were identified: coup d'état in Ukraine and the country being governed by a Western-backed junta; Ukraine is a fascist state; Ukraine is a failed state; Russia is not a participant in the Eastern Ukrainian war; the Ukrainian Armed Forces; volunteer battalions; Internally displaced persons and refugees fleeing to Russia; the territorial disintegration of Ukraine; the territorial claims of Ukraine's neighbours; the legitimisation of the annexation of Crimea and the occupation of the Donbass by pro-Russian governments, organisations and media; the war in Ukraine being conducted by the EU, NATO and the West; the decline of Western support for Ukraine; the international organisations being manipulated; Ukraine and the EU; the disintegration of the EU and the decay of the West; MH17; diseases being spread by the West; Turkey/Syria/ISIS.

- Besides these general issues, pro-Russian websites tailor their narratives and topics to local weaknesses, vulnerabilities and needs. The content of pro-Kremlin websites aimed at the populations of EU member states generally offers support to political actors who can potentially weaken the EU and NATO. As a consequence, the voices of far-left and far-right actors promoting closer ties with Russia and the disintegration of the EU and NATO are amplified.

- A noticeable trend is that pro-Russian propaganda mobilises against the candidates whose aims are contrary to Russian geopolitical interests during election campaigns. On the contrary, candidates who speak favourably of Russia receive positive coverage.

⇨ Sometimes the official stance of the Russian government is the complete opposite of what is being spread by pro-Russian propaganda. For example, Russian officials claim the interest of Russia is to have a strong EU as its neighbour, while Russian state-owned media, such as Sputnik and RT, host Eurosceptic politicians exclusively.

⇨ Propaganda sites always feature Russia in the role of the victim of Western aggression, they try to depict Russia's actions as self-defence. Sometimes Russian intervention in former Soviet republics is justified by claiming they belong to the sphere of influence of the Russian Federation; thus, it is Russia's right to interfere in their domestic affairs.

- *Possible counter-arguments*: Russia's 2014 military strategy declares NATO the main threat to the country, while no official NATO document names Russia as a threat to the alliance.

- Russia took several steps to shield itself from "foreign influence" and Russian officials often complain about Western influence in the "near abroad" of Russia. However, it is Russia that interferes into the domestic affairs of foreign states politically (e.g. a Russian court recognising the events in Ukraine in 2014 as a coup) and militarily (e.g. support for separatist rebels in Ukraine).

⇨ Democracy, minority rights or the freedom of the press is very important for Russia as long as supporting these bring benefits to the Russian Federation internationally. However, such considerations are not important at all for the Putin-regime domestically. Russia often claims that there is no freedom of speech in Europe because of "political correctness" and it steps up as the protector of the rights of Russian minority living abroad.

- *Possible counter-arguments*: Based on, for example, the OSCE report on the 2016 parliamentary election in Russia, there are considerable problems with Russian democracy. In the West, elections are not controlled by authorities and the national parliaments are not filled with fake opposition parties supporting the government.
- The Russian administration is worried about the rights of Russians living abroad, however, it has little concern for the rights of its own minorities, e.g. the Chechens.
- While Russia is worried about the freedom of speech in the West, domestically every meaningful media outlet is in the hands of the state or pro-government oligarchs. Opposition journalists in Russia are harassed constantly. On the other hand, whenever some concerns about RT arise in the West, Russian state official immediately start talking about retaliation.

⇨ Pro-Russian propaganda regularly claims that Viktor Yanukovych is the legitimate president of Ukraine and the current government is a Western-backed junta.

- *Possible counter-arguments*: In fact, 328 Ukrainian MPs voted to oust President Yanukovych, including some members who had previously left Mr. Yanukovych's party.
- The current presidential election was conducted in accordance with Ukraine's international commitments, the OSCE noted. On the contrary, OSCE's report on the 2016 Russian parliamentary election was not as positive.

⇨ Pro-Russian propaganda refers to the referendums in Crimea, Luhansk and Donetsk as legitimate. Pro-Kremlin sites claims that they were all monitored by election observers.

- *Possible counter-arguments*: The OSCE was not invited to observe any of those referendums. The election observers cited by pro-Russian media are mainly pro-Russian politicians from the West who, in return,

enjoy at least the political support of the Kremlin, if not financial advantages (e.g. Marine Le Pen's loan from a Russian bank).

⇨ Ukraine is being led by a fascist government.

- *Possible counter-arguments*: Although some far-right elements were involved in the Maidan revolution, there are no fascist members of the government of Ukraine. Furthermore, the Ukrainian parliament has voted to disarm all paramilitary groups.

⇨ Russian propaganda claims the West/the EU/NATO was behind the Euromaidan revolutions and that they intervened in the domestic affairs of Ukraine.

- *Possible counter-arguments*: There is evidence that the US played a somewhat active role in brokering a deal between opposition forces in Ukraine, however, there is also ample proof that the Russians played a key role in Viktor Yanukovych refusing to sign the agreement between Ukraine and the EU, which led to Euromaidan in the first place.
- Furthermore, in response to allegations that the West is conducting war in Ukraine, it must be pointed out that evidence actually suggests that Russia is supporting separatist rebels with troops, equipment, etc. (e.g. statistics about the number of tanks available to the rebels, satellite images).

⇨ Russian propaganda claims that the forces of the Russian Federation are not involved in the conflict in Eastern Ukraine, they are merely local volunteers.

- *Possible counter-arguments*: If separatist forces were truly made up of local volunteers, the Ukrainian Armed Forces would have little trouble defeating them.
- Separatist forces use Russian equipment. Although the Ukrainian Armed Forces are also equipped with Russian weapons, the separatists have more weapons they could have acquired as spoils of war and they have weapons the Ukrainian Army never possessed in the first place.

- Several satellite images are available showing Russian troops and equipment crossing into Ukraine.

⇨ NATO is encircling Russia by extending its borders towards the country. NATO is also subservient to US interests.

  - *Possible counter-arguments*: NATO is a purely defensive alliance; therefore, it is not a military threat to Russia.

  - NATO membership is open to any state that applies for membership and that is accepted into the alliance. NATO cannot refuse to grant membership to those who meet all its criteria because it is too close to the Russian border.

  - Although the US is the major contributor to NATO's budget, decision-making in NATO is unanimous, meaning that no single state has influence over other members.

⇨ Pro-Kremlin media claims the EU and NATO are disintegrating and propaganda sites often report on the general decay of the West.

  - Brexit is a blow to the EU, but the UK has always been one of the most Eurosceptic nations in the Union due to, for example, its history as a global power and its economic and commercial relationships with the members of the British Commonwealth.

  - The European Union's popularity has increased since the Brexit referendum and several far-right parties have revised their opinion from leaving the EU to emphasising the necessity of reforming the Union. Populist, anti-EU candidates are on track to lose both the French and German elections.

  - Almost all EU member states and the rest of the Western world are ranked above Russia in terms of HDI and Russia has not been able to close the considerable gap in the past few years. HDI is an indicator for assessing the development of a country that does not only take economic achievements into account.

V. The basics of arguing against pro-Russian propaganda

⇨ Pro-Russian narratives cannot simply be ignored, as fake news reach a considerable proportion of the population via social media. According to Buzzfeed News, in the last few months leading up to the US election, the American population had shared, reacted to and commented on more fake news on Facebook than they did on accurate ones. Therefore, mainstream media must react to pro-Russian propaganda by pointing out its weaknesses.

⇨ The inconsistencies of pro-Kremlin propaganda must be highlighted. Readers must be shown that even the same propaganda site sometimes offers conflicting explanations for a single event or series of events. Offer a coherent counter-narrative to propaganda.

⇨ Rebut the factually incorrect information provided by pro-Russian propaganda. In addition, highlight the logical flaws in its arguments. Ridicule could also work to undermine fake news and the logic behind them (e.g. so the West is supporting a fascist Ukrainian government, while it is also too tolerant of Muslims, the LMBTQ community and liberal media – all of whom were persecuted by the fascists?)

⇨ The arguments of fake news websites supporting Russia must be turned against them. In general, the accusations of pro-Russian media against their opponents are characteristics of the Russian Federation itself. Therefore, the arguments of the Kremlin's propaganda machine can be reversed: Russia is the one that is in decay, its economy depends solely on the price of its

natural resources, it is the Russian Federation that tries to influence the domestic politics of other states and Russia is an aggressive power that intervened in Georgia and Ukraine.

⇨ It is important to point out how certain arguments of pro-Kremlin sites serve Russia's geopolitical goals. This way it is possible to show the audience how the alternative truth built by the propaganda machine is against the interests of the targeted nation.

⇨ It is not always important what pro-Russian propaganda talks about. Instead, it is worth it to focus on what is missing from the pro-Kremlin narrative, e.g. the fact that they consider information a tool in its foreign and security policy.

⇨ Frame the question of Russian influence as a "hard" geopolitical issue and not a "soft" human rights one.

⇨ Moreover, pro-Russian websites only display the opinion of individuals supporting their narrative. This is a good argument against claims that mainstream media only features the liberal viewpoint.

⇨ Pro-Russian propaganda often complains about practices used by mainstream media that they also employ. For example, pro-Russian sites oppose the use of anonymous sources by traditional media, yet they also sometimes refer to unnamed sources. Furthermore, articles on fake news sites are mostly published anonymously.

VI. Best practices for countering Russian propaganda

⇨ Both rational arguments and ridicule have been proven to be effective in debunking conspiracy theories. Reality still matters to people but many find it difficult to tell facts apart from "alternative facts".

⇨ Deconstruct Russia's self-defined ultraconservative image. Exploit the kleptocratic nature of the Putin-regime, the falling birth rate in the Russian Federation that is taking Russia closer and closer to the aging Western societies it wants to distance itself from or the lack of meaningful economic and social change in Russia.

⇨ Always criticise the Kremlin and not Russian society to avoid sounding Russophobic.

⇨ Even though pro-Russian propaganda does not seek to convince the audience, it is useful to provide examples of it offering vastly different narratives on the same event. Furthermore, it is important to point out that sometimes the Russian government uses the lies spread by Russian propaganda to start diplomatic spats (e.g. Lisa case(s), the Hungarian tank transport scandal). This can

be used to prove that propaganda activities are genuinely useful to Russian officials.

⇨ To establish the credibility of photos, it is possible to click on the photo with the right mouse button and select the 'Search Google for image' option. Alternatively, it is possible to use browser add-ons, such as 'Who stole my pictures'. Photos are the most popular content on social media, therefore, undermining the credibility of an image helps in dismissing the claims supported by it.

⇨ Find out more about videos posted by or embedded into pro-Kremlin websites by finding the original ones on YouTube. Check when the video was uploaded to YouTube and its description. Pay attention to details such as vehicle license place to confirm the video was actually taken where it claims it was. Look through the comment section under the video to see if someone linked the original one there. In addition, one can search for the events featured in the video in Google.

⇨ Pay attention to witness testimonies and interviews cited by pro-Russian propaganda sites. Check if the testimony/interview is connected to the content of the article at all. Look for differences between what the witness/interviewee says and what propaganda claims they said. It is important to check if translations are accurate. Try to look for other 'roles' played by the witness. Every time a pro-Russian media outlet finds a victim who completely backs the pro-Kremlin viewpoint, it is important to mention that pro-Russian media has allegedly paid or tried to pay individuals to contribute to their content.

⇨ With regards to quotes from individuals generally critical of Russia, it is important to check if the quote was taken out of context. Provide the context for the quote and point out how the actual context makes the pro-Russian argument baseless.

⇨ Investigate the experts and sources used by pro-Russian sites. The experts they quote usually serve the interests of the Russian Federation in many ways, for instance by "observing" illegitimate elections.

⇨ Other sources usually turn out to be either anonymous blog posts or articles by well-known extremist sites. Sometimes pro-Russian sites claim suggest their source is a prestigious Western magazine, while in reality they refer to a little-known blog with a similar name. In these cases, it can be pointed out that they could fully disclose the name of their source if they were confident in its credentials.

VII. SOURCES AND FURTHER READING

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