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Abstract

Nowadays, information circulates at an exponential speed and individuals have all the technological means to comment on socio-political and economic events at domestic and international level. Unfortunately, with such opportunities come threats, i.e. to come across mis-/disinformation, which spreads six times faster than factual information for appealing to emotions and being made credible by a veil of truth. Disinformation has become a prominent security concern within inter-state conflicts like the Russia's aggression against Ukraine. Moscow has allocated impressive resources to run a disinformation machine which builds upon USSR's active measures doctrine. The information space is monopolised by Kremlin's official discourse, which is echoed by state-owned media outlets and society through social media. Since 2014, Moscow has applied this government-media-people prism to gain tactical advantages on the battlefield; brainwash the domestic audience about the conflict's "justifications"; discredit Ukraine's governments, Western military support and democratic values; and justify atrocities against the Ukrainian population.

This dissertation wants to provide a discourse-oriented snapshot of the main false narratives which Russia has relied upon within its aggression against Ukraine, showing how these have resonated in the Euro-Atlantic information space due to Moscow disinformation machine's systematic work. The empirical discussion delves into four narratives spread around and after Donbas' occupation and Crimea's annexation in 2014 together with three threads following the full-scale

invasion in 2022.

Russian false narratives have not been successful in 2022 as in 2014 for three reasons: their easily disprovable and dehumanising tone; Kremlin's inability to adapt its playbook to a changing socio-political landscape and Western states' relatively higher preparedness to respond; the constant reshaping of Putin's inner circle to define regime propaganda's new faces. Therefore, Moscow has insisted on repetition of stories under different guises and, interestingly, shifted from disinformation to the de-contextualisation of factual trends like economic inflation or the energy crisis to discourage Euro-Atlantic allies' commitment to the Ukrainian cause.

NATO and the EU have been unable to mitigate the spread of Russian narratives by restricting media outlets' broadcasting, as their response has mainly been reactive (i.e. debunking). Indeed, EU's East StratCom Task Force and NATO's Strategic Communication Centre of Excellence continue to expose Moscow's lies and fact-check them; however, they are underfunded and understaffed by few member states considering disinformation an urgent threat.

Even so, the Euro-Atlantic landscape provides virtuous pre-bunking instances involving governments, private companies and civil society: reforming laws on restrictions of freedom of speech and propaganda, setting up an *ad-hoc* institutional infrastructure and, in the long-term period, build a media-literate society. If such a whole-of-society approach is replicated among states, it might provide the EU with the required capabilities to become a global leader in countering disinformation, while helping NATO adapt itself to a world posing contemporary challenges it was not designed to cope with. Such development can also encourage NATO and the EU to harmonise their information security doctrine and, consequently, favour burden-sharing solutions to counter disinformation. In this respect, taking inspiration from the virtuous examples within the private sector and civil society can be an asset.