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RUSSIA'S DISINFORMATION AND THE WAR IN UKRAINE

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Russia's Disinformation and the War in Ukraine

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Executive Summary

Russia's war of aggression against Ukraine has proven unsuccessful in many unexpected directions and the disinformation campaign with the aim of spreading the false narratives about its military engagement in Ukraine is among them. A general overview of respective events and moves has shown that Russia has been forced to adjust its approach on disinformation and increase its focus on the domestic audience. The article aims to demonstrate that in these efforts, Russia tries:

1. To justify its so-called "special military operation" by claiming to seek liberation of the brotherly Ukrainian people from forcefully installed neo-Nazi regime in Kyiv;
2. To apply the policy of deniability to the crimes it has committed on the territory of Ukraine.

At the international level, Russia attempts:

1. To portray Ukraine as a West-supported aggressor by using the traditional playbook of illegal development of Weapons of Mass Destruction (WMD) on the territories of the former Soviet Union;
2. To distract Western societies' support for weapons supply to Ukraine by warning of nuclear use;
3. To prevent the full international isolation by targeting the countries in Africa, the Middle East and Latin America to get their support at the different international fora.

After providing specific facts that support the existence of these patterns, the article tries to explain the reasons behind Russia's changed behaviours and claims that it was caused by:

1. The unexpected failure on the battlefield in Ukraine;
2. The development of the Open Source Intelligence (OSINT);
3. The fear of complete international isolation.

Introduction

Spreading false narratives and weakening opponents by utilizing the different tools of disinformation and misinformation have been part of Russia's foreign and security policy, even during the Soviet times, infamously known as "active measures". In a modern security environment, these methods as part of large-scale hybrid warfare tactics have become indispensable aspect of Russia's strategic thinking.

Russian disinformation campaign has been known as complex and well-organized. Over the years, Russia has employed a multi-layered strategy to introduce, amplify, and spread false and distorted narratives across the world. According to the U.S. State Department's Global Engagement Center's (GEC) report, published in 2020 "Russia's disinformation and propaganda ecosystem is the collection of official, proxy, and unattributed communication channels and platforms that Russia uses to create and amplify false narratives."(U.S. State Department, Global Engagement Center, 2020) The ecosystem consists of five main pillars: official government communications, state-funded global messaging, cultivation of proxy sources, weaponization of social media, and cyber-enabled disinformation."

These tactics were actively used during the military invasion of Georgia in 2008 and annexation of Crimea in 2014. Being based on the huge disinformation efforts lasting since the collapse of the Soviet Union with changing dynamics, this information warfare utilized against Georgia and Ukraine had been quite successful.

Considering this unfortunate experience and the complexity of Russia's strategy of information warfare, the world had no doubt in the repeated success of this policy after the start of war in Ukraine in 2022. However, we have been observing the different reality.

Since the launch of its war of aggression against Ukraine, Russia has been trying to use the traditional playbook, but has been proven unsuccessful. Currently its disinformation efforts are divided in two main directions, targeting the domestic and international audiences. Respectively, it has to be underlined that Russia was forced to adjust its approach and increase its efforts towards the domestic audience. Therefore, this article aims to demonstrate the general patterns of Russia's disinformation campaign during the war in Ukraine and analyze the reasons behind the shifts in Russia's general policy of information warfare.

Targeting domestic audience

Since the launch of war in Ukraine, Russia has been relying on several common narratives to spread disinformation among the domestic target audience.

Russia claims that Ukraine has no history of statehood and Ukrainian identity has never existed separately since it is an indispensable part of Russian nation. Hours before Russian tanks rolled into the sovereign Ukrainian territory and the first bomb was dropped on Kyiv, in his televised address, Russia's President Vladimir Putin provided a false historical overview to justify his unfolding the so-called "special military operation" (The Office of the President of the Russian Federation, 2022). Portraying Ukraine as an artificial creature by hands of Lenin over a century ago, Putin declared that Ukraine has no right for the sovereignty and independence. In his beliefs brotherly Ukrainian people are taken hostage by the neo-Nazi regime that illegitimately took control over Ukraine with Western support in the aftermath of the "Maidan" events in 2013-2014. And since then, people of Donbas are subject to genocide from Kyiv's puppet regime, which is a legitimate reason to launch the "operation" to liberate the people of Ukraine.

Based on this large an hour-long address, Russian authorities and the state-sponsored media tried to portray the military engagement against Ukraine as an existential battle for Russia's survival. Prominent television personas and well-known Russian propagandists are tirelessly spreading these narratives to mobilize masses in support of the war against Ukraine. With harsh and angry rhetoric, they convince the domestic audience that all the Russian efforts should be directed to win this "Great Patriotic War" against the U.S. and NATO-led Western imperialism that uses Ukraine as a proxy on the battlefield (Wertsch, 2023).

The same rhetoric of depicting Ukraine as an aggressor continued in the aftermath of Russia's withdrawal from north of Kyiv region. In response to the horrible pictures spread across the world about crimes Russian troops committed in the suburbs of Kyiv, Russia launched a dirty campaign of blaming the West and Ukraine for staging the Bucha massacre. This campaign of deniability has led by Russian official authorities. For instance, Russia's Ambassador to the UN Vasily Nebenzya stated at the UN Security Council on April 5, 2022 (The Permanent Mission of the Russian Federation to the UN, 2022):

“...there are outright criminal theatre shows with peaceful Ukrainians killed by their own radicals in order to, in the best Goebbels traditions, blame the Russian army for their deaths. They were killed in the areas the Russian troops left following the peace talks in Istanbul, which gave hope to so many people. As it turns out now, they should not have left it. I am talking primarily about Bucha.

I am aware that you saw the dead bodies and heard the stories. However, you only saw what they wanted to show you. You can't fail to see blatant inconsistencies in the version of the events being promoted by the Ukrainian and Western media, including the fact that there were no dead bodies in the town after the Russian troops left, as evidenced by a number of videos. There are records where Ukrainian radicals shot those who wear white armbands, that is, civilians. A close look at the video demonstrated today would reveal that people lying on the ground wore white armbands, meaning that they were civilians. And the fact that the bodies in the video do not look like they have been lying out there in the street for three or four days (according to the sensational and scientifically absurd information provided by The New York Times, the bodies have been lying there since March 20). Only complete amateurs or our Western partners who do not want to listen to anything and have long called everything that's black white and vice versa, could fall for this fake show.”

Since then, these messages have become an official part of Russian diplomats' statements at the different high-level meetings within the United Nations and other international fora (The Permanent Mission of the Russian Federation to the UN, 2022).

Another important dimension of Russian disinformation campaign on the domestic level is the counter-valuing the effect of the Western sanctions. On the one hand Russian authorities claim that the sanctions have not impacted domestic economy and the respective government institutions are able to overcome the consequences (РИА Новости, 2023). On the other hand, they tried to convince the Russian population that decreasing Europe's dependency on Russian energy resources would have led to the European Union's collapse forcing European leaders to give up on Ukraine's support and making concessions to Russia (TASS, 2022).

Targeting international Audience

On the international level, Russian disinformation campaign since the start of war can be divided in three main categories: 1) portraying Ukraine as a West-supported aggressor by using the traditional playbook of illegal development of Weapons of Mass Destruction (WMD), specifically biological and chemical weapons on the territories of the former Soviet Union; 2) trying to distract Western societies' support for weapons supply to Ukraine by warning of nuclear escalation; and 3) targeting the least developed countries in Africa, the Middle East and Latin America to get their support at the different international fora.

Alleged development of WMD

Over the years, Russia has been accusing the U.S. Department of Defense for development of biological weapons at the Richard Lugar Center – research institution located on the territory of Georgia and fully financed by the Government of Georgia (The Washington Post, 2023). Russia has been deliberately blaming the U.S. and Georgian authorities for non-compliance to and blatant violation of the norms and

principles of Biological Weapons Convention (BWC) (The Washington Post, 2023). Especially dynamic was this campaign during the COVID-19 pandemic, when Russia tried to distract the effective role of the Center in countering the pandemic. At the different international fora, Georgian and the U.S. officials denounced Russia's false and politically motivated claims (Makszimov, 2020).

Since the launch of its war of aggression against Ukraine, Russia has intensified its disinformation campaign against the Richard Lugar Center in Georgia. However, Ukraine has become the new and even major target of these accusations. Starting from March 2022, several days after invasion, Russia's Ministry of Defense conducted several press-briefing demonstrating the documents allegedly proving the U.S. program of biological weapons production in Ukraine (U.S. State Department, Global Engagement Center, 2023). More than that, in March 2022, under the initiative of the Chairman of the State Duma Vyacheslav Volodin, the Russian government created the Parliamentary Commission on the Investigation of U.S. Biological Laboratories in Ukraine (U.S. State Department, Global Engagement Center, 2023). The commission – co-chaired by Deputy Federation Council Speaker Konstantin Kosachev and Deputy State Duma Speaker Irina Yarovaya – has served as a key platform for spreading disinformation. With the regular announcements this body claims that “proof obtained by the commission fully confirms the U.S.-created network of biological intelligence worldwide” (U.S. State Department, Global Engagement Center, 2023).

Using nuclear rhetoric to distract the weapons supply to Ukraine

On February 24, 2022, announcing the start of his so-called “special military operation”, Vladimir Putin said (The Office of the President of the Russian Federation, 2022):

“...today's Russia remains one of the most powerful nuclear states. Moreover, it has a certain advantage in several cutting-edge weapons. In this context, there should be no doubt for anyone that any potential aggressor will face defeat and ominous consequences should it directly attack our country.”

Another warning was issued by President Putin in April (CNN, 2022):

“If someone intends to intervene on what is happening from the outside and creates unacceptable strategic threats for us, then they should know that our response to oncoming strikes will be swift, lightning fast. We have all the tools for this, ones that no one can brag about, and we won't brag—we will use them if needed—and I want everyone to know this. All the decisions have been made in this regard.”

In May, Deputy Chairman of Russia's Security Council Dmitry Medvedev has announced (Reuters, 2022):

“NATO countries pumping weapons into Ukraine, training troops to use Western equipment, sending in mercenaries and the exercises of Alliance countries near our borders increase the likelihood of a direct and open conflict between NATO and Russia. Such a conflict always has the risk of turning into a full-fledged nuclear war. This will be a disastrous scenario for everyone.”

Similar rhetoric threatening the western societies with the nuclear use if their governments continue military support to Ukraine, has been accompanied the Russian military campaign against Ukraine ever since.

In the meantime, in February 2023, Russia announced termination of its participation in the New START agreement (TASS, 2023) – the only remaining arms control agreement with the United States.

The culmination of this policy was a decision to deploy tactical nuclear weapons to Belarus. In May 2023, Russia and Belarus signed a deal formalizing the deployment of the weapons on the territory of Belarus while keeping the Command and Control (2C) in Russia (Karmanau, 2023). According to Putin the construction of storage facilities in Belarus would be completed by July 2023.

Targeting the countries in Africa, the Middle East and Latin America

Russia has always tried to spread its influence on the countries in Africa, the Middle East and Latin America. However, since the start of its unprovoked and unjustified war against Ukraine, the disinformation campaign in these regions to increase the number of the supporting countries has intensified significantly.

In all three regions relying on its sponsored media-outlets, independent journalists and social media, Russia tries to spread its narratives about the war in Ukraine.

According to Anna Borshchevskaya, Russia “routinely frames the war as a Russian challenge to the U.S.-led hegemonic order, an argument that plays well in many Arab capitals” (Borshchevskaya, 2023). She adds, “the Arabic news aggregator Nabd offers an extensive record of RT Arabic reposting across regional media, at Nabd and other sites. The headlines are as typical as they are illustrative: “The West and US not interested in supporting Ukraine but weakening Russia,” “Washington’s mission is to limit the growth of its European and Asian partners,” “Ukraine is forced to fight on behalf of NATO,” and so on.

In Africa, as the U.S. State Department reports, Russia has weaponized the Pan-Africanism – “a legitimate movement that is respected by many across the continent and the world” (U.S. State Department, 2022). Prominent Pan-African activists such as Kémi Séba “promote Russia’s interests across the continent, including African voices calling for the removal of French and Western influence across the Sahel while encouraging more Kremlin influence” (U.S. State Department, 2022).

In Latin America, Russia has been using independent journalists and social media to spread false information about the war in Ukraine and encouraging the anti-Western narratives among the countries of the region (Brandt&Wirtschafter, 2022).

Analyzing the general patterns of Russian disinformation campaign during the war in Ukraine

As the information above demonstrates, Russia has continued to use its traditional playbook of spreading disinformation by relying on the policy of deniability – mainly utilized by its official authorities, its media-outlets, so-called “useful idiots” in different countries and social media. However, it is obvious, that the Russian efforts are not as successful as they used to be even during the annexation of Crimea in 2014 or military invasion of Georgia in 2008. While using the same tactics Russia has been forced to shift its focus to the domestic audience. At the same, it had to change its target audience internationally by lowering its presence in the Western "ecosystem". Presumably there are several reasons for such changes:

1. *Unexpected failure on the battlefield.* It is a well-known that Russian leadership was expecting to take over the capital of Ukraine in the first hours of invasion and the entire country in the matter of days or weeks. However, the opposite has happened. To this end, Russia even had to call on the country-wide military mobilization to advance its effort for the event it refuses to call the

“war”. In order to keep the public on track and avoid the large opposition (as it slightly occurred in the republics of North Caucasus), the false narratives have to be spread among the society to legitimize the aims of the so-called “special military operation”.

2. *The development of the Open Source Intelligence (OSINT)*. The technological progress of the modern international environment, makes the OSINT a highly and perfectly developed field. The openly accessible tools of investigation keep the international audience on the track and allow it to quickly check the information. The OSINT has been a crucial component of the war in Ukraine. With their activities on the social media, people working in this direction have made this military engagement a livestreamed event. Therefore, in these circumstances, it is difficult to influence societies with false narratives. And that is why the policy of deniability on Bucha massacre has not gain an expected success for Russian authorities.
3. *Fear of complete international isolation*. The Western sanctions and restrictions force Russia to seek alternative ways of keeping itself from complete international isolation. Hence, focusing its foreign policy orientations, including the disinformation campaign towards the countries of Africa, the Middle East and Latin American, allows Russia to maintain the network of supporters and potential friends. These countries despite their limited influence in international politics, are still significant to keep the number of states supporting resolutions, statements or other efforts in Russia’s favor at different international platforms. Foreign Minister, Sergei Lavrov’s frequent visits to these countries are another demonstration of this pattern.

Conclusion

Since Russian disinformation campaign has been known as complex and well-organized, the international society was expecting the repeated success of this policy when Russia’s unprovoked and unjustified war of aggression was launched against Ukraine in 2022.

However, despite Russia’s attempts to use the traditional playbook, it has been quite unsuccessful in this direction. By analyzing different patterns in Russian disinformation camping towards its domestic and international audiences, it has been revealed that Russia has been forced to adjust its approach. While there can be found many reasons behind these changes after a thorough investigation and research, as for now based on a brief observation of the different events, several common explanations can be identified and put forward.

Russia has been proven unsuccessful because it is undergoing unexpected failure on the battlefield in Ukraine. At the same time, Russia’s traditional playbook is too outdated in a modern environment, characterized with rapid technological development. In this condition, when independent investigation can heavily rely on the tools of the Open Source Intelligence (OSINT), it is hard to convince the people in the opposite. And finally, the effect of sanctions and bans imposed by the Western countries seems to be of great impact. In these circumstances, Russia is doomed to find itself in a complete international isolation. To avoid such an outcome, it has to attract the countries in the regions of Africa, the Middle East and Latin America to maintain at least a limited support at the international level.

Overall, indeed, it has been surprising to see the Russia being forced to modify the general approaches of its information warfare. However, the reality is obvious, and the information provided in this article attempts to direct the attention to it.

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