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***Russia's information aggression before and during the
full-scale invasion of Ukraine***

*Identifying elements of change and continuity amongst the
Kremlin's disinformation operations vis-à-vis EU's and
NATO's courses of action to counter them*

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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.

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Introduction

The evolution of information warfare in Russia's security doctrine and the adaptation of the information ecosystem in the lead-up to the war against Ukraine

'The news is the incense by which we bless Putin's actions, make him the President' (Peter Pomerantsev, 'Nothing Is True and Everything Is Possible')

Since Crimea's illegal annexation in 2014, Russia has tried to hinder Ukraine's territorial integrity and bring it back under its sovereignty based on the two peoples' common destiny (President of Russia, 2021b). In doing so, Moscow is acting as the last colonial empire in the contemporary world (Inozemtsev, 2017). The Kremlin has exploited information warfare's potential through an incomparable network of actors to deceive the Euro-Atlantic audience about reality on the battlefield, NATO and EU's legitimacy to enlarge, and Ukraine and its people's dignity. In short, Moscow has committed itself to reconstruct reality and public beliefs about Russia and its relations with Ukraine and the West (Karlsen, 2019).

The ongoing conflict has inaugurated a new phase of unconventional warfare (Anghel, 2020: 65), whose protracted fervour blends with interstate conflict's lethality (Hunter and Pernik, 2015: 3). To convince its population about the necessity to carry out this 'struggle', the Russian

political system portrays Putin as a leader sacrificing himself for his country (Interview 3, 2023) and maintains a centralised institutional structure based on a command-and-control dynamic to avoid room for dissent. In fact, Putin chairs the National Security Council, which coordinates the armed forces and their Directorate for Information (GRU), the *Roskomnazardor* (the communication infrastructure agency), the Federal Protection Service (FSO) and the Foreign Ministry (Cristadoro, 2018: 105). To spread its message, the Presidency relies on political advisors (*kurators*) like former Presidential Administration Deputy Chief Vladislav Surkov (Herd, 2016: 12).

Russia's disinformation operations aim at confusing Western audiences, strengthening existing opinions, mobilising Putin's constituency and creating a parallel alternative reality (Wilson, 2015). These laid the foundations of the 2000 national information security doctrine (Bagge, 2019: 90), which encouraged counterpropaganda to avert negative consequences from external "disinformation" about domestic policy, while media outlets' foreign representations replicate the effort abroad (President of Russia, 2000). The 2016 doctrine associated information security as states' desire to '*use their technological superiority to dominate the information space*' (President of Russia, 2016) and overturn global strategic stability (Bagge, 2019: 103). The document, building on the 2014 Military doctrine (Global Security, n.d.) reflects Moscow's discursive approach vis-à-vis post-Maidan events in Ukraine (Bagge, 2019: 111), emphasising foreign information operations allegedly undermining Russian 'historical foundations and patriotic traditions' while indoctrinating the Ukrainian people to portray Russia as an enemy. Hence the need to safeguard 'cultural sovereignty' from external 'destructive information', 'spread of extremist products' or 'interethnic intolerance' (President of Russia, 2016).

To respond to these threats, the 2010 Military Doctrine was adopted to refine strategic deception, intelligence and electronic warfare, active information and psychological countermeasures (President of Russia,

2010). Information security's centrality was crystallised in the 2021 National Security Strategy, which prioritises domestic infrastructure protection from foreign destructive operations while instilling traditional spiritual, moral, cultural and historical values amidst society (President of Russia, 2021a).

The dissertation addresses two fundamental research questions. The first tries to understand how disinformation proved relevant from the February 2014 events to the full-scale invasion's breakout, and throughout the first year of the invasion (until 24 February 2023). In this sense, I will dedicate two chapters of the analysis to illustrate how false narratives resounded during the two periods from a discourse viewpoint: for this purpose, I provide examples of statements and articles released by official governmental channels, Kremlin-owned/friendly news outlets and influential public figures. I will also highlight a few messages spread on Facebook and Twitter, which I picked based on research through keywords and significant reactions.

I will apply this methodological framework to analyse four narratives from the 2014-2022 period and three to cover the February 2022-February 2023 one. In the latter case, the lower number of narratives looked at has to do with the shorter reference timeframe and a lower number of pieces of disinformation which had resonance for a long enough period. Still, this imbalance will not prevent a comparison between the two periods to identify changes and continuities from a discourse-related viewpoint, since the narratives touch upon similar events and/or Russia's argumentation to justify its aggression against Ukraine.

The second research question aims at reflecting upon NATO and EU competent institutions/agencies' response to Russian disinformation. In the third and final chapter of the analysis, I try to discuss member states' (in)capability to reach consensus upon an anti-disinformation framework within their constituencies, highlighting strengths and loopholes to fill in to undermine Moscow's disinformation machine. In this regard, I will hint at meaningful private sector/civil society initiatives which expose Kremlin

false narratives and deter future perpetrators from acting as potential sources of inspiration to support debunking efforts with pre-bunking ones. While it is almost impossible to pre-empt disinformation except by educating individuals to deal with it or undertaking pre-bunking strategies, this does not mean that competent authorities should not continue with debunking, fact-checking and removing content which psychologically harms targeted audiences and threatens democratic values. At the same time, states/international organisations should not fight disinformation on the front line (Jeangène Vilmer, 2021: 28), as they might end up deciding what counts as true or false to the detriment of freedoms of speech and press.

My analysis about disinformation's role within the Russia-Ukraine conflict builds upon the historical grievances between the two countries since USSR's dissolution in 1991. Once Ukraine was ready to shift away from the former Soviet sphere, Russia triggered domestic unrest, as seen with the 2006 energy crisis and the 2013-2014 Euromaidan protests after then-President Yanukovich's refusal to sign the EU-Ukraine Association Agreement. This constituted the point of no return in Moscow-Kyiv relations and triggered hostilities in Eastern Ukraine and Crimea's illegal annexation in 2014, thus laying the groundwork for a bloody and quasi-frozen conflict until Moscow launched the full-scale invasion on 24 February 2022.

Moscow relies on 'active measures' (*aktivnyye meropriyatiya*), where disinformation, followed by blackmailing, political influence operations, clandestine radio broadcasting or foreign media control (US Department of State, 1981: 1) constitutes the key to change the international order and people's perceptions according to seven golden rules: exploiting societal cracks; creating an unquestionable lie; wrapping it around a kernel of truth; attributing the story to another actor; finding a 'useful idiot' to push the narrative; denying everything; and playing the long game (The New York Times, 2018).

This doctrine, inherited from USSR times, falls under the *Maskirovka* theory, i.e. the construction of a parallel reality to deceive the adversary

(Ottaviani, 2022: 25). Arab Spring revolutions marked a watershed moment in Russia's understanding of war, as they were read as successful attempts by the US to overthrow Washington-unfriendly governments with, *inter alia*, information-psychological operations. President Putin understood their potential and encouraged Chief of General Staff Valerij Vasil'evič Gerasimov and Vladislav Surkov to work on a new doctrine (*ibid.*: 31), where non-military strategies offset military ones according to a 4:1 ratio (Gerasimov, 2013). In July 2014, Putin acknowledged information's relevance in Russia's military strategy, defining it '*a formidable weapon that enables public opinion manipulations*' (President of Russia, 2014b).

Before unveiling his doctrine, Gerasimov had highlighted the advantage of a centralised information space, which can promote a unified message (Sushentsov, 2015). With this aim, Moscow uses the media ecosystem as a tribune with a 'megaphone' of manipulative tactics, from bots to fake websites, to sow uncertainty amongst targeted individuals (EUvsDisinfo, n.d.). The ecosystem also reaches foreign countries, where proxies paid by Moscow are located to contribute to spread disinformation (Interview 1, 2023). This international orientation is reflected in the evolution of the main Kremlin-owned outlets, as *RT* dropped 'Russian' from its brand name, while the *Voice of Russia* evolved into *Sputnik International* (Fedchenko, 2016).

Over the breakout of hostilities in Ukraine, we witnessed a shift in the editorial policy. *RT* removed entertainment programmes and focused on demonising Kyiv (Ottaviani, 2022: 170). The once trustworthy *RIA Novosti* became a subsidiary within *Rossija Segodnya's* media group, which turned into Kremlin's official voice and whose leader Dmitry Kiselyov became known for his extremist takes on Ukraine (*ibid.*: 174). *Sputnik News's* establishment in 2014 marked the media ecosystem's leap towards the global audience through correspondence offices in the world's most important cities and a website translated in 30 languages (*ibid.*: 174-175), pushing NATO and EU's strategic communication divisions to brand it 'a major source of disinformation' (Watanabe, 2018:

5).

Such premises psychologically prepared Russian society to the 2014 aggression (Interview 5, 2023) and caught on Russian diaspora in Europe over the invasion's launch in 2022 (Atlantic Council, 2023a: 4), when fringes of the community defaced tourist attractions with the pro-war 'Z' symbol (Connolly, 2022) or mobilised against Russian traditions' alleged erasure (TASS, 2022g). Coupled with the spread of false narratives to support its *casus belli* (Atlantic Council 2023b: 4), this 'explosive mix' secured Russian society's loyalty by keeping its consciousness in a state of hysteria (Herd, 2016: 10).

Literature Review

'While information is the oxygen of modern age, disinformation is the carbon monoxide that can poison generations.' (Newton Lee, 'Counterterrorism and Cybersecurity: Total Information Awareness')

Introduction

The chapter reviews the relevant literature to discuss the role of disinformation within Russia's military aggression of Ukraine, in order to provide the reader with a solid theoretical framework within which to contextualise the empirical analysis. I begin with a terminological framework on disinformation, the means to spread it, and the origins of Moscow's disinformation playbook to be found in the Soviet active measures doctrine. Secondly, I discuss the applicability of 'hybrid warfare' to the (non-)military means used by the Kremlin to impair Ukraine's sovereignty and disrupt the Euro-Atlantic information space.

The chapter then moves on to elaborate on Russia's approach to information warfare, with special regard to the Gerasimov doctrine, to point out how unconventional means to wage war have become more relevant than (but not substitutive of) the conventional ones. I highlight the centrality of information operations amongst non-military instruments and how the Kremlin has adapted its propaganda machine to the contemporary digitalised world by exploiting the potential of social media platforms. In the fourth section, I illustrate the main positions within the academic debate on Moscow's approach to information operations, with the aim of identifying grey areas on which my analysis can add value.

In the last section, I discuss some prominent academic opinions on the policy response that NATO and EU's competent authorities should devise to counter Russian disinformation. Most relevantly, I refer to scholars who, based on the performance of existing mechanisms, suggest areas worth investing in or initiatives worth following to help the two international organisations become fully fledged actors in the fight against information operations which confuse and deceive large segments of Western society lacking the required level of media literacy.

1. Terminological framework and the origins of Russia's disinformation

Disinformation can be defined as the intentional spread of falsehoods to mislead, deceive or confuse (Fetzer, 2004). It comes from *dezinformatsiya*, which gave the name to KGB's black propaganda department tasked with fabricating false information (Giusti and Piras, 2021). (Social) media outlets/platforms give rise to a vicious cycle where disinforming content gets to influence societal beliefs around topics at issue (Bennett and Livingston, 2018). Disinformation differs from misinformation, which lacks the intention to spread false information, and malinformation, i.e. manipulating factual content to cause harm (Echemendia, 2022).

Disinformation is a fundamental component of post-truth politics, i.e. *'reliance on assertions that 'feel true' but have no basis in fact'* (The Economist, 2016). Post-truth politics appeals to emotions through fake news and conspiracy theories creating alternative realities and serving propaganda purposes (Al-Rodhan, 2017). Hence, fake news can be considered an emotional weapon to strategically manipulate audiences' feelings to undercut potential for collective action (Loveless, 2020). Such emotive appeals overwhelm individuals' attempts to deal with political topics (Druckman, 2012). With free circulation of unverified information on the Internet, fake news can be rapidly shared, not least because social media platforms have allowed the proliferation of fake accounts as catalysts to spread lies (Meyer, 2017). Through extensive use of

digital communication systems and reach of social media (Corner, 2017), fake news has turned into an advanced version of disinformation which can be spread sporadically or continuously. The latter scenario can create a cluster (simultaneous diffusion through several channels) or snowball effect (bombardment of false information capturing a potentially vast audience vulnerable to different attacks) (Giusti and Piras, 2021).

Propaganda can be defined as *'an attempt to influence thoughts and behaviour in such a way that a person would perceive evoked thoughts and behaviour without looking for reasons and explanations'* (Pynnöniemi and Rácz, 2015). In a nutshell, it is the activity through which disinforming content can be fed, possibly with the help of fake news. Since the XVII century, state actors and information channels have made recourse to propaganda to support a specific cause, manipulate truth and/or censoring opposing views, as it occurred in Nazi Germany (Giusti and Piras, 2021).

Among the theories behind disinformation's cause, the framing theory states that you *'select some aspects of a perceived reality and make them more salient to promote a particular problem definition, causal interpretation, moral evaluation and/or treatment recommendation'* (Entman, 1993). Therefore, you construct a social reality for people to interpret information and events (Brighton, 2019). Social media have turned into the most powerful instrument to fulfil that aim by giving *'a central organizing idea or story line that provides meaning to an unfolding strip of events'* while *'the frame suggests what the controversy is about'* (Gamson and Modigliani, 1987). Such platforms increase the potential for manipulation and deception (Brighton, 2019), which find fertile ground among citizens losing trust in democratic institutions (Bennett and Livingston, 2018).

Disinformation campaigns have turned into social polarization facilitators (Asmolov, 2018). Russia has done so to Ukraine's detriment since late 2013 by disseminating messages (Burkovskiy, 2017) through traditional media, state-sponsored news organisations, conspiracy

websites, troll factories, bots, hackers and social media (Wierzejski et al., 2017) not only domestically, but first and foremost in the Euro-Atlantic information space, where Moscow relies on a web of Russian-friendly outlets and think tanks to spread false narratives (Snegovaya, 2015).

Russia follows KGB's 'active measures' doctrine, comprising disinformation, propaganda, political repression and subversion (Harding, 2014) to pursue geostrategic disinformation against NATO, the EU and democratic nations' cohesiveness (Bennett and Livingston, 2018) while using subversive warfare tools to hinder trust in their values, leaders and lifestyle (Seely, 2018). In parallel, Russia positions itself as victim of Western 'Russophobia' (Schmidt-Felzmann, 2017) and self-legitimizes to respond to an alleged political/informational attack against it (President of Russia, 2015). Hence, Russia reinforces a 'siege mentality' while fostering an environment where political murders and violence become unremarkable (Fedor, 2015).

Such actions follow the *fil rouge* of Kremlin's disinformation initiatives, i.e. deceit (*maskirovka*). The above-mentioned examples are strategies to '*warp the enemy's view of Soviet positions, designs and missions, and to alter the perceptions of their own side and their clients as well*' (Beaumont, 1982). Academics like Galeotti (2015) confirmed the validity of such theory when applied to early episodes of Moscow's hostile measures in Ukraine, namely the confusion that the 'Little Green Men' aroused among Kyiv's military establishment to allow Russians and local allied militia to take control of Crimea.

In reaction to 'Western aggression', Moscow engages in 'reflexive control', the 3rd founding pillar of the 'active measures' doctrine alongside deceit and disinformation (Connable et al., 2020). It is a stratagem to interfere with opponents' perceptions and information channels by biasing the information space (Snegovaya, 2015), leading it to make decisions to Kremlin's benefit (Thomas, 2004). The goal is not to undermine enemies' morale, but to form a perception of reality reflecting Russia's interests (Bedritsky, 2007). Contemporary analysts place Russia's ongoing information aggression within the 4D approach:

dismiss, distort, distract and dismay (Emerson, 2015). These pillars already supported the military disinformation doctrine in USSR times as part of 'reflexive control' (Snegovaya, 2015).

2. Debate on the applicability of 'hybrid warfare'

Disinformation is playing an increasingly influential role among the techniques at states' disposal to wage 'hybrid warfare', even more so in a world where the technology to produce and disseminate information is rapidly evolving, thus leaving further ground for the manipulation of individual perceptions. With the Internet and social media acting as ideal catalysts, it has become easier, more efficient and cost-effective to undertake these actions (Waltzman, 2017), to the point of being regarded as societal threats undermining the information space, reducing human agency to counter them and, ultimately, impacting global geopolitics (Monsees, 2020). This is perfectly in line with Jolanta Darczewska's (2014) statement that information is a cheap, universal and easily accessible weapon capable of penetrating state borders without restrictions. Hence, it is no coincidence that EU High Representative for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy Josep Borrell (2020) insisted on treating intentional disinformation campaigns as '*a hybrid threat to European and global security*'.

'Hybrid warfare' has become the centrepiece of the debate on 21st-century wars, being understood as an umbrella term to combine conventional and unconventional means for a state to divide society and undermine its trust in the government of the targeted state. Among the unconventional means, we find cyber-attacks, influencing subversion and disinformation (Rühle, 2021). 'Hybrid warfare' has been used by the West and Russia to reciprocally create the image of a 'perfect enemy' which is omnipresent and exploits drawbacks in national decision-making to make the opposing state fail. In the Russian case, though, military officials refer to 'non-linear war', as elaborated by Chief of General Staff Valerij Gerasimov in his 2013 doctrine (*ibid.*). Here, while acknowledging the shift towards non-military tools in modern conflict (Gerasimov, 2013), he employed the term 'hybrid warfare' in relation to

the West's tactics to create unrest in foreign countries to lay the groundwork for intervention to restore domestic order (Rühle, 2021).

Due to impressive technological developments such as social media and the cyber space, hybrid activities have become recurrent in the contemporary conduct of international relations. In the case at issue, many analysts believe Russian operations in Crimea and Donbas in spring 2014 provided a suitable example of hybrid warfare; nonetheless, they neglect that the Kremlin's success was largely due to conventional military power. This is intertwined with Western strategic community's obsession with hybrid threats leading them to mystify Moscow as an infinitely malign actor outmanoeuvring Western democracies at every turn (*ibid.*).

Within the purview of 'hybrid warfare', much of the relevant literature approaches (dis)information as a strategic weapon used to achieve political and military goals (Thornton, 2015), and citizens' minds are the battlefield on which this war is fought (Dunn Cavelty and Mauer, 2008). In the Russia-Ukraine conflict, this is epitomised by the Kremlin's leverage on ethnic Russians in Crimea and Donbas, which set the stage for the violation of Kyiv's sovereignty in 2014 and 2022. Information operations may manifest themselves in several ways, from manufacturing credibility through fake experts to validating certain narratives to hacking legitimate accounts, from distorting research in conformity with desired narratives to using diplomatic and state media outlets to amplify interventions from specific voices (Miller et al., 2022).

From a terminological and substantial viewpoint, a scholarly debate has been launched over the nature and suitability of 'hybrid warfare' when it comes to Russia's combination of conventional and unconventional means to wage armed conflict (Shandra and Seely, 2019). Mark Galeotti (2016), for instance, conceives Moscow's hybrid warfare in terms of proxy warfare, information and special forces operations. This modern approach follows the footsteps of the Soviet Union's experience of conflict. The argument about continuity with the past contradicts Bērziņš's view (2015), according to which today's new-

generation warfare would break lines with the USSR's model, thus falling out of hybrid warfare's scope of application.

3. Russia's approach to information warfare

Waltzman (2017) highlights how Russia lives in perpetual information warfare to hinder the 'myth' of objectivity imposed by the Western world (Yaffa, 2014). To substantiate information operations' centrality in Kremlin's *modus operandi*, it is worthwhile recalling General Gerasimov's (2016) observation on the 4:1 ratio of (non-)military measures, the former including economic sanctions, diplomatic pressure and information operations. Hence, information warfare can be encapsulated within the category of unconventional warfare, whose wide spectrum embraces Moscow's military, information, economic and cultural activities, namely the use of propaganda and deception towards the Russian-speaking populace; steadfast denial of Russian operations; the unfolding of military activity without declaring war; recourse to unidentified local agents (US Army Special Operations Command, 2014).

These features lay the foundations for the '*spetzpropaganda*' doctrine, which stipulates that information operations are multidisciplinary in nature, be them (non-)military, technological or social. Information warfare acts as states' leading tool to attain diplomatic leverage and fulfil foreign policy objectives (*ibid.*); conversely, military actions would play a marginal role (Galeotti, 2014). In armed conflict, Russian disinformation actors devise a virtual reality replacing the on-field truth with pro-Kremlin fiction (Darczewska, 2014). This effort should precede the deployment of military force and shape a response from the international community that favours it (President of Russia, 2010). This position is coherent with Chekinov and Bogdanov's view (2015) that information warfare's ace up the sleeve is to begin operations prior to military ones to prepare the potential battlefield or 'lay the groundwork for victory' (Chekinov and Bogdanov, 2013).

Recourse is made to information warfare tools to avert use of force

or, if this becomes unavoidable, deceive the opponent and legitimise Moscow's actions domestically and internationally (Connell and Vogler, 2017). In doing so, information operations blur the dividing line between peacetime and wartime (Thomas, 2010). These operations are regarded by Russian military elites as a 'continuous activity' irrespective of bilateral relations with foreign governments (Waltzman, 2017). In other words, they conceive information warfare as a never-ending state of war within a long-term power strategy (Bechis, 2021). Conversely, the West views information operations as tactical measures to be adopted only if hostilities break out (*ibid.*).

Among Russian academics, Igor Panarin and Aleksandr Dugin stand out for their insights into information warfare (US Army Special Operations Command, 2014). While Panarin conceived a centralised media manipulation and propaganda campaign recalling the response to 'colour' and Arab Spring revolutions (Darczewska, 2014), Dugin's 'net-centric warfare' brought information warfare in line with the rise of social media as paramount to conduct campaigns targeting groups in war-torn areas and arouse support abroad, thus leading to the creation of proxies to spread Moscow's message (*ibid.*).

The literature has outlined Russia's main methods to spread disinformation: alternating understatement and exaggeration; privileging emotionality over critical information analysis; showing a biased attitude on the media towards the Kremlin; and rejecting government criticism through whataboutism (NGO Interviews Ukraine, 2017). Moscow uses these methods to disseminate false narratives through a variegated range of sources: public and private TV channels (e.g. *Channel One*, *Russia-1*, *Russia-24*, *Zvezda*), news agencies and print media (*TASS*, *RIA*), social networks and blogs (*Vkontakte*, *Odnoklassniki*) (*ibid.*). The expression 'firehose of falsehood' (Paul and Matthews, 2016) captures the diversity of channels and false narratives, as well as the efficiency to reach designated targets. Such multi-levered apparatus demonstrates how the Kremlin has shifted from mere political subversion to a more integrated approach which uses political violence and state diplomacy,

alternates hard and soft power and relies on narrative warfare according to a command-and-control logic (Alya and Seely, 2019).

Relying on extensive and concerted use of (social) media channels, the Kremlin has built a discourse on information-psychological warfare, where relevance is placed on influence over enemy countries and the delineation of external enemies within Russia (NGO Interviews Ukraine, 2017). By analysing Russia's disinformation framework, I illustrate how a state can take advantage of modern technologies to run a propaganda machine by blending informational and psychological influence. Given the dynamism and versatility of Russia's methods (*ibid.*), I want to stimulate further research on the information-psychology nexus, how it plays out in the ongoing conflict and how fundamental this category is in the Russian definition of information warfare (Blank, 2016). The more audiences hear false narratives, the more inclined they are to accept them as true (Paul and Matthews, 2016).

4. Loopholes and opportunities in the academic debate on Moscow's approach

Although 'hybrid warfare' acts as a conceptual tool to interpret changes in Moscow's military capabilities, Renz and Smith (2016: 1) are critical of using it to assess its foreign policy objectives and to prepare defence plans accordingly: in fact, if we misuse 'hybrid warfare' as an umbrella term for Russia's unconventional instruments, we risk missing the full picture and making skewed conclusions that could play into Moscow's hands. For instance, although operations in Crimea mostly involved information and psychological warfare tools, we should not neglect the role of special forces, auxiliary fighters and the threat to deploy more military force to support them (*ibid.*: 11). This is why they encourage scholars to close a research gap on the study of Russia's (non-)military intentions towards external actors: in this sense, by focusing on the role and the effects of disinformation operations in Ukraine from 2014 onwards, my analysis can contribute to shed a light on the causes behind the ongoing war and the unfolding of the full-scale

invasion.

On this note, I want to elaborate on Gen. Philip Breedlove's definition of Russia's operation in Ukraine as the most astounding '*blitzkrieg in the history of info warfare*' (Pomerantsev, 2014). From this perspective, I want to highlight the unicity of the ongoing conflict in terms of resource mobilisation and the spread of narratives through traditional news outlets and social media around the Kremlin's *Greater Novorossiya* project which, until its abandonment in 2015 (Kolesnikov, 2015), foresaw the recovery of today's Southern Ukraine from Odessa to the Donbas, once under Russian Empire's domination (Basora and Fisher, 2014). This approach is innovative compared to the history of conventional warfare and will arguably become the rule in today's digitalised and interconnected world. Furthermore, my analysis wants to underline the centrality of citizens, who become the curators of disinformation within the framework of state-sponsored propaganda (Golovchenko et al., 2018) and, therefore, the peculiarity of the ongoing war for occurring on three fronts: military confrontation on the battleground, interstate diplomacy and the information space.

From a terminological viewpoint, I find the position expressed by US researchers from the National Endowment of Democracy (DEM) worth considering. Cardenal et al. (2017) address Moscow's capability to manipulate the information space as 'sharp power', defining it as the ability to exert influence which '*pierces, penetrates, or perforates the political and information environments in the targeted countries*'. Its coercive nature is more suitable for the case at study compared to Joseph Nye's 'soft power' (1990), which foresees the fulfilment of a certain objective through attraction (Bechis, 2021). Besides that, 'sharp power' seems an appropriate revival of the Soviet 'active measures' or, in Kennan's words, 'measures short of war' tasked with annihilating the opponent's resistance by means of covert operations in, *inter alia*, the information domain (*ibid.*).

With my dissertation, I would also like to contribute to the relevant literature by looking at how disinformation is enacted in the Russo-

Ukrainian war. In this regard, I reiterate Al-Rodhan's (2017) argument that '*a future in which scientific facts are repudiated cannot be anything but insecure*'. Pursuing *veritas* and facts is not only indispensable for political decision-making and the safeguard of democracy, but first and foremost for human progress (Pazzanese, 2017). My dissertation wants to give relevance to this field by reflecting upon how Moscow's perpetuation of post-truth politics has hindered not only Ukraine's sovereignty in Crimea and Donbas, but also the integrity of the Ukrainian people through war crimes and crimes of aggression against it. For this reason, arguments like Levinson's (2015) that Moscow's disinformation merely wants to '*distort information flows and fuel nervousness among European audiences*' provide the observer with a partial (and outdated) picture of the ongoing aggression. While it might have offered a credible snapshot of the nature of information operations in the early stages of Eastern Ukraine's occupation, such an understanding needs to be revisited in light of the appalling developments on the battlefield and in the diplomatic exchanges from 24 February 2022 onwards.

5. Responses to disinformation: searching for ideal solutions

Scholars distinguish between hard and soft approaches to stem disinformation's flow (Giusti and Piras, 2021). The former comprise legislating news media and moderating online content (Fioriglio, 2019), while the latter range from debunking to media literacy education (Friesem, 2019). Other plausible remedies include fake news' verification through machine learning (Vosoughi, Mohsenvand and Roy, 2017) and real-time fact-checking (Sethi, 2017). Since false information spreads quicker than authentic information (Vosoughi, Roy and Aral, 2018), I welcome "pre-bunking" solutions to prevent narratives from inoculating in people's minds (van der Linden et al. 2017). One example was given by the US National Security Agency when, leading towards the 2020 Presidential Elections, threatened to shut down the Internet Research Agency in St. Petersburg to deter it from spreading disinformation (Interview 4, 2023). Conversely, debunking cannot deal

with today's flow of false content (Lewandowsky, Ecker and Cook, 2017) because, according to an old proverb wrongfully attributed to Mark Twain (Chokshi, 2017), *'a lie is halfway round the world before the truth has got its boots on'*.

I support Giusti and Piras's call (2021) to fill a legislative gap to turn mainstream social media companies into surveillance entities without institutional checks on their activity, thereby averting censorship and safeguarding freedoms of speech and press. The avoidance of their disproportionate restriction while tackling fake news is considered the crucial challenge in the European information space (Pollicino, 2019). Nevertheless, these solutions should be complemented by media literacy programmes involving all education levels and vulnerable individuals (Giusti and Piras, 2021). These modules, rather than being exclusively focused on Russia, should stress the need for competent authorities to comprehensively address the phenomenon (Comai, 2021). We need to complement the issue's diagnosis with treatments addressing the ultimate disease (Tufekci, 2018). In addition, competent authorities should revamp the work of fact-checking agencies/task forces. At EU level, this role is played by European External Action Service's East StratCom Task Force alongside European Parliament's Disinformation Unit (Roozenbeek and van der Linden, 2019).

Disinformation can be neutralised through a robust approach which focuses on it at the campaign level and problematizes content based on its strategic intent. Information operations deserve cross-disciplinary treatment to grasp their emerging characteristics in today's technologically mediated world (Starbird et al., 2019). Criley and Chaterje-Doody (2018) propose a poststructuralist approach helping both insiders and the public recognise how concepts and practices turn into 'common sense' knowledge. Poststructuralism leads relevant actors to elaborate effective responses by examining *'how certain representations underlie the production of knowledge and identities and how these representations make various courses of action possible'* (Doty, 1996).

These pillars can lay solid foundations for NATO and EU's action. Considering information attacks' scale and Moscow's identification as a common enemy, Waltzman's argument (2017) that defence strategies should be devised on a country-by-country basis reflecting cultural and historical specificities is untenable; on the contrary, the conflict should be read as a wake-up call to undertake multilateral initiatives. For EU Member States, such a coming-together may encourage them to commit to a more resilient common security and defence policy. On the other hand, it should push EU institutions to further regulate disinformation following their initiatives vis-à-vis, for instance, the 2015 migration crisis, Brexit and the COVID-19 pandemic (Giusti and Piras, 2021), thus building a solid legislative corpus upon the 2018 Action Plan Against Disinformation (European Commission, 2018c). Concerted efforts to avert disinformation can push NATO's evolution from a mere military defence organization to an actor countering contemporary sophisticated threats. Any coordination effort, however, will be groundless if Western actors do not follow UK Minister of State for Security Tom Tugendhat's call for '*a definition of Russian warfare in all its complexity and sophistication*' (Seely, 2018).

Conclusions

The expression 'firehose of falsehood' encapsulates the disruptive character of Russian disinformation in Ukraine and the wide array of instruments to spread it, where social media's potential marks an added value to the efforts of traditional outlets. Building on the Soviet 'active measures' doctrine, Moscow's approach insists on exaggeration and emotionality to, on the one hand, work on the information-psychology nexus by making its false narratives credible and, on the other hand, exacerbate existing societal divisions and deception towards Western democratic values.

'Hybrid warfare' has turned into a fashionable expression to refer to the Kremlin's non-military operations; however, it should be cautiously applied to the case of Ukraine's aggression. In fact, notwithstanding the increasing relevance of unconventional warfare means in contemporary

conflicts in line with the Gerasimov doctrine, conventional ones still come into play. Lastly, Russia has turned information warfare into a perpetual condition to distort the reality on the battlefield and penetrate targeted countries' political and information environments. To counter the exercise of such form of 'sharp power', states should join efforts at supranational level by integrating short-term (debunking and pre-bunking) and long-term responses (enhancing media literacy).

***Russia's military and information operations
around and after Crimea's occupation take the
West by surprise***

'To make the truth more plausible, it's absolutely necessary to mix a bit of falsehood with it. People have always done so.' [‘Чтобы сделать правду правдоподобнее, нужно непременно подмешать к ней лжи. Люви всегда мак и посмупали.’] (Fyodor Mikhailovich Dostoevsky, ‘Demons’)

Introduction

The events between February and March 2014 marked a formidable success for Russia, which waged the occupation and annexation of Crimea without suffering any casualties and colouring the Ukrainian (and Euro-Atlantic) information space. Notwithstanding the worrisome escalation of events leading up to the military operation's unleash, from the failed signature of the Deep and Comprehensive Free Trade Agreement between Brussels and Kyiv to the ensuing Euromaidan protests, the Kremlin's operation caught the Western world by surprise: neither did Euro-Atlantic states quickly respond to military hostilities' breakout, nor did they safeguard their information ecosystems against the spread of false narratives crediting Vladimir Putin's geopolitical ambitions.

As a result, Moscow could set in motion the active measures

playbook inherited from the Soviet era and replicate (if not topple) the success experienced in the early stages of the 2008 Russo-Georgian War. During 2014 and the following years, the Russian disinformation machinery took advantage of the West's regulatory and operational stalemate to give momentum to a wide range of false narratives which were detrimental for the Ukrainian state, its population, the EU and NATO. More precisely, amongst the most resonant ones we find: the alleged legitimacy of Crimea's annexation referendum building on the territory's historical Russian legacy; the need to free Ukraine from a 'regime of Nazis' who took power through a 'coup' backed by Western powers and undermine the integrity of the ethnic Russian community; the alleged downing of the Malaysia Airlines MH17 flight by a Ukrainian missile; the aggression Russia is allegedly suffering from NATO and EU's Eastern enlargement.

What complicated the response to the spread of these narratives was their restless repetition by changing the version of the facts, thus making them credible and difficult to debunk. As a consequence, they made their way through the disinformation prism starting from the Kremlin's official channels, being processed through state media outlets and being emotionally received by individuals on social media platforms, with the end result of making them question the democracy- and rule of law-oriented Western values and their countries' support to the Ukrainian cause while convincing them about the authenticity of Kremlin's official version of the events.

Background

In late 2013, while the Euromaidan Revolution was unfolding, Russia launched a massive and propagandistic information attack to discredit Ukraine and Western democracies with repetitive narratives through manifold state-controlled channels (Burkovskiy, 2017). Such operations were aimed at deepening the divide within the Ukrainian population and amongst NATO allies; justifying Crimea's occupation (lately annexation) while denying military involvement in Donbas; changing the newly appointed government after Yanukovich's ousting; keeping domestic

social unrest at bay and preserving President Putin's popularity (NGO Interviews Ukraine, 2017). In parallel, demonstrations triggered the need to launch a military operation in Putin's mind: to justify it in the population's eyes, Russian state media committed themselves to psychologically prepare it between late 2013 and early 2014 (Interview 5, 2023).

Rather than persuading audiences about the validity of its arguments, Moscow's ultimate objective was to instil confusion (Interview 3, 2023) by making them 'Question More', as underlined by *RT's* tagline. To boost its information operations, in late 2014, *RT* increased its annual budget of over \$300 million by 41% to incorporate German- and French-language accounts within its communication network. This move went hand in hand with rising recourse to social media to weaponize information, with the simultaneous effect of exploiting weak spots in Western democratic frameworks and eroding trust in traditional mass media and investigative journalism (StopFake.org, 2014).

What made Russian fake news so credible was the combination of fiction and facts, which were mostly added as background details to give news a realistic character. While Soviet 'active measures' consisted of objective information by 95% (Sodatov, 2011), nowadays Moscow's propaganda machine creates more fake connections to display its stories in the media landscape (Fedchenko, 2016). In Ukraine, Russia has acted along five lines (dismiss, distort, distract, dismay and divide) to blame Western countries for the crisis's breakout (Collab, 2019). Through dismissal, Moscow tried to denigrate the individuals making accusations, criticise their messaging form and dismiss their content. For instance, on 25 September 2014, once former NATO HQ deputy spokesman Lieutenant-Colonel Jay Janzen emailed *Reuters* about Russian troops' significant presence in Ukraine (The Moscow Times, 2014), Russian Defence Ministry Spokesman Igor Konashenkov called him a 'clerk' willing to gain notoriety during NATO staff rotations (Cepolicy, n.d.).

Then comes distortion, i.e. altering data to match the narrative being spread. An example concerns then-Deputy Defence Minister Anatoly Antonov who, in April 2015, warned about Poland's creation of 30,000-troop rapid-response units, thus ignoring NATO Secretary-General Jens Stoltenberg's announcement about the Alliance's increase of its rapid-reaction forces to that threshold and the fact that the designated forces remain in the country of origin, unless they are solicited for exercises (*ibid.*). Distraction, instead, aims at sowing doubt and drifting attention away from Russia's actions to cast responsibility on other actors. As explained below, this was the case for the suggestion that MH17 flight's downing had been caused by a Ukrainian missile, or its association with the previously disappeared MH370 flight claiming that the accident had been staged (*ibid.*).

The Kremlin disinformation machine propagated dismay by discouraging states/international organisations from planning actions against Russia which might be detrimental to them. This aspect was strictly related to NATO's military build-up along the Eastern Flank, with Moscow recurring to 'nuclear escalation' discourse in reaction to Denmark's plans to place a ballistic missile defence radar (Defence News, 2016), as well as EU's and US' imposition of sanctions due to Crimea's annexation and encroachment of Ukraine's territorial integrity (Cepolicy, n.d.). Finally, the exacerbation of societal divisions was the desired aim of Moscow's disinformation campaigns, and acted as the *fil rouge* linking the other four 'Ds' since they were all used with that purpose.

In parallel, as brilliantly put by Pomerantsev (2015), not only did waves of disinformation sow confusion among Western democracies, but first and foremost exacerbated division within the Ukrainian population to psychologically destabilize the country, thus portraying it as a 'failed state' not worth receiving international support (Fedchenko, 2016). The following narratives concerning 2014 events marked four crucial instances where the Russian disinformation playbook fulfilled these objectives.

Main false narratives

1. *The Crimean referendum: seceding from Kyiv's 'oppressive regime' to move back to the peninsula's 'native shores'*

The weeks around the 16 March 2014 referendum, where the Crimean population almost unanimously (95.32%) voted to secede from Ukraine and paved the way for annexation to Russia, were characterised by accusations of violating international law and revindications of the vote's legitimacy on historical and cultural grounds. The latter were central in Putin's 18 March address, which labelled Crimea as 'an inseparable part of Russia' based on 'truth and justice', 'shared history and pride' and the Tatar minority returning 'to their homeland' after Communist Party Head Nikita Khrushchev's cession of the peninsula 'in clear violation of the constitutional norms' (President of Russia, 2014a). After the vote, pro-Kremlin articles stressed Russia-Crimea historical and cultural linkages, complemented by heated debates about whether Moscow had committed military aggression or Crimeans self-determined to secede from Kyiv's 'repressive regime'. To justify this narrative, Kremlin-owned media referred to decisions such as the arbitrary reduction of Russians citizens' presence in Ukraine (TASS, 2014a).

In 2015, *Russia Insider* (2015), building on a TASS article (2015b), quoted Kremlin Spokesman Dmitri Peskov pointing out the inappropriateness of the word 'annexation' because of the voluntary nature of 'Crimea's reunification with Russia' and referendum's legitimate operationalization by the peninsula's legislative authority, which Kyiv never recognised. In November, a Russian Facebook user, in reaction to former US President Barack Obama's recalling of Crimea's annexation, hinted at statements by Ukraine's commander-in-chief, OSCE observers and German authorities which would corroborate the thesis that Russian troops never launched a military operation in Eastern Ukraine. Hence, the hostilities that continue to claim thousands of victims would be diminished to an 'invention of US mainstream media'.

12 novembre 2015 · 🌐

...

"Amazingly, Obama claimed the military intervention prevented a slaughter. Actually, it's estimated that 30,000 Libyans were killed by NATO and its rebels."
"Then he recalled Russia's annexation of Crimea, pointing out Russian aggression in eastern Ukraine. Even Commander-in-Chief of the Armed Forces of Ukraine General Viktor Muzhenko stated they have no evidence of Russian troops on Ukrainian soil. French Intelligence and the OSCE observers claimed the same. German Authorities revealed that the 'Russian invasion' issue was an invention of U.S. mainstream media. Yet still some idiots yack about it – the Stoooge-in-Chief along with them. Why does a referendum stir up plenty of bile to Obama? Were the Crimeans to use firebombs and batons, like the neo-Nazis in Kiev, to please him?"

TVOINNEWS.COM

The Stoooge and the Statesman - Christian B. Malaparte

When he rose to power, Russia was falling apart after the disastrous policies of the soaked-pu...

👍 50

Commenti: 5 Condivisioni: 6

Source: Facebook

In January 2016, *Ukraina.ru* amounted to report that former Ukrainian president Leonid Kravchuk had dismissed the chance to have a 'Ukrainian Crimea' as unreal (EUvsDisinfo, 2016a). Actually, he stated that it would be impossible for Crimea to revert to Ukraine under its previous status and that wider autonomy would have to be granted (StopFake.org, 2016a). In March, in line with the previously mentioned comments by Spokesman Peskov, YouTube channel *Voskresnyi vecher s Vladimirom Solovyovym* argued in a video that Russia's seizure of the Crimean Peninsula did not exhaust international law's definition of 'annexation' or 'aggression', thus ignoring the authoritative 1974 UNGA Resolution 3314 (EUvsDisinfo, 2016c). On the same day, another pro-Russian channel called *Dimitriy Kiselyev Vesti nedeli* echoed the narrative that Moscow saved Crimea and Sevastopol from hostilities, and argued that the peninsula's economy was flourishing again thanks to Russian subsidies (EUvsDisinfo, 2016d). These statements clearly ran counter to the real state of affairs, with social unrest escalating into separatist insurgencies in Donbas (Kirby, 2015) and the Crimean population suffering from energy shortages and rising costs of food and

basic services (EUvsDisinfo, 2016d).

In late 2016, a Russian-sympathising Facebook page provided another instance of how repetition makes disinformation effective, as its post justified the vote's legitimacy by, first, establishing a cause-effect relationship between the alleged government coup in Kyiv after the Euromaidan protests and the referendum and, secondly, recalling the gift made by then-CPSU Secretary-General Khrushchev in 1954.

29 settembre 2016 · Segui

Crimea is Russia - deal with it! (This was not shown on Western TV channels.)

In March 2014, following a violent government coup in Kiev, Crimeans voted with an overwhelming majority for independence from the Ukrainian state. 84% of Crimeans as whole turned up to vote in the referendum, with 97% in favour of unification with the Russian Federation. In Sevastopol, a city with a longstanding history of Russian military battles and victories, had a 90% turnout, and also voted 97% in favour.

Crimea was initially gifted to the Ukraine in 1954 by Soviet leader Nikita Khrushchev, who did not have sufficient quorum members in the Supreme Soviet (USSR parliament) for the decision to be voted on legitimately. But Khrushchev was an ethnic Ukrainian and gifted the Crimea to the Ukraine by decree. Admittedly, Khrushchev couldn't have foreseen that one day the Soviet Union may not be one unified territory. He could not have foreseen that the US would carry out a government coup in what was Russia's closest ally, and in this way - the historic Russian naval city, Sevastopol, may end up in NATO disposition. It is difficult to guess the reasoning of the White House to think they could pull this off - as it is more likely that Russians would go to war for Sevastopol, than ever see it under NATO or US control. However, no blood was spilled this time and the Crimea made a quick, painless transition into Russia.

The majority of Crimeans today identify as ethnic Russians - the complete opposite to the words of Mr McCain.

Accusations of "annexation" quickly replaced principles of legal rights to self-determination in Western media. The right to decide which country your geographical area belongs to is enshrined in the UN Charter and other instruments of international law. Putin talked about this in some detail at the Valdai Discussion Club 2015 (in my video list under "The bear does not ask permission" - <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=yrolg...>)

In this outtake of 9th May, Victory Day parade in Sevastopol (2014) - it becomes starkly evident that Fascism was not fully eradicated in WWII - the parasite simply changed continents.

0:00 / 11:40

215 Comments: 21 Condivisioni: 63

Mi piace Commenta Condividi

Source: Facebook

In a service aired on 10 January 2017, *Rossiya 24* revived the line of argument according to which the annexation prevented Crimean residents from being involved in a civil conflict. However, by the time the

referendum took place, hostilities had already broken out between Ukraine and Russia, with the latter's forces occupying territories under Kyiv's sovereignty at the latest on 26 February 2014 (EUvsDisinfo, 2017a). In 2018, the Russian Foreign Ministry came back on the peninsula's historical background to lay claim to it relying on Empress Catherine the Great's Manifesto on Crimea's accession to the Russian Empire. In such instance, disinformation took a more serious tone, as the narrative came from Kremlin's official channels, which deliberately omitted three crucial events: Crimean Tatars' declaration of an independent democratic republic after World War I (EUvsDisinfo, 2018b), Crimea's reorganisation into an Autonomous Soviet Socialist Republic in 1921 (Encyclopaedia Britannica, n.d.) and the previously recalled transfer to Ukraine in 1954 (Encyclopaedia Britannica, n.d.).

In 2019, whataboutism reached Moscow's official channels, with the MFA putting the referendum for Crimea's annexation on the same level as the 2009 one making the island of Mayotte a Department of France, even though in the latter case no military use of force was involved.



Source: Twitter

Less than two months later, a tweet from the Russian Mission to the OSCE celebrating Yalta's 181st birthday as Russian city caused a quarrel between two users. One recalled that, since Russia was born in 1991 and, by then, Crimea was under Ukraine's sovereignty, Moscow could



not define the city as Russian. The other, instead, sided with the Mission's statement, counter-arguing that, based on 'self-determination', the peninsula had fallen back under Moscow's sovereignty with a 'democratic referendum'.

 **Russian Mission OSCE**  @RF_OSCE · 10 ago 2019

On 10 Aug 2019, the Russian city of Yalta celebrates its 181st birthday. There, in February 1945, the Yalta Conference was held, where the leaders of [#USSR](#), [#USA](#) and [#GreatBritain](#) defined the postwar world order. We congratulate all Yalta residents on the holiday!



МИД России  e altri 4

 4  31  43 

· 10 ago 2019

Yalta is NOT Russian city. Russia occupied Ukrainian Yalta in 2014. Russian Mission OSCE just stop lying please.

 1   4 



· 11 ago 2019

Really? So today's Russia was established in 1991 also. Because RSFSR wasn't Russia. Russian Empire wasn't Russia. Yalta is Ukrainian city due to 1991 international documents and nobody cancelled them. Learn history you kremlin troll.

 1   1 

11 ago 2019

You should learn the history instead. Yalta was a Russian city (which is never Ukrainian) as part of Ukraine from 1991 to 2014. In 2014, Yalta, as part of Crimea, was returned to Russia through a democratic referendum.

 1   1 

11 ago 2019

Again? Since 1991 Crimea is part Ukraine documented. Russia annexed part of Ukraine and broke all international laws ever. No even one country in this world got this annexing, Russia under international sanctions since 2014. So?

 2   1 

Russia did not annex Crimea. Crimea was returned to Russia through a referendum. After the coup d'état in Kiev organized by NATO to overthrow an elected government, Crimean people voted to separate from Ukraine. This is self-determination, not annexation.

[Traduci il Tweet](#)

4:06 AM · 11 ago 2019



Source: Twitter

Crimea's status became an issue of debate again in 2021, when *The Cradle Media* shared an article about Russian tanks moving towards Ukraine (Durdin, 2021) in reaction to a decree which Kyiv had allegedly issued to 'invade' the peninsula despite being an integral part of the country, notwithstanding false follow-up comments by some (even verified) accounts continuing to stress the centuries-old *lien* between Simferopol and Moscow, uphold the outcome of the 2014 popular consultation and Kremlin's duty to protect its local troops and population after the 'coup' deposing Yanukovich.



Sharmine Narwani 
@snarwani

...

In case anyone is wondering why Russian tanks are heading to the border with Ukraine, it is because the Ukrainian president just issued a decree to invade Crimea. Know this before western media makes this out to be a Russian act of aggression.

zerohedge.com/geopolitical/r...

[Traduci il Tweet](#)

2:34 PM · 2 apr 2021

847 Retweet | 461 citazioni | 1.493 Mi piace | 87 segnalibri



Crimea had a referendum, and most of its citizens decided to join Russia, it isn't annexation.

Russian soldiers showed up there because in 2014 there was a coup in Ukraine, and Russians had a military base in Crimea, they went to protect their soldiere already there.

[Traduci il Tweet](#)

5:01 PM · 2 apr 2021

1 citazione 22 Mi piace

Source: Twitter

2. *Interfering in Kyiv's domestic affairs with a mission to protect the Russian community from a Western-backed fascist regime leading Ukraine to failure*

Since Euromaidan protests' unleash, Russia's disinformation machinery branded Kyiv's government as 'hostile' and worth being overthrown. TV channels built their discourse around the term 'junta' to link Poroshenko's takeover to the Western-backed 'coup d'état' by Euromaidan protesters (NGO Interviews Ukraine, 2017). Once the new government took office, and after the Crimean referendum was held, the same channels adjusted their narrative to give emphasis to the executive's illegitimacy and insufficient power (Dutsyk, 2015) that was

driving Ukraine towards state failure.

To convey this idea, Russian media outlets added a layer of catastrophe to sensitive issues like energy shortages, higher utility tariffs (NGO Interviews Ukraine, 2017) or radical movements causing social disorder (Vinogradov, 2017) and leading to a 'third Maidan' (Shutov, 2015) or a 'nationalist revolution' (Burkovskiy, 2015). With such polarized and extremist thinking amidst Ukrainian society, Russian media and politicians called for early elections or pro-Russian forces' deployment (Burkovskiy, 2017), thus entrusting the self-proclaimed Donetsk and Luhansk Republics with rescuing the South-Eastern Ukrainian population from 'a military operation' (Sergeitsev, 2014) led by Kyiv's 'nationalistic dictatorship' (RIA Novosti, 2020).

Worse still, Kremlin-friendly public figures resorted to antisemitic rhetoric to justify 'Crimea's reunification with Russia' (Issuu, 2015) and military aggression in Donbas: in particular, *RT* editor-in-chief Margarita Simonyan mentioned episodes such as Jews' alleged persecution and the plundering of Kyiv's synagogue (NGO Interviews Ukraine, 2017), while Russia's Investigative Committee introduced expressions such as 'genocide of Russian-speaking civilians' and MFA Spokeswoman Maria Zakharova referred to 'linguistic genocide' or 'violent Ukrainianization' (Life.ru, 2017). This rhetoric was replicated by mainstream media outlets, with *TASS* (2014b) denouncing violations of Russian-speaking people's rights. Genocide-related discourse revived Moscow's argument about responsibility to protect ethnic Russians in South Ossetia and Abkhazia during the 2008 Russo-Georgian War (Interview 5, 2023).

On 18 May 2015, *Rossiya 24's* news programme *Vesti at 23:00* reported an alleged Jewish exodus from Ukraine alongside the EU being accused of neglecting neo-Nazism's propagation across the country (Fedchenko, 2016). This false report was disproven with the collaboration of the director of VAAD (Association of the Jewish Organizations and Communities of Ukraine)'s Monitoring Group of the Rights of Ethnic Minorities Vyacheslav Likhachev (StopFake.org, 2015). In December, Russian MFA Human Rights Commissioner Konstantin

Dolgov defined Ukraine a ‘firing ground of neo-Nazism’ (NTV, 2015). Together with the narrative blaming Euromaidan for economic downturn, chaos and radicalism in Ukraine (Shutov, 2015), such piece of disinformation had a three-fold effect: inviting Crimea and Donbas residents to support Russia; discrediting Ukrainians’ protests against corrupt power in Russians’ eyes; discouraging mobilizations against Putin’s regime (NGO Interviews Ukraine, 2017).

Among the YouTubers spreading the narrative about Kyiv’s alleged plans to threaten Russian minority’s existence, Georgiy Kotenok’s claims were confuted by then-OSCE High Commissioner on National Minorities Astrid Thors (EUvsDisinfo, 2016b), who recalled Kyiv’s commitment to comply with European standards of minority rights (OSCE High Commissioner on National Minorities, 2016). Despite being debunked several times, the false narrative continued to catch on news outlets like *Russkaya Pravda* (2017), which groundlessly considered Ukraine’s neo-Nazi nature the result of US- and George Soros-backed colour revolutions, especially taking into account the scarce appeal of far-right parties/movements like *Right Sector* in the country (1.8% at the 2014 parliamentary elections) (EUvsDisinfo, 2017c).

On 28 September 2017, the Ukrainian Parliament reformed the educational system, making Ukrainian the official language and guaranteeing national minorities’ nursery and primary education in their own language from 2018. In secondary schools, some subjects could be taught in EU languages, with vocabulary additions from minority language for technical subjects like mathematics (Ukrainian Foreign Ministry, 2017). The Kremlin deemed the reform discriminatory towards the Russian-speaking population, especially concerning education from the secondary level upwards (TASS, 2017b).

Later that year, mainstream media articles (RIA Novosti, 2017; TASS, 2017a) reported Putin’s commitment to stop what would amount to a genocide of the scale of Srebrenica, having allegedly caused around 10,000 victims by the end of 2017 notwithstanding the absolute absence of evidence of a threat in that regard (EUvsDisinfo, 2017e). This narrative

kept momentum even after the Ukrainian *Verkhovna Rada* adopted a bill on the 'Reintegration of Donbas' on 18 January 2018 (RFE/RL's Ukrainian Service, 2018) which would legalize a genocide against its own citizens (Petr Tolstoy Vremya Pokazhet, 2018) despite not meeting UN's definition (EUvsDisinfo, 2018a). In June, *TV Zvezda* added insult to injury by speaking about the presence of 'Nazi zombies' among Ukrainian troops fighting in Donbas (*ibid.*).

The 2019 presidential elections saw the Jewish-originating Volodymyr Zelensky obtaining a landslide victory as far-right candidates got derisory percentages of the votes cast. Rather than convincing Moscow's propaganda machine to drop Nazi-related rhetoric, Zelensky's election did not prevent Kremlin officials from continuing to depict Kyiv's government as nostalgic of Banderite nationalism, or as a 'vassal' regime of the forces behind the alleged coup in February 2014. For instance, Russian Security Council's Deputy Chairman Dmitriy Medvedev (2021) indirectly criticised Zelensky as a weak and unreliable leader and accused him of cooperating with neo-Nazi groups, to the point that, once the domestic situation changed, they would 'sew a yellow star' on his back.

3. Russia is merely defending itself from NATO and EU's aggression around its neighbourhood

Since the early 2000s, Russia has felt threatened by EU and NATO's Eastern enlargement and blamed them for their 'imperialist ambitions', lamenting an encroachment of its domestic interests in the neighbourhood. Notwithstanding the illegitimacy of such claims, this was enough to amass solidarity from some fringes of the digital audience, who tried to tarnish NATO and EU's reputation for taking their intervention in Ukraine as an excuse to fulfil their alleged expansionist plans towards Eastern Europe or 'a kind of velvet aggression' (Cohen, 2014). In early 2015, President Putin called for NATO expansion's end by referring to Kyiv's army as a 'NATO legion' aiming for Russia's geopolitical containment (TASS, 2015a).

In 2016, Russian TV channels joined this disinformation campaign by spreading a wide array of anti-Western messages (NGO Interviews Ukraine, 2017): a Brussels-Washington collusion to widen their presence in Eurasia; Russia's economic growth despite sanctions; the emergence of China and alternative geopolitical realities like BRICS, the SCO and the EEU vis-à-vis the decline of Western forums and values (Eastern Partnership Civil Society Forum, 2016).

In 2017, John Mearsheimer (2014) elaborated on the military layer of the West's alleged eastward expansion by regarding Crimea's takeover as inevitable and grounded on Putin's legitimate fears that the peninsula 'would host a NATO base' and Ukraine would be 'turned into a Western bastion'. On 8 June, the *Verkhovna Rada* adopted a resolution prioritising NATO membership in Kyiv's foreign policy. In reaction to it, *Svobodnaya Pressa* published an editorial attributing the cause of Ukraine's loss of Crimea to NATO Eastern enlargement (Aksenov, 2017). The allegations met NATO's (2023b) categorical denial, as not only does enlargement not threaten Moscow's sovereignty, but first and foremost the root cause of the matter is the peninsula's annexation (EUvsDisinfo, 2017b).

Notwithstanding Ukrainian Parliament's vote in February 2019 to amend the constitution to lay the foundations for EU and NATO membership (UATV, 2019), *Rusvesna* (2019) held that the alliance would not consider admitting it in the shorter or longer haul and prefer to consolidate it as a buffer zone vis-à-vis Russia, thus ignoring the steps taken by NATO and Ukraine to strengthen bilateral relations since the 1990s (EUvsDisinfo, 2019c). *RT* (2019) reformulated the narrative to define Ukraine's policy as veiled 'Russophobia' within NATO's expansionism although, throughout its existence, the country had sporadically framed its foreign policy in unequivocally pro-Western terms (EUvsDisinfo, 2019f).

Pro-Russian media outlets also touched upon the Eastern Partnership, the EU's project to enhance cooperation with Ukraine, Azerbaijan, Armenia, Belarus (who suspended its participation in 2021),

Georgia and Moldova. *Ukraina.ru* (Kovalevich, 2019) dubbed it a 'Russophobic organisation' to provoke Moscow, an aggressing initiative causing hostilities in Donbas, or an expedient to turn post-Soviet states into colonies through economic ties. These assertions did not consider that countries joined the Eastern Partnership to bring forward economic and political reforms while independently choosing their trade counterparts (even Russia) or organisations (see the EEU), and that the framework acts as a 'democratic, economic and educational platform' for partners (EUvsDisinfo, 2019b).

A conspiracy theory emerged about NATO leaders at the London Summit planning to target Russia's nuclear arsenal and critical infrastructure, Kaliningrad's military grouping and Saint Petersburg to make them fall under Poland's control, Belarus and finally Moscow. In the meantime, Kyiv would open its airspace and airfields to NATO forces. These allegations ran counter to the Alliance's defensive nature (EUvsDisinfo, 2019g) and added up to a chain of theories concerning a NATO 'Barbarossa plan' to attack Russia (EUvsDisinfo, 2018f), plans to target Moscow from Belarus (EUvsDisinfo, 2019d) or military build-up for nuclear conflict (EUvsDisinfo, 2019e). Meanwhile, the EU was equalled to Hitler's 'New Europe' concept for contributing to Russia's 'dismemberment' and demotion to raw materials supplier for Western enterprises (EUvsDisinfo, 2020a).

Another disinformation thread came from the association of NATO military exercises with presumed attempts to encircle Moscow. One example was *Sea Breeze* being deemed to exacerbate Black Sea states' militarisation (Armenia Sputnik, 2020), although it allows Allied states to join capabilities to safeguard maritime regional security (EUvsDisinfo, 2020c). Another instance concerned NATO-Ukraine joint exercises allegedly aiming at drawing a tense zone around Sevastopol's Black Sea Fleet as part of a systematic military build-up in the region (Lukasheva, 2020). However, their purpose was assisting Kyiv in bolstering its naval infrastructure (EUvsDisinfo, 2020d).

In mid-2021, President Putin turned down rapprochement

perspectives with the West due to EU's unwillingness to commit to the 'Greater Europe' project while opting for an approach based on NATO expansion, the alliance being defined a 'relic of Cold War'.



Source: Twitter

Disinformation intensified before the unfolding of the full-scale invasion in February 2022, with NATO exercises being read as violations of Western guarantees to the USSR about the lack of further expansion (Nurieva, 2021). Still, as confirmed by the late Mikhail Gorbachev (Korshunov, 2014), that topic had never been debated with US and European counterparts before or after USSR's collapse (EUvsDisinfo, 2021b). Interestingly, in mid-December, Russia's MFA launched a questionable call for dialogue with Western countries concerning security guarantees in Ukraine.



Source: Twitter

Less than a month before 24 February, Kremlin-owned media (RIA Novosti, 2022) depicted Ukraine as NATO and US's 'toy' to exercise geopolitical pressure on Russia (RT, 2022a) and that its cause was no longer relevant to them, even though EU restrictive measures for violations of Kyiv's sovereignty and territorial integrity since 2014 suggest otherwise (EUvsDisinfo, 2022a).

4. MH17 flight's downing by a Ukrainian missile followed by biased investigations and trial

Since the Malaysia Airlines MH17 flight was downed on 17 July 2014, causing the worst disaster for a civilian aircraft with 298 victims, disinformation was spread concerning the perpetrators, the composition of the joint investigation team and the way the trial was conducted. The crash was instrumentalised to accuse the EU of taking it as an opportunity to double down on economic sanctions against the Kremlin (RT, 2014). After investigations were opened, Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov (Sputnik News, 2014) lamented alleged violations of international aviation rules.



Source: Twitter

As investigations got underway, Russian-friendly blogs (Helmer, 2015) concluded that Australian detective Andrew Donoghue had found that a Ukrainian BUK downed the aircraft while the joint investigation team was far from closing its probe (EUvsDisinfo, 2015). Expressions like 'Dutch investigation' or 'Dutch probe' started to circulate as veiled 'Russophobia' or ways for Russia to not identify itself with a 'biased' investigation. This reflects the position of *Sputnik News* (2016) when it shared Russian Defence Ministry's view that the probe relied on open-source and Ukrainian intelligence.

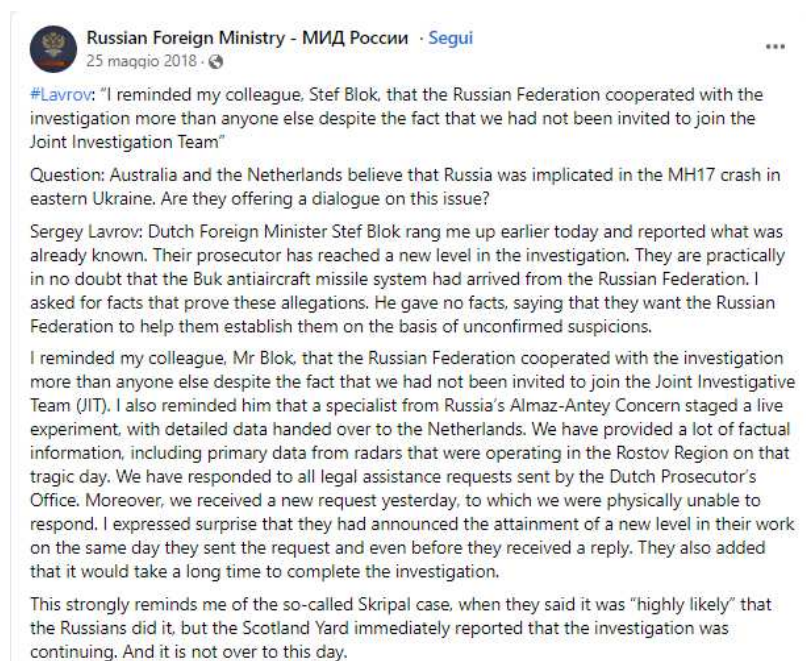
On 28 September 2016, Russian MFA Spokeswoman Zakharova expressed disappointment with the investigation's 'biased and politically motivated' findings that a Russian-made missile had hit the aircraft, stating that '*to arbitrarily designate a guilty party and dream up to the desired results*' turned into the rule for Moscow's '*Western colleagues*' (Euronews, 2016). She also hinted at the omission of Kremlin's 'incontestable evidence' about Kyiv's involvement (RT, 2016) and the fact that Russia was barred from joining the proceedings (Dearden, 2016).

Although the probe was concluded, clarifying that the flight had been shot down by a 9M38 missile launched by a BUK-TELAR brought in Moscow-occupied territories from Russia (EUvsDisinfo, 2017d), TV channels aired unreliable eyewitness accounts to manipulate the story behind MH17's downing. For instance, *Ren.tv* (2017) spread the version of a former Ukrainian army major who reported that the missile had been transported *ex post facto* by a Ukrainian military convoy.

On 24 May 2018, investigators concluded that the missile had originated from the 53rd Anti-Aircraft Missile Brigade from Kursk (EUvsDisinfo, 2018c). Such evidence, however, was denied by outlets

like *Sputnik* (2018), which viewed the probe's release as an opportunity to portray Putin as a 'demon' in light of the 2014 NATO Summit in Wales. To Russian narratives' detriment, *Bellingcat's* open-source investigation (2018) clarified the identity of a potential perpetrator, Oleg Ivannikov, who was acting undercover as an officer of the Main Directorate of Russian MoD's General Staff to supervise separatist and Wagner troops in the Luhansk People's Republic.

Foreign Minister Lavrov and Spokeswoman Zakharova spoke about 'ideological bias' (TASS, 2018). The former, reporting after a summit with his Dutch counterpart Stef Blok, reminded that Russia had fully cooperated with the investigations notwithstanding their non-admission to the joint investigation team and the omission of 'factual information'. Conversely, he lamented prompt attribution of liability to Russia for the crime committed, and invited Moscow's 'partners' to avoid speculating on a grave human tragedy.



The image is a screenshot of a Facebook post from the official page of the Russian Foreign Ministry. The post is dated May 25, 2018. It features a blue header with the ministry's name in Russian and English, and a 'Segui' button. The main text of the post is a quote from Sergey Lavrov, where he reminds his Dutch colleague, Stef Blok, that Russia has cooperated with the investigation more than anyone else, despite not being invited to the Joint Investigation Team (JIT). The text continues with a question from the Netherlands regarding the MH17 crash and Lavrov's response, detailing the cooperation provided to the Dutch prosecutor's office. The post concludes with a reflection on the Skripal case, noting the discrepancy between the initial 'highly likely' Russian report and the subsequent continuation of the investigation.

 Russian Foreign Ministry - МИД России · Segui
25 maggio 2018 · 🌐

#Lavrov: "I reminded my colleague, Stef Blok, that the Russian Federation cooperated with the investigation more than anyone else despite the fact that we had not been invited to join the Joint Investigation Team"

Question: Australia and the Netherlands believe that Russia was implicated in the MH17 crash in eastern Ukraine. Are they offering a dialogue on this issue?

Sergey Lavrov: Dutch Foreign Minister Stef Blok rang me up earlier today and reported what was already known. Their prosecutor has reached a new level in the investigation. They are practically in no doubt that the Buk antiaircraft missile system had arrived from the Russian Federation. I asked for facts that prove these allegations. He gave no facts, saying that they want the Russian Federation to help them establish them on the basis of unconfirmed suspicions.

I reminded my colleague, Mr Blok, that the Russian Federation cooperated with the investigation more than anyone else despite the fact that we had not been invited to join the Joint Investigative Team (JIT). I also reminded him that a specialist from Russia's Almaz-Antey Concern staged a live experiment, with detailed data handed over to the Netherlands. We have provided a lot of factual information, including primary data from radars that were operating in the Rostov Region on that tragic day. We have responded to all legal assistance requests sent by the Dutch Prosecutor's Office. Moreover, we received a new request yesterday, to which we were physically unable to respond. I expressed surprise that they had announced the attainment of a new level in their work on the same day they sent the request and even before they received a reply. They also added that it would take a long time to complete the investigation.

This strongly reminds me of the so-called Skripal case, when they said it was "highly likely" that the Russians did it, but the Scotland Yard immediately reported that the investigation was continuing. And it is not over to this day.

It's like a déjà vu. If our partners decided to do it again and speculate on this grave human tragedy (hundreds of people died) to achieve their political aims, I'll leave this on their conscience. To quote what President Putin said yesterday at his joint press conference with President of France Emmanuel Macron, we are still ready to cooperate despite numerous questions that arise in our minds in connection with this situation. The important thing is that this cooperation should be honest and that the information and facts we provide should not be ignored or used selectively. This is probably where the whole problem lies.



91

Commenti: 9 Condivisioni: 21

Mi piace

Commenta


Condividi

Source: Facebook

In parallel, disinformation campaigns unpacked specific elements of the incident, e.g. the (non-)closure of airspace and details over the (non-)transportation of the missile from Russia into occupied territories. As for the former, *RIA Novosti* (2018) claimed that Kyiv had violated ICAO rules by not closing war-torn territories' airspace, although the MH17 flight was flying higher than the closure's altitude threshold (32,000 feet) (EUvsDisinfo, 2018d). *RT* (2018) tackled the evidence of the military convoy transporting the missile, with MoD Main Rocket and Artillery Director Mikolai Parshin pointing out that footage had been 'doctored' to show it came from Russia. This was the result of a misinterpretation of objects to show lighting issues in the investigation team's videos while the Ministry, as later clarified by *Bellingcat* founder Eliot Higgins (Unian, 2018), wrongfully took the truck's wrong direction as a sign that the truck's photograph was fake (EUvsDisinfo, 2018e).

In mid-2019, the Russian MFA reiterated the groundless and one-sided nature of the allegations, while boasting about Moscow's interest to cooperate being rejected by the court and disclosure of first-hand evidence which should have been considered. Even then-Malaysian Prime Minister accused prosecutors of lacking sufficient evidence

against Russia (ONA, 2019).

 Embassy of Russia in Australia · Segui
20 giugno 2019 · 🌐

Russian Foreign Ministry statement

The statements made by the Joint Investigation Team (#JIT) at a news conference on June 19 about the alleged involvement of Russian servicemen in the Malaysia Airlines Flight #MH17 crash were utterly regrettable. The Russian Federation once again finds itself the target of completely unfounded accusations intended to discredit it in the eyes of the international community.

As was the case at its previous news conferences, the #JIT did not produce a single shred of concrete evidence to back up its groundless statements.

The JIT continues to put forward not entirely reasonable arguments, some of which are based on dubious information sources. Meanwhile, the data submitted to the investigation by Russia continues to be willfully ignored.


Moreover, the JIT representatives accuse Russia of withholding full cooperation. We categorically deny such accusations. From the very first day of the tragedy, Russia has been vitally interested in finding the truth and willing to help the investigation in every respect. Russia actively cooperated with the Netherlands and presented all information it had on the MH17 crash. In the process, Russia's relevant agencies carried out an enormous amount of unprecedented work: from declassifying information on Russian military equipment and conducting a meticulous experiment in collaboration with Almaz-Antei, to providing primary radar data and documents showing that the missile that downed the Malaysian Boeing belonged to Ukraine, as well as precision expert analysis proving that the video clips supporting the JIT's conclusions were fabricated.

Moreover, Russia has suggested working together from the outset. Instead, international investigators excluded Russia from full participation in the JIT, reducing Russian efforts to a secondary role. Meanwhile, they made Ukraine a full participant in the JIT, giving it an opportunity to falsify evidence and completely evade responsibility for failing to close its air space.

Under the circumstances we continue to raise justified questions about the quality of the JIT's performance. All this confirms the apprehensions we voiced earlier regarding the biased, one-sided nature of the inquiry.

Nevertheless, the Russian Federation will continue assisting the investigation so that the truth about the MH17 crash is established and the real culprits are duly punished.

[Russian Foreign Ministry - МИД России](#) [Australian Government Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade](#)



👍❤️😭 80 Commenti: 21 Condivisioni: 19

👍 Mi piace 💬 Commenta ➦ Condividi

Source: Facebook

In the following months, MFA Spokeswoman Zakharova (TASS, 2019) referred to a 'pre-approved decision' by the joint investigation team, who would twist evidence incriminating Russia. Moreover, she criticised Dutch Foreign Minister Blok's demand to 'surrender', recalling Ukraine's responsibility for not closing airspace contrary to Dutch Parliament's concerns.



Source: Facebook

In February 2020, Kremlin Spokesman Peskov mentioned a leaked document of the Dutch Military Intelligence and Security Service, which found that no Buk missile systems had been deployed in the region prior to the flight's downing, as evidence that Moscow should not be held accountable (TASS, 2020). Two days before proceedings at The Hague District Court began, Russian MFA stressed the 'old magic formula' of disclosing charges relying on irrefutable but classified evidence as a sign of absence of grounds to convict Moscow. *Sputnik* described the investigation as politicised and one-sided (EUvsDisinfo, 2020b), although there would have been no legal reason to involve Russia, since the crash neither occurred on its territory, nor claimed Russian lives (Wall Street Journal, n.d.).

In July, the US-based Flight Safety Foundation started to inquire on why Kyiv had not closed the airspace over Eastern Ukraine's combat zone (Sputnik News, 2020). One year later, the Netherlands recommended it aborting the initiative to Russian Foreign Ministry's surprise and disappointment, with Zakharova viewing it as another missed opportunity to consider manifest evidence just to *'deflect blame from Kiev onto Moscow and shelter the Ukrainian authorities from any*

responsibility (TASS, 2021).

Conclusions

The main disinformation arguments around Crimea's annexation revolved around the free and fair nature of the vote, which would have fully complied with international standards and the population's right to self-determination and to voluntarily come back under the sovereignty of a state they identified themselves with. This false narrative bridges with two of the others analysed in this chapter: in this sense, the claim that the referendum came as a result of the alleged 'coup d'état' against then-President Yanukovich's 'legitimate executive authority' (Herd, 2016: 10) is linked, first, to NATO and EU's willingness to place Poroshenko's 'pro-Western puppet government', thus creating the conditions to bring Ukraine under their 'protective wing'. Secondly, the narrative is related to Moscow's entitlement to intervene against the newly settled 'Nazi junta' to protect native Russian speakers while denying military presence as part of its reflexive control strategy to, as Alexey Levinson put it, 'distort information flows' and 'fuel nervousness among European audiences'. In doing so, Moscow could keep expressing its desire to de-escalate hostilities while mounting chaos (Iasiello, 2020: 13).

Other arguments concerned Crimea's historical and cultural bond to Russia, the strong presence of ethnic Russians identifying themselves more with Moscow than Kyiv and Crimeans' alleged better living standards after the annexation, although the economy contributed to these less than prior to 2014 (Interview 3, 2023). Most relevantly, the peninsula would have 'rightfully' come back under Russian sovereignty after being 'gifted' to Ukraine by Khrushchev against constitutional rules. This is part of Putin's revisionist approach to former Soviet leaders' legacy. Nevertheless, the decision was fully compliant with the 1936 charter's provision on territorial transfers among Soviet Republics, with the Politburo and then the Supreme Soviet's praesidium acting by consensus (*ibid.*).

Poroshenko's 'Nazi' government was allegedly in place with the

West's blessing as part of its proxy war against Russia, thus becoming a Western vassal. Worse still, Ukraine would have become a failed state celebrating past far-right leaders/heroes like Stepan Bandera, whose military strength would rely on neo-Nazi corps like the Azov Battalion and would have committed crimes against the Russians in Eastern Ukraine by, for instance, preventing Russian language from being spoken. With the passing of time, though, these narratives lost relevance and credibility as Zelensky became president in April 2019. In such context, disinformation often left ground to hate speech against not only Kyiv's government, but also the whole country. Alongside antisemitism, racism, homophobia and xenophobia, this stands at the core of Kremlin's 'active measures' against Ukraine (Fedchenko, 2016).

Another fundamental feature was dehumanization, which convinced fringes of Western audience that Ukrainians were worse than they looked like, turning it into an acceptable target of Russian aggression (EUvsDisinfo, 2019a). In this respect, the use of 'genocide' acted as a trump card to justify Moscow's intervention to rescue local ethnic Russians from the allegedly destructive intentions of Ukraine's 'Nazi' or 'Banderite' executive (NGO Interviews Ukraine, 2017). Put differently, Russia depicted itself as engaged in a struggle resembling the one against Nazi Germany in World War II (Yashin and Shorina, 2015).

By contrast, disinformation on NATO and EU's 'expansionism' towards Russia's Western border remained constant. As Kyiv was allegedly becoming the 'launchpad of Western imperialism' and the North-Atlantic alliance continued its military exercises in the Black Sea, Moscow felt provoked enough to intervene to defend its neighbouring sphere of influence. Betrayal towards NATO for its broken promise to not further enlarge after the end of the Cold War dominated the Russian media landscape, even though the Soviet Union and Western democracies never reached any formal agreement on the matter. Furthermore, NATO and the EU would undergo enlargement by taking Kremlin's interferences in neighbouring states' domestic affairs as a 'pretext' for toppling democratically elected, albeit Moscow-leaning,

governments and replace them with pro-Western puppet ones. In a nutshell, the Kremlin built its disinformation campaign around US's desire for global hegemony to justify its efforts to put a geopolitical/military spoke in Washington's wheel (CEPA, 2016). Another key objective was undermining NATO and EU's solidarity towards Ukraine by exacerbating the institutions-society divide at domestic level (Herd, 2016: 10).

As for the MH17 Malaysia Airlines flight's downing, Moscow tried to cast doubt on its responsibility in the incident while exposing Kyiv as the responsible party, a consideration applicable to the whole conflict (EUvsDisinfo, 2019a). While Crimea-related narratives witnessed a steady decline of interest, the intensity of the debate around this incident fluctuated, with peaks after the crash, the investigations' closure in 2018 and the trial's start in The Hague in 2020. On those occasions, pro-Russian sources insisted on, *inter alia*, US's non-disclosure of key evidence about the incident's circumstances and the court not allowing Moscow to participate in the proceedings to confute the claims by the prosecution, whose composition was allegedly biased in Ukraine's favour.

2

Russia's 2022 disinformation playbook: antisemitic rhetoric vilifying the Ukrainian people alongside attempts to undermine Western support

'One of the chief obstacles to intelligence is credulity, and credulity could be enormously diminished by instructions as to the prevalent forms of mendacity. Credulity is a greater evil in the present day than it ever was before, because, owing to the growth of education, it is much easier than it used to be to spread misinformation, and, owing to democracy, the spread of misinformation is more important than in former times to the holders of power.' (Bertrand Russell, 'Free Thought and Official Propaganda')

Introduction

With the full-scale invasion, Russia hoped to execute the same resistance-less strategy as in Crimea eight years earlier. However, it miscalculated Ukrainian people's resistance and Western democracies' commitment to defend Kyiv's sovereignty and territorial integrity, with the effect that the plan to subjugate Ukraine in a few days capitulated. As the 'active measures' playbook seems to have grown obsolete, the historical false narratives lost traction for being easily disprovable and were replaced by others which are deplorable in nature. This was the

case for the repugnant parallel between the Nazi's Jewish solution and Kyiv's alleged ethnic Russians' genocide, as well as the portrayal of atrocities around Ukraine as false-flag attacks by Ukrainians themselves.

Over the last few months, given the unfoundedness and lost traction of such narratives, Russia has shifted to malinformation by relying upon factual trends like inflation, commodities' price increase and the cost of financing the conflict to discredit NATO and EU's efforts to support Ukraine. In parallel, Putin's inner circle is being reshuffled: in fact, when it comes to the individuals promoting Kremlin's message, historical regime figures like Patrushev, Gerasimov and Shoigu are letting other key actors (above all President's Spokesman Peskov and Foreign Ministry Spokeswoman Zakharova) go ahead. In times of change and uncertainty about the conflict's progress, it becomes demanding to strive for continuity in information operations.

Background

The invasion's lead-up was characterised by three fundamental statements by President Putin: the article on Russians and Ukrainians' historical unity on 12 July 2021, the address to the nation on 21 February 2022 and the invasion's launch three days later. The 2021 article set the stage for military intervention by invoking historical events and cultural aspects, including: the common descendance from the *Ancient Rus* state; the same language spoken and religious faith practised by people in western and eastern Russian lands; and the incorporation of Kyiv and territories on the left bank of the Dnieper River (referred to as *Malorossiya*, Little Russia) into the Russian empire in 1686 (President of Russia, 2021b). Putin then negatively portrayed the '*consolidation of Ukrainian culture, language and identity*' as '*frittering away the achievements of many generations*', and contrasted it with the 1991-2013 period, when Kyiv received \$82 billion in budget savings (*ibid.*). Due to the 2014 events, Ukraine would have become a 'springboard against Russia', turning the conflict into a 'proxy war' and tolerating the persecution of Crimean and Donbas populations by Kyiv's 'neo-Nazi' government (*ibid.*).

Over the following months, (pro-)Kremlin media outlets disseminated claims about Ukrainian armed forces preparing attacks against Russia, while accusing the West of supporting Kyiv's provocations (Buziashvili and Ponce de León, 2022). Reports referred to Ukrainian ceasefire violations, the US training extremist troops to attack Donbas, Kyiv orchestrating a chemical attack in separatist territories (*ibid.*) and Russian FSB's assumptions that the Ukrainian navy Donbas vessel approaching the Kerch Strait could threaten maritime safety (Axe, 2021), immediately rebuked as distraction tactics by the US Embassy in Kyiv.



Source: Twitter

Between January and February 2022, 190,000 Russian troops gathered along the Ukrainian border (Garamone, 2022), with NATO and the US warning about the risk of an invasion (US Department of State, 2023). This, however, did not prevent Moscow from denying the build-up (TASS, 2022a), while media outlets close to the intelligence community accused Washington of spreading 'hysteria' (News Front, 2022a) and dragging Ukraine into war (News Front, 2022b).

On 21 February 2022, Putin escalated the crisis by signing a presidential decree recognising the Donetsk and Luhansk separatist republics (Deutsche Welle, 2022). After recalling that modern Ukraine had been entirely created by Bolshevik Russia, he took a revisionist approach vis-à-vis former Soviet leaders' decisions, from Lenin's statehood project based on republics' autonomy and nationalisms' appeasement to Khrushchev surrendering Crimea in 1954 (President of Russia, 2022a). Putin then mentioned the troublesome bilateral

economic relations and energy blackmail, the 'negation of everything that united' Ukraine to Russia and state institutions' corruption. These conditions allegedly paved the way for neo-Nazism's materialisation in the February 2014 'coup', turning Ukraine into 'a colony with a puppet regime' at Western democracies' mercy (*ibid.*). Such regime would be committing a 'genocide' against 4 million Russian speakers while fuelling military confrontation vis-à-vis Moscow by creating a 'terrorist underground movement in Crimea and Donbas' and disregarding the Minsk Agreements. In parallel, Ukraine would have welcomed NATO armed forces on its territory for exercises despite contravening art. 17 of the constitution, thus giving impetus to the Alliance's 'eastward expansion' (*ibid.*).

When announcing the 'Special Military Operation' on 24 February by relying on such claims (President of Russia, 2022b), Putin criticized Western powers' 'feeling of absolute superiority' in reshaping the world order since 1991 following a 'modern absolutism' logic. Such "arrogance" would have been displayed through Belgrade's bombing, the Iraq War and the military interventions in Libya and Syria (*ibid.*). Moreover, the address criticised Western states for rejecting Russia's 'readiness to work honestly', seeking to undermine its traditional values while displaying attitudes 'contrary to human nature' on their peoples (*ibid.*).

Given Western expansionism, Russia's allegedly unsuccessful attempts to peacefully resolve hostilities in Donbas and ethnic Russians' 'genocide', Putin perceived the invasion as an inevitable step by invoking self-defence (art. 51 UN Charter) and the friendship and mutual assistance treaties with the Donetsk and Luhansk Republics. He simultaneously ordered Ukrainian military officials to not 'carry out their criminal orders' to avoid further bloodshed (President of Russia, 2022b). Conversely, this declaration laid the groundwork to the most destructive war of attrition in Europe since World War II. Operations began with the seizure of the Chernobyl nuclear power plant (Tuysuz and Qiblawi, 2022) alongside allegations about Ukraine's readiness to detonate a 'dirty nuclear bomb' (Buziashvili, 2022), building on pro-Russian military

expert Igor Nikulin's claim that Kyiv posed a nuclear, terrorist and biological threat (DFR Lab, 2020). However, unlike nuclear bombs, 'dirty' ones only imply putting radioactive materials together, do not detonate and require fewer technological and economic resources (Buziashvili, 2022).

Main false narratives

1. *Russia is defending itself in a 'proxy war' against Western states willing to subjugate Ukraine to fulfil their imperialist ambitions*

Kremlin-owned media outlets (Arkadiev, 2022; Duma TV, 2022) echoed Foreign Minister Lavrov's claim that Ukrainian President Zelensky would promote a proxy war against Moscow by trying to involve NATO, notwithstanding the Alliance's defensive nature and Putin's unprovoked launch of the invasion (EUvsDisinfo, 2022c). In late March, *RIA Novosti* journalist David Narmania (2022) conferred upon Russian soldiers a mission to avert Western worldwide hegemony and save 'the lives of peaceful Ukrainians', and made an optimistic forecast of the 'Special Military Operation'. On 21 April, Russian MFA official Alexey Polishchuk reiterated optimism about military operations, which would terminate upon removal of threats brought by Ukraine's 'colonization by NATO members' (TASS, 2022e). Matters went from bad to worse when Lavrov warned about escalating risks of nuclear conflict (Reuters, 2022a). In an interview to TASS (2022f), he echoed the narrative that Moscow aimed at eradicating 'Western neo-colonial oppression' from the world. Together with Putin's calls for denazification and de-Ukrainization, these assertions acted as smokescreens to distract the audience from Kremlin's destructive plans against Kyiv (EUvsDisinfo, 2022f).

Over the following weeks, *RIA* (2022) blamed NATO for turning Kyiv into Moscow's hostile neighbour and provoking Russia with its military build-up on Ukrainian soil. Nonetheless, NATO never attempted to make Ukraine Russophobic or favour its membership ambitions, while Russia contravened to the Founding Act on Mutual Relations, Cooperation and

Security (NATO, 1997) by attacking Ukraine under potential NATO membership's pretext (EUvsDisinfo, 2022g). Russian Security Council's Deputy Chairman Medvedev added insult to injury by interpreting Western countries' weapons supply to Ukraine as a hampering factor towards peaceful conflict resolution (TASS, 2022j), thus ignoring EU's economic and individual sanctions to discourage Moscow's hostilities (EUvsDisinfo, 2022i).

Despite allegations that the West had rejected Russia's attempts to negotiate hostilities' cessation and create a system of equal security in Europe (Kolesnikova, 2022; TASS, 2022j), those demands concealed violations of international law and Ukraine's sovereignty (EUvsDisinfo, 2022k). MFA Spokeswoman Zakharova accused the EU of planning to establish military bases in Ukraine to train 'terrorists and Nazi fighters' (Life.ru, 2022). She built on EU High Representative Borrell's proposal for a training programme for Ukrainian forces in the region (RFE/RL, 2022a), which should, however, be contextualised within Western military assistance to Kyiv to liberate occupied territories (EUvsDisinfo, 2022l).

In September, *RT* contributor Ben Norton (2022) wrote that the West would have escalated the proxy war against Russia rather than acknowledging a peace deal that Moscow and Kyiv had presumably concluded in April. From 23 to 27 September, sham referenda were held in the Donetsk, Luhansk, Kherson and Zaporizhzhia oblasts behind the shadow of Putin's address regarding them as an integral part of a necessary war to defend state sovereignty vis-à-vis Ukraine's counter-offensive (President of Russia, 2022d). All the occupied territories voted for the annexation by a landslide (Euronews, 2022c). On 30 September, Putin signed decrees branded 'accession treaties' by Kremlin sources (RFE/RL, 2022c) to desperately change the course of the conflict by warning that Ukrainian forces would be attacking Russia (EUvsDisinfo, 2022o).

In parallel, Putin and Defence Minister Shoigu's decision to mobilise 300,000 Russian reservists (Sauer, 2022) indicated the need to revamp

an unsatisfactory military campaign. To divert attention from defeats in Kharkiv and Lyman, the Kremlin pushed journalists and TV guests to implement coerced self-censorship against the ‘milbloggers’, a Telegram community of war correspondents and former proxy officials denouncing mobilisation’s logistical and communication failure vis-à-vis exaggerated expectations to win the conflict (Stepanenko and Kagan, 2022). This caused an unusual blow to Defence Ministry’s efforts to exaggerate military success (Reznikova, 2022). Criticism also aroused among the *siloviki* (powerful leaders close to Putin’s inner circle), where Chechen leader Ramzan Kadyrov, echoed by Wagner Group financier Evgeniy Prigozhin, accused Moscow’s military command of inadequately responding to the Lyman defeat and called it upon to liberate the annexed oblasts (Stepanenko et al., 2022). This generated a tit-for-tat dynamic as Kremlin-owned TV channels committed themselves to bury those vents (Solovyov Live, 2022).

Following *Nord Stream* pipelines’ and Kerch Bridge’s explosions, (pro-)Russian media revived the ‘proxy war’ rhetoric by regarding those episodes as the prelude to other attacks against critical infrastructure within the West’s alleged campaign to destroy Russia (Tsukanov, 2022). Those claims, lacking evidence about incidents’ dynamics, merely aimed at denigrating Kyiv as unable to make military progress without the West (EUvsDisinfo, 2022q).

Western support through arms supply and intelligence sharing, despite limiting itself to restore Ukrainian territorial integrity (EUvsDisinfo, 2022r), was considered an attempt to wage hybrid conflict against Moscow, using Kyiv’s government as a ‘lever’ to contain it (TASS, 2022k). In doing so, according to Professors Alfred de Zayas and Wang Yiwei, NATO would ‘add fuel to the fire’ (Sputnik News, 2022b). More worryingly, Kremlin’s disinformation machine resorted to trite allegations about Ukraine being short of building a tactical nuclear bomb (Savchuk, 2022) or a plutonium-based ‘dirty bomb’ (RT, 2022b) with the West’s collaboration (Kasatkina, 2022). Such claims, however, were dismissed by IAEA experts after inspecting the country’s facilities

(Reuters, 2022b), which were found in compliance with the nuclear-free policy under the 1994 Budapest Memorandum (EUvsDisinfo, 2022s).

In late 2022, accusations towards Ukraine for infringing the Minsk Agreements alongside calls for peace negotiations were revived. In his New Year's Eve address, besides depicting the war as an existential struggle towards 'true independence' (US Department of State, 2023), Putin accused Western states of *'lying about peace while preparing for aggression'* and *'cynically using Ukraine as a means to weaken and divide Russia'*, while Moscow's struggle should be replicated by other countries to strive for *'a just multipolar world order'* (President of Russia, 2022f).

Based on such remarks, Russia's disinformation machinery hailed 2023 as the year in which Moscow would win the conflict, clearing the way for a multipolar and more harmonious world (Starikov, 2022). Reference to 'harmony', however, contradicts Moscow's actions fuelling food and energy insecurity, namely the obstruction of Kyiv's grain exports and of oil and gas supplies towards EU member states (EUvsDisinfo, 2023a). Both the messianic struggle for multipolarity and for victory over Ukraine retraced Soviet-time rhetoric about the 'great patriotic war' against Nazi Germany to portray the conflict as existential. On 18 January, Foreign Minister Lavrov not only compared NATO and EU's mobilisation against Russia to Napoleon's and Hitler's against the Russian Empire and the USSR (Russian Foreign Ministry, 2023), but also blamed the West for using Kyiv as a proxy against Russia to solve the 'Russian question', indirectly hinting at Hitler's 'Jewish question' (US Department of State, 2023).

Although 'great patriotic war' rhetoric conceals Stalin's systematic repression of dissent, Putin used it to mobilise troops and elite support by projecting fear for the government onto an external enemy (Arutunyan, 2023). On similar terms, on 30 January, Russian Deputy Foreign Minister Ryabkov vented against US's and Germany's delivery of M1 Abrams and Leopard tanks by considering NATO committed to 'zombify' Russia's neighbouring countries with 'Russophobic horror

stories' (RIA Novosti, 2023).

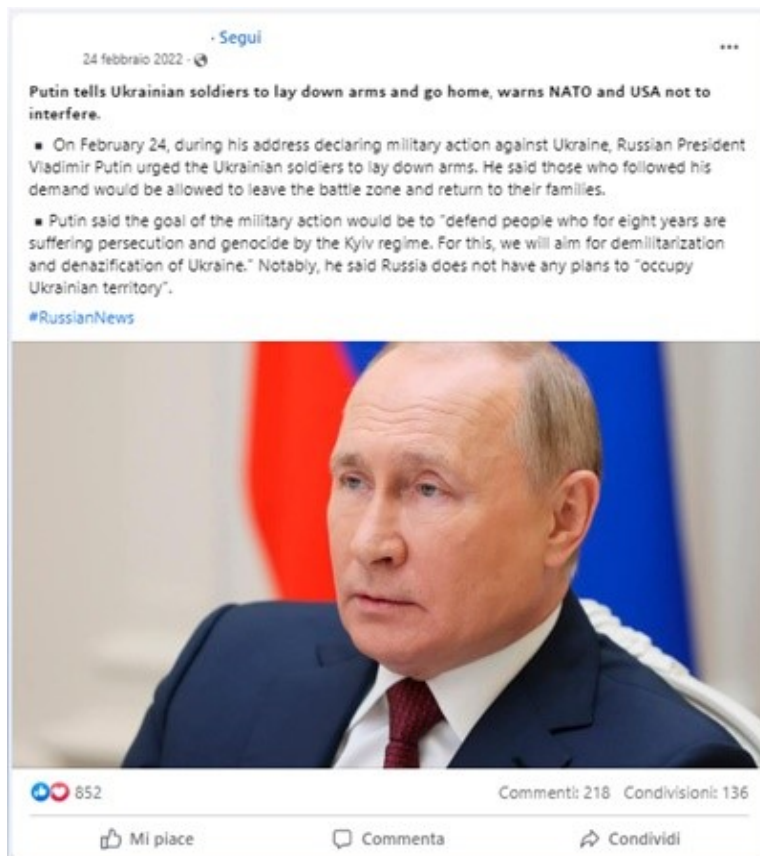
On 16 February 2023, the State Duma Committee on International Affairs declared Moscow's withdrawal from the Council of Europe's statute and the European Convention on Human Rights. As stated by Committee's Head Leonid Slutsky, the organisation's foundational principles '*began to erode in favour of the European Union and NATO*', turning it into a promoter of 'values alien to Russia' (News Front, 2023a). The following week Putin claimed that Kyiv had negotiated the delivery of heavy military equipment with the West (e.g. air-defence systems and warplanes), while NATO was settling biological laboratories and army bases along the Russian border to prepare Kyiv for an attrition war (Pincus, 2023).

2. From 'de-nazification' to 'de-satanization' of a country committing genocide against Russian speakers while pursuing the 'one nation' myth

Building on Russians' and Ukrainians' 'historical unity', Russian disinformation revived the revanchist 'all-Russian nation' ideology (Makarov, 2021) to undermine Ukraine's national identity and sovereignty. The only link between the two peoples is their belonging to the Slavic ethnolinguistic group (EUvsDisinfo, 2021a), while Russia's aim is to bring Kyiv back under its control (Gorenburg, 2019) within a mission to recover its Soviet-time 'grandeur' by subduing other states (Starodubaska, 2022: 53) and saving Russian speakers regarded as 'younger brothers' who should 'return home' (Person and McFaul, 2022).

Combined with Kyiv's alleged genocide against ethnic Russians in Donbas, as stated by Putin on 15 February (Euronews, 2022a), the one-nation myth was instrumentalised to justify a full-scale invasion to 'de-nazify' the country, i.e. execute a Stalinist-like repression of a democratically elected government (EUvsDisinfo, 2022b). To promote the 'Donbas genocide' narrative (US Department of State, 2023), Russia's military intelligence service (GRU) opened a website titled 'Tragedy of Donbas' (Harris, Parker and Nakashima, 2022). Putin's

remarks about demilitarisation and denazification from his 24 February address, where he labelled Kyiv's government 'a gang of drug addicts and neo-Nazis' (President of Russia, 2022b), were echoed by a Moscow-friendly Facebook page, while the Beijing-owned *People's Daily Online* (2022) shared Lavrov's remarks dismissing Moscow's invasion plans and declaring its readiness for negotiations.



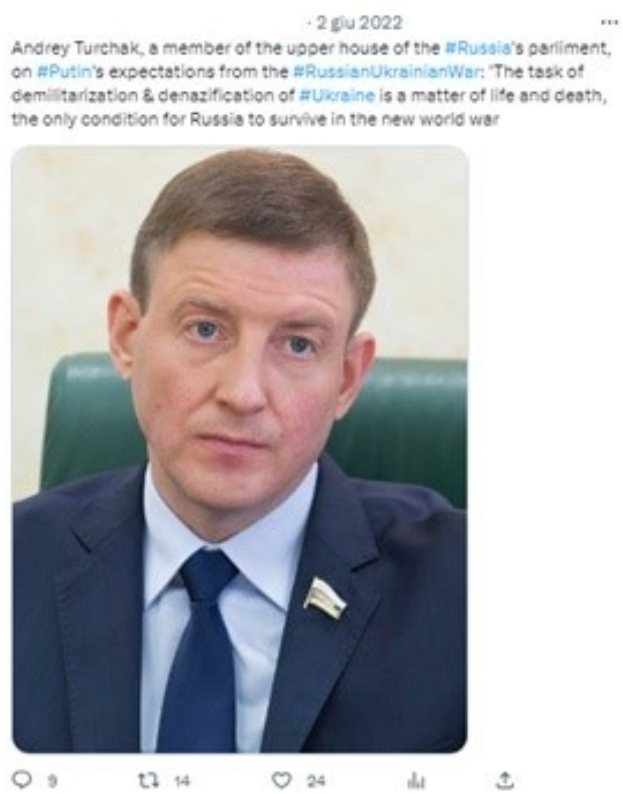
Source: Facebook

On 3 April, *RIA Novosti* columnist Timofey Sergeytsev (2022) encapsulated Russia's understanding of 'denazification' and its objectives, including the 'liquidation of armed Nazi formations', accountability of the 'Nazi regime' and its supporters for their crimes, and creating permanent denazification bodies. The author also illustrated Ukrainian Nazism's ambivalence for concealing a desire for 'independence' and Western-oriented development. Sergeytsev's analysis broadened the narrative's circle to 'deukrainisation' (carving out society's self-identification of historical territories along artificial ethnic lines), 'debanderisation' (erasing Ukraine's Nazi legacy), 'de-

Europeanisation' and 'decolonisation' (getting rid of the 'intoxication, temptation and dependence' resulting from Ukraine's Europe-oriented trajectory) (*ibid.*).

As Ukraine made progress towards EU accession, Kremlin-owned media used the 'Nazi rule' narrative to make catastrophic predictions on EU's future (Bushev, 2022), with Deputy Foreign Minister Alexander Grushko forecasting its collapse if Kyiv joined it (EA Daily, 2022). Nevertheless, Ukraine had already banned Nazi and Communist ideologies (Verkhovna Rada of Ukraine, 2015) and far-right parties had not met the 5% threshold at the latest parliamentary elections (RBC-Ukraine, 2019). These conditions helped Kyiv receive EU candidate status on 23 June (Politico, 2022).

The more the invasion evolved into a war of attrition, the more Moscow viewed it in existential terms. To drift attention away from the failed quick capitulation of Ukraine, public figures like State Duma member Turchak and MFA Spokeswoman Zakharova stressed the existential nature of Kyiv's 'denazification' and 'demilitarisation'.



Source: Twitter



Source: *Twitter*

To render ‘denazification’ existential, Moscow vilified the Ukrainian population through antisemitic rhetoric (US Department of State, 2022), albeit with a boomerang effect, as this approach built on self-contradictory claims, such as Security Council Deputy Chairman Medvedev’s assumption (2021) that Zelensky would have ‘lost’ his Jewish identity, or propagandist Vladimir Solovyov’s denial of it (Vzgliad, 2020). Interviewed by Italian TV network *Mediaset*, Foreign Minister Lavrov stated that the ‘*wise Jewish people say that the most ardent anti-Semites are usually Jews*’ (Russian Foreign Ministry, 2022a), causing the reaction of then-Israeli Foreign Minister Lapid (2022) to define such remarks as the ‘lowest level of racism’.

Holocaust distortion, however, increased as Lavrov accused Israel of supporting Kyiv’s ‘neo-Nazi regime’ (Russian Foreign Ministry, 2022b), followed by Solovyov’s assertion that Nazism would imply ‘Russophobia’ more than antisemitism (Davis, 2022). Russian intelligence-friendly sources labelled Kremlin critics ‘Hitler-like racists’ for suggesting that ethno-religious identity at birth determines one’s political orientation (One World, 2022). In June, the Federal Security Service (FSB) advocated for releasing allegations of mass killings by Ukrainians in Donbas, creating a ‘network of propagandists’ to spread them and

'anti-fascist' groups in post-Soviet states, while launching a disinformation operation about EU's declining living standards due to its support to Kyiv (US Department of State, 2022).

In September, the 'deukrainisation' mission embodied Ukrainian language's 'purification' to make it sound Russian (EUvsDisinfo, 2022n). Vladimir Gladkov (2022) reported political scientist Sergei Markov's statements distinguishing between classical and modern Ukrainian: while the former is closer to Russian, the latter would be an artificial creation with Russophobic nature which, if not eliminated, would still be taught in schools. Once formalising the annexation of the four occupied oblasts, Putin revived claims about 'genocide, shelling and blockades' against Russian-speaking people, who would have suffered from '*a criminal policy to cultivate hatred for Russia and everything Russian*' since Kyiv allegedly intended to reserve them the fate the 'colonial' West would plan for the world (President of Russia, 2022e).

As military operations were not bearing fruit, the Russian Security Council elevated 'denazification' to a spiritual dimension by referring to the need to 'desatanise' Ukraine to prevent it from becoming a 'totalitarian hypersect' repudiating values on which Orthodox, Muslim and Jewish faiths were based (TASS, 2022I). After Russian Orthodox Church's endorsement to the conflict in April (Ivanova, 2022) by blessing Moscow forces as 'the last bastion against the immoral West' (U.S. Department of State, 2023), such 'holy war' rhetoric gained traction within Kremlin's political-military leadership. Putin referred to 'the overthrow of faith and traditional values' as 'pure Satanism' while praising the four Ukrainian breakaway oblasts' annexation as a 'glorious spiritual choice' (President of Russia, 2022e). A military officer harangued a group of recruits by convincing them that they were fighting 'satanists' who insisted they should 'attend LGBT parades' (Nazaryan, 2022). Kremlin ideologue Aleksandr Dugin intervened to claim that '*Armageddon and the Apocalypse are unfolding before our eyes*' (Rothrock, 2022). Additionally, Patriarch Kirill endorsed the September military mobilisation, reassuring that reservists would be absolved for

their sacrifice (Orthodox Times, 2022) to fight a 'fratricidal holy war' (RFE/RL, 2022b).

Canadian journalist Aaron Maté tweeted how US media and Jewish communities would not comment on Washington's alleged support to neo-Nazi groups like the Azov Battalion. Another account reported Russian Presidency's statement expressing the will to purge Western influence ('the Westernist vermin') from Ukraine to stop the government's 'repression' against Russian speakers ('our precious Christian children').



Source: Twitter



Source: Twitter

In early 2023, such destruction-oriented tone was taken to the extreme amongst Russian military troops and the political sphere. In late January, Ukrainian blogger Denis Kazanskyi shared an extract from an interview to Alexei Milchakov, an openly declared Nazi Russian soldier advocating for a real genocide against all Ukrainian inhabitants. In February, State Duma member Andrey Gurulyov would reiterate these objectives (Russian Media Monitor, 2023). By contrast, perhaps to lower the disinformation tone, a Russian TV guest downsized Kremlin's objectives from denazification to the annihilation of anti-Russia's

'hotbed'.



Source: Twitter



Source: Twitter

As Western support to Ukraine increased, 'denazification' rhetoric became more frivolous. Emblematic was Lavrov's 'Support for Ukraine = Russophobia = neo-Nazism' formula (Andriukaitis, 2023) to equate Western states' assistance to Hitler's invasion of the Soviet Union (U.S. Department of State, 2023). Lavrov (Russian Foreign Ministry, 2023) also referred to the Holocaust to blame the West for planning a 'Russian question' against the Russian-speaking population in Donbas, thus

perpetuating a trend to distort history which peaked on 9 May 2022, when Putin animated 'Victory Day' celebrations (President of Russia, 2022c) by justifying the invasion as a 'sacred' and 'patriotic' act comparable to the 'Great Patriotic War' against Nazi Germany (U.S. Department of State, 2023).

Lastly, *News Nation* alleged that Kyiv would follow *Hitlerjugend* (Hitler's Youth)'s footsteps by training children soldiers to kill Russians (News Front, 2023b). *En masse* conscription claims, however, besides ignoring Ukrainian law's prohibition to recruit underage combatants (Verkhovna Rada of Ukraine, 1992), resulted from evidence misleadingly displaying military academy students as recruits to discredit Kyiv's Defence Ministry (EUvsDisinfo, 2023b).

3. *The apex of dehumanisation: denying the occurrence of war crimes or branding them as false-flag provocations by Ukraine*

Disinformation about mass killings in Mariupol, Bucha, Iziium and other Ukrainian cities marked the most deplorable page in Kremlin's playbook. On 2 March 2022, International Criminal Court's prosecutor opened an investigation (ICC, 2022), followed two weeks later by the Pre-Trial Chamber's arrest warrants for Putin and his Children's Rights Commissioner Maria Lvova-Belova for orchestrating and tolerating children's deportation from occupied territories to Russia (ICC, n.d.).

As investigations opened, Moscow systematically denied involvement in the bombing of a maternity hospital, the Azovstal steel plant and the Donetsk Academic Regional Drama Theatre in Mariupol, the latter causing 600 casualties alone (Hinnant, Chernov and Stepanenko, 2022). *RT* contributor Max Blumenthal (2022) attributed the shelling to the Azov Battalion, which was controlling the area and, hoping to trigger NATO forces' deployment, allegedly undertook a false-flag operation by detonating the building and using fleeing civilians as human shields. The 'provocation' would have been anticipated by Russian journalist Dmitriy Steshin (2022), who posted two 'false flags' by

President Zelensky on Telegram (Steshin, 2022) to drag Turkey into the conflict (referring to Russia's bombing of the Turkish-built Kanuni Sultan Suleyman Mosque) and gather civilians in the theatre to detonate it, still claiming that Russia committed the act to justify the issuing of a no-fly zone over Ukraine.

When Russian troops left Bucha, over 600 corpses were lying on the streets after summary executions (Human Rights Watch, 2022b). Still, the Russian Defence Ministry (Sputnik Kazakhstan, 2022) dismissed them as Ukrainian government's provocation, since no locals would have suffered from violent actions during Russian troops' permanence, and dead bodies would not have been in *rigor mortis* when Kyiv discovered them (EUvsDisinfo, 2022d). Foreign Minister Lavrov slammed the episode as a 'fake attack' orchestrated by Ukraine and the Western coalition after Russian troops left on 30 March (TASS, 2022b). Defence Ministry spokesman Igor Konashenkov even disputed the authenticity of atrocities' footage which became famous worldwide (Teslova, 2022). Pro-Russian Iranian outlets like *The World News* (2022) even compared the actions to those committed by the *White Helmets*, a humanitarian organisation which, within the Syrian civil war, was repeatedly labelled by Moscow a Western-backed terrorist proxy group and accused of organ trafficking or staging chemical attacks (EUvsDisinfo, 2022e).

On 5 April, Russian Defence Ministry (2022) spokesman Konashenkov stated that members of the 72nd Ukrainian Centre for Psychological Operations would have staged mass shootings amongst Bucha's civilian population to attribute casualties to Russian forces '*for further distribution through the Western media*'. Additionally, a mannequin video claiming that Bucha mass killings had been staged became viral on social media platforms; however, the video had been shot by a Russian TV channel near St. Petersburg (Euronews, 2022b).

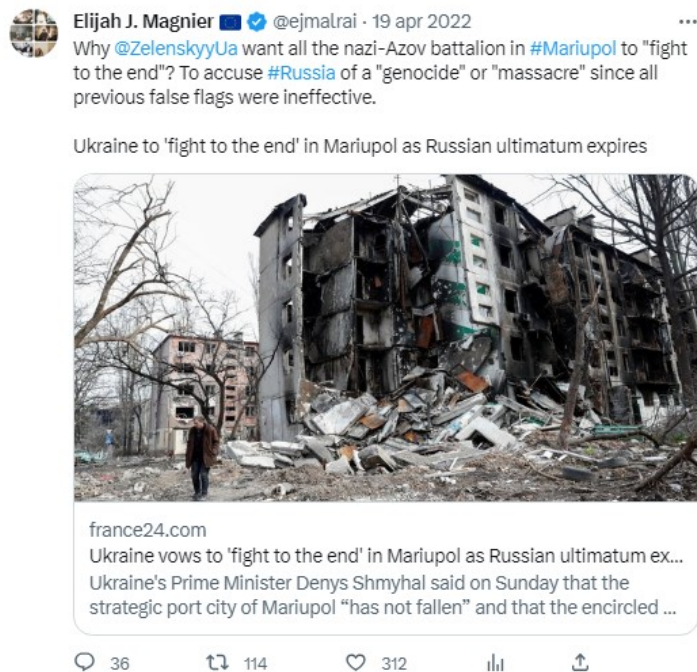
Kremlin-owned media also spread independent reportages questioning the reliable Western accounts on Ukraine. For instance, Dutch journalist Sonja van den Ende branded such reports 'rubber-stamping fake news' and, drawing comparisons with Syria, Iraq and

Afghanistan, hinted at an alleged strategy to find a ‘bad guy’: in this sense, Putin being labelled ‘butcher’ built on Syrian President Assad’s ‘murderer’ epithet. Van den Ende also recalled the parallel between Kyiv’s presumed false-flag provocations and attacks against the Donbas population to the *White Helmets* staging ‘gas attacks’ in Syria (Baxter, 2022).

On balance, attempts to shift responsibility on Kyiv for mass atrocities was aimed at questioning war crimes attributions after Russian troops left Bucha (ISW, 2022), with Putin referring to Ukrainians ‘being used against Russia’ while defining the tragedy as a British special operation (Meduza, 2022b). On 9 April, Donetsk People’s Republic head Denis Pushilin warned about Ukraine preparing massive attacks to hold Russia accountable for casualties (RIA FAN, 2022a). On 10 April, the Russian Defence Ministry charged Kyiv for a false-flag attack in Irpin to attribute civilian massacres to Russia (TASS, 2022c). On 13 April, as the Ukrainian Defence Ministry reported on Moscow ordering its forces to destroy casualties’ evidence through crematoriums (Interfax Ukraine, 2022), Russian MFA spokeswoman Zakharova warned about Ukrainian “provocations” in the Sumy region (RIA FAN, 2022b) to shift public attention to other contexts from which Russian forces were withdrawing to not be associated with killings.

Disinformation also concerned the use of chemical or nuclear weapons to commit mass atrocities. For instance, Russian Deputy Foreign Minister Syromolotov asserted that nuclear material could be brought to Ukraine (IZ, 2022) in line with the false claims to justify the invasion (ISW, 2022). Military Radiation, Chemical and Biological Defence Forces chief Igor Kirillov alleged that American and European officials were leading a bioweapons programme in Ukraine (Lenta, 2022), and reinforced the false-flag narrative about Mariupol’s biochemical attack by reporting Kyiv’s purchase of 50 drones spraying toxic chemicals (TASS, 2022d). Until Mariupol capitulated in May, Ukrainian forces followed Prime Minister Denys Shmyhal’s vow to ‘fight to the end’ to retain control over the strategic port city (France 24, 2022),

albeit not preventing veteran war correspondent Elijah Magnier from interpreting the move as another false-flag attempt to accuse Russia of 'genocide'.



Source: Twitter

With the invasion in its 3rd month, Turkey offered to host negotiations (Malsin, 2022b) after two first rounds in March (Malsin, 2022a). Russia, through their ambassador to the UK Andrei Kelin, tied their unfruitful outcomes to Ukraine's efforts to fabricate footage of dead corpses in Bucha (News.am, 2022) after Russian Permanent Representative to the UN Vassily Nebenzya stated that Western media 'admitted' that civilians would have died because of artillery shelling by Kyiv (TASS, 2022h). Both diplomats ignored fact-checked evidence incriminating Moscow (EUvsDisinfo, 2022h), from witness accounts (Meduza, 2022a) to radio conversations among Russian troops (Stanley-Becker and Guinan-Bank, 2022) and crimes against civilians (Human Rights Watch, 2022a). Furthermore, Russian Security Council's Deputy Chairman Medvedev rejected the 'all-out war' nature of the invasion and the thousands of civilian casualties thereof (EUvsDisinfo, 2022j), as he reiterated the 'special operation' character of military actions (TASS, 2022i).

As massacres became more sporadic, so did disinformation

episodes. Every time, Kremlin-owned outlets defined them as Ukrainian false flags, like the strike on Kremenchuk's shopping mall on 27 June causing around 20 casualties and 59 injuries in the first 24 hours (Roschyna, 2022). Russia's Defence Ministry admitted carrying out a strike, albeit on a stockpile of Western weapons which would have detonated on a 'non-operating shopping center' next door (Tenisheva, 2022). Meanwhile, *Sputnik News* (2022a) exploited former French soldier and writer Adrien Bocquet's story as eyewitness of 'false-flag operations' in Bucha. His report relied on a volunteer who had allegedly seen '*refrigerator trucks [...] unloading bodies and laying them out in rows*' (*ibid.*). However, the story lacked footage, which had allegedly been forbidden by Azov forces under the threat of '*imprisonment for ten years or more severe consequences*' (*ibid.*). More interestingly, pro-Russian media *Tsargad* (2022) reported that former French presidential candidate Ségolène Royal had argued that Kyiv's 'Ukronazi' regime had fabricated evidence about Mariupol maternity hospital's shelling and the Bucha massacre to meddle in the peace process. While apologising for denying Russia's commission of war crimes in Mariupol, she did not suggest that evidence in Bucha had been staged (EUvsDisinfo, 2022m).

Disinformation on mass atrocities came full circle with the 'Donbas genocide' trend. Dzherelievsky (2022) branded violence in the Kharkiv region the new 'Bucha scenario', where Kyiv's 'Nazi regime' would carry out systematic executions amongst the local population. Conversely, Russian troops committed hostilities against local Ukrainians in Izium (EUvsDisinfo, 2022p), where more than 440 bodies were exhumed from a forest grave site (Guerin, 2022). In this respect, on 23 September, the Independent International Commission of Inquiry on Ukraine established by the UN Human Rights Council concluded its investigations documenting war crimes including, *inter alia*, illegal use of explosive weapons, children's rights violations and torture (UN OHCHR, 2022). While waiting for ICC Prosecutor's findings, the Commission shed light on Russia's war crimes in Ukraine. Predictably, the Russian MFA systematically denied and attributed responsibility to Kyiv.



Source: Twitter

Although disinformation about atrocities lost traction in 2023, *Sputnik News* (2023) continued to cover Adrien Bocquet's story, who applied for political asylum in Russia. He came back on 'Ukraine's false-flag operations' in Bucha to warn Western countries that they should be held accountable for them. As debunked by French newspaper *Libération*, Bocquet misrepresented both his past as air force fusilier (Horn, 2022) and the events 'witnessed in Ukraine' by photoshopping imagery (Service Checknews, 2022).

Conclusions

These false narratives built on those around 2014 events through a 'discursive *fil rouge*', i.e. recourse to offensive rhetoric to trigger audiences' emotions and make them embrace easily disprovable narratives. Disinformation depicting the conflict as Russia's attempt to defend itself from Western imperialism recalls USSR's 'Great Patriotic War' against Nazi Germany and gives continuity to the 2014 playbook, albeit with a few nuances. To keep it credible, Moscow described the conflict as a proxy war, where NATO and the EU would use Ukraine as a puppet state to expand their military presence and train 'Nazi fighters' to destroy Russia. On the other hand, the Kremlin saw itself engaged in a mission to promote 'messianic multipolarity' worldwide against

Western hegemony (Interview 5, 2023). This coupled optimism about ‘Special Military Operation’'s execution which, notwithstanding on-field complications, impacted on domestic population's psychology as support for the war remained solid (Levada Center, 2022). Still, some sceptical voices questioned Russian narratives' validity without defying the ‘culture of science’ (Picheta, 2023), which became more entrenched after Putin signed a law criminalising the spread of ‘false information’ about the invasion (Darcy, 2022).

The need to ‘denazify’ and ‘demilitarise’ Ukraine also follows from the 2014 disinformation trend portraying Kyiv's government as a ‘Nazi junta’ targeting Russian speakers. However, unlike in 2014, the Kremlin extended its mission to save the Russian population to the whole country because of the two peoples' historical unity (President of Russia, 2021b). In this regard, Russia referred to ‘deukrainization’, the need to ‘purify Ukrainian language’, ‘desatanisation’, and ‘decolonisation’ to prevent Kyiv from joining NATO and the EU. At the same time, the increasingly absurd reshaping of disinformation reflected the difficulty to look for a convincing narrative after military losses (US Department of State, 2023).

Kremlin's rhetorical dehumanization about mass atrocities around Ukraine marked a *fil rouge* with genocide-related narratives to demonize the Ukrainian population (US Department of State, 2023). (Pro-)Russian media outlets, while denying killings' occurrence and Russian troops' presence on the crime scene, claimed that Kyiv would orchestrate false-flag operations against its population to justify the ‘Special Military Operation’. Although evidence about Moscow's responsibility for war crimes allowed the ICC to issue arrest warrants against Putin and Lvova-Belova (ICC, 2023), such milestone is unlikely to lead to their conviction, since Russia's withdrawal from the Rome Statute (BBC News, 2016) will prevent the Court from exercising jurisdiction on it (Interview 3, 2023). While disinformation's degeneration into Holocaust distortion built on the 2014 ‘denazification’ narrative, change can be found in recourse to out-of-context information, such as the mannequin video supporting Bucha

killings' staged nature and the shift of chemical weapons' discourse from the Syrian *White Helmets* to Ukrainian forces.

***A bumpy road towards a whole-of-society
approach against Kremlin-sponsored
disinformation***

'Falsehood flies, and truth comes limping after it, so that when men come to be undeceived, it is too late; the jest is over, and the tale hath had its effect: like a man, who hath thought of a good repartee when the discourse is changed, or the company parted; or like a physician, who hath found out an infallible medicine, after the patient is dead.'

(Jonathan Swift, "Political Lying")

Introduction

This chapter unpacks NATO and EU competent agencies' response to Russian disinformation to point out their late, piecemeal and reactive nature. It illustrates the declarations and action plans the two organisations have implemented with relatively little success, due to the absence of both the political will to prioritise the issue and a common vision on it. These conditions have negatively impacted on EU East StratCom Task Force and NATO StratCom Centre of Excellence's work as 'clearing houses' of false narratives which, by the time they were disproven, had already left a lasting psychological influence on targeted audiences.

To suggest inputs for a more deterrent approach, the discussion refers to virtuous civil society initiatives which, by interacting with state institutions and/or private companies, provide instances of a whole-of-society approach to disinformation. They put pre-bunking and media literacy promotion at their centrepiece, which may lower the burden on fact-checking organisations running time-consuming and cost-ineffective debunking actions. Euro-Atlantic institutions should not only aim at exposing false narratives, but first and foremost encourage truthful reporting while punishing disinformation actors to create a culture of critical thinking, deter future campaigns and lay the foundations for a media-literate society.

EU's and NATO's policy response

1. EU: late institutional activism through a patchwork of instruments

In March 2015, EU leaders underlined the need to challenge Kremlin's campaigns (European Council, 2015) and called then-High Representative Mogherini to come up with a strategic communication action plan (Jeangène Vilmer, 2021: 19). Six months later, the European External Action Service (EEAS) set up the East StratCom Task Force, which daily identifies and disproves disinforming content by (pro-)Russian newspapers, TV channels, blogs and social media accounts on the *EUvsDisinfo.eu* website alongside weekly reports condensing major trends. In 2017, it was complemented by two agencies focusing on Southern Europe and Northern Africa, and the Western Balkans (*ibid.*).

In 2019, the three task forces were joined in the EEAS Strategic Communication and Information Analysis Division by a horizontal team, focusing on 'emerging threats, data analysis, policy development and international cooperation'. Additionally, the EU's Rapid Alert System on Disinformation (EEAS, 2021) was introduced to facilitate inter-state sharing of insights on disinformation campaigns and response coordination. It is also one of the four pillars on which the 2018 Action Plan on Disinformation was built (EEAS, 2019).

Meanwhile, the European Commission (2016a) adopted a joint framework on countering hybrid threats and devised a Hybrid Fusion Cell (Jeangène Vilmer, 2021: 19) to gather evidence and inform EU and national decision-makers from a strategic foresight and situational awareness standpoints (Lasoen, 2022: 7). The joint framework advocated for inter-state information-sharing mechanisms to deliver strategic communication, building resilience by addressing e.g. cybersecurity and critical infrastructure protection, and enhancing cooperation with NATO and other partners against hybrid threats (European Commission, 2016b).

Based on European Parliament's resolution (2017) for a study on 'legislative intervention to limit the dissemination and spreading of fake content', The Commission convened experts (Jeangène Vilmer, 2021: 19) who, in March 2018, recommended grounding communication on tackling online disinformation (European Commission, 2018a). This report laid the groundwork for the Code of Practice on Disinformation (European Commission, 2018b), which encouraged prominent private actors like social media companies to merely agree upon voluntary standards to counter disinformation. Such aspect led the Commission to adopt additional guidelines to strengthen the Code and oversee implementation (European Commission, 2021a), which would be taken over by a permanent task force (European Commission, 2021b).

The 2018 Action Plan against Disinformation acknowledged Russian disinformation as the 'greatest threat to the EU' (European Commission, 2018c: 4), and aims at bolstering EU's capabilities to detect, analyse and expose disinformation; strengthening joint responses; mobilising the private sector; raising societal awareness and resilience (*ibid.*: 5). In March 2019, EU institutions and MSs set up the Rapid Alert System (Jeangène Vilmer, 2021: 20), which comprises a digital platform and a network of national contact points for faster coordinated responses (EEAS, 2019).

The urgency to combat hybrid threats to secure EU's physical and digital environment was reiterated in the 2020-2025 Security Union

Strategy, which was conceived as an ‘umbrella framework’ for policies countering hybrid threats, protecting critical infrastructure, enhancing law-enforcement capacity in digital investigations, countering terrorism and illicit trafficking (European Commission, 2020a). This framework complemented the strategic communication campaigns ‘InvestEU’ (Europe that delivers), ‘EUandME’ (Europe that empowers) and ‘EU Protects’ (Ratsyborinska, 2022: 97).

Ukraine’s full-scale invasion accelerated the release of the Strategic Compass for Security and Defence to: bolster protection of EU’s critical assets; ensure reliance on trustworthy communication systems (EEAS, 2022a: 33); update the Union’s 2013 cyber security strategy (European Defence Agency, 2013) with new standards and rules (Gjoreski, 2022: 78); protect classified information to facilitate inter-state sharing (EEAS, 2022a: 33). This process should boost EU’s capability to cope with hybrid threats, cyber-attacks and foreign information manipulation and interference (FIMI) through an EU Hybrid Toolbox (*ibid.*: 12). The tools to counter disinformation should contribute to build a common understanding of threats and devise instruments to detect, analyse and solve them while holding perpetrators accountable (*ibid.*: 34). By the end of 2023, the EU plans to establish a data collection mechanism on FIMI incidents (Gjoreski, 2022: 79) to strengthen its capabilities vis-à-vis hybrid, cyber, information, terrorist and other extremist threats (*ibid.*: 85). Meanwhile, the Commission (2022) strengthened the Code of Practice on Disinformation by adding a permanent task force to boost cooperation and implement standards.

To date, the EU Council has adopted 11 packages of restrictive measures targeting more than 1,800 Russian individuals/entities through e.g. travel bans and asset freezes, coal, crude oil and dual-use technology embargoes, and sanctions against specific economic sectors (Council of the EU, 2023a). Moreover, it imposed broadcasting prohibitions on Kremlin-owned/friendly outlets within EU’s information space. Examples are *RT* and *Sputnik* (in various languages), *Rossiya 1*, *Rossiya 24*, *Pervyi Kanal* and *NTV* (EU Sanctions Map, n.d.).

On 7 February 2023, High Representative Borrell presented EEAS's 1st report analysing FIMI trends (EEAS, 2023a) by stressing three courses of action: deterring FIMI, supporting Ukraine and building resilience vis-à-vis authoritarian regimes (EEAS, 2023b). The report illustrates Moscow's and Beijing's information manipulation tactics in late 2022 and outlines best practices to counter the phenomenon (EEAS, 2023c).

2. *NATO: adapting a conventional warfare toolbox to an unconventional threat*

Despite being repeatedly targeted by false narratives viewing its eastward enlargement as the operationalization of imperialist ambitions against Russia's territorial integrity (Sabbagh, 2020), NATO only made its first step towards countering disinformation at the 2018 Brussels Summit, whose final communiqué acknowledged that Allies had been dealing with disinformation campaigns and cyber-attacks (NATO, 2018). The 2016 EU-NATO Joint Declaration previously underlined how the two organisations had boosted their response to cyber threats (Council of the EU, 2018) and were preparing for crisis and resilience, disinformation and cyber security (Ratsyborinska, 2022: 95).

At the London Summit, state leaders committed to strengthen NATO's '*ability to prepare for, deter, and defend against hybrid tactics*' undermining state and societal security (NATO, 2019). In 2020, NATO's Reflection Group released the 'NATO 2030' report with recommendations to deal with contemporary threats (NATO, 2020b). It remarked hybrid challenges' destabilising nature, the need to reinforce cooperation with partners (Ratsyborinska, 2022: 90) and, based on their duty to develop individual and collective capacity vis-à-vis armed attacks (NATO, 1949: art. III), conferred upon states the responsibility to build resilience, while NATO would support countries suffering from overwhelmed capabilities (NATO, 2020b). The 2022 Strategic Concept tries to come full circle with these 'declaratory milestones' and the invasion of Ukraine by recognising Russia as the most significant

security threat and expanding the spectrum of contemporary security challenges, including: malicious cyberspace activities, emerging and disruptive technologies, and disinformation campaigns by authoritarian regimes (NATO, 2022a).

NATO describes its approach to fight disinformation as a 'twin-track model' (NATO, 2020a), i.e. understanding the information environment whilst engaging through fact-based communication, exposing false narratives and funding academic/civil society initiatives (Jeangène Vilmer, 2021: 21). Such an approach is implemented by, first, the international secretariat's Public Diplomacy Division in Brussels, which rebuts Russian myths and harmonises activities amongst NATO units and Allies (NATO, 2022b) and, secondly, the StratCom Centre of Excellence in Riga, which holds an annual summit for stakeholders to share best practices (NATO StratCom COE, n.d.-a). The Joint Intelligence and Security Division plays a complementary role in responding to hybrid and information operations (Jeangène Vilmer, 2021: 21).

3. Drawbacks: a merely reactive response backed by intermittent political will and without strategic foresight

NATO's and EU's recommendations and action plans still have not been followed by binding commitments, largely because of the difficulty to build political willingness to counter a phenomenon rarely listed amongst their policy-making priorities (Interview 1, 2023). In this regard, it is surprising to observe an absence of radical reforms at EU level between the 2018 Action Plan Against Disinformation and Ukraine's invasion, which acted as a (late) wake-up call to release the NATO Strategic Concept and the EU Strategic Compass. These do not foresee modalities to build a supranational understanding of disinformation and devise binding solutions to lend current competent bodies a hand. The Strategic Compass would lack strategic foresight, as it only lays out threats and not interests to pursue (Blockmans et al., 2022: 8). It could be harmonised with the NATO Strategic Concept (*ibid.*) in areas like

countering hybrid threats where, notwithstanding the challenges related to the invasion, cooperation is still embryonic (Brânda, 2022: 245).

Moreover, NATO is struggling to adapt its collective defence mission to cyber-attacks and FIMI: therefore, the 2019 Allied Joint Doctrine for the Conduct of Operations' remarks (NATO Standardization Office, 2019: 118) about psychological operations' unpredictability and civil audiences' engagement beyond military campaigns (Anghel, 2020) are still valid. This lacuna plays havoc with cooperation with the EU, where Council's decision-making is complicated by unanimity. By targeting eight Russian individuals contributing to spread false narratives, the latest sanctions package (Council of the EU, 2023b) can turn into a platform for further designations. Additionally, the anti-circumvention mechanism might encourage the establishment of a binding EU code of conduct adhered to by actors like media companies and supported by a framework to punish perpetrators (Interview 1, 2023). Nonetheless, the shutdown of individuals' profiles and outlets' channels should be temporary and strictly related to conflict-related disinformation to not raise freedom of speech concerns and lead to court litigation (Interview 2, 2023).

These drawbacks impact on EU East StratCom Task Force and NATO StratCom Centre of Excellence's work. Despite debunking thousands of pieces of disinformation (Interview 3, 2023), they are understaffed and underfunded: as of December 2021, the East StratCom Task Force comprised 16 members (EEAS, 2022b) and benefited from a €11.1-million budget (EEAS, 2021). NATO StratCom COE relies on the work of around 50 employees (NATO StratCom COE, n.d.-b), but benefits from a mere €5.9-million budget (NATO StratCom COE, 2021). Furthermore, debunking neither prevents false narratives from spreading, nor erases their psychological impact (Jeangène Vilmer, 2021: 27). By the time truth puts its shoes on, a lie can travel halfway around the world (Oregon Health News Blog, 2021) because it does not require verification. Therefore, as large portions of the population look for 'good stories' that trigger their emotions (*ibid.*: 28), fact-checkers

need to supplant false narratives with truthful ones or ‘whodunits’ (Wemer, 2019).

Lastly, EU’s *modus operandi* suffers from expertise compartmentalisation between Russia, Africa and Western Balkans. Consequently, by exclusively covering Russian disinformation, the East StratCom Task Force risks being labelled as ‘Russophobic’, while the name of its website (*EUvsDisinfo.eu*) suggests that it deals with the entire phenomenon (Jeangène Vilmer, 2021: 29). Such a piecemeal approach also ignores equally compelling threats from other regions like Africa, where Moscow is very active, and from states feeling at crossroads between Eastern and Southern Europe (Grossman et al., 2019). Conversely, an unbiased agency with a 360° focus would gain a broader picture of the threat while benefitting from regional expertise (Jeangène Vilmer, 2021: 30), thus guaranteeing smoother inter-state/institutional cooperation and a quicker response to disinformation (Pamment, 2020).

Widening the anti-disinformation toolbox: virtuous examples from the private sector and civil society

The need to accommodate conflicting national interests impacts on international organisations’ decision-making. Meanwhile, following a profit-making *modus operandi*, the private sector has acted, with social media companies removing content, profiles and advertisements spreading pro-Kremlin narratives, especially after the invasion’s unfolding. For instance, on 25 February 2022, Facebook censored *Zvezda*, *RIA Novosti*, *Lenta.ru* and *Gazeta.ru*, while the mother company *Meta* set up a special operations centre to remove content violating its rules. YouTube suspended manifold Russian state-media channels monetising from ads, while taking down channels and videos spreading ‘coordinated deceptive practices’ (Bond, 2022a).

Most of the censored Facebook accounts and YouTube channels concerned fake personas with artificially generated profile pictures to masquerade as independent media. Meanwhile, Twitter countered the

sharing of links originated in Russia to disrupt the public debate (Bond, 2022b). On 28 February 2022, *Meta* barred access to *RT* and *Sputnik* for EU social media users (*ibid.*) in line with EU sanctions. As remarked by Wilson Center fellow Nina Jankowicz, disinformation campaigns have become more overt compared to the pre-2022 period, since social media have become mouthpieces of Kremlin's official communications and 'staged events' to justify the invasion (*ibid.*), sow distrust in Western institutions and discourage military support to Kyiv.

Another innovative feature was the periodical release of propaganda documentaries linked to Kremlin-funded news outlets. As of February 2023, YouTube removed more than 800 channels and 4 million videos (Maitland et al., 2023). One of these was the *iEarlGrey* channel, which referred to Mariupol hospital's bombing as orchestrated (iEarlGrey, 2022a) and to Kyiv's 'systematic targeting' of ethnic Russians in Eastern Ukraine (iEarlGrey, 2022b). Furthermore, YouTube took down 40 reposts of *RT*'s '*Donbass: I'm Alive!*' film, which defined NATO 'the reincarnation of the Wehrmacht and SS', and uploads by channels controlled by *Rosstrudnichestvo* (the Russian Federal Agency for CIS Affairs), *Compatriots Living Abroad* and the *International Humanitarian Cooperation* (Maitland et al., 2023).

In short, to take down disinforming social media content, international organisations need to involve private actors. Still, notwithstanding significant progress in removing lies and information-sharing, social media platforms' *modus operandi* largely remains reactive (Jeangène Vilmer, 2021: 30). By contrast, they should shift towards a more deterrent approach to provide both Ukrainians and Russians a truthful coverage of the conflict (Bond, 2022b).

At state level, some noteworthy news outlets or grassroots initiatives operate according to a deterrence ethic (The New York Times, 2018), discouraging individuals/entities from spreading disinformation through their 'naming and shaming' or threats to shut down their accounts/websites. Not surprisingly, these come from countries having a big Russian minority and a long exposure to the phenomenon

(Interview 2, 2023). One example is *Melu Teorija*, a series broadcasted by Latvian TV from 2017 to 2020 breaking down Moscow's disinformation machine and confuting its lies (TV3 Latvia, 2020).

In 2017, the group of Ukrainian professors and students launching *StopFake.org* after Crimea's occupation landed on cable TV with *StopFake News*, a weekly investigative journalism show disproving fake news on the air (Kramer, 2017). The team also holds media workshops around the EU and the post-Soviet space (Budivska, 2017) to offer guidelines to detect and debunk Kremlin disinformation (Maheshwari, 2017). This work is complemented by *Detektor Media*, an NGO/online news organisation working to improve national media's quality and boost media literacy through critical journalism (Countering Disinfo, 2021).

The Baltic region provides the successful story of the 'elf' movement which, after originating in Lithuania in 2014, now operates in 17 countries (Debunk.eu, n.d.). Named *DebunkEU*, it consists of 'volunteering cyber warriors' (students, teachers, IT experts and MPs) exposing (pro-)Russian trolls through AI (Jeangène Vilmer, 2021: 24). The findings are forwarded to the Lithuanian government, who publicly 'blames and shames' trolls (Interview 4, 2023). Hence, the elves not only turn attacks into stories, but can also deter others from doing the same (Jeangène Vilmer, 2021: 24). *DebunkEU* is supported by an independent technology think tank called *Debunk.org*, which carries out disinformation analysis and runs media literacy campaigns in the Baltics, Poland, Georgia, Montenegro, North Macedonia and the US (Debunk.org, n.d.).

Research institutes also deliver meaningful material for policymaking. Within NATO's and EU's framework, the Digital Forensic Research Lab (operating under the Atlantic Council's auspices) and the EU DisinfoLab display technical and policy expertise to provide comprehensive overviews of the Euro-Atlantic information space. The European Centre of Excellence for Countering Hybrid Threats in Helsinki brings NATO and the EU perspectives together by providing states' representatives with expertise alongside joint training exercises (Hybrid

CoE, n.d.). Two other noteworthy research centres are the *European Values Center for Security Policy* and *Bellingcat*. The former, through its *Kremlin Watch* programme, monitors and exposes disinformation through fact-checking and myth-busting, and is the largest contributor to the East StratCom Task Force (EVC, n.d.). *Bellingcat*'s famous 2020 report unveiling 'independent platform' *Bonanza Media*'s disinformation project alongside Russia's military intelligence contributed to establish the truth about MH17 plane's downing (Bellingcat, 2020).

The way forward: a holistic, whole-of-society approach to instil media literacy, and a new avenue for EU-NATO cooperation

To become resilient against disinformation requires 'preparation, prevention, protection, promotion and transformation' policies, whose implementation must involve state institutions and citizens (European Commission, 2017). Hence the need for a whole-of-society approach to make sure that all stakeholders capable of acting and having enough expertise are engaged (Ratsyborinska, 2022: 104). Countries being exposed the longest to Kremlin's campaigns are in the best position to counter them (The New York Times, 2018). Unfortunately, they are confined to Scandinavia, the Baltics and Canada, where the administrative culture has embraced a cross-sectoral approach. By contrast, the rest of the Euro-Atlantic area suffers from complex bureaucracies and inter-institutional rivalry (Jeangène Vilmer, 2021: 28). Until the Psychological Defence Agency's establishment in 2022, Sweden had 11 ministries/governmental departments working on disinformation (Interview 4, 2023).

This structural shift could encourage the EU to integrate the three StratCom Task Forces into a single body where every geographical division contributes to comprehensively tackle the phenomenon. Moreover, the EU might broaden cooperation with NATO through cross-staff information-sharing and training programmes. The EEAS (2023c: 7) report on FIMI mentions a 'Common Framework and Methodology' to

gather evidence on such incidents (European Commission, 2020b) and deliver on the Strategic Compass, notably on the creation of a data collection mechanism with a Data Space to strengthen EU's '*ability to detect, analyse and respond to the threat*' by, *inter alia*, sanctioning perpetrators (EEAS, 2022a).

The 'Kill Chain' approach (Bergh, 2020) could fulfil this objective. Thanks to systematic data collection, competent agencies can identify perpetrators' actions before deploying their message. Once FIMI material is published, early detection and official rebuttal can prevent campaigns from reaching the targeted audience (EEAS, 2023c: 26). The report also indicates the 5-step 'Analysis Cycle' as a methodology to disrupt FIMI episodes. First, it maps channels and behavioural tactics, which are then prioritised according to potentially harmful incidents. Thirdly, it identifies links amongst channels within the ecosystems to understand how narratives are amplified (*ibid.*: 28). Fourthly, findings are shared with stakeholders capable of immediately reacting through investigations or public rebuttals. Meanwhile, data is stored for comparative analysis of long-term trends. Lastly, by expanding the actors and the patterns being monitored, the previous steps are optimised to achieve situational awareness (*ibid.*: 29).

To keep pace with an evolving operational environment, NATO would need to embrace a whole-of-enterprise approach, which would integrate its C4ISR (Command, Control, Communications, Computers, Intelligence, Surveillance and Reconnaissance) architecture (Davis, 2023). To do so, the organisational structure needs to modernise existing capabilities and projects, cohere disconnected capability programmes and revise processes. Within this framework, the development of a NATO digital backbone should be contemplated (*ibid.*).

The EU should push MSs to adopt media literacy and basic 'cyberology' modules at all educational levels, establish vocational training programmes for vulnerable societal groups (Interview 1, 2023) and review legislative frameworks by setting clear standards and sanctioning mechanisms (Nacev, 2019: 15). Following the Hybrid

Threats Centre of Excellence's example, NATO and the EU can build a European network of analytical centres detecting disinformation and devising recurrent trends among polarised societies (StopFake.org, 2016b). EU's sanctioning activity would benefit from the oversight of a Council of Europe-like 'Venice Commission' for the media domain, which would provide impartial guidelines for blacklisting news outlets while supporting high-quality journalism (*ibid.*).

Meanwhile, debunking initiatives can be coupled by pre-bunking ones along three pathways. First, fact-checking actors can make recourse to psychological inoculation to make individuals resistant to manipulation techniques like excessive emotional language, incoherence and false dichotomies through brief exposition to and refusal of manipulative messages (Jigsaw, 2021). Secondly, they could contemplate fact-based counterpropaganda, i.e. producing content which is as eye-catching as propaganda to increase its likelihood to be shared (Božovic, 2019: 9). Thirdly, international myth-busting projects can help inform policy debates and correct media inaccuracies by lecturing journalists and policymakers (StopFake.org, 2016b).

On balance, every initiative should follow four lines of defence (Kalenský, 2019): documenting the threat through knowledge of manipulative actors and strategies, raising awareness among targeted audiences, addressing societal weaknesses through cross-age media literacy, and sanctioning information aggressors (Jeangène Vilmer, 2021: 3). Their implementation requires two conditions: political decision-making based on strategic communication and institutions-citizens trust (Interview 1, 2023). To strike an optimal security-liberty trade-off, although FIMI can threaten democratic values, states/international organisations should leave the private industry, civil society, fact-checkers and researchers on the front line (Jeangène Vilmer, 2021: 28). Social media platforms provide technical expertise, human and financial resources to track disinformation; however, due to their economic dependence on emotional hyper-partisan stories, they may turn a blind eye on content which generates several interactions

(The New York Times, 2018). Hence, civil society and research centres become pivotal thanks to their independence and critical-thinking approach.

Lastly, if think tanks gather representatives from research and policy-making realms, they can initiate a cross-fertilization process where both sides benefit from each other's assets and devise 'outside the box' solutions (Jeangène Vilmer, 2021: 23). By taking this approach to the supranational level, NATO and the EU can promote a transnational community of information activists, journalists, academics and NGOs through regular exchange programmes to build mutual trust and understanding on how to fulfil 'information defence' (StopFake.org, 2016b).

Conclusions

Russian disinformation's 'total war' approach requires a 'total defence' response comprising deterrence, defence and resilience (George Marshall Center, 2023). Deterrence can be achieved through pre-bunking, which would take a heavyweight off fact-checking agencies' shoulders. Defence is still the main response pillar through exposure and debunking of false narratives. The combination of deterrence and defence should lead to resilience, whose assessment requires an understanding of concerned actors' vulnerabilities. To do so, a whole-of-society approach is paramount: through information-sharing and cross-fertilisation, we ensure that all stakeholders have a say in the matter and gain a complete picture of the threat.

NATO and the EU have dealt with Russian disinformation through a largely voluntary and piecemeal approach, where action plans have not been followed by binding legislation largely due to the absence of political will to prioritise the challenge. After downplaying its compelling nature, the two organisations delegated the task of exposing Kremlin's lies to understaffed and underfunded task forces. Since the war of attrition seems to have no end in sight, NATO and the EU should harmonise their information doctrines and benefit from respective hybrid

and cyber warfare toolboxes. To do so, a whole-of-society approach can allow them to benefit from private/civil society realities, whose expertise might help them build a common understanding of Kremlin's disinformation ecosystem. Without it, NATO and EU stakeholders will compromise the already steep road towards a media-literate Euro-Atlantic society (George Marshall Center, 2023).

Conclusion

Preparing for the long game: dealing with a war of attrition while exploring avenues for accountability in the information space

'We have to focus on foreign actors who intentionally, in a coordinated manner, try to manipulate our information environment. We need to work with democratic partners around the world to fight information manipulation by authoritarian regimes more actively. It is time to roll up our sleeves and defend democracy, both at home and around the world.' (Josep Borrell, '1st EEAS Report on Foreign Information Manipulation and Interference Threats')

With the Russo-Ukrainian war, we have witnessed disinformation at its prime through two fundamental factors: first, the Kremlin's decision to rely on the Gerasimov doctrine and put disinformation at their military strategy's centrepiece; secondly, the fast-evolving nature of technology and today's hyper-digitalised world. Since 2014, and with an accentuation after 24 February 2022, Moscow has relied on disinformation not only to conceal Russian army's precariousness, but first and foremost to mislead Western democracies about its intentions towards Ukraine. While justifying Donbas' occupation and Crimea's annexation with the safeguard of ethnic Russians, the Kremlin invoked the need to defend its territory from NATO's and EU's enlargement.

In February 2022, Moscow launched the full-scale invasion to overthrow Kyiv's 'Nazi regime' while advocating for Russian and Ukrainian peoples' historical unity. Since then, Russia has been applying the same disinformation playbook as in 2014 with a more dehumanising tone. However, false narratives did not manage to take root in Ukraine, which has been steadfastly defending its right to sovereignty and non-interference in its domestic affairs.

From 2014 to 2022, Moscow's disinformation ecosystem has grown in terms of the actors being involved (from Putin's inner circle and state institutional channels to independent, but Kremlin-friendly, outlets outside Russia) and of keeping up with the technological developments concerning the instruments to colour the information space. Likewise, Moscow has remained faithful to its operational pillars, most notably the 5Ds (dismiss, distort, distract, dismay and divide). Nevertheless, it has adapted them to the changing geopolitical context in the Euro-Atlantic area and, most of all, to the situation in Ukraine to justify its military aggression. The analysed Russian myths contain some elements of continuity, such as the efforts to delegitimise Kyiv's government, denounce the alleged genocide against the Russian-speaking population and to portray itself as the victim of 'Russophobia' and 'NATO expansionism'. At the same time, we notice a discourse shift to hinder Ukraine's sovereignty and territorial integrity, moving from recourse to historical arguments and 'historical unity' between Russians and Ukrainians, to the need to embark on a R2P-like mission to save Russian speakers from oppression by the 'the neo-Nazi junta' while dehumanising President Zelensky and the population through Holocaust distortion.

Such discourse shift can be contextualised within the evolution of President Putin's operational thinking to legitimise his political authority domestically and project it internationally. After taking office in 2000 through legal and rational legitimation (i.e. elections) to establish a dictatorship of the rule of law, he pursued charismatic historical legitimation to come back to the presidency in 2012 and consolidate

power. Since then, Putin has seen himself as indispensable to hold Russia together and started to promote the imperialist *Novorossiia* and *Ruskiy Mir* projects, whose practical expression were the 2014 annexation of Crimea and occupation of Donbas (Interview 5, 2023). In 2022, the quest was extended to Ukraine as a whole, not only to safeguard ethnic Russians, but also to hinder Kyiv's Europeanization through a civilizational mission against Western decadent democratic values. In this sense, the invasion provided Putin with an assist to take discourse off-ramp and broaden confrontation against the Euro-Atlantic community worldwide to fulfil the messianic mission of establishing multipolarity in the 'edging middle' or 'Global South' (*ibid.*).

Such an ideological scale-up, however, did not reflect itself in success on the battlefield or in the information space. On the one hand, the Kremlin's disinformation ecosystem, in virtue of its state-centric organisation and relevant funding (Interview 4, 2023), worked well to arouse confusion by repeating false narratives and reshaping their versions, as well as to make large layers of Western society question their governments' policies and democratic values. On the other hand, their unjustified military operations and the incontrovertible evidence about war crimes undermined pro-Russian sentiment in Ukraine, thus largely dissipating Russian constituency's support (Interview 6, 2023). Moreover, false narratives' easily disprovable nature obliged Moscow to start relying on factual information (looming inflation, energy supply crisis, rising fuel prices etc.) to discourage Western military support to Kyiv (Interview 4, 2023) which, in parallel, was regarded as the primary cause of hostilities' perpetuation. Although it managed to sow conflict fatigue at societal level (Interview 6, 2023), it had the opposite effect on Euro-Atlantic states' governments, who stepped up their support to Kyiv's cause and joined forces to target Russian political elite, economy and, indirectly, military capabilities to protract the war of attrition (Council of the EU, 2023a).

NATO and the EU have adopted action plans, codes and best practices to debunk disinformation, with the EU also sanctioning

individuals and news agencies responsible for their spread. However, as debunking is proving time- and resource-consuming, European state governments and supranational agencies need to foster coordination with independent research institutes and think tanks to monitor and counter disinformation through a whole-of-society approach, where every stakeholder can contribute with its understanding and expertise (EEAS, 2023c: 32). Initiatives in this direction are media literacy programmes at all education levels and standards of behaviour disincentivising false narratives' spread on social media. Such initiatives would eventually contribute to the more time- and cost-effective pre-bunking solutions, which tip the balance towards deterrence over reaction.

China's decision to support Russia since early 2023 is a complicating factor for conflict resolution. When it comes to countering Euro-Atlantic influence on the international arena, Beijing does not back down; nevertheless, what arouses doubt around this decision is its clash with the foreign policy principle of peaceful conflict resolution. Therefore, by diplomatically supporting Moscow while bringing it under its economic sphere of influence, Beijing is contributing to blur the non-military dynamics of the conflict, thus providing an assist to disinforming actors.

Furthermore, although Putin and Lvova-Belova's indictment by the International Criminal Court (2023) may represent a significant step towards Russia's accountability for war crimes, the Court will face difficulties to exercise its jurisdiction on individuals residing in a state which does not fall within it. Considering such difficulty, the Atlantic Council (2023a: 51) has explored two alternative avenues to establish accountability not only about war crimes, but also the spread of disinformation. First, article 20 of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights prohibits war-related propaganda and advocacy of national/racial/religious hatred inciting discrimination (UNGA, 1966). However, article 37 of the 1977 update to the 1949 Geneva Conventions does not outlaw 'ruses of war' (e.g. misinformation) (ICRC, 1977). The second option would be to prosecute, under art. 8 of the Rome Statute

(ICC, 1998), Kremlin disinformation before the invasion as evidence of preparing an aggression based on the pretext of Kyiv's alleged genocide against ethnic Russians or preparation of chemical weapons attacks (Atlantic Council, 2023b: 52-53). By referring to these potential courses of action, I hope to stimulate research following NATO Cooperative Cyber Defence Centre of Excellence's efforts to explore legal questions on information operations through the Tallinn Manual 2.0 (Ansley, 2017).

The Euro-Atlantic Community is facing a challenge within a challenge, whose compelling nature requires them to become fully fledged actors fighting for a truth-seeking information environment. Such an achievement can catalyse EU's progress towards strategic autonomy in defence matters and strengthen NATO's ability to counter hybrid threats, which is constrained by the absence of political consensus (Interview 1, 2023). Such stalemate could allow the EU to take the lead, as it can take advantage of its soft power toolbox, the same technology infrastructure as the US and a larger online audience (Interview 4, 2023) which has been targeted by disinformation to sow political polarization and exacerbate the energy crisis (Interview 6, 2023). The 3rd EU-NATO Joint Declaration's mention of the need to address FIMI (NATO, 2023a) could encourage the two organisations to harmonise their information security toolboxes and share resource burdens to counter disinformation.

In conclusion, if NATO and the EU do not read the conflict as a wake-up call for cooperation, they will fail to adapt their missions to contemporary challenges. Such urgency to act is dictated by, first, Moscow's non-contemplation of a weakened position in the international community/information landscape (Bagge, 2019: 196) and, secondly, its steadfast rejection of democratic values which, according to *RT* editor-in-chief Margarita Simonyan (2018), did not gain traction because Western countries pushed Russians to rally around them. The Euro-Atlantic community should be prepared for a long armed and information conflict to not suffer from fatigue to the point of accepting deceiving calls to negotiate peace and making concessions to Moscow. While we shall

make no assumptions about “victory” on either side, disinformation campaigns will have a lasting effect beyond the conflict (Atlantic Council, 2023a: 37).

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Interviews

Interview No. 1 with an expert from the European Values Center for Security Policy, 25 January 2023.

Interview No. 2 with an expert from the European Values Center for Security Policy, 8 February 2023.

Interview No. 3 with a former expert from the George C. Marshall European Center for Security Studies, 13-14 April 2023.

Interview No. 4 with an expert from the George C. Marshall European Center for Security Studies, 13 April 2023.

Interview No. 5 with an expert from the George C. Marshall European Center for Security Studies, 14 April 2023.

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Lectures/seminars

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