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From Soviet Active Measures to Russian Information Warfare

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Abstract

In the past decade, or longer – but especially since the illegal invasion of Ukraine in early 2022 -- Russia has expanded and moved rapidly to improve its ability to employ "disinformation," or "information warfare" [information that combines truth with falsehood] as an effective instrument in to accomplish its more specific foreign policy objectives. Despite many years of preparation for cyber conflict against critical U.S. infrastructure and military forces, the U.S. government and cybersecurity industry were unprepared for Russian information operations targeting the 2016 U.S. presidential election.

In the present essay we intend to track the reemergence and development of the information warfare and disinformation component of Russian policy after Putin came to power, including its deep roots in Soviet "active measures." As relations with the West deteriorated, disinformation was an important part of Russian policy and the breadth of its target audiences and the issues covered increased.

Finally, we look at the responses to Russian disinformation policy of the targets – especially the post-communist states.

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In the past decade, or longer – but especially since the illegal and destructive invasion of Ukraine in early 2022 -- Russia under Vladimir Putin has expanded and moved rapidly to improve its ability to employ "disinformation," or "information warfare," as an effective instrument to help it to accomplish its more specific foreign policy objectives. Although it has only been since direct Russian involvement in the U.S. presidential election of 2016 that this has been an issue of major public political concern in the United States, a flood of research on this topic has now begun to appear. Despite many years of preparation for cyber conflict against critical U.S. infrastructure and military forces, the U.S. government and cybersecurity industry were unprepared for Russian information operations targeting the 2016 U.S. presidential election (Lucas, 2020). It is clear, however, that the Russian propaganda/ disinformation activities in the U.S. are but one part of a policy targeted virtually everywhere across the entire world and that this policy builds upon the earlier propaganda and disinformation activities of Russia's predecessor state, the USSR.

In the present essay we intend to track the reemergence and development of the information warfare and disinformation component of Russian policy under President Putin, including its deep roots in Soviet "active measures," up until the invasion of Ukraine, when it expanded exponentially. We shall also track the areas of the world targeted, and the increasing breadth of its target audiences and the issues covered.

Soviet Propaganda and Disinformation Policy[1]

Current Russian disinformation policy clearly has its roots in what the Soviets termed "active measures" and in which they included both propaganda and disinformation. On the propaganda side, for example, in 1983 the Soviets published books in eighty-four foreign languages mainly for distribution abroad. In English alone 1,200 books and pamphlets appeared in more than 24 million copies (Pechat' v USSR, 1983). The weekly *Moscow News* appeared in more than 800,000 copies in English, French, Spanish and Arabic translations at that time (Sanakoev, 1980). Besides direct dissemination of Soviet propaganda and disinformation, the Soviets also relied on the wide network of foreign communist and front organizations to distribute Soviet-oriented propaganda.

The purpose of this propaganda network and facilities was to support both general and specific Soviet foreign policy objectives -- more specifically, to weaken the United States and NATO and to extoll the achievements of the USSR, thereby advancing Moscow's objectives. The definition of propaganda used in this analysis will be based on that developed by Barach Hazan (1976) as the preconceived, systematic and centrally coordinated process of manipulating symbols, aimed at promoting certain uniform attitudes, beliefs, values and behavior within mass audiences – these expected attitudes, beliefs, values and behavior are congruent with the specific interests and ends of the propagandist.

Related to, but distinct from propaganda, is disinformation, defined as any governmental-sponsored communication of intentionally false and misleading material (often combined with selectively true information) which is passed to targeted individuals, groups, or governments with the purposes of influencing foreign elite or public opinion and policies (Shultz and Godson, 1984; see Pond, 1985). Propaganda differs from disinformation in two important ways. The former is targeted at a mass audience and is not necessarily deceptive, while disinformation is aimed ultimately at foreign policy decision makers and is always purposefully deceptive.

Propaganda and disinformation belong to a category of activities which the Soviets referred to as active measures – including both overt and covert techniques employed for the purpose of

influencing events and behavior in foreign countries. “These measures are employed to influence the policies of other governments, underline confidence in the leaders and institutions of these states, disrupt the relations between various nations, and discredit and weaken major opponents” (Shultz and Godson, 1984). They were also used to generate abroad favorable views toward the Soviet Union and its policies and support for specific policy initiatives.[2]

The Collapse of the USSR and the Failed Democratization of Russia

The dissolution of the Soviet Union in 1991 and the emergence of fifteen new states in its place seemingly brought to an end the imperial tradition of Russian domination over various peoples conquered and absorbed into the Russian/Soviet empire over the period of more than half a millennium. Yet, since the very creation of the new Russian state political leaders in Moscow have been committed to

returning Russia to the status of a great power, including, since Vladimir Putin assumed power two decades ago, the reestablishment of much of the imperial political order that seemingly collapsed in 1991, and to using propaganda and disinformation in the pursuit of this and other goals. To a substantial degree Western policy after the collapse of the former USSR assumed that Russia’s demise as a great power would be a permanent characteristic of the international system and, thus “active measures against the West would cease. Throughout the 1990s and after the turn of the century Russia’s interests and concerns were largely ignored, as both the United States and the Western community more broadly moved to fulfill their own political and security objectives in post-communist Europe—objectives that included the incorporation of most of Central and East European post-Soviet space into Western security, political and economic institutions.

Initially, as the Russian state found itself in virtual political and economic freefall under President Boris Yeltsin, the objective of reestablishing Russia’s great power status seemed to be little more than rhetoric and an unrealistic and unrealizable dream. Even though Russia did employ its greatly reduced military capabilities in the attempt to play a role in those Soviet successor states challenged by internal conflict—conflict often facilitated, if not initiated, by clandestine Russian military interference (Kozhemiakin and Kanet, 1998) -- the prospect of the Russian Federation’s rejoining the ranks of major global actors seemed remote until the domestic rise to power of President Vladimir Putin at the end of the century. However, as the Russian economy and Russian self-confidence and assertiveness were buoyed by the rising price of oil and gas, the revitalization of other sectors of the economy, and the reassertion of Moscow’s control over growing segments of the vast territory of the Russian Federation itself, more sophisticated diplomatic and economic instruments, including what amounts to economic blackmail,[3] became a central component of Russia’s reassertion of influence within what Moscow views as its traditional, and legitimate, sphere of influence—although, as events in Georgia since 2014 have made clear, brute military power remains an important element in the Russian arsenal. In effect, the Russian political leadership’s initial commitment to integration into the “community of civilized states,” to use Yeltsin’s phrase (1992), and its willingness to follow the Western lead on major international political issues, were short-lived. Even before 1995 President Yeltsin and Foreign Minister Andrei Kozyrev, the primary architect of this pro-Western emphasis in Russian policy, was forced to redefine Russian foreign and security policy in a much more realistic and nationalist direction than they had done initially (Tsygankov and Tsygankov, 2021). Yet, the issue that raised the most serious response in Moscow in this period remained the question of NATO’s expansion eastward. Moscow orchestrated a multifaceted campaign that included pressure on the applicant countries and threats that the expansion would, in effect, initiate a new cold war in relations between Russia and the West. In fact, however, when NATO decided to invite the Czech Republic, Hungary and Poland to join the alliance, Russia reluctantly accepted the decision without any of the retaliatory responses that had been threatened. With Kozyrev’s replacement as foreign minister by Georgii Primakov in 1996, Russia proclaimed a formal Eurasian thrust in its policy, one that included active Russian involvement in and primacy over the so-called “near abroad” of former Soviet territory.[4]

After Putin was appointed acting prime minister and later replaced Yeltsin as Interim President on the last day of 1999 his commitment to reestablishing Moscow’s control over domestic politics and rebuilding the foundations of Russia’s great power status, the financial boon resulting from the explosion of oil and gas prices, as well as the shortsighted and counterproductive policies of Washington, strengthened and expanded the range of policy instruments available to Russia, including economic and political leverage, in its ongoing attempts to reestablish its dominant role across post-Soviet space—the creation of a “Greater Russia”—as an integral part of reasserting its role as a great power whose interests could no longer be ignored as they were throughout the 1990s.[5]

The Return of Imperial Russia

But it was clear in the approach that Washington and its allies took to Moscow’s objections to Western policy that Russia was not viewed in the restructured European security environment as an equal player whose interests had to be given serious consideration. Once it became obvious that their efforts to forestall the expansion of NATO eastward were doomed to failure, the Russians seem to have accepted reality and attempted to gain whatever benefits they could out of that acceptance. They shifted the focus of their opposition to NATO expansion from East Central Europe to the Baltics. Moreover, on May 27, 1997, Moscow signed the Russia-NATO Founding Act that was supposed to provide clear parameters for the relationship between Russia and the Western Alliance. In return Russia was granted membership in an expanded “G-8,” although it was excluded from full participation in those “G-8” meetings at which meaningful decisions concerning international financial matters were likely to occur. Although Russia and the U.S. cooperated in a variety of security areas, these relationships did not fulfill Russian goals. Moreover, given the disastrous state of the Russian economy at the time, Moscow could have little hope of exercising any real influence within the group. At the same time the Russia-NATO Founding Act also proved to be unsatisfactory as a means for Russia to pursue its foreign policy interests. Thus, by summer 2001, little more than half a year into the presidency of George W. Bush and one and a half year into Vladimir Putin’s presidency, U.S.-Russian relations were on an apparent collision course.[6] Russians were increasingly frustrated by Washington’s obvious disregard for their role in world affairs and by the apparent U.S. lack of concern for Russian interests -- as in the NATO bombing of Yugoslavia and in U.S. efforts to restrict Russian involvement in the development of oil and gas reserves in the Caspian Basin (Ebel and Menon, 2000; Kanet and Homarac, 2007). Before we turn to a discussion of Russian policy in the Putin era – as a prelude to returning to the issue of disinformation as a tool in that policy, it is important to refer to the Chechen war because of its overall impact on many other aspects of Russian policy. Moreover, the ongoing Russian struggle to reassert control over Chechnya and to root out Chechen opposition to that effort brought Moscow into regular conflict with Georgia, whose government the Russians accused of harboring and supporting Chechen separatists (Kanet and Homarac, 2007).

So, the war in Chechnya was much more than simply an internal challenge to central authority within the Russian Federation; it also had a visible impact on relations with both near neighbors and with the West. The Russian Federation’s relations with the West, especially with the United States, were increasingly conflictual. Russia was no longer taken seriously as a major actor in world affairs, and its views and concerns – for example, NATO’s campaign against Yugoslavia for its attempt to expel the majority of the ethnic Albanians from Kosovo largely ignored Russia based on the assumption that it was no longer an important or relevant actor.

Thus, when Vladimir Putin took over as interim president on January 1, 2000, he inherited these and an entire series of additional policy disagreements with the United States, and the West more generally -- that included the restructuring of the Russian debt, NATO and EU expansion, the U.S. commitment to move forward with a missile defense system, the longer-term future of Yugoslavia and the Balkans, Russia’s nuclear relations with Iran, and so on. The general parameters of Russian policy, including policy toward the United States, were set early in Putin’s presidency and

derived directly from the policy lines established in Moscow in the mid-1990s. Putin made clear his commitment to reestablishing the place of Russia as the preeminent regional power and as an important international actor. Essential preconditions for the fulfillment of these objectives, as the "Foreign Policy Concept" that Putin approved indicated, were the internal political stability and economic viability of Russia (*Foreign Policy Concept*, 2000; "Kontseptsii natsional'noi bezopasnosti," 2000). According to this policy prescription Russia had to overcome all efforts toward and evidence of separatism, national and religious
extremism, and terrorism. Putin moved forcefully, and in most cases effectively, in reasserting central governmental control in Russia. The economy, while still not flourishing, had shown strong signs of turning around with growth rates of 4.5, 10.0, and 5.0 percent in the years 1999-2001 (Central Bank, n.d.). In the foreign policy arena Putin continued to seek allies who shared Russia's commitment to preventing the global dominance of the United States that represents, in the words of the *Foreign Policy Concept* (2000), a threat to international security and to Russia's goal of serving as a major center of influence in a multipolar world. Putin's success in dealing with the major problems challenging the Russian state at the beginning of the decade meant that Russia now faced the United States and the West from a position of increased strength. Besides rebuilding the foundations of the Russian state at any cost as a precondition of Russia's ability to reassert itself as a major power, Putin and his associates benefited greatly from the exponential rise in global demand for gas and oil and the ensuing revitalization of the Russian economy. This, in turn, has contributed to Russia's ability to pursue a much more active and assertive foreign policy, as many analysts have noted (Hancock, 2007; McFaul and Stoner-Weiss, 2008 and Menon and Motyl, 2007).

Military Intervention, Economic Coercion, and the Rebuilding of "Greater Russia"

Before turning to the role of "information warfare" and disinformation in Russia's move to reestablish its great power status we begin with a discussion of the reintegration of former Soviet space, which some have termed "Greater Russia," precisely the policy implied by Putin's negative reference to the dissolution of the USSR. As we have already noted, despite the rhetorical commitment of Russian leaders to deal with the former Soviet republics as sovereign equals, from almost the very creation of the Russian Federation Moscow has been directly and indirectly involved in the internal affairs of its new neighbors. Throughout the 1990s the major instruments used to reestablish Russia's influence were various types of *de facto* military intervention and efforts to turn the CIS into a meaningful organ of economic and political reintegration. Since 2000 Russian policy toward its neighbors in the CIS, as well as to the Baltic states, has become much more sophisticated and complex, though by no means more cooperative and neighborly, culminating in the unjustified invasion of Ukraine —and has relied increasingly on the use of Russia's dominant position in the energy field and its growing economic leverage vis-à-vis its generally much weaker and economically dependent neighbors. Most important has been the Russian government's regaining almost total control over Russian energy production and distribution and increasingly dominating the energy sector of neighboring countries — often through the semi-coerced purchase of the energy distribution and processing infrastructure of those countries (Nygren, 2007b; 2007c, esp. pp. 238-45; Gasparyan, 2021). As noted above, the exponential increase in global demand for energy was the single most important factor fueling the revival of the Russian economy and to growing Russian political influence vis-à-vis neighboring states (Nygren, 2007a; 2007b; 2007c; Ebel and Menon, 2000).[7] In fact, almost from the very inception of the new Russian Federation Moscow has used its control of energy as a means to "influence" other former Soviet republics to change political positions that they had taken or to follow Moscow's policy lead. This has been especially true in Russia's relations with the Baltic republics, with Ukraine, Georgia, and more recently even with Belarus, all post-Soviet states with which Russia has had serious policy differences over the course of the past fifteen years. Moscow has in all cases put the blame for the cut-off of energy flows on the other side, or explained them as the result of technical problems, and argued, as well, that the policies of its oil and gas companies were dictated solely by economic, not political, considerations.[8]

All these countries are energy poor and almost totally dependent on supplies of petroleum, natural gas and, in some cases, electricity imported from the Russian Federation (Gasparyan, 2021). Russia pursued what Nygren (2007b) refers to as the "tap weapon"—by stopping the delivery of oil and/or gas to these countries—on various occasions as a means of strengthening its position in policy disputes and negotiating situations. The dispute with Ukraine in 2005-2006, which resulted in Russia's cutting off exports of gas in the middle of winter—resulted from Gazprom's decision to more than triple the price of gas. This decision, however, emerged only in the aftermath of the "Orange Revolution" which had reversed the "victory" of Russia's preferred candidate in the recent Ukrainian presidential election. Until that time Putin's policy toward Ukraine had been based on pragmatic long-term political and economic considerations. However, with the collapse of pro-Russian political forces in Ukraine, Russia expanded a more coercive approach, to demonstrate to the Ukrainians that assertions of independence from Moscow's influence would have real costs (Bugajski, 2004, pp. 80-89). The "gas war" of 2005-2006 between Russia and Ukraine was "resolved" by a complicated settlement in which a majority Russian-owned Swiss company sold gas originating supposedly from Central Asia to Ukraine at subsidized prices, with prices increasing gradually over several years to world market levels.[9]

Ukraine is by no means the only post-Soviet state to have experienced Moscow's political displeasure and, thus, the effects of the "tap weapon." Belarus, which for most of the post-Soviet period has pursued a slavishly pro-Russian policy, angered Putin's government in 2002, thereby leading to four years of confrontation between the two countries, with Gazprom taking the lead role in the dispute. Once again, because pipelines to the West crossed Belarusian territory, Belarus had some bargaining power. Eventually, however, the government of President Alexander Lukashenko was forced to capitulate or face the cut-off of Russian gas supplies. Prices were to be increased over a five-year period, while Gazprom gained direct control over the pipelines across Belarus (Nygren, 2007c, pp. 76-79).

Until the August 2008 Russian invasion of Crimea, the gas weapon, as well as that of electricity, had been the most important instrument in Russian pressure brought against Georgia, in order to coerce the latter into policies more in line with Moscow's interests. Here, these pressures have been employed, along with traditional threats of military intervention in support of Abkhaz and South Ossetian separatists—threats that were realized in August 2008 (*The Economist,* 2008b). In the Georgian case over the past several years Russia acquired substantial ownership of energy production and distribution facilities in Georgia to cover the costs of outstanding debts and as a precondition for continued discounted prices on Russian gas (Giragosian, 2007; Pamir, 2003).[10] This control, however, did not cow the Georgian government into accepting Russian dominance in the region—or accepting the *de facto* autonomy of the Russian-backed secessions in South Ossetia and Abkhazia, resulting in military hostilities in August 2008 that in effect wiped out Georgian military capabilities developed in recent years with U.S. military assistance and training.[11]

Russia's *de facto* control over the energy supplies of other post-Soviet states—Armenia, Moldova, and the Baltic states—has also been used in similar ways to influence the policy positions of these countries, as Nygren (2007c) has described in some detail. Yet, there is another part of Russia's use of its domination over energy
production and distribution that is significant for the drive to reestablishing Greater Russia and reestablishing the Russian Federation as a major world power; namely, attempting to gain control over the distribution of oil and gas from Central Asia in Western markets.

Russian Foreign Policy and Disinformation

As we have already seen, with the turn of the millennium Russian relations with both many newly independent former Soviet republics and with the states of the West deteriorated appreciably, some to the point of warfare. Military and economic tools were increasingly means used by Moscow to gain their objectives. However, propaganda and disinformation, as had been the case with the

USSR, also emerged as important instruments with which to achieve foreign policy goals. We will turn, therefore, to an examination of the Russian conception of disinformation and the institutional framework within which it is carried out, as well as the most important targets and themes emphasized recently.

In post-communist Russia three academic views of information warfare have emerged that, in fact, define the same activity: "the process of undermining a legitimate government by manipulating the information domain in order to influence political elites and instill political dissent, separatism, and social strife within a given system" (Fridman, 2017).[12] This concept describes, in the view of the Russian analysts, a Western technique to subvert its adversaries. In the opinion of Aleksandr Dugin, for example, the West (mainly the U.S.) has been waging an offensive against Russia throughout the 20th and early 21st centuries. Two directly political actions have been justified as a result of these views entering the political realm: the passage of domestic laws to limit the possibility of Western influence in Russia itself and also the development of what have become global disinformation and other techniques of information warfare.[13]

By the middle of the first decade of the twenty-first century Russian relations with much of the "near abroad" and with the West had already deteriorated significantly and Russian disinformation began to rise significantly. The outbreak of conflict with Ukraine in 2014 resulted in what Marcel Van Herpen (2020, p. 1) calls "the Kremlin's most massive propaganda offensive in the past seventy years."[14]

Russian Information Warfare

Although Russian "information warfare," or "disinformation policy" never disappeared completely after the demise of the USSR, it began to expand appreciably after Putin came to power and relations with both much of the "near abroad" and with the West began to deteriorate. As described by President Vladimir Putin, "We must take into account the plans and directions of development of the armed forces of other countries… Our responses must be based on intellectual superiority, they will be asymmetric, and less expensive" (Putin, 2006). In his *Handbook of Russian Information Warfare* Keir Giles (2016, pp. 4, 22) explains:

> *"information warfare can cover a vast range of different activities and processes seeking to steal, plant, interdict, manipulate, distort or destroy information. The channels and methods available for doing this cover an equally broad range, including computers, smartphones, real or invented news media, statements by leaders or celebrities, online troll campaigns, text messages, vox pops by concerned citizens, YouTube videos, or direct approaches to individual human targets. Recent Russian campaigning provides examples of all of the above and more…..*
>
> *Russia seeks to influence foreign decision-making by supplying polluted information, exploiting the fact that Western elected representatives receive and are sensitive to the same information flows as their voters. When disinformation delivered in this manner is part of the framework for decisions, this constitutes success for Moscow, because a key element of reflexive control is in place.*
>
> *However, even if disinformation is not successfully inserted into the policy-making chain, and only spreads in mass and social media, the effect can be to create a permissive public opinion environment where Russian narratives are presented as factual."*
>
> *Therefore "information warfare" is a broader concept than "disinformation" or "propaganda" and has the ultimate purpose of influencing the decision-making process, or the social and political environment in which decisions are made in the target society/polity.[15] The range of targets is broad. Subversion campaigns can aim, as noted by two Russian analysts, "to involve all public institutions in the country it intends to attack, primarily the mass media and religious organizations, cultural institutions, nongovernmental organizations, public movements financed from abroad, and scholars engaged in research on foreign grants. All these institutions and individuals may be involved in a distributed attack and strike damaging point blows at the country's social system with the purported aims of promoting democracy and respect for human rights" (Chekinov and Bogdanov, 2013).*

Obvious targets for distributing disinformation are the media, and a direct link is seen between media campaigns and a society's capacity to resist. Social media are also an important tool in Russia's campaign (Treyger, *et al,* 2022). The same Russian analysts note that the "mass media today can stir up chaos and confusion in government and military management of any country and instill ideas of violence, treachery, and immorality, and demoralize the public. Put through this treatment, the armed forces personnel and public of any country will not be ready for active defense" (Chekinov and Bogdanov, 2012). But organizations other than the media can also be targeted.

Russian Information Warfare in the Post-Communist World[16]

We shall now briefly examine some of the examples of Russian "information warfare" and the responses of the target states to the attacks. Among the first major campaigns orchestrated by Moscow was that against Estonia in 2007, when the Estonians had the audacity to move a Soviet World War II statue from the center of the capital to a military cemetery on the edge of the city, resulting in the Bronze Soldier conflict (Heering and Kamboj, 2021). Given that about 26 percent of the population of the country -- significantly more in urban areas -- consists of ethnic Russians (slightly more including all Russian speakers), this was an issue that greatly divided society. The Estonian government responded to widespread Russian actions by pursuing a policy and establishing an agency committed to an active approach to integration of non-Estonian speakers into the broader society and a response to Russian "information warfare" policy (Jankowicz, 2020, pp. 49 ff.) that is among the most active in post-communist Europe and much of the rest of the world.[17] Linked to quite tense relations between the two until present, Western opposition to Russian policy has been tied to the latter's engagement in a major disinformation and propaganda campaign to support its intervention and seizure of power, but backed it up with continued military pressure, as well as propaganda against Georgia (Shaishmelashvili, 2021)

Russian Disinformation Policy in the Developing World

The Russians have also been very actAive in engaging in disinformation tactics in the developing world, possibly with special focus on Africa, but also on other regions.[18] They have extended their global disinformation campaign to Africa, where they promote pro-Russian and anti-Western attitudes through propaganda. After each disinformation campaign, Moscow assesses its efforts and then tweaks tactics accordingly, adapting to new countermeasures as necessary. This campaign is centered in and focused on numerous African countries and has been a blending of Kremlin propaganda and local content. Disinformation campaigns in Africa have been elevated to a centerpiece of Russia's foreign and security policy (*IntelBrief,* 2019).

As Shelby Grossman (2020) demonstrates, the Russians have been employing social media in Africa to support local regimes and to oppose Western interests and policies. Russia is also running

some of its disinformation campaigns against the United States and Western Europe out of Africa (Hatmaker, 2020). Comparable campaigns have been carried out in Latin America where Twitter and other social media accounts have been very active in supporting accounts that Russia has been "playing a geopolitical role in this hemisphere against what they consider its main enemy — the United States," said Carlos Vecchio, the Venezuelan envoy in Washington who is representing the opposition movement against Mr. Maduro (Jakes, 2020).[18] The overall importance of the media – and of the ability to project the Russian "story"-- can be seen in the fact that Russia has recently announced the commitment of a million dollars for the expansion of "independent" media in developing countries ("Russia to Invest." 2021).

Russian Disinformation Policy in the West: The United States and Western Europe

As pointed out early in this article, although Russian disinformation policy has expanded dramatically across the world in recent years, that focused on the West –- on Europe and the United States -- has remained by far the most extensive. As Gabriele Consentino (2020) and many others have shown in some detail, even U.S. and other elections have not been beyond the reach of the Russian Internet Agency (IRA),[19] although the overall impact of their involvement is not clear. The Russians have attempted, both during and outside election cycles, to support candidates whom they favor and to contribute to the political divisions that exist in Western societies (CSIS, 2020; Zeltien and Radio France, 2019).

These Russian attacks involve transparently false stories, as well as partially true ones, that are meant to cause dissension and political chaos in the target states.[20] Across Western Europe the Russians have established radio stations and other communications facilities in Germany, Switzerland and elsewhere that broadcast to West European audiences and thereby, as the Russians hope, have an impact on them (Reichmuth, 2021; Spahn, 2022). Moreover, there is clear evidence in the United States that many of the vitriolic exchanges supposedly between domestic political factions in reality stem from Russian sources—via Facebook, for example, by which an estimated 140 million Americans a month were reached via Russian trolls prior to the U.S. election in 2020 (Hao, 2021; Lardieri, 2021).

Among the more important issues addressed in this Russian campaign to undermine, or at least cause disruption, even chaos, in Western political systems have been those associated with the global COVID 19 pandemic (Gordon and Volz, 2021). Russian disinformation sources have questioned the efficacy of the vaccines developed to deal with the disease and, thus, have contributed to the concern about them and the refusal to take them in the West – especially in the United States (Vanian, 2021 and Barnes, 2021).

A study of disinformation in the United States concluded that the most affected audience has been a politically conservative one (Hjorth and Adler-Nissen, 2019).[21] The result is an undercutting of mainstream views and the emergence of opposition to government policy on masks, vaccines, political issues, and related matters. This finding that there is more impact of Russian policy on the political right is borne out by the position taken on numerous international political issues by conservative commentators like Tucker Carlson (2021) of Fox News and Senators like Ted Cruz 2021 of Texas who basically criticized President Biden and supported Putin of Russia on his threat to invade Ukraine, a U.S. ally. For Tucker Carlson, Cruz and others like Representative Marjorie Taylor Green on the right, the United States has pursued policies in Central and Eastern Europe since the demise of the USSR that have challenged Russia's regional interests and, thus, Putin can be expected to and is justified in challenging Ukraine and indirectly the USA, as it is currently doing.

A Response to Russian Information Warfare

The question arises what one can do to respond to and counter Russian disinformation. "Western countermeasures have raised awareness of Russian activities, but their impact on Russia's efforts has been uncertain, and Russia appears undeterred." (Treyger *et al.,* 2022, Bodine-Baron, *et al., 2018*; Conley, Jeangène Vilmer, 2018*).* In the cases of Estonia and the Czech Republic both countries recognize Russian information warfare and have been quite effective in countering it by establishing government agencies to detect and counter Russian efforts, and by engaging think tanks and citizen volunteers in countering it, among many other approaches (CSIS, 2020), including an attempt by Estonia to get the EU to create an agency to deal with the issue. Elsewhere in Europe Sweden has invested heavily in a comprehensive approach to combating foreign interference in their democracy, and their efforts have largely been successful. This begins with other post-communist states (Ellick and Westbrook, 2019); moreover France successfully prevented Russian interference in its 2017 elections and in Putin's attempts to divide French society (Conley and Jeangège Vilmer) Internet Research Agency had a role in the very close election in the UK to leave the EU (Taylor, 2019).

The most comprehensive answer to the question of how to respond, however, is that by Jean-Baptiste Vilmer (2017) who provides a list of twenty-five policy recommendations that he views as useful – or necessary – to counter Russian disinformation, from distinguishing disinformation and propaganda from public diplomacy to defending European values.[22] Many of the suggestions on this list derive from the experiences of European countries (Kent, 2020).

Toward the Future

What is now clear across most of the globe is the fact that Moscow is involved on a massive scale in the attempt to manipulate the views of the populations and elites of other countries on all sorts of political issues – from the local ones to issues of Russian-Western confrontation. In some cases, the objective is to justify Russian intervention, as in Georgia and Ukraine. In others it is to support local political elites that favor Russian positions on global or regional issues.[23] In yet other cases it is to drive a wedge between developing countries and the West. Additionally, as in the disinformation campaign on the ineffectiveness of Western anti-COVID 19 vaccines, it is meant to contribute to sowing political chaos in other countries that will weaken opposing governments.

As proposed by the Russian academic theorists of information warfare, Moscow must use all means possible to weaken and to contain the impact of disinformation of its opponents and projecting its own, while systematically denying engagement in such activity (Fridman, 2017). One advantage that other states now have, compared with a decade ago, is the fact that Russian disinformation policy is now well known and some states – especially in East-central Europe and Scandinavia -- have developed effective means to limit the impact of Russian information warfare. Other states, therefore, can learn from them. Yet the costs, in terms of alertness and in devoting substantial effort to containing the impact of propaganda and disinformation, will remain very significant.

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Bio of author

Kanet is Professor Emeritus of Political Science at both the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign (since 1997) and at the University of Miami (since 2019). While at UIUC he served as Head of the Department of Political Science (1984-87) and as Associate Vice Chancellor for Academic Affairs and Director of International Programs (1989-97). More recently he served as Dean of the School of International Studies at the University of Miami (1997-2000).

Kanet has edited or coedited forty books on Soviet and Russian foreign and security policy, American foreign policy, and global politics; contributed 250 articles and chapters to scholarly journals and books; and lectured widely in the United States, Europe, Africa, and Asia. He has received various grants, awards, and honors.

Footnotes

[1] This section of the current analysis draws on Kanet (1987). See, also, the excellent article on Russian propaganda by Paul and Matthews (2016) and the works by Rid (2020), Corera **(2020),** Darczewska (2014), and Jankowicz (2020).

[2] Ladislav Bittman, the defected former head of the Soviet disinformation unit, described in great detail how he had mixed fact with fiction to create make-believe events and policies (Bittman, 2017; see, also, Rid, 2020, pp. 5-6;). For a detailed discussion of the broad disinformation campaign associated with the likely role of the USSR in the assassination of President John F. Kennedy see Woolsey and Pacepa (2021).

[3] As Nygren (2007c, pp. 232ff.) demonstrated, economic levers became the most reliable instruments for Russia in its campaign to reassert control over its neighbors—at least until the military operations in Georgia.

[4] For an excellent discussion of this shift in Russian policy toward the countries of the CIS (Commonwealth of Independent States) and the increased use of economic and financial instruments of power, see the work of Bertil Nygren (2007a, 2007b, 2007c).

[5] For an important collection of perceptive articles that examine the domestic and foreign policy dimensions of Russia's reemergence as a great power see Hedenskog *et al.* (2005); see also Rukavishnikov (2007).

[6] For a careful analysis of the state of Russian relations with the West at this time see the excellent article by Alla Kassianova (2001).

[7] The dominant narrative in analyses of Russia's economic revival that attribute that revival almost exclusively to Russian gas and oil exports and to the rise in global demand and, thus, prices for those exports has been increasingly challenged by those who point to the vibrant growth of other sectors of the Russian economy. A recent World Bank report notes, for example, that growth in the Russian economy has been stimulated by sectors other than simply gas and oil. The report noted: "In 2003 04, oil and some industrial sectors drove economic growth, but the subsequent expansion was driven largely by non-tradable goods and services for the domestic market, including manufacturing goods. In 2007, wholesale and retail trade alone accounted for almost a third of economic growth. Booming construction and manufacturing contributed another 30 percent. Manufacturing expanded by 7.4 percent in 2007, up from 2.9 percent in 2006. By contrast, growth in resource extraction virtually stopped, reflecting capacity constraints…The good news, so far, is that high rates of productivity growth underlie this robust growth" (World Bank in Russia, 2008), p. 4).

[8] It is important to recognize that, with the collapse of the former Soviet Union, the Russian Federation decided to continue to supply gas and oil to other former republics—now, new sovereign states—at prices substantially below the world market price. Thus, as global prices for gas and oil skyrocketed after the turn of the century, Russia was exporting oil and gas to neighboring countries at subsidized prices one-third or less of the world market price.

[9] Nygren (2007c, pp. 61-62) provides a detailed discussion of the specifics of the agreements, as well as the relevant sources. Ukraine was in a position to bargain with Gazprom and Moscow because Russia depended upon the secure flow of gas through pipelines across Ukraine in order to fulfill its export obligations to customers in Central and Western Europe.

[10] In 2003 the Russian firm UES obtained 75 percent ownership in a Georgian electricity distribution company and management control over several power plants, as well as 50 percent ownership of a nuclear power plant. Gazprom acquired control of Georgia's main gas pipeline in 2005 in return for a restructuring of the latter's debt. In other words, Russia now directly controls much of Georgia's energy production and distribution and still serves as the primary source of gas, even after the opening of the new pipeline from Azerbaijan in late 2006 (Khachatrian 2003; Torbakov 2003a; 2003b).

[11] In early August 2008—after weeks of mutual verbal attacks between Moscow and Tbilisi and apparently with encouragement from political elements in the United States—President Saakashvili of Georgia, reportedly responding to rocket attacks from locations inside the breakaway region of South Ossetia, sent forces into the region to reincorporate the breakaway republic. The Russians, who had apparently massed troops on the Russian-South Ossetian border in advance, almost immediately overwhelmed Georgian forces in the republic, as well as in a second breakaway region of Abkhazia, and advanced far into Georgia territory proper. (Giragosian, 2008; Galloway, 2008). Among the most salient analyses of the Russian intervention is that of George Friedman (2008), who points to the importance in Russia's calculations of what Moscow perceived—not without reason—as a U.S. policy of containment in which Georgia and Ukraine were important elements.

[12] In what may well be the best introduction to the topic available, Ofar Fridman (2017)
discusses these conceptual narratives for understanding information warfare: 'subversion-war' developed by Evgeny Messner (Fridman, 2018), 'net-centric war' developed by Aleksandr Dugin (n.d.), and 'information warfare' developed by Igor Panarin (Bolding, 2020). These concepts all mean basically the same thing and underlie these authors' views of information warfare/disinformation. For a broad discussion of the general without sole regard to Russia, see Stengel (2019).

[13] For an overview of the Putin government's gaining control over the internet at home, while also attempting to control it internationally, see Soldatov and Borogan (2015).

[14] Some excellent discussions of the breadth and importance of disinformation policy since Russia's invasion of Ukraine are Bushwick (2022); "Disarming Disinformation" (2022); Disinformation (2017); Legucka (2020); NPR (2022); Smith and Cardin (2017); "Twitter" (2022); and Yablokov (2022).

[15] As already noted above, the treatment of Russian "information warfare" by Fridman (2017) is exceptionally perceptive. For a more general discussion that places Russian policy in the context of disinformation more generally see Pomerantsev (2019).

[16] One of the most comprehensive treatments of Russian information warfare against former communist states is Nina Jankowicz's (2020) examination of information wars against Estonia, Georgia, Poland, Ukraine, and the Czech Republic. As she notes, the primary purpose of information warfare is to drive political wedges between competing population groups in target countries. This is very often accomplished by projecting information that is largely, or fully, true, but is likely to contribute to political conflict in target countries. Moreover, Richard Stengel (1919) places Russian policy in the context of that of China and others. For another comprehensive study see Vilar (2015).

[17] For a discussion of various means to counter Russian "information warfare" see Hellman and Wagnsson (2017).

[18] For a general discussion of Russian policy in Latin America, including disinformation policy, see Palassoe (2021) and Kanet and Moulioukova (2011).

[19] See Hao (2021) concerning the role of the Internet Research Agency (IRA) in carrying out Russian disinformation policy; see, also, Reltien (2019), Bail *et al.*, (2020); Chen (2015); and Sodaltov and Borogan, 2015 17 U.S. intelligence agencies found evidence of Russian involvement in the 2020 presidential election, Trump denied the any rationale for such involvement in the prior election (Weisburd *et al.,* (2016).

[20] See the various articles that treat different aspects of Russian disinformation activities in the European Union by Makhashvili (2017) and Taylor (2019), in Germany by Reichmu and Borogaatov and (2021) and Becker (2021).

[21] In 2022 a growing portion of the Right of the Republican party basically support Russia in its war against Ukraine (Shapera, 2022). See, also, Oshin (2022).

[22] The entire list of Vilmer's recommendations includes: distinguish disinformation and propaganda from public diplomacy; do not engage in Russophobia or demonizing Putin; note publicly that the issue is important; recognize that there is a continuum between military actions and information warfare; understand the subject well by reenforcing research on the subject; recognize the limits of a solely governmental response and the need for a global one; recognize the limits of refutation and that pointing out the truth is insufficient. create the largest and youngest and most educated audience possible that thinks critically; promote a journalistic ethics charter signed off on by the media of all countries; adapt the response to the listener. encourage the development of independent Russian media that is nor state financed. translate and promote the work of independent Russian journalists invite the most promising of independent media to join a program; point out the old witnesses of Russian disinformation that expose methods used. use the technology available for fact-checking to identify trolls, including Facebook and Twitter; reenforce the European task force by providing sufficient funds and personnel; encourage European states to develop national means for the fight against disinformation; reenforce cooperation among states, the EU, NATO in this area; for each false information not only correct the content, but also expose the method used; point out the source of financing; create an international organization dedicated to fighting disinformation; consider more restrictive countermeasures such as fines and sanctions; counter not only disinformation, but also its intent and potential effects, by strengthening what it seeks to weaken. communicate more effectively in Russian, especially on social networks; and assume and defend European values and develop a positive discourse. For another list of actions to thwart Russian policy see Conley and Jeangène Vilmer (2018).

[23] This position was widely held among those of the political center and left for the U.S. presidential elections of 2016 and 2020 and borne out by much official intelligence (Barnes, 2021; Intelligence Community, 2021).

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