



# Russia and Disinformation: Maskirovka

FULL REPORT

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# RUSSIA AND DISINFORMATION: MASKIROVKA

## FULL REPORT

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How does Russian state disinformation operate in the Caucasus region? This report considers three different cases of disinformation deployment in the Caucasus region to highlight the dynamics of Russian state influence, both domestically in the Russian Federation's North Caucasus region as well as in Georgia, just across the Russian border in the South Caucasus.

This report is part of a series on disinformation to come out of the Actors and Narratives programme. The other three reports in the *Russia and Disinformation* series: 'The Case of the Caucasus', 'The Case of Ukraine', and 'Institutions and Actors' can be found at [www.crestresearch.ac.uk/tag/russia-disinformation/](http://www.crestresearch.ac.uk/tag/russia-disinformation/)

### About CREST

The Centre for Research and Evidence on Security Threats (CREST) is a national hub for understanding, countering and mitigating security threats. It is an independent centre, commissioned by the Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC) and funded in part by the UK security and intelligence agencies (ESRC Award: ES/N009614/1). [www.crestresearch.ac.uk](http://www.crestresearch.ac.uk)





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# INTRODUCTION

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This CREST report investigates the phenomenon of disinformation in the contemporary context as conceived and practised by actors in the Russian Federation. We consider *inter alia* the following questions:

- The historical background to disinformation operations in the Soviet Union/Russia.
- To what extent there are dominant narratives that dominate Russian disinformation, and if so whether these narratives explain Russia's wider strategic aims.
- How disinformation complements external diplomacy and is woven into 'strategic narratives' promoted by the Russian state.
- Targets and objectives of disinformation activities (with two short case studies of disinformation campaigns).
- Means and methods of dissemination of disinformation.
- To what extent disinformation appears to work and the measures adopted to date by external actors to counter its influence.

This report has been prepared by scholars working at the interface between international relations and area studies with many years of experience in researching Russian foreign and security policy. It draws on extensive scrutiny of open-source material, including from Russian-language primary sources as well as Western academic research and policy-related documents. It comes at a time when Russia's use of disinformation is increasingly perceived as posing a threat to Western governance; Prime Minister Theresa May has been explicit about the dangers posed by a Russian state that seeks to 'weaponise information' in order to sow discord in the West (Mason, 2017).

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## WHAT IS DISINFORMATION?

In the Russian context the term disinformation (*dezinformatsiya*) is often used to embrace a number of other concepts: 'strategic deception' (*strategicheskaya maskirovka*), 'active measures' (*aktivnye*

*meropriyatiya*), information operations, psychological operations, concealment and deniability. The common factor is the use of various information tools – with some analysts referring to it as the 'information weapon' – to convey selective, incomplete and/or distorted messages and influence the thinking of an adversary.

Official Russian documents consider the use of information as a key aspect of security policy (Hellman and Wagnsson, 2017: 155-56). Disinformation is often woven into traditional diplomacy, 'soft power' in the form of trade and cultural links, or the promotion of 'strategic narratives' by official sources which act as a 'force multiplier' in shaping the views of target audiences.

It may also be aimed at undermining the credibility or confidence of perceived adversaries by disrupting their own narratives, sowing confusion and mistrust, and – according to some studies - fostering 'networks of influence' (political, business, security, media) that seek to undermine state cohesion or even achieve state capture (The Kremlin Playbook, 2016).

A number of conceptual and methodological challenges arise in addressing this topic. In conceptual terms, how does Russian disinformation differ from 'perception management' techniques used by other states (see Hellman and Wagnsson, 2017: 153). In a situation where the Western policy community has identified Russian disinformation activities as constituting an exceptional security threat, the issue is studied according to a particular logic which is often isolated from the broader context in which it features.

In methodological terms, Russian concepts and terminology differ from Western ones and reflect differing 'mental maps' of the problem, leading to errors by Western analysts in assessing Russian approaches, for example in contemporary war-fighting, where the Western notion of 'hybrid warfare' has limited analytical utility (McDermott, 2016: 97). Also, disinformation activities can be difficult to trace; carefully selected ideas and opinions may be interwoven with factual narratives, making it difficult to assess the veracity of open-source empirical information.

It can be particularly problematic to assess to what extent disinformation influences target audiences. Relatively little research has been done on establishing



a conceptual and methodological framework that takes account of aims and future likely evolution of what has become known as ‘information warfare’.

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## BACKGROUND

To what extent is Russian disinformation a continuation of Soviet doctrine and practice: has the institution survived more or less intact, with only the means of persuasion evolving with the development of new technologies and means of dissemination? Several studies have pointed to the legacy of Soviet doctrinal thinking, practices and institutions in the sphere of disinformation (Romerstein, 2001). The use of propaganda as a weapon in political conflict emerged in the early Soviet period; during the Cold War, it was also employed by Western states in response to the perceived Soviet threat.

Disinformation as understood today can be traced back to the later stages of the Cold War period. It was used ‘to refer to the intentional promotion of false, incomplete or misleading information, often in combination with factual information, in order to ‘deceive, misinform, and/or mislead the target’; this included ‘actions to convey and (or) deny selected information and indicators to foreign audiences to influence their emotions, motives and objective reasoning’. The adversary’s ‘filter’ – ‘made up of concepts, knowledge, ideas and experience’ - is targeted by a ‘specially selected piece of information capable of causing changes in the information processes’ and deceiving either the decision-making elite or public opinion and distorting their perceptions of reality (Pynnöniemi and Rácz, 2016: 32, 37).

This later became known as ‘active measures’, involving ‘certain overt and covert techniques for influencing events and behaviour in, and the actions of, foreign countries’ in a number of ways:

- Influencing the policies of another government.
- Undermining confidence in its leaders and institutions.
- Disrupting relations between other nations.
- Discrediting and weakening governmental and non-governmental opponents.

Overt propaganda is defined as ‘written or oral information which deliberately seeks to influence and/or manipulate the opinions and attitudes of a given target grouping’. Covert propaganda aims to ‘lead the target to believe in the veracity of the message and consequently to act in the interests of the nation conducting the disinformation operation’ (Pynnöniemi and Rácz, 2016: 38). ‘Active measures’ use an adversary’s existing weaknesses against himself by amplifying pre-existing discord, for example Western peace movements during the later Soviet period, taking advantage of press freedom (Rid, 2017). Soviet ‘active measures’ were targeted at ‘political leaders, opinion-makers, the media, business leaders and the general public of Western countries’ through the deliberate dissemination of false or misleading information in the media, leaking stolen or forged documents, promoting disruptive political movements and engaging experts to influence policy in line with Soviet interests. Such measures were part of a range of instruments of statecraft that also included diplomacy, trade links, academic exchange and journalism (Canadian Security Intelligence Service, 2018: 27-8).

Some sources have suggested that disinformation today is to a notable extent a continuation of Soviet-era practices. Russia’s current information security doctrine recognises the ‘enhanced intelligence activities of foreign States against the Russian Federation’ and the need for ‘upgrading the information security system of the Armed Forces of the Russian Federation, other troops, military formations and bodies, including forces and means of information confrontation’ to put into effect ‘countervailing information and psychological actions’ (Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 2016; for more on this see Franke, 2015).

An earlier version of this doctrine described disinformation as a means to ‘improve the ways and means of providing strategic and operational camouflage and conducting intelligence and electronic countermeasures, along with the betterment of methods and tools for actively countering propaganda, information and psychological operations by a likely adversary’ (Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 2000). ‘Facts on the ground’ are carefully created and controlled through concealment and misrepresentation in order to influence perceptions of ‘reality’ in the mind of the adversary and secure strategic advantage, while maintaining level of ‘plausible deniability’;



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such disinformation entails the ‘active creation and communication of meaning that is “synchronized with the actions of all instruments of national power”’ (Pynnöniemi and Rácz, 2016). Chief of the Russian General Staff General Valerii Gerasimov, who has contributed much to contemporary

Russian military doctrinal thinking on the nature of the operational environment and future war, has stated that ‘emphasis on the method of fighting [is moving] toward[s] the complex application of political, economic, information and other non-military means, conducted with the support of military force’ (Canadian Security Intelligence Service, 2018: 39). This suggests that, in Russian political-military thinking, disinformation becomes an integral part of future conflict.



# DISINFORMATION AND RUSSIA'S 'STRATEGIC NARRATIVES'

Miskimmon, O'Loughlin and Roselle (2014) have developed the concept of strategic narratives to frame research into the link between information and international influence in the contemporary media environment. Strategic narratives, defined as a form of communication through which political actors attempt to give meaning to the past, present and future in order to underpin broader political objectives, can shape behaviour domestically and internationally by structuring thought and action. They work simultaneously at multiple points on a 'spectrum of persuasion'; they contribute to persuading rational actors to behave in a particular way or structure perceptions of the international environment, the identity of actors and the meaning of the system.

The concept also recognises that communication in international affairs is often a matter of contestation, not just benign attraction. Sovereign countries able to influence discourse among states may thus occupy a privileged position in deciding the rules and norms within international society. Unlike Soviet propaganda, Russian narratives have little genuine ideological content. However, authoritative scholars who carried out a survey of the Russian media response to the Ukraine crisis have concluded that

*Russian tactics in what some have called the 'New Cold War' should not be attributed to a purely cynical eclecticism (exploiting whichever political and ideological currents and trends that serve current needs, no matter what their provenance)... we should not ignore the (so far unsuccessful) efforts to knit the dominant narratives, despite all their many contradictions, into an ideological fabric capable of providing the basis for a coherent worldview and a stable sense of national identity (Hutchings and Szostek, 2015: 182-3).*

Russia's role in the international environment has undergone substantial changes since the end of the Cold War. Szostek (2017: 584) has pointed to 'nation branding' practices which have contributed to a positive Russian narrative of a country which has achieved 'effective statehood' and regained its international status as a sovereign great power. At the same time, a more salient feature of Russia's strategic narrative since the onset of the Ukraine conflict has been an increasing anti-Western, and particularly anti-American, discourse. Relations with the West are portrayed as a 'competitive struggle' (*konkurentnaya bor'ba*), with Russia as one of the (re)emerging powers which are challenging Western hegemony in the international system and the obstruction of Russia's legitimate interests; Russian strategic narratives aim to promote or defend certain legal norms within a pluralist international order. The 'information struggle' is a key part of this confrontation.

The broader strategic 'metanarrative' which focuses on Russia's supposed marginalisation by the West in the post-Cold War period - the threats presented by an enlarging NATO or attempts to destabilise Russia through democracy/human rights promotion - has a constitutive effect on interests and collective identity among the elite and the public alike, which means the narrative's power is also of the *structuring* kind (Szostek, 2017: 577).

In conceptual terms, we may consider the strategic narrative as a basis of core perceptions on which various other narratives – specific, reactive, tactical (used and then discarded depending on their utility) – are layered. Thus, Moscow presents arguments about the causes and consequences of the current estrangement (for example, Western 'double standards' over intervention) in order to justify its present policies, such as the annexation of Crimea or its military role in Syria. Russia's information campaign has made increasing use of negative and derogatory narratives which impede dialogue or negotiation; this extends to official diplomatic statements in international fora, including at the United Nations and the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe.

Indeed, Russian officials have been explicit in claiming that the West itself has launched a sustained information campaign against Russia. At a round-table event organised by the Russian Council for Foreign



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and Defence Policy (2017) - entitled 'Diplomacy vs. hypocrisy in the post-Cold War era' - leading political commentators warned of the 'vicious circle' of mutual distrust 'in which neither Russia nor the U.S. is ready to establish a sincere dialogue because they are mentally prepared for deception' (Moscow News Weekly; see also Yablokov, 2018: 84). In this situation 'hypocrisy', which makes extensive use of disinformation, becomes the norm; the purveyance of information is based not on compliance with accepted standards of evidence or conformity to a shared understanding of events but on whether it contributes to achieving the aims of the protagonist.



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## OBJECTIVES OF DISINFORMATION: TARGETING THE ADVERSARY

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As well as its role in promoting strategic narratives, disinformation is also aimed at the ‘blurring of boundaries between public diplomacy and active measures’ to disorient and destabilise the target audience (political decision-makers and publics) by purveying multiple narratives, sowing mistrust and undermining credibility, and thereby forcing the adversary on the defensive in order to attain strategic advantage (see Kragh and Åsberg, 2017: 774). As practised today by the Russian state, disinformation often purveys multiple versions of reality via a combination of official untruths or partial truths that are often mutually contradictory and via the omission of crucial facts.

The coherence of the narrative in a specific case is less important than creating uncertainty about the facts on the ground. Disinformation narratives are also used tactically, deployed and abandoned as the situation changes, as in the Kremlin’s manipulation of nationalist sentiment in Ukraine in March-April 2014. Moscow seeks to discredit critical voices by depicting them as provocations by foreign agents or fifth columnists, consolidating the narrative of an ‘anti-Russian’ or ‘Russophobic’ West provoking a passive Russia to defend itself. In this scenario, the logic of the conflict is inverted, since the attacker becomes the victim, who is in turn accused of starting the conflict; hence Russian arguments that the West is stoking the conflict in the Donbas (Pynnöniemi and Rácz, 2016). This has the additional effect of achieving domestic consolidation through ‘popular mobilization, nation-building and community cohesion’ (see Yablokov, 2018: 3-4, 7-8), contributing to order and protecting Russia’s strategic narrative in what its political class perceives as a turbulent, unpredictable and potentially hostile international environment (Hellman and Wagnsson, 2017: 153-5, 158).

Feklyunina (2016: 34-38) suggests that we need to look at distinct audiences that are particularly sensitive to Russia’s strategic narratives – what she calls

‘communities of grievances’, whose views are amplified and shaped with the help of Russian disinformation.

Through social media, these communities disseminate messages consistent with their views and so Russia’s narratives can be carefully tailored to their specific concerns, for example feelings of distrust towards the political establishment, mainstream political parties and mainstream media, in an anti-public intellectual discourse. For example, RT, one of Russia’s key propaganda outlets (see below), covers stories not found in the mainstream media and offers alternative Russian perspectives on current affairs. By adapting its messages to the specific concerns of these communities, Russian actors aim to weaken its opponents and to create more favourable conditions for achieving its foreign policy goals.

One recent report offers a more extreme interpretation of Russia’s approach: ‘Russia’s disinformation machinery is explicitly weaponised as a resource for future wars, weakening a target country’s sense of danger and diminishing the will to resist’. Russia’s intervention in Syria underscores the challenges posed when a state actor utilises disinformation and deception to back its acts of aggression; such methods have allowed President Putin, in the last few years, ‘to move from one foreign policy adventure to the next, in the process weaponising information against Western societies’ (Canadian Security Intelligence Service, 2018: 8, 62). The present writers subscribe to a more sober assessment; in our opinion, rather than a new Cold War ‘what we face now is a struggle over opposing models of political and social control, rather than geo-strategic dominance or competing ideologies, involving not only Russia but all the countries of the modern world. It is about inclusion versus exclusion. It is about open versus closed’ (The Observer, 2018).



# CASE STUDIES: THE BALTIC STATES AND SYRIA

Several elements of Russia's strategic narratives, inscribed into the information campaign targeted at the Baltic states and executed with targeted digital disinformation aimed at weakening these states from within, have been identified (see Canadian Security Intelligence Service, 2018; Lucas and Pomeranzev, 2016; for a more detailed case study of Russia's involvement in Ukraine see the CREST report *Russia and Disinformation: The Case of Ukraine*). This disinformation campaign is taking place in the context of a deteriorating security environment in the Baltic Sea region:

- Russia is portrayed as a 'besieged fortress', surrounded by hostile states and contained by NATO enlargement; the internal mobilisation of Russian society around the current regime is intended to influence the Russophone population in the Baltic States.
- At the same time, Russia's military presence in its Western Military District conveys the impression that NATO is powerless to protect the Baltic States' sovereignty and territorial integrity in the event of conflict.
- There has been a sustained campaign aimed at the revival of anti-American and anti-NATO sentiments in Europe.
- Russia is presented as an alternative to the liberal Western model, as the custodian of 'traditional' Christian conservative values and opponent of 'universal' individual rights.
- The spectre of the fragmentation of the EU is proclaimed.
- The Baltic states' historical ties with Russia as their liberator from Nazism are emphasised in information campaigns claiming that there are still fascist elements there (cf demonstrations orchestrated by Russian actors over the removal of the 'Bronze Soldier' in Tallinn in 2007, which

involved an information campaign targeted at Russophone citizens of Estonia).

Disinformation surrounding Russia's intervention in the Syria conflict differ from those used in its neighbourhood and has a wider international resonance. Moscow pursues a sustained strategy of deflecting attention from Assad's campaign while de-legitimising Western political and military actions:

- Russia is fighting international terrorism in Syria, supporting the legitimate authorities in the shape of the Assad regime against the 'terrorist' opposition, thereby helping to sustain Syria's sovereignty and maintain regional stability
- The US is favouring opposition groups linked to al-Qaeda with the aim of using them to unseat Assad and carry out 'regime change' on the Iraq or Libya model – even that the US is defending Islamic State and contributing to its crimes
- Reports that Russia's indiscriminate air strikes have led to civilian casualties have been routinely dismissed as 'fake news'; Russian officials represent the residents of opposition-held areas as combatants and thus legitimate military targets, blurring the distinction between extremist Islamist forces and other opposition groups, and attack the credibility of witnesses who provide evidence of attacks against civilians, for example international bodies such as Amnesty International and Human Rights Watch, or the aid organisation Syria Civil Defence (otherwise known as the 'White Helmets')
- The West itself is accused by officials of using fake news - 'lies and dirt – from minor fantasies to the global manipulation of public opinion' (Zakharova, 2017) in attempting to discredit the actions of the Syrian regime, including over the use of chemical weapons
- At the same time, the necessity of Russia's cooperation with the Western powers to develop a shared understanding on coordinating counter-terrorism efforts, expanding humanitarian access and strengthening the ceasefire has been emphasised, thereby reinforcing the image of Russia as a constructive international actor and demonstrating Russia's influence as an equal among a 'concert' of powers managing global security.



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# DISSEMINATION OF DISINFORMATION

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Russia has attempted to establish an integrated foreign language broadcasting service, targeted at Western audiences and operating according to Western standards, in the form of RT (formerly Russia Today) and Sputnik. One source describes RT discourse as ‘a textbook example of the “strategic narratives” that can be seen as part of states’ soft power arsenals... in the world of RT, most things that go wrong are the fault of the US, UK and EU... the days of Western hegemony are numbered’ (cited in Hellman and Wagnsson, 2017, 157). The RT network was licensed in the US (Rid, 2017) and at the time of writing includes news channels in English, Arabic and Spanish; it boasts a documentary channel, a video news agency RUPTLY, and online news platforms in Russian, German, and French. The size of the RT weekly audience, according to the findings of a 2015 Ipsos survey, exceeds 36 million people in 10 European countries, 8 million in the US and 11 million across the Middle East and Africa. Its on-line audience appears even more substantial, with more than 4 billion views across its channels and 4.5 million subscribers, though the actual size of its regular audience is uncertain (Feklyunina, 2016: 36).

Russian television has been particularly important in influencing Ukrainian public opinion, with all major channels until recently freely available there and Ukrainian state-run technical facilities being used for carrying and amplifying signals, as a result of a partially integrated media economy between the two countries.

One technique is to interview commentators in the target country who validate the Kremlin’s narrative (for example, UKIP in the UK), amplifying and validating their beliefs without providing the other side of the story. Another technique is to plant commentary from Kremlin-friendly speakers without mentioning their affiliation. For example, after the shooting-down of Malaysian Airlines flight MH17 over Ukraine, investigative journalists with the Bellingcat group gathered evidence from open sources demonstrating that the plane was shot down with a Buk-M1 missile which had entered Ukraine from Russia; in response, a group of initially anonymous and ‘independent’

bloggers calling themselves ‘anti-Bellingcat’ published a lengthy report rebutting Bellingcat’s findings, which was widely reported in multiple languages by Kremlin outlets (Canadian Security Intelligence Service, 2018).

These channels operate alongside a much wider network of information websites and social media outlets. Some newspapers reflect pro-Russian views. According to recent research, however, much more use is being made of the internet (blogs, special-purpose news sites, fake news sites, social media platforms) as instruments of disinformation, with the print media in decline. The contemporary fragmented social media space can facilitate the dissemination of distorted or multiple versions of ‘facts’ in both textual and visual form. Various ‘independent’ sites conceal their links to the Russian government (NewsFront.info, which produces pro-Kremlin and anti-Western content in a number of languages, is according to a whistleblower interviewed by Die Zeit funded by Russian intelligence).

Social media platforms dramatically increase the amount of information available to develop content most likely to influence the target audience, facilitating the rapidity with which disinformation can be aimed at specific groups of people, with little or no oversight or government regulation (Canadian Security Intelligence, 2018).

Russia’s disinformation campaign is supported by ‘an extensive network of Internet trolls and bot networks which generate and spread material across the web’, used in different phases of a psychological attack often targeting ‘communities of grievance’, and supported by politicians, diplomats and state-controlled media outlets such as RT and Sputnik (Canadian Security Intelligence Service, 2018; The Guardian, 16 November 2017).

The use of bots may inflate political actors’ ‘follower’ and ‘like’ counts, influence political discourse and manipulate public opinion. They are able to create a story and ensure it reaches the target population most likely to be influenced by it through Facebook, Twitter and other channels (The Guardian, 6 November 2017), with news agency interviews featuring so-called experts, forged documents and doctored photos and videos corroborating the story. Most fake news analysis of the Ukraine conflict was generated by Zvezda TV, which is directed by the Russian Ministry of Defence,



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and Ukraine.ru, a web site belonging to the Russian state-owned Novosti information agency.

Russia-based troll accounts impersonating US citizens infiltrated online communities of alt-right Twitter users, promoting their messages during the 2016 US election cycle. They also penetrated left-leaning Twitter communities that formed around issues such as #BlackLivesMatter, amplifying existing divisions in the United States. On another front, Russia-connected information operations have targeted online activist communities that take shape around anti-war ideologies and use them to spread messages challenging US and NATO activities in Syria (Canadian Security Intelligence Service, 2018). Pro-Kremlin non-governmental organisations in several countries contribute to the dissemination of disinformation (Kragh and Åsberg, 2017: 774).

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## WHAT WORKS AND WHAT DOESN'T

Efforts to date to analyse the impact of Russian disinformation have been patchy in terms of coverage and methodology, understandably so given the differentiated approaches towards individual countries and the specific political aims in each case. One extensive report containing a number of country case studies has concluded that, while the independent mainstream news channels in Europe are resistant to Russian state-promoted strategic narratives, there are some linked with Russia-friendly political forces that are more open to the Russian interpretation of events; Russian state outlets provide sources of narratives for local pro-Russian fringe media (Kremlin Influence Index, 2017).

Put simply, the visibility of Russian narratives depends on the already existing political affiliations of the media actors. Most journalists and editors of mainstream independent media in most European countries are generally sceptical about Russian narratives; however, in some central and eastern European countries the 'oligarchic nature of the media space' means that Russian influence is more pronounced (Kremlin Influence Index, 2017).

While Russia's capabilities should not be underestimated, Russian disinformation, or strategic deception, has its limits; it has not led to any substantive change in the policies of the countries examined. Its success in promoting alternative ideas that may impact on the political sphere is largely dependent on the targets' vulnerability to self-

deception. Well-grounded, transparent and fact-based knowledge and the willingness to invest into gathering it are needed; a higher level of public knowledge, as well as the readiness of the decision-makers to listen to researchers with specialist knowledge could have prevented a series of mistakes and missed opportunities (Pynnöniemi and Rącz, 2016).

Protection measures in the US and Europe have been instituted, but further measures recommended by analysts include the sharing of best practice among government agencies internationally to boost resilience; engaging at the national, regional and local levels (see Lucas and Nimmo, 2015: 13); conducting regular vulnerability analyses; issuing statements to educate political parties and publics about disinformation campaigns, particularly those affecting elections processes (for more on this see House of Commons, 2018: 43-8); and improving government-media dialogue and engaging social media companies to mitigate potential threats (Brattberg and Maurer, 2018).

*StopFake.org*, launched in 2014 by professors, students and alumni of the Mohyla School of Journalism in Kyiv, as a reaction to the annexation of Crimea and Russia's war against Ukraine in the Donbass region, is a fact-checking project that tackles Russian disinformation and propaganda by debunking fake news.

To expand its work internationally, *StopFake.org* partners with many fact-checking organisations and networks across Europe to share information, raise global awareness of Russian disinformation and its influence on political processes and decision-making, and facilitate political discussions of disinformation in other countries, verifying and refuting disinformation and propaganda about events in Ukraine being circulated in the media.

The project has grown into an information hub where all aspects of Kremlin propaganda are carefully examined and analysed (Canadian Security Intelligence Service, 2018).

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