Russia and Disinformation: Maskirovka

INTRODUCTION

This summary 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.

- 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.

The 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.

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.

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.

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'.

THE EVOLUTION OF 'ACTIVE MEASURES'

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'. 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 and covert propaganda is deployed to influence audiences, with messaging disseminated as part of wider disinformation campaigns. 'Active measures' use an adversary's existing weaknesses against himself by amplifying pre-existing discord. 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. Russian disinformation and 'active measures' today, appear to be a continuation of Soviet-era practices.

DISINFORMATION AND RUSSIA'S 'STRATEGIC NARRATIVES'

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.

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.

OBJECTIVES OF DISINFORMATION: TARGETING THE ADVERSARY

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.

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 delegitimising 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.

DISSEMINATION OF DISINFORMATION

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. 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, 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. 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.

About this project

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This brief is part of a series on *Russia and Disinformation*. The full report, and the other three reports and accompanying briefs in the series ('The Case of the Caucasus', 'Maskirovka', and 'Institutions and Actors',) can be found at www.crestresearch.ac.uk/tag/russia-disinformation/

For more information about the project, please visit the CREST website at www.crestresearch.ac.uk