PAULA BOGÓNEZ MUÑOZ

The Russian Narrative Strategy on Telegram.
Analyzing Propaganda, Disinformation, and the Pursuit of Influence in
Colombia and Mexico in the Context of Ukraine's War

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Glasgow Student Number: 2687288B
Dublin City Student Number: 21108943
Charles Student Number: 31883925

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ABSTRACT

This paper explores the importance of propaganda's role within the social media environment, specifically as a potent weapon employed by state actors. Within the context of the Ukraine war, this investigation unravels the magnitude of this phenomenon paying attention to the actor which has harnessed this relatively new digital resource to an unprecedented degree: the Russian Federation.

Following a vast review of literature and an empirical exploration, this research highlights how Russia's utilisation of propaganda poses a major concern, especially for the United States and its allies. What renders this investigation particularly interesting is its deliberate focus on Latin America, a region where recent evidence suggests Russia is intensifying its propaganda activities. Scholarly attention remains scarce on this geographical area. To address this analytical gap, a detailed examination of Russian Telegram Embassy Channels in Colombia and Mexico is undertaken. This approach allows a better understanding of potential state sponsored and tailored propaganda, enhancing the knowledge about the phenomenon in the context of warfare.

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1. Introduction

Technological advances have changed the way society understands and participates in the world. Nowadays, connectivity with the global network system has provided citizens with unthinkable benefits. Reflecting on the recent devastating Covid-19 pandemic, one cannot help but ponder how vastly different the experience of citizens would have been without the existence of the Internet. Plausibly, a significantly greater number of people would have lost their jobs as remote opportunities would have been completely improbable. Also, students of all ages might have been forced to interrupt their formative processes due to limited access to educational resources. More importantly, individuals would have experienced more isolation as daily interactions with loved ones happened mainly through the support of digital communication platforms.

However, the increased connectivity has also promoted malicious practices capable of polarising public opinion, weakening trust in democratic institutions, justifying military interventions, and ultimately impacting the geopolitical environment. In all these endeavours, information dissemination has become a very powerful weapon. Propaganda and disinformation practices have been employed throughout history to obtain political benefits through social influence. Nevertheless, in the 21st century, their scope has extended, and their possibilities multiplied due to the existence of a digital realm and social media platforms. As will be explained in the following sections, this technological revolution has democratised access to information enabling an immediate exchange of ideas across borders and cultures. Yet, a parallel phenomenon has surfaced: malicious actors have realised the immense potential of exploiting these digital platforms to push their agendas on a global scale. Hence, this investigation aims to highlight the major implications of propaganda,

disinformation, and other kinds of intentional communication techniques on international security.

In essence, the research aims to contribute to the academic literature focused on the pressing problem of state propaganda's resurgence. To achieve this goal, a theoretical-practical approach is deemed optimal. A theoretical focus of this issue is crucial because due to its rapid emergence, propaganda-related concepts (including fake news, disinformation, weaponised information, information warfare or hybrid tools) have become popular buzzwords in journalistic articles, public discussions and academic investigations. While much effort has been made to correctly address state-sponsored propaganda, ambiguous definitions add a complexity layer to the task. For this reason, this paper is an effort to shed some conceptual light on the matter. Likewise, once the terminology has been established, it will be easier to understand why some states have strengthened their digital capabilities and integrated them as crucial components of modern warfare.

One country stands out for its distinctive role in malicious information dissemination: Russia. At the beginning of the century, previous Soviet principles regained strategic relevance and Moscow focused on building a strong propaganda machine to gain its citizens' support. After military confrontation in Estonia in 2007, Georgia in 2008 and Crimea in 2014, it became more evident than ever, for the Kremlin information superiority provided them an unmatched opportunity to influence a war's outcome. Not only that, affecting social perception outside its immediate neighbourhood could result fundamental to "challenge United States' global leadership, and ultimately cement Putin's position as the sole leader capable of protecting and defending Russians from an imagined immoral, hypocritical, and spiritually corrupt West" (Rizzuto and Hinck, 2023). In connection with this, Kremlin's actions should be examined considering its quest for great power status.

The Russia-Ukraine war's ultimate escalation on the 24th of February 2022 responds to Russia's view of an enduring Great Power competition against the West, especially the United States, the European Union and NATO. A logical assumption regarding the reason behind Russia's invasion in Ukraine is it responds to geographical-historical parameters. Indeed, this is the reasoning presented in Ukraine's Official Website, which asserts that Vladimir Putin sees Ukrainian and Russian territory as one nation that must be unified, as it was during Soviet times. Not surprisingly, the Russian President defined the Soviet Union's collapse as the "greatest geopolitical disorder of the [20th] century" (Brand Ukraine, 2023). From an objective perspective, this vision falls short and does not reflect Russia as utilising propaganda in the context of the war in Ukraine to advance its global interests and disrupt the established power structures.

The motivation behind this research is to deepen the understanding of propaganda's influence in the 21st century, specifically concerning malicious state actors' intentions to alter the existing power balance in underexplored areas. Latin America is one of these under-explored territories. Although historical ties between Russia and some countries from the region -such as Venezuela or Cuba- have been explored, Kremlin's influence in the region has been studied mainly from a military and diplomatic perspective. In the context of the war in Ukraine, flourishing preoccupation has arisen from many journalists that have pointed out how Russia is targeting Spanish-speaking users in a very carefully orchestrated disinformation campaign. Therefore, the dissertation intends to fill this gap by utilising the information warfare framework to understand Russia's propaganda campaign in Latin America, its scope and potential implications for international security.

Therefore, Kremlin's interest in Latin America should not be ignored. Due to the ties Colombia and Mexico hold with the United States, a close study of Russia's diplomatic channels in these countries can shed some light on how Moscow is, and presumably will, present itself to increase its support in fairly neutral populations. To achieve the research objectives, this study employs a mixed-method approach, which comprises content analysis of Russian embassies' Telegram Channels in Colombia and Mexico and a qualitative examination of their messaging patterns. This approach allows for a nuanced understanding of the narratives propagated and the channels through which they are disseminated. The social media platform Telegram has increased its significance as a source of information about the war, therefore this study could contribute to a better understanding of how the messaging app is being used by state actors to advance their global agenda.

After some preliminary considerations and the outline of the objectives of the thesis, the investigation is structured in the following manner. Chapter 3 provides an in-depth conceptual clarification on terminology of the topic and outlines the main analytical framework under which this investigation operates. Chapter 5 examines Russia's employment of propaganda in the last few years. Chapter 6 explains the regained value of Latin America for Russia and delves into the country's propaganda manoeuvres in the region. Chapter 7 corresponds to the empirical part of the investigation and studies propaganda dissemination in the Russian Embassy Telegram Channels in Colombia and Mexico.

1.1. Objectives

This research aims to examine the ramifications of Russian propaganda and disinformation within the contemporary landscape of the 21st century. Its primary focus is to understand the extent to which the Kremlin has weaponised information to advance its global influence, with a specific emphasis on its

activities in Latin America. Consequently, this study undertakes an empirical analysis of Russian Colombia and Mexico Embassies' channels.

Although Russia's weaponisation of information via digital environment is a well-documented phenomenon, scant attention has been directed to the Latin American sphere. This research aims to bridge the existing gap.

Specific objectives:

- Provide conceptual clarifications to contextualise the menace posed by state-sponsored propaganda and disinformation.
- Develop Russia's understanding of information security and hot that translates into their propaganda activities in the digital environment.
- Explain Russia's engagement with the Latin American region from an informational perspective.
- Examine Russian interests in Latin American and identify existing vulnerabilities in the region susceptible to exploitation by the Kremlin.
- Discover potentially customised propagandistic information in the contexts of Colombia and Mexico

2. Methodology

2.1. Methodological approach

The methodological approach of this investigation will be clarified following the classification established by Rafael Calduch (1998). Following the expert's categorisation, this study falls under the qualitative typology, and it combines both descriptive and analytical methods.

Regarding the first method, few remarks must be made. For the appropriate approach to the object of study, an extensive bibliographical review will be provided in order to clarify fundamental concepts information-related as well as to contextualise the emergence of state-backed malicious digital activities and the decisive role social media platforms specifically -and overall, the Internet- has played on it. In this sense, investigations conducted by experts from the fields of security, communication, military, and international relations have been widely reviewed. In addition to this, Russian Federation and United States' statements and official documents have also been incorporated into the corpus of the thesis under the assumption they illustrate how information has increasingly been introduced in their security agendas as a matter of priority. Therefore, the first section of the paper will mainly adopt a descriptive qualitative methodology based on the review of documents that provide relevant information about the selected research subject.

The second part of the investigation applies the theoretical inferences outlined in the first section to Russia's informational intervention in Latin America. Accordingly, this section is an empirical study carried out using the content analysis technique. This method involves "any technique for making inferences by objectively and systematically identifying specified characteristics of messages" (Holsti, 1969 p.14) and it is useful for "making replicable and valid inferenced from texts (or other meaningful matter) to the contexts of their use" (Krippendorff, 2004 p.18). Social science scholars have frequently employed content analysis as a research tool due to its ability to comprehensively identify distinct patterns within a defined set of information and emphasise the significance of the context in which these patterns emerge. This methodology is particularly valuable when examining potential propagandistic elements within the dynamic media landscape.

In the early stages, content analysis was primarily employed to investigate the development, execution, and potential consequences of propaganda in the context of military conflicts. This interest stemmed from the assumption that propaganda played a crucial role as a warfare tool, capable of shaping public perception of a conflict and ultimately lead to significant socio-political transformations at a broader macro-level (Lilleker and Surowiec, 2019). Nowadays, propaganda associated to military conflict is still the subject of content analysis research. However, the methodological technique has gone through important updates to accommodate the new digital media landscape. Social media has facilitated communication among population on a vast scale, overcoming physical, time and technical constraints.

Following this technological innovation, the amount of information exchange via digital has inspired researchers to inspect who, what, why, how, to whom and with what intention of these online messages. Content analysis has been one of the preferred methods as it allows to systematically analyse and evaluate data of various typologies such as texts, images, videos, or audios to decipher specific patterns, themes or characteristics present within the content (Columbia University Mailman School of Public Health, 2023). An example of this investigation is found in Abu Mualla's research. Using content analysis, the expert conducts an analytical study of Israeli official propaganda on the social network Facebook to demonise and intimidate Palestinian citizens in the context of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict (Abu Mualla, 2017). Similarly, Seo and Ebrahim (2016) develop a comparative investigation to examine the different propagandistic visual strategies of the Syrian President Bashar al-Assad and Syrian Coalition and Opposition with the goal of illustrating the main themes circulated by the two main rival factions of the Syrian conflict. Russia's propaganda activities have also received attention from a content analysis perspective. Golovchenko (2020) utilised this technique to uncover

disinformation narratives and their general in Twitter during Russia's illegal annexation of Crimea in 2014.

Russian propaganda techniques take place in both, open and covert channels. An important part of the literature has focused on inspecting how state-funded media outlets such as RT and Sputnik distribute Russia's vision in the digital environment. On contrast, there are still scarce investigations on Russian official channels that ultimately represent the main principles guiding the Kremlin's influence propaganda operations. Additionally, when addressed, the focus is on the Facebook or Twitter accounts of general institutions digital presence such as the Ministry of Internal Affairs, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, the Government of Russia or the President of Russia. Even if this type of research is needed to understand how the Kremlin's shows itself to the world, it can also be limited. Typically, these accounts generate and disseminate thousands of messages daily, making it challenging to conduct a comprehensive investigation that incorporates all the data. Another drawback is that these channels, being representatives of high-level entities, tend to focus on general topics, obscuring potential specific Russian disinformation techniques depending on the context in which they are applied.

These circumstances have been recognised in the existing literature covering the issue of Russian propaganda in Latin American countries. Existing research is often general and does not make any distinction by country, as is the case in the case of European countries. For the above-mentioned reasons, two case studies have been selected for the empirical analysis: the Telegram accounts of the Russian Embassy in Mexico and the Russian Embassy in Colombia. Country-by-country empirical analysis provides the benefit of detecting potential variability of narratives. That is, the research is conducted under the assumption that Russia is possibly tailoring its propagandistic approaches on Latin American countries depending on their specific geopolitical situation, historical

context, or domestic issues. If such a scenario were to occur, comprehending customised Russian propaganda would not just reveal propagandistic patterns but also illuminate the necessity of formulating targeted countermeasures and response strategies to mitigate the potential effects on the country's public opinion and political landscape.

2.2. Data collection and case studies

The selection of Russian embassies' Telegram channels for the empirical investigation is justified based on several criteria. The first factor considered was that the chosen embassies must have had an active account on Telegram. There were potentially interesting cases with representation in Twitter or Facebook, but they were finally not selected as the research aimed at conducting the investigation on Telegram for this social media platform's limited content moderation. Since the invasion of Ukraine began on the 24th of February 2022, Telegram reached an incredible influence in the way the war was related to the audience in part because of its founder's emphasis on privacy and hand-off content approach. In the words of Masha Borak, the messaging app has become a "tool of misinformation and manipulation -with users struggling to decipher the reality in the flood of information coming from their phones (…). Telegram has become the window into a war that has destabilised the world", who also defines the platform as a "haven" for those escaping censorship as it gives more freedom to disseminate any type of content through its broadcast-only channels (Borak, 2023).

Secondly, governmental ties with Russia were another determinant element while choosing the subjects of research. The investigation stems from the assumption that Russia is engaged in a propaganda competition, utilising information as a strategic weapon to further its global interests. Therefore, it

was deemed more relevant to analyse Russia's informative actions in the embassies of countries that do not exhibit a distinct sympathy towards Moscow.

Additionally, the condition of geographical proximity was also taken into account, reaching the conclusion it was necessary to include Mexico among the chosen case studies. The proximity factor enhances the likelihood of security implications of disinformation practices for the United States, which remains Russia's main adversary in its contest to reshape the organisation of power internationally.

In the case of Colombia, an intriguing coincidence further supported its selection as a case study. The embassy's Telegram channel was observed to have opened shortly after the war in Ukraine began. This temporal correlation made it particularly interesting to scrutinise the main themes covered by the channel, especially which related propaganda and its subtypes.

The timeframe of the sample covers all messages produced by each embassy from the 4th of March 2022 (day in which the Russian embassy in Colombia channel was created) until the 4th of March 2023. It must be noted both of them are verified as official sources from the Russian government. For each of the embassies we present the total sample of results collected and analysed:

- Embassy of Russia in Colombia (Rusia en Colombia – 463 Followers): 55
- Embassy of Russia in Mexico (Embajada de Rusia en Mexico – 11.497 Followers): 272

To collect the information, two spreadsheet documents were prepared to collect all the information about each post, including: content, source, publishing date, thematic and reactions.

3. Preliminary considerations

The development of the dissertation encounters various significant limitations that warrant consideration. Firstly, the focus on an on-going conflict introduces a dynamic aspect to the research as new information emerges every day. Nonetheless, it is important to acknowledge that the analysed sample covers a year time period, sufficiently extensive to ensure the formulation of insightful inferences and conclusions. Despite this limitation, the data extracted for the elaboration of this thesis presents a valuable opportunity to identify information patterns and trends in Russia's Latin American strategy that could motivate further research on the topic considering the growing digital presence of Russian narratives in the Global South.

The second constraint to inspect is connected to the decision to conduct a comparative analysis with two countries. The Latin American region is composed of thirty-three countries, with their distinct socio-political conditions. Given the considerable diversity in this region, it is imperative to interpret the findings with prudence. Rather than seeking to find the overall strategy employed by Russia in the region, the primary objective of this investigation is to offer hints, ideas and explanations on the ways Moscow can, and probably will, try to influence audiences from the region to achieve support for their military operations and Ukraine as well as to undermine confidence in north American and western institutions and values.

Lastly, it is accurate to affirm social media is one of the major sources of information about societies ever existed. From an academic perspective, the access to vast volumes of digital data instantaneously provides infinite opportunities for scientific research. Nevertheless, it is crucial to underscore that such access often occurs without a clear agreement between the subject of study and the researcher conducting the investigation. While bots and digital trolls

undoubtedly constitute a significant portion of digital accounts, real individuals participate in these platforms, and it is rightful to protect their privacy rights. This is an ethical consideration that arose while crafting the methodological approach and ultimately led to an exclusive focus on official Russian Telegram channels. Through this approach, the research seeks to mitigate potential concerns regarding the invasion of privacy and the ethical implications of gathering information without explicit consent.

4. Analytical Framework and Conceptual Clarification

4.1. Framing

This chapter delves into two aspects crucial to grasp the context of this investigation. Firstly, it will provide a conceptual clarification of the terminology used, aiming to distinguish and interconnect propaganda, disinformation, misinformation, malinformation and fake news. As these terms have become buzzwords in our daily life, the discussion aims to clarify concepts, highlight on-going debates, and establish the conception held in the paper in relation to the terminologies. Once this conceptualisation is clarified, an enquiry will examine the analytical framework, shedding light on how some states employ these communication strategies in the digital world as tools of warfare. Finally, a deeper explanation on the main subject of this investigation, Russia, will be offered. This will help to understand Moscow's vision of the information environment and how from this stance derive illicit propagandistic activities that are framed by Russian activities as defensive in nature.

4.2. Setting the Base: Conceptualising Propaganda and Disinformation

Since the beginning of the 21st century, scholars have advised the advent of a new era characterised by the information revolution as its scope, shape and characteristics progressively changed the way humans interact in their daily

lives. Although there is little doubt about its transformative potential, its characteristics and effects are highly debated among academic and public spheres. However, this should not come as a surprise, as it clearly reflects both the complexity of the information environment in the last decades as well as its capacity to rapidly mutate. Indeed, one can think that before the complete adjustment to the Internet had happened, there are already new development - such as artificial intelligence models- that outpace the capacity of governments to ensure a safe digital environment for society.

However, some authors have argued that the approach to understand this information revolution is not correctly conceptualised. In this sense, Alan Gilchrist (2013) argues that the main problem comes with the "information" element. In his opinion, the term is so widely used that its meaning is diffused, and therefore it is difficult to assume a revolution of it. In order to deepen his critique, the author refers to Abbot's work by reproducing his quote:

> "Often, it appears, information is regarded as a kind of homogenous fluid, an indifferent material whose processing demonstrates the wizardry of our technology, but which in itself should concern us no more than the electricity supply that makes computing possible" (Abbot, 1999, p. 1).

The author then, does not neglect information as a fundamental element of the transformation, but highlights the changes in how the information is exchanged as the decisive component of the revolution. For this reason, Gilchrist (2013) supports that, to understand the implications and challenges of this revolution, we must understand it as a communication revolution. More precisely, as a specific stage that, through telecommunication systems, mass media and the Internet, has resulted in the interconnection of most of the population.

This differentiation might not seem particularly relevant, but it is basic to understand the relevance that the disinformation and propaganda practices have reached nowadays. Meanwhile, neither of these phenomena are specific from our times; they have become the object of increased attention.

A visual representation of this can be seen by using the Google Trends tool. This feature allows a user to analyse how frequently a certain term has been entered into the Google's search engine over a specific period of time. As the world's most popular search engine with over 85% of the market share (Chaffey, 2023) it provides a glimpse of how some trends have developed in the past years. For the purpose of this paper, it is representative to inspect the attention words as "disinformation", "fake news", "malinformation", "misinformation" or "propaganda" have received. When searching for these terms on Trends we can see how in the past years the interest over them has increased significantly (See *Apendix 1*)[1]. Meanwhile fake news achieved popularity especially after 2015, the other three terms regained interest in 2021.

When observing this overview isolated, one might hastily conclude that the increased attention stems from the diverse array of challenges these informative endeavours present to society, including the polarisation of public opinion, the promotion of violent extremism and hate speech, or the undermining of democratic systems (European Commission, 2023). Nonetheless, it is not merely their existence that has become profoundly threatening, but rather their proliferation due to the emergence of new and improved digital communication channels. For this reason, it is important to keep in mind the distinction made by Gilchrist (2013), as these types of information have been used for various

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[1] In Google Trends the interest over time is represented with a number ranging from 0 to 100, depending on the highest point on the chart for the given region and time. Therefore, a score of 100 represents the peak popularity achieved for the term, meanwhile a score of 0 means a term has not been introduced in the Google Search Engine frequently enough to be representatively significant. Source: https://www.wordstream.com/google-trends

purposes, but it is their use in the current digital environment that makes them succinctly different than before.

In relation to this matter, Natalie Nougayrède (2018 para. 6) confirms that "the use of propaganda is ancient, but never before has there been the technology to so effectively disseminate it". Historians trace the origins of propaganda, disinformation, and misinformation back to the era of the Roman Empire, demonstrating their enduring presence in society over centuries. In their comprehensive publication titled "A concise historical survey of fake news and disinformation," Julie Posetti and Alice Matthews (2018) provide a well-structured analysis of the evolutionary trajectory of this phenomenon throughout history. They explore various instances, ranging from Octavian's successful smear campaign to secure his position as Roman Emperor, to the notorious Great Moon Hoax of 1835 -made possible by the advent of the Gutenberg press in 1493-, as well as the emergence of modern communication tools like radio and television, which facilitated the widespread dissemination of ambiguous or false information among the public.

However, as stated above, if the interest on this communication strategy has been widely explored for centuries, in the last two decades the investigations on the matter have grown exponentially due to the rise of social media. In this sense, the initial optimistic view about digital platforms as empowering tools for the powerless faded, and it has been substituted by pessimism as its negative consequences become more evident (Wolf, 2015). In the same line of argumentation Andre M. Guess and Benjamin A. Lyons explain:

> "Not that long ago, the rise of social media inspired great optimism about its potential for flattering access to economic and political opportunity, enabling collective action, and facilitating new forms of expression (…). Several political upheavals and an election later, the outlook in both the

popular press and scholarly discussions is decidedly less optimistic. Facebook and Twitter are more likely to be discussed as incubators of "fake news" and propaganda than as tools for empowerment and social change. The resulting research focus has changed, too, with scholars looking to earlier literatures on misperceptions and persuasion for insight into the challenges of the present" (Guess and Lyons, 2020, p. 2).

Nevertheless, it is important to note that despite the long-lasting historical presence of these practices, they should not be regarded as a uniform or homogenous activity. Indeed, "fake news", "disinformation", "misinformation" and "propaganda" all revolve around false or misleading information that is spread in the communicative action as informative content (Ibid). However, there are discernible differences among each type, including variations on intent, the actors who employ them and the outcomes they seek to achieve. Recent years have witnessed a significant surge in public interest surrounding these communicative practices, as they have become an integral part of everyday discourse. This widespread attention has led to a tendency to use these terms interchangeably, treating them on many occasions as synonymous. On other occasions, it can be inferred from the context in which they are mentioned that they refer to distinctive circumstances, but without delving into their meaning, the interpretation is left to the reader's imagination.

While achieving a flawless comprehension and application of these concepts may be unattainable, it is the responsibility of academia to spearhead effort to ensure that their meanings do not become devoid of substance. Therefore, it is crucial to first examine the specific understanding of each term as well as the specific framework under which they operate.

According to the Oxford's English Dictionary, propaganda is the "systematic dissemination of information, especially in a biased or misleading way, in order

to promote a political cause or point of view" (European Parliament, 2015 para. 2). As an article from Johns Hopkins University indicates, it is important to highlight that this definition that does not insinuate propaganda always involves "speech or writing that has no basis in facts" (John Hopkins, 2023 para. 2). On the contrary, propaganda can -and usually is- based on facts, which are puzzled in a certain way to provoke a specific reaction in the targeted audience. The definition offered by Benkler, Faris and Robert (2018, p. 29) is more complete as it highlights this feature: "communication designed to manipulate a target population by affecting its beliefs, attitudes, or preferences in order to obtain behaviour compliant with political goals of the propagandist".

On another note, when examining propaganda, one must keep in mind that its biased or misleading nature does not mean it is always malicious. "It is neither bad nor good, what is imperative is how it is practiced by the perpetrator", clarifies Ontlotlile Seemela (2022) from the University of South Africa. The brilliant essay "Martin Luther King Jr. on Democratic Propaganda, Shame, and Moral Transformation", written by Meena Krishnamurthy (2022), demonstrates how propaganda can -and has been-used for the good. In the document, the author dives into King's work to explain how the leader used a specific form of propaganda -referred as "democratic propaganda"- to combat political inaction of a wide sector of the population in the civil rights movement. He understood the reluctant attitude of white moderates not as misunderstanding of the unjust social situation but a lack of sufficient motivation to actively participate in the movement. For this reason, the leader used a diverse array of rhetoric strategies to persuade them that the only way to achieve change was through social mobilisation (Krishnamurthy, 2022). An important lesson to draw from this example is that propaganda can serve as a tool wielded by a particular actor who perceives the act of communication as a valuable opportunity to achieve a desired objective, regardless of the ethical nature behind it.

Considering the aforementioned, it can be assumed that propaganda, when effectively employed, can serve as a powerful tool of influence and control. It possesses the capacity to shape narrative, manipulate public perception and sway opinion. In addition, this potential has been exacerbated as the digital environment allows an unprecedent proliferation of information, both, in terms of speed and reach. The exponential growth in the accessibility and velocity of information transmission has developed in parallel with the number of actors that actively participate in the dissemination of information, as well as propaganda. As communication channels continue to diversify, extending beyond the confines of traditional news outlets and professional journalists, political actors, conspiracy theorists, and hate groups have discovered a powerful resource for disseminating their propaganda. Consequently, in recent years, the term "propaganda" has become predominantly associated with a negative connotation.

A parallel response arises when "disinformation", "misinformation", "malinformation" or "fake news" are invoked. Nevertheless, these concepts are more contemporary compared to the long-lasting practices of propaganda, which, as mentioned earlier, have spanned centuries. Unlike propaganda, this proliferation has witnessed significant growth in recent times as pivotal events such as the 2016 United States Presidential election, the Covid-19 pandemic, the Brexit referendum and, lastly, the Ukrainian war have demonstrated the power narrative can have.

These specific historical events have acted as catalysts, triggering widespread concerns and raising flags regarding the immediate and long-term implications of information flows in an increasingly digitalised mass media landscape. In some cases, their example has cast doubt on well-established democratic systems, as exemplified by the 2016 United States presidential election. In this regard, the experts Allcott and Gentzkow (2017, p. 212) highlight how fake

news played a potentially determinant role in the election to an extent that "Donald Trump would not have even been selected president were it not for the influence of fake news". Similarly, in a statement to the Spanish newspaper El Periódico, Juan Fernando López Aguilar, Member of the European Parliament, highlighted the role of these phenomena in the successful Brexit movement indicating the following:

> "For the first time in history, a country within the EU, as a result of misinformation, disinformation, and fake news, and by a slim majority of just three points over the minority that voted against it in the unfortunate referendum of 2016, is leaving the European Union" (El Periódico, 2020 para. 5).

On another note, amidst the backdrop of the Covid-19 pandemic, effective information management emerged as a critical factor, as the outbreak of the virus posed unprecedented challenges to international bodies and nation-states. Unfortunately, alongside the virus itself, an equally pervasive "infodemic" emerged, fuelled by incorrect, biased and intentionally misleading information. The fast expansion of misleading or incorrect information about the pandemic intensified public confusion, hindered the implementation of effective policies, and undermined the trust on institutions (Tagliabue et al., 2020).

Lastly, the reference to the war in Ukraine is not coincidental. On the contrary, it is within this framework that this research holds significance and relevance. The conflict has served as the latest -and, for some, the most blatant- example of how the information environment is increasingly becoming a pseudo battleground, where rival actors vie to sway popular support in their favour. In this game, strategies have diversified, and the relatively low costs of disseminating dubious content on a large scale have enabled benefits that certain nation-states already seem to have recognised. The European Digital Media

Observatory highlights how the spread of these specific practices is enhancing information disorder about the war, impacting society and decision makers whose moves might be fundamental in the conflict's outcome (European Digital Media Observatory, 2022).

This initial exploration of the actual use of digital communication channels by states in the current era serves the purpose of highlighting the specific typology of propaganda that is particularly relevant to this research: state-sponsored propaganda. Within the scope of this study, propaganda is comprehended as the overarching instrument employed by Russia to disseminate its narrative and foster ambiguity and scepticism towards Western entities, notably NATO and the United States. With that being said, the remaining terms that will now be explicated should be comprehended, in the context of this document, as specific manifestations of propaganda through which some states, such as Russia, intend to contest support in the international sphere via narrative bombardment.

One more remark should be addressed. What is at stake for these actors is not only obtaining support for the own's side of the conflict decisions and actions, but also the capability to influence the citizen's perception on the conflict itself. In other words, digital mass media communication is an interesting tool in the hands of nation states not only to gather support about what is being conducted in the battlefield but also to insert doubt about what the reality of the conflict is. In this sense, narrative can allow that certain actions and decision are seen from a diametrically different perspective than that of its opponent presents.

The terminological confusion referred has been acknowledged before, and it is the main reason which led Wardle and Derankshan (2020) to reflect on the language used to address such a complex phenomenon. In their opinion, "disinformation" was too wide and generic to refer to the intentionally manipulated information used to achieve predefined political objectives. As a

result, they categorised the three informative disorders of "misinformation", "disinformation" and "malinformation" attending to whether the false, erroneous or misleading information does not have the intention to harm third parties; if this information is disseminated deliberately; and, lastly, it the message has a clear harmful goal.

Three main elements emerge when differentiating these terms: intent, content veracity, and harm. Attending to these factors, the Cybersecurity and Infrastructure Security Agency (CISA) of the United States created a glossary for each type of propaganda subtype that is more concrete. According to CISA (2023, para. 6), misinformation "is false, but not created or shared with the intention of causing harm"; disinformation "is deliberately created to mislead, harm or manipulate a person, social group, organisation or country"; and, lastly, malinformation "is based on fact, but used out of context to mislead, harm, or manipulate" (Ibid para. 8).

To summarise, in the first case, we are referring to the dissemination of information that is, in fact, fake, regardless of whether there is an intention to mislead, confuse or provoke a certain reaction. In the second case, the nature of the information shared is not what defines the category, but the intention behind its dissemination. In the last case, even though the information can be real, the way it is presented provides manipulation opportunities.

These definitions provide experts a useful guide to conduct their investigations. However, as digital communications have massified their use, further investigation is needed to fill existing gaps. In relation to this, the definitions provided for the addressed categories allow some degree of interpretation. One may think determining intention of "disinformation" or "misinformation" is subjective as personal assumptions can play a role into the perception of a certain event. This is a valid concern, as it is questioning the cause-effect

reasoning. In this sense, public incidents can sometimes be linked to a previous mass media campaign -for which there is enough evidence that was stimulated by an actor that wanted to achieve benefits dishonestly-, but this does not conclude that it was intentionally drafted to cause harm. These are just some examples that illustrate the complexity of categorising these similar-sounding concepts.

CISA (2023) does not make an explicit mention of "fake news" when discussing the threat of propaganda perpetrated. Similarly, the European Commission avoids the term in its analysis of the increasing threat of online disinformation and misinformation campaigns. The European body acknowledges the potential consequences of these "disinformation" and "misinformation" campaigns due to their growing prominence as instruments to delegitimise democratic institutions, polarise public opinion, and Europeans' health, security, and environment at risk (European Commission, 2023). A High-Level Group prepared a document for the European Commission holding the same principle, the main threat and concern for the union should be disinformation practices and not fake news. The views expressed in the report sustain this argumentation for two main reasons. The first one is fake news' inability to capture the complexity of disinformation as it encompasses a wide spectrum of information types. Secondly, fake news is misleading, as it has become a resource increasingly utilised by some politicians and like-minded enthusiasts to undermine trust in news media (European Commission, 2018).

Although there might be alternative plausible explanations for this omission, it is logical to think that the term "fake news" lacks sufficient explanatory capability. Although its existence can be traced back to the 19th century, Donald Trump popularised the term in 2016 -to the point Collins Dictionary coined it as the word of the year in 2017. Since then, many experts argue that it has

become so "repeated in the media context, which has made its meaning more equivocal" (Baptista and Gradim, 2020, p. 4).

Because of this, the researcher from the University of Bristol, Habgood Coote (2018), advocates for the omission of this word in "Stop talking about fake news!". In his opinion, the term has been used to refer to so many incompatible realities that it has become empty of relevant meaning. After reviewing an extensive amount of literature around the topic, he concludes that there are "advocates for just about every possible way of defining fake news (…), each usage has a radically different extension, going some way towards the current confusion around the term" (Coote, 2018 p.7). While some people refer with it to any bad information, others apply it to satire, parody, advertisement, fabricated claims, manipulated images or information that mimics news media format, political claims etc. Lastly, he suggests that the term has become so politically charged that it cannot provide any light to rigorous academic research. The debate extends beyond definition parameters as the question of whether intent should be taken into consideration when categorising something as fake news arises (Baptista and Gradim, 2020).

For these reasons, this study will have no reference to fake news when addressing Russia's information strategy in Mexico and Colombia. Despite this consciousness, however, some definitions of the term resemble the subject of this study, and its polysemy may affect the comprehension and clarity of the investigation.

4.3. Digital propaganda in the context of geopolitical competition

So far, we have presented an explanation of how over the past few decades propaganda and its diverse subtypes have become a worrisome phenomenon. Nonetheless, in order to grasp the complexity of the threat, it is crucial to now

focus on the actors involved in these communication strategies as well as the specific circumstances under which this tool is being employed. Only analysing these components will make sense of the bigger picture of propaganda and why it has been capable of raising alarms in the West.

The United Nations Universal Declaration of Human Rights compiles a set of principles to ensure citizens' rights are protected globally from potential abuses. Article 19 addresses freedom of expression in the following manner:

> "Everyone has the right to freedom of opinion and expression; this right includes freedom to hold opinions without interference and to seek, receive and impart information and ideas through any media and regardless of frontiers" (United Nations General Assembly, 1948 para.36).

Complementary to this clause, in 1946 Resolution 59 of the United Nations General Assembly also stipulated the freedom of information as an integral part of the fundamental right of freedom of expression. The resolution contained this statement:

> "Freedom of information is a fundamental human right and is the touchstone of all the freedoms to which the United Nations is consecrated (…). Freedom of information requires as an indispensable element the willingness and capacity to employ its privileges without abuse. It requires as a basic discipline the moral obligation to seek the facts without prejudice and to spread knowledge without malicious intent" (United Nations General Assembly, 1946 para. 10).

The advent of the Internet and the astonishing rise of social media sites have played a pivotal role in the malicious exploitation of these rights. Although it

seems clear from the United Nations' perspective that freedom of information is limited by certain moral limits, in practice these are not being respected equally by all actors that create, disseminate, and consume information in the digital world.

In this sense, in their report on disinformation, Cyber Risk Gmbh (2023) highlight a paradox related to the idea of freedom of information. In their opinion, while more freedom of information is in general terms beneficial as it increases transparency and the possibility to receive messages from different sources, it also involves certain difficulty when individuals face the challenge to correctly identify truthful information and its contrary. If we think about it, our parents and grandparents' communication sources not that long ago were the television, the radio, or the newspapers. Now, digital platforms are becoming so popular because of their easy accessibility, summarised structure, and capacity to maintain the user's attention on the screen that more people every year are turning to the big social networks to consult the news.

According to the Pew Research Centre's (2022) latest statistics, 60% of adults in the United States consume news from social media sometimes or often. The media researcher Amy Watson (2023) conducted a survey between January and February 2023 to investigate the same aspect, founding similar results for other countries. Indeed, Colombia (64%) and Mexico (65%) ranked 10th and 11th respectively when looking at the share of adults who use social media as a source of news.

The benefits offered by the digital media landscape have attracted many individuals to spend an increasing amount of their time scrolling down these easily accessible feeds. However, this has not gone unnoticed by other actors who see a unique opportunity to exploit the digital realm to fulfil their interests. Certainly, the awareness regarding propaganda has evolved as certain states

have refined their strategies to exert influence through carefully drafted digital strategies, policies, and campaigns. The most known examples of these are China and Russia as their digital communication practices lead many experts to raise concern about the use of information as a weapon, what has also been called with the sentence "weaponisation of information". Once again, this strategy is not new, but social media has allowed an audience infiltration never seen before (Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development, 2022).

It is useful to reiterate a few examples that were mentioned before because they have been milestones of propaganda proliferation in recent years. To begin with, in relation with the Covid-19 pandemic, two disparate narratives emerged about the virus spread. Many westerners agreed on the narrative that Chinese authorities did not act for the general benefit and selfishly decided to hide what was happening in the country when the illness rapidly spread in the Wuhan region. According to Victor Lin PU (2021), former staffer of the National Security Centre, there is an alternative lecture of the events that indicates that China made an unmeasurable effort to contain the disease while other countries prepared for what it would follow in the next months. Not surprisingly, the latter is what China wanted the people -or at least their people- to believe as the truth. A coordinated multi-layered effort was implemented, and it included trolling factions to influence the general sentiment of citizens in the digital environment.

What is noteworthy about this case is not simply the regime's ability to refute accusations backed by substantial evidence, but rather the bigger picture of propaganda campaigns in the context of geopolitical competition. In other words, Beijing's decision to launch a disinformation campaign focused on the pandemic employing both state-owned and private resources, should not be only interpreted as a reactive measure aimed at safeguarding the Chinese Communist Party's reputation in the eyes of the international community. Rather, this response to the outbreak serves as an example of the ongoing Great Power

Competition in which China is engaged against the West, with the United States being the primarily focal point of blame (Wendler, 2021).

In consequence, this investigation is based on the perspective that the character of traditional war is changing as international state powers have renewed their approaches to achieve their interests through methods that do not always involve direct confrontation. The deliberate weaponisation of information is one of these new strategies as the main competitors in the international arena have detected opportunities to take advantage of the new communication channels.

4.4. Weaponised information: a valuable addition to Russia's hybrid toolkit

Although China's case provides a first overview about the threat of propaganda as a subtype of weaponised information, the discussion will now focus on Russia, the subject of this investigation. Previously, the 2016 United States presidential elections and the Ukraine war were alluded as they represented how the changes on information flows via internet are impacting public sentiment towards a given topic. In both incidents, Russia actively weaponised information to achieve predefined objectives set on its global agenda.

The European Center for Populism Studies (Paul and Matthews, 2016) points out towards Russia as a key player employing weaponised information to erode trust in the authenticity of information and manipulate public opinion. But what is exactly the weaponisation of information? Does it only revolve around propaganda practices? Are there other vectors that should also receive attention?

Before addressing these questions, it is important to first define the weaponisation of information. It has been described as a "message or content piece that is designed to affect the recipient's perception about something in a way that is not warranted" (Wigmore, 2017 para.1). In our view, this definition

is incomplete because it fails to incorporate certain crucial characteristics pertaining to the specific situation in which weaponised information is being operated and by whom. Additionally, it is crucial to stress these singularities' importance due to the risk of misunderstanding weaponised information as propaganda and completely blurring the connection between them.

Firstly, we agree with Sophia Ignatidou (2019), Chatham House researcher on digital communication and surveillance, who argues that the focus should not be only on information but on the weaponisation of the communication systems through which information is shared globally. In this sense, the expert mentions the power conferred by tech companies to propagandist actors by the creation of a priceless tool that increases their capability of penetrating the social layer across the globe. In this sense, Ignatidou specifies two elements have come together to allow the quick spread of propaganda: modern digital communications and actors who understand the increased vulnerability of citizens to propaganda and disinformation practices resulting from these technological advances.

Secondly, discussing weaponised information requires a reflection on its terminology for a better understanding of its distinction from propaganda. The use of a warfare-related term (weapon) to name the phenomenon indirectly connects it to the notion of conflict. Does this mean any questionable messages interchanged through digital newspapers or posted in a social media platform must be looked at as a part of a massive conflict with potentially as many vectors as digital users? Absolutely not. The crucial factor that differentiates weaponised information from ordinary propaganda lies in the surrounding environment in which propagandistic information is inserted, usually by a mastermind responsible for the operation. In times of conflict, weapons are one of the main resorts to defeat an opponent. Coincidentally, while opening the first media military festival in 2015, the Russian Minister of Defence Sergei Shoigu

stated that "words also shoot" (Splidsboel Hansen, 2017). This declaration underscores the significant role of information dissemination for certain states that seek to garner public support through non-kinetic means.

At present, the concept of weaponised information is primarily associated with state actors. While it is plausible that other public or private players may adopt similar tactics in the near future, they currently lack the necessary financial and human resources to achieve a narrative dissemination comparable to that of states. Flemming Splidsboel Hansen comments this aspect mentioning Russia's well-established information structure:

> "Concerted efforts have resulted in the super-spreading of fabricated information. This new war is being waged by tech geeks, like Russia's Internet Research Agency, that can launch an organised and strategic alternate campaign, and not by nuclear weapons, which are antiquated and expensive" (Splidsboel Hansen, 2017 p. 13).

In relation with Hansen's statement, weaponised information is not a singular, instantaneous action that can be quickly deployed or can achieve results immediately. For obvious reasons, it has to be in accordance with the broader objectives defined by the state in its foreign agenda, and it can be readapted depending on the geopolitical circumstances. For example, Former Acting Director of the CIA Michael Morrell observed that Russia's main goal when introducing propaganda campaigns in the past years was to manipulate American citizens, especially when it came to presidential elections preferences. However, the war in Ukraine demonstrates that Russia has various fronts open, and it employs weaponised information in many of them (Bertrand, 2016).

The Committee on Foreign Affairs from the House of Representatives of the United States met in April 2015 to address this issue in the House Hearing 114

Congress, titled "Confronting Russia's Weaponisation of Information". The alarming tone regarding Russia's manipulation campaign provides enough evidence to understand weaponised information as a serious threat to the United States and its European partners. During the hearing, the members highlighted Russia's propaganda machine is in overdrive, with over 600 million dollars spent annually to presumably jeopardise democracy.

> "It is long past due that we take a hard look at this challenge. The Kremlin's disorientation campaign goes beyond political spin and disinformation. Propaganda is a critical element of Russia's so called hybrid warfare strategy, a strategy of devastating display in occupied Crime and war-torn eastern Ukraine. Coupled with cyber-attacks, and other covert operations, these new capabilities and Vladimir Putin's belligerence pose a direct threat to our allies and our interests. These measures are well financed, these measures are working, and these measures demand a robust response. (…) This strategy is not just to disseminate lied but to sow doubt and confusion, especially about what is happening in Ukraine (United States Committee of Foreign Affairs, 2015 p. 4).

Given the relatively minimal barriers and widespread accessibility to online information, the repercussions of information warfare can be enduring and challenging to overcome. Russia has mastered this practice over the years. After the 2016 elections, a Senate Selected Committee on Intelligence drafted a precise report that covered Russia's role in the elections. The focal point of the report is the close collaboration between pro-Russian groups and the Russian government, along with affiliated institutions. From their perspective, this alliance meticulously executed a precisely targeted campaign aimed at stirring certain emotions tied to the elections, with the ultimate goal of influencing the final results. (Select Committee on Intelligence United States Senate, 2020).

Already at that moment, the governmental institution denoted that the Russians were not limited to the electoral occasion. In contrast, the report supports that the Committee on Foreign Affairs noted, Russia's interference in the electoral process was part of a broader strategy aimed at manipulating American citizens' coexistence and faith in democratically constituted institutions. The members of the Committee dedicate Section C (U) to explain the weaponisation of social media in the hands of the Kremlin as an extension of an evolving military doctrine that pictures "information warfare" as one of its main elements (Ibid).

Therefore, the main objective of weaponised information is to target the subject's cognitive system to distort reality by distributing a massive influx of contradictory information. The importance of the mental structure for a successful campaign is as important as the digital scene in which the influence operation takes place. It is the coincidence of both aspects that makes this communicative endeavour so powerful. When successful, the result would be either an alignment of a target's preferences with the pre-defined goals of the sender or at least a change in the perception of the recipient on a well-established opinion incompatible with the one held by the influential actor. From this, we can infer that weaponised information acts as a reality moulder when there are two irreconcilable political values and worldviews.

Margaret S. Marangione (2021) explores one more aspect which makes weaponised content threatening in our society. Drawing upon existing research on the matter, she maintains that there has been a decline in human's critical thinking capacity. Is it not easy to determinate if this deterioration emanates exclusively from a cause-effect relation with the massive amount of information available online and it is not the objective of this paper to investigate such delicate matter. However, the expert condemns the widespread decline in people's ability to actively examine and question the flow of information shared on social media. In this context, weaponised content can cause unimaginable

damage. As crucial as it is for users to reinforce their critical thinking when looking at information on their screens, equally important is the dissemination of rigorous academic and journalistic research on state-funded propaganda and disinformation campaigns, its main themes, methodology and cues for detecting potentially misleading information.

5. Literature Review: Unravelling Russia's Persistent Propaganda efforts

The Kremlin's focus on the psychological as a means to challenge the United States' hegemonic role in the international landscape should be viewed as the latest iteration of an enduring influence strategy, rooted in historical developments spanning hundreds of years. In this regard, during the Bolshevik Revolution information methods were put into place to affect the perception of society on the conflict, presumably resulting in movements on its favour. Under the name of "active measures" the Bolshevik regime catalogued in 1919 a wide range of operations that ultimately pretended to "influence events and behaviour in, and the actions of, foreign countries" (Ajir and Vailliant, 2018 p.72).

As years went by, the capabilities to distort and deceive the opponent's reading of reality were perfectionated, achieving a commensurable organisation and deployment in times of the Cold War. During the Soviet Union's enmity with the United States, the so-called active measures became one of the main tools employed by the Kremlin to confront the military and industrial superiority of the rival (Pynnöniemi, 2019). Russia's utilisation of information to gain strategic advantage over opponents has largely been studied in the military and academic spheres. The pioneer ideas of Sun Tzu and John Boyd, among others, found regained strategical value in the context of the late-Cold War when high-level military strategists recognised the opportunities information control provided (Libicki, 2020). In this sense, Western scholars increasingly paid attention to the reorientation of the Soviet Union's capabilities in favour of the

reflexive control theory. This one mainly focused on feeding information conveniently to indirectly influence opponents' decision-making processes as well as manipulate their perception of reality (Chotikul, 1986; Thomas, 2004).

The range of elements to this specific way of conducting war by other means included mechanisms to provoke the adversary, distort their perception of the situation, overload its decision-making processes, or discredit the enemy using biased information (Vasara, 2020). To mention a few of them, active measures subsets included clandestine operations, military deception, disinformation (including propaganda), sabotage, fabrication, provocation and "wet affairs" (Ajir and Vailliant, 2018).

In the post-soviet era, with the diffusion of Information Communication Technologies (ICTs), a new wave of academic and military research on Russia's information strategies started. In the case of Russia, Maria Snegovaya from the Institute for the Study of War, pinpoints that "despite the attention the topic has received among the Western audiences, Russia's newly launched information war is no different from the disinformation instruments that were used by the Soviets against the West in the second half of the 20th century" (Snegovaya, 2015, p.12). In the same line of thought, Christopher Paul and Miriam Matthews (2016) suggest the Kremlin's current approach to propaganda has direct roots in the Soviet Cold War-Era techniques. This is because it continues to use information advantages to generate "obfuscation and on getting the target to act in the interests of the propagandist without realising they have done so" (Ibid, p.1). However, the authors stress that even if the ultimate goals to use information techniques have remained constant, contemporary technology possibilities' have induced increased opportunities for social diffusion.

One characteristic has remained constant, and it explains the Kremlin's obsession with the control of information flows. To understand it, member of

the Russian Security and Military Research Group Katri Pauliina Pynnöniemi reflects on the Russian word *informatsionnoe protivoborstvo.* This one is included the 2011 document released by the Ministry of Defence the *Conceptual views on the activities of the Armed Forces of the Russian Federation in the information space,* which serves as a terminological encyclopedia on the regime's thinking understanding of the information sphere. Pynnöniemi reveals the correct translation would be information counter-struggle. The translation of Russian term as information warfare misses the underlying rhetorical game, aimed at portraying Russia as the one under attack" (2019, p. 216). This brief terminological note illustrates Russia's long-lasting perception of reality and the subsequent strategical decisions derived from that view. "The Russians view their actions as being defensive in nature" (Ibid, p. 216) as they understand the West, and particularly the United States, are permanently looking to weaken their aspirations.

Among all possible flanks, the Russian regime has expressed its concern about the role of information in modern warfare in its official documents and military doctrine. Particularly since the rise of Vladimir Putin to power, Russia has shown a fervent preoccupation of how information is -and can be- used to hinder its chances of reclaiming its rightful position of power in the global political arena. Consequently, Moscow deliberately developed a holistic approach to information security in foreign policy guiding documents such as the Foreign Policy Concept (2008), the Military Doctrine (2010), the Military Doctrine (2014), the National Security Strategy (2014), the Foreign Policy Concept (2016), the Information Security Doctrine (2016), and the National Security Strategy (2021) (Wilde and Sherman, 2023). In a report for the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, Gavin Wilde and Justin Sherman review these documents and highlight Russia's perception of the Internet and communication systems as a source of instability.

Differing from the West's notion of information security, Russia under Putin's governance adopts a "comprehensive view of information security that goes far beyond the technical" (Ibid, p.6). In this sense, they consider that information warfare is being conducted both in times of war and peace, and the warfare activities range from attacking national infrastructure and other technological devices to accessing the countries' information recourse or conducting information activities to manipulate the public opinion. Therefore, there is not a clear distinction between technical and psychological means, considering both can seriously jeopardise Russia's national security.

The *Doctrine of Information Security of the Russian Federation* (Совет Безопасности Российской Федерации, 2016) provides an overview on the matter. In *Table 1* (next page) the main principles regarding the information environmentare outlined. They indicate the authorities' perception of a severe threat to national security facilitated by the global digital information system.

These guiding lines that recollect the Kremlin's beliefs on how technology is being used against the country are complemented with other annotations in the same line of thought. Propaganda and disinformation do not appear explicitly but there is a continuum hidden reference to the matter as the following statement demonstrates:

> "The possibilities of transboundary information circulation are increasingly used for geopolitical goals, goals of a military-political nature contravening international law or for terrorist, extremist, criminal and other unlawful ends detrimental for international security and strategic stability (…). There is a trend among foreign media to publish an increasing number of materials containing biased assessments of State policy of the Russian Federation" (Russian Federation Government, 2016 para. 29).

To counter this imminent threat, they consider recurring to information technologies tools as the only way forward to preserve the "cultural, historical, spiritual and moral values of the multi-ethnic people of the Russian Federation" (Ibid para. 34).

Table 1. *Doctrine of Information Security of the Russian Federation. Basic notions.*

- *"The information security of the Russian Federation (hereinafter referred to as the "information security") is the state of protection of the individual, society and the State against internal and external information threats, allowing to ensure the constitutional human and civil rights and freedoms, the decent quality and standard of living for citizens, the sovereignty, the territorial integrity and sustainable socio-economic development of the Russian Federation, as well as defence and security of the State;*

- *The provision of information security is the implementation of mutually supportive measures (legal, organizational, investigative, intelligence, counter-intelligence, scientific and technological, information and analytical, personnel-related, economic and others) to predict, detect, suppress, prevent, and respond to information threats and mitigate their impact;*

- *Information security forces are government bodies, as well as units and officials of government bodies, local authorities and organizations tasked to address information security issues in accordance with the legislation of the Russian Federation;*

- *Information security means are legal, organizational, technical and other means used by information security forces;*

- *The information security system is a combination of information security forces engaged in coordinated and planned activities, and information security means they use;*

- *The information infrastructure of the Russian Federation (hereinafter referred to as the "information infrastructure") is a combination of informatization objects, information systems, Internet websites and communication networks located in the territory of the Russian Federation, as well as in the territories under the jurisdiction of the Russian Federation or used under international treaties signed by the Russian Federation".*

Source: http://www.scrf.gov.ru/security/information/DIB_engl/ (Russian Federation Government, 2016)

For the purpose of this research, the reference to "information warfare" is only going to be used to provide a general idea of Russia's own perception of its surrounding area. Like in the above-discussed concepts, this term can easily lead to confusion as the definition attached to it substantially differs depending on the actor using it. Therefore, it is more accurate to refer to propaganda, disinformation, and related instances as "weaponised information". Adopting this terminology to refer to Russian propagandistic actions does not absolve other countries from intentionally using similar tactics to further their global interest. What it instead highlights is that Russia's worldview manifests in down-to-earth practices, one of them behind the intention to deliberately use communication technologies to spread doubts about events to millions of people. This strategic dissemination of a counter-narrative aims to portray Russia in a favourable light and deflect any negative portrayals. In a nutshell, Moscow is activating information strategies to achieve the effect it claims to be suffering from the West.

To sum up, Russia has a long history of employing information techniques to wage a war against its rivals. Some decades ago, these came in the form of electronic interference, on-paper propaganda or unreal information fed to the rival to affect its decision-making progress. The arrival of the Internet era has amplified the range of possibilities to successfully vulnerate weaknesses of the rival and Moscow is well aware of this situation. Subsequently, under the command of Vladimir Putin, the Russian Federation's propaganda budget is increasing at a notable pace. According to Disinformation Debunk Disinformation Analysis Center (2023), Moscow spent almost 2 billion US dollars on propaganda and disinformation in 2022. Around 50% of these funds were allocated to media brands VGTRK, RT and Rossiya Segodnya. This is

only an estimation gathering information from official documents, press releases and statistical sites collecting data, but it gives an idea of how serious Moscow is when it comes to protecting the image of the regime.

It is evident that the Kremlin has not remained passive to the alleged advent of an era in which warfare is not only conducted with the use of force. The process of readaptation has been addressed through the lens of hybridity. According to Russian perception of hybrid warfare to safeguard the citizens' security and the regime's stability it is fundamental to include non-conventional strategies to non-conventional threats coming from the Western adversaries. Simply put, hybrid warfare serves as the overarching concept that highlights the importance of contemporary non-kinetic means to wage a war, *information warfare* being its more significant example. While investigating how Russia materialised its aspirations in Ukraine, Davies provides a useful definition to understand the hybrid warfare framework through which the Kremlin is shaping its activities:

> "Hybrid warfare is boundary-less fusion of all three forms of warfare across the full spectrum of conflict, incorporating all facets of tactics, techniques, and procedures as its disposal in order to achieve its intended political aims. It blurs the traditional lines of wat by employing methods which are predominantly not politically or ethically palatable to the West in modern times. There methods -the use of "plausible deniability" couple with conscious disinformation (blatant deception); the use of conventional weapons coupled with state and/or non-state actors, including terrorist and/or criminal parties, to carry out tasks; and, the use of media and cyberspace to intimidate, destroy, shape and spread propaganda, to name a few – can vary, are unpredictable and do not conform to international law." (Davies, 2016, p.4.5)

The implications of the implementation of non-traditional warfare resources are clear to Russian Team Lead and Research Analyst at the Institute for the Study of War Mason Clark. He argues that Russia has realised conventional warfare is unlikely in the contemporary age due to technological advances and changing power dynamics. Consequently, "the Kremlin further asserts that Russia should shape its military and national security tools to optimise for hybrid wars, not only because they are increasingly common, but also because they are more practical and effective than traditional warfare" (Clark 2020, p. 9). When involved in a hybrid war, there is not a boundary that distinguishes conventional operations from deniable of services attacks and propagandistic activities. All of them pertain to the same level of importance for the government. Clark differentiates between two types of objectives for Russia in its implication in hybrid wars: immediate and long-term. He assesses the broader goal in an hybrid war is an information objective, as it involves "gaining control over the fundamental worldview and orientation of a state" (Ibid, p. 16). For this reason, it is not surprising to see the importance given to information security and the employment of disinformation and propaganda techniques as security tools.

6. Russia's Historical Hybrid Warfare information: lessons from Georgia, Crimea and Ukraine

The Crimea invasion in 2014 marked a turning point in the history of hybrid warfare. Experts had agreed on one main characteristic of hybrid warfare: it included not only the traditional combat operations conducted by military personnel but also meddling to provoke political protests, interference to coerce states financially and a whole spectrum of operations conducted using the new communication systems, like cyber-attacks and disinformation activities. However, following the incidents leading to the illegal annexation of the Crimean Peninsula from Ukraine by the Russian Federation, prominent scholars and renowned political authorities underscored the heightened significance of

information warfare has assumed heightened significance within the domain of hybrid warfare (Wither, 2016; Freedman et al., 2021).

George C. Marshall European Center for Security Studies Researcher James K. Wither (2016) addresses this element by drawing a comparison between Russia's intervention in Crimea and Daesh's campaign on the Middle East. He finds that the terrorist group achieved positive results partly by executing an intense propaganda and disinformation campaign, especially to recruit thousands of foreign contributors to its lines. Therefore, he supports the argument that Russia's success in annexing the Crimean Peninsula was facilitated by the crucial use of information techniques in the warfare.

On the one hand, at the tactical level, elements of electronic warfare and cyberattacks hindered the response capacity of the Ukrainian government authorities. On the other, the opportunities offered by digital communication were exploited to erase the line that separated the truth from falsehood; Russia managed to create an alternative reality, where it was the victim of the conflict, and disseminated it worldwide (Ibid). In short, it was possible to violate the legitimacy of Ukraine through different flanks, the persuasion of public opinion being one of the most important. Former NATO Secretary General Anders Forgh Rasmussen also highlighted this in an interview a few months after the integration of Crimea, while characterising Russian tactics in the conflict in Ukraine. In his own words, the hybrid war Russia waged to bring the territory under Russian influence included "an aggressive program of disinformation" (Landler and Gordon, 2014 para. 7).

Snegovaya (2015) considers Russia's aggressive approach in the 2014 Crimean conflict as the most evident characterisation of hybrid strategy utilising weaponisation of information to date. Among the most repeated claims disseminated by Putin's propaganda machine, there were allegations about

oppression of ethnic Russians by Ukrainian extremists, terrorists and fascists, and deployment of troops in the border by the Ukrainian government. This conveyed the message of Russia's involvement in the conflict being reactive, due an imminent security threat against them. Crimea was considered an ideal battleground for Russia to put its informational dependent warfare approach to test (Lange-Ionatamišvili, 2015).

However, Crimea was not the first attempt. In contrast, the Georgian crisis in 2008 offered valuable insights about the weaknesses present in the Kremlin's information strategy (Cohen and Hamilton, 2011). Cyberthreat Intelligence Analyst Emilio J. Iasello relates these flaws comparing the 2008 conflict with Georgia and the 2014 confrontation with Ukraine. To do this, he distinguishes two informational efforts in which the countries tried to surpass one another: information-technical and information-psychological (Iasello, 2017). Surprisingly, although Putin emerged victorious in the fight against the Republic of Georgia, it has been stated the Kremlin lost the information war as Mikheil Saakashvili's government effectively counterattacked Russian efforts in the cognitive domain.

Meanwhile, Russia focused on repeating to the international community that they had been attacked and were forced to respond and that the United States and the West's allegations were completely unjustified as they themselves had acted similarly in other nations of the world. Georgia quickly understood the importance to counterattack the narrative. With the support of private consultancy firms, public relations specialists and foreign government's communication channels Georgians neutralised Russian narrative presenting an alternative side of the story that pictured them as the real victims of the conflict. The result, "Georgia won the hearts and minds of the global community even though Russia won the physical space" (Ibid, p.53).

Following the Russo-Georgian conflict, the Kremlin became aware that information warfare was not correctly integrated in its military doctrine. Georgia had succeeded in convincing the global community that Russia was the aggressor by an exquisite management of information flows via television and Internet. Once the conflict had ended, prominent Russian authors Igor Panarin and Colonel Anatoliy Tsyganok inspected what had gone wrong with Russia's information warfare techniques in the conflict (Thomas, 2010). In general terms, they urged the Russian government to create a cohesive, coordinated, and multilevel information structure. Panarin devised a system in which different private and public entities (see *Table 2*) covered eight key components that would ensure the country's preparedness for information warfare: diagnostic, analysis and forecasting, organisation, and management, methodological, consultative, prevention, control, and cooperation (Ibid).

Council for Public Diplomacy	"Includes members of the state structure, media, business, political parties, nongovernmental organisations (NGOs), and so on headed by Prime Minister Putin".
Advisor to the President of Russia for Information and Propaganda Activities	"Coordinates activities of the information analysis units of the President's administration, the Security Council, and several other ministries".
State Foreign Affairs Media Holding Company	"The government should subordinate this company to the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, where the American experience can be copied".
State Internet Holding Company	"Create a domestic media holding company for the publishing of books, video films, video games, and the like for dissemination on the Internet".
Information Crisis Action Center	"Enable the authorities to present commentaries on unfolding events in a timely, real-time manner to the world information arena. "Homework assignments" must be readied in advance".
Information Countermeasure System	"Create a system of resources to counter information warfare operations by Russia's geopolitical enemies".
NGOs	"Network of Russian organisations operating on Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS), European Union (EU), and U.S. territories".

Table 2. *Components of the management system to counter information aggression against Russia as describe by Igor Panarin.*

Source: https://www.jstor.org/stable/pdf/resrep12110.8.pdf. In Thomas, T. (2010) "Russian Information Warfare Theory: The Consequences of August 2008".

Assessing the actual materialisation of Panarin's or Tsyganok's proposed structural recommendations in practice is a challenging task considering the regimen's lack of transparency on these matters. Nevertheless, there is no doubt Russia took note of these and other Russian military experts' statements and understood that its geopolitical aspirations in the world were largely determined by whether it would be capable of reorganisation its military approach to the age of digital communications. In a short period of time, Russian officials started offering revised principles on information technologies; information conceptualisation became wider in military doctrine, and groups of experts were formed to be as updated as possible on new information developments (Thomas, 2010). Ultimately, "the war with Georgia forced a host of information security issues to the fore (…). A short confrontation resulted in a wide-ranging discussion about the power of the Internet to influence public opinion during a conflict" (Ibid, p.292).

Following the 2008 informational failure, the post-Georgia years demonstrate that if there is one characteristic to Russian warfare techniques, it is its inherent adaptability. Keir Giles, prominent scholar on Russian security issues and author of famous books Moscow Rules: What Drives Russia to Confront the West and Russia's War on Everybody: And What it Means for You, assesses that this chameleonic performance is what makes Russian information warfare particularly challenging considering it is always evolving, identifying successes to reinforce them, and abandoning disastrous attempts (Giles, 2016). Consequently, military and academic specialists must remain vigilant because any preparation based on actual or past capabilities is most likely incomplete. Russia will never fight two wars in a similar form without adding or supressing certain features.

The Ukraine conflict provides the most notable example of Russian adaptation capabilities. In 2008, Russian military power was questioned due to its Internet mismanagement. However, only a few years later, the Kremlin outpaced its adversaries with a well-planned, coordinated, and multi-level information offensive executed around the opportunities offered in the Internet age. The Crimea conflict formally started in 2014, although Putin's government had long been preparing the informational ground for what was to come. From leaving Georgia weakened due to an underestimation of Internet's role in shaping a conflict's outcome to being considered a digital manipulation super machine, "No one enjoyed as much success through the exploitation of social media as Russia in the annexation of Crimea", confirmed Michael Holloway (2017 para. 4). In the same line of thought, Giles considers Crimea as the culmination of Soviet subversion techniques updated to the modern digital context. The adaptation has been put into practice by covering three main areas: news media internally and externally with important digital presence, social media and blogging platforms to ensure Russian narrative social dissemination and penetration and, language skills to provide target the public effectively (Giles, 2015).

In Crimea's case, the impact of propaganda and disinformation in the population on the Donbas was fundamental to successfully integrating the region within Russia's territory. Three operative levels made the Russian strategy incredibly successful (Holloway, 2017). Firstly, Russian cyber-attacks produced an information black-out to "disconnect" the population from potential information that contradicted the Russian narrative by attacking the communication channels in the region. Secondly, they inserted certain narratives on social media through official and non-official channels that polarised the general opinion with little interference from foreign actors. The propaganda and disinformation campaign revolved around various themes, including cultural values, historical revisionism, western interference, and Ukrainian hostility

against ethnic Russians in the region (Sikandar Babar, 2023). One illustrious example is found in the history of the crucifixion of a 3-year-old boy in Slovyansk. According to the Russian state-run media Channel One, Ukrainian nationalists had been the perpetrators of the atrocity in front of the eyes of the child's mother. Meanwhile, this story was debunked shortly after; its consequences were not fully reversible -especially in reputational terms for the Ukrainian forces- taking into account that this channel had around 250 million viewers at the moment globally (EUvsDisinfo, 2016). Therefore, the Russian Federation guaranteed the victory on the conflict not only by displaying military strength but also by bolstering its ability to persuade the population residing in the disputed region of its version of the events (Holloway, 2017). Crimea served to illustrate how effective weaponised information can be when given certain characteristics, including proper timing, technical communication disruption capabilities, coordination of media outlets and a forceful social media army and a receptive audience.

It would be a mistake to assume that the Kremlin emerged victorious in the annexation of the Crimean Peninsula only because of its capacity to control region's internal conditions. The Kremlin's state level disinformation and propaganda campaign caught Western media organisations and citizens unprepared. In this sense, Russian communication campaign was able to infiltrate in the West and "media outlets were still faithfully reporting Russian disinformation as a fact" (Giles, 2015 p. 47). Even if the West became aware of Russia's subversion machine during the conflict, pro-Russian narratives had already been amplified in the international communication environment. The evaluation of the impact that the initial confusion had on individuals' perceptions outside the Russo-Ukrainian zone and its influence on policymakers' decisions is a complex task. Nevertheless, it is evident that Crimea served as a pivotal point for the Western nations to comprehend the information arms race into which Russia had immersed itself.

In 2022, a new chapter in Vladimir Putin's ambition to restore lost superpower place for Russia in world affairs began. It came in the form of an unprecedent escalation of the Russian-Ukraine conflict. On the 24th of February, Ukraine once again became the centre of a unilateral military aggression from Russia. In contrast to Crimea 2014, the latest offensive against its neighbour must be read as the most important execution of Russia's view of great power rivalry competition to date. According to a report by Jonathan Masters (2023) for the Council on Foreign Relations Putin embarked on the full invasion of the country not only motivated to regain a region with which strong cultural, social and historical bonds remained essential to Russia's view of the world and itself but to confront the progressive alignment of the Western bloc to its area of interest, specifically through the institutions of the European Union (EU) and North Atlantic Treaty Organisation (NATO). In short, Ukraine's war has extended beyond any geographical borders and constitutes the higher expression of weaponised information as a warfare tool to date.

If Crimea constituted the perfect scenario to beat the opponent from the inside, the invasion of Ukraine reveals that international support becomes a valuable weapon to counteract the unexpected resistance of the opponent. There is a big chance President Putin's original plan of a fast invasion through multiple fronts that would face little resistance from its military inferior neighbour (Person and McFaul, 2022) did not envision an immensurable robust foreign support to Ukraine. As little as three days the Kremlin had predicted it would take to forcibly remove Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky from power Nothing, however, could be further from the reality Russian forces found when the military operation started (Seddon et al, 2023)

Since the beginning of the invasion, Ukraine managed to receive financial, humanitarian, and military aid. According to data from the Centre for Economic Policy Research more than 144 billion euros were transferred to Ukraine via government-to-government commitments since the invasion started until

January 2023 (Trebesch, 2023). In total, the United Stateds followed by European members and institutions were the largest financial supporters of Ukraine. In addition to this economic aspect, the Western world also accompanied this material provision with a persistent information campaign that condemn Russia's actions. Indeed, Western media rejected referring to the confrontation utilising the Kremlin's narrative of a "special military operation" and instead tended to present it as "war", a "military offensive" or an "invasion" (Połońska-Kimunguyi, 2022). Similarly, the most prominent European political figures explicitly declared their rejection of Russian aggression. High Representative confirmed the day of the attack that "there are among the darkest hours for Europe since World War II. A major nuclear power has attacked a neighbouring country and is threatening reprisals on any other state that may come to its rescue" (Borrell, 2022 para. 1). In the days following the attack, EU leaders rapidly reached a consensus to impose sanctions on Russia, with a focus on key sectors such as finance, transportation, exports, energy, and others (Council of the European Union, 2023).

Despite its unpredictability, the Kremlin was not completely caught off guard. The beginning of the invasion also marked a new period of Russian narrative warfare in which eroding global confidence in Ukraine became a main goal to undermine a country with exceptional Western foreign support and advance Russia's interests.

A notable change in Russia's information warfare strategy over previous years is the expansion of its propaganda machine globally. However, this aspect remains under studied as the majority of investigations since February 24th have focused on pro-Russian narratives' distribution to domestic and European audiences. Domestically, research has brought to light a disinformation and propaganda ecosystem that effectively aligns the perceptions of Russian citizens with their government's agenda. This system includes promoting suspicious and

anti-Western narratives, imposing censorship, targeting opposition groups, and indoctrinating children (Grace, 2022).

From a European perspective, the war in Eastern Europe has inspired researchers to examine how Russia is employing targeted disinformation in certain countries, particularly those with large-Russian speaking communities. Maria Katadmadze (2023) illustrates Latvian efforts to constrain Russian media influence. Isabella Wilkinson and Tamar Dekanosidze (2022) inspect the urgent need of Georgian authorities to tackle Russian-backed disinformation, as far-right groups, nationalist politicians and orthodox religious factions are amplifying the Moscow's vision of the war. Tailored analysis has also been produced in Germany as suspicious pro-Russian comments appear on digital national magazines articles which presented information about the war in Ukraine (Koval, 2023).

What can be taken from these examples is that the West is employing a vast number of resources to counteract pro-Russian tailored digital information strategy and ultimately legitimise Ukraine's version of the conflict. International experts consider that due to Zelensky's charismatic character and the government's employment of digital and traditional media, Ukraine has taken the lead against Russia in the informational flank by garnering indisputable support from the West. The Conversation newspaper published an article in connection with this matter under the title "Ukraine's information war is winning hearts and minds in the West" (Butler, 2022).

However, it is essential to avoid making rash assumptions by overly generalising Ukraine's cognitive successes in the West. As mentioned earlier, Russia's information warfare tactics involve continually adapting to the specific geopolitical context where they are employed. In the context of the war in Ukraine, this adaptation has taken the shape of a widespread effort to create confusion about the conflict in other regions, all while challenging the United

States' dominant position in these newly contested areas. The Atlantic Council Digital Forensic Research Lab has pointed this out as problematic in the following way:

> "Since the start of the war, Western media routinely claimed that Ukraine is winning the information war against Russia, pointing to its charismatic president, its ability to deploy memes to embarrass Russia, and its information operations designed to undermine Russian morale. While Ukraine has indeed successfully deployed such tactics, the notion of Ukraine winning the information war is not a universally held one, and to date faces limited analysis beyond information environments in Ukraine and Western countries. With its vast global reach, pro-Kremlin media continue to pour resources and messaging into other parts of the world, including the Global South, exploiting antiimperialist sentiments and historical distrust of the West. By maintaining these information operations at a global scale, Russia has successfully prevented international consensus rallying behind Ukraine at a level that is often presumed in the West" (Osadchuk, 2023 p.28).

The following section will analyse Latin America as an emerging focal point of Russia's digital information warfare, aiming to explore its security implications. Furthermore, a comparative case study will be undertaken on two countries within the region to ascertain whether the Kremlin propagates a uniform narrative or if there are noteworthy variations among targeted countries. Uncovering such distinctions would warrant further investigation, given that research on Russia's propagandistic case-to-case strategies in the region seem to still be rare.

7. Expanding Horizons: Russian Information Warfare Latest Front in Global
- Latin America

In the context of the Ukrainian-Russian war, the role of social media, in both how the war is communicated as well as how it is conducted, is indisputable. In this context, scholars have redirected their attention to Russia's weaponised information as a means to sow discord and confusion about the conflict's reality. However, as it was previously advanced, a vast proportion of these studies have focused on Eastern Europe -especially in countries from the former Soviet Union- to understand the scope and impact of such communication manoeuvres. This comes with the assumption that Russia's digital influence is a threat mainly in this European region, when the reality is that its scope is much wider as well as its implications for international security.

Journalists have taken the lead reporting this aspect. The main indication of this trend came when diverse Western media stated that Russian propaganda and disinformation campaign had found a new target among the Spanish-speaking community. In this regard, Foreign Policy announced, "Russia has Taken Over Spanish-Language Airwaves on Ukraine" (Detsch, 2022). Similarly, Associated Press proclaimed, "Russia aims Ukraine Disinformation at Spanish Speakers" (Klepper and Seitz, 2022). Meanwhile The New York Times published an article on the matter titled "How Russian Propaganda is Reaching Beyond English Speakers" (Lee Myers and Frenkel, 2022). The headlines of the articles highlight the Spanish language's role in spreading Russian propaganda in various regions. However, reading further into the articles clarifies that the primary concern revolves around the spread of disinformation and misinformation in Latin America. This focus on Latin America excludes concerns related to Spain or other Spanish-speaking communities living in other countries. In essence, while the headlines may suggest a broader scope, the

articles emphasise the specific concern of disinformation in Latin America rather than the Spanish language itself.

Prior to the ultimate explosion of the war in Ukraine and its subsequent information war there were already certain actions which indicated Vladimir Putin's increased interest in showing himself to the Latin America public as a viable alternative to the U.S. global leadership. Indeed, in a Hearing before the 114th Congress Senate Armed Services Committee General, John Kelly, Commander of the U.S. Southern Command warned about Russian meddling in the near abroad stating:

> "Periodically since 2008, Russia has pursued an increased presence in Latin America through propaganda, military arms, and equipment sales, counterdrug agreements, and trade. Under President Putin, however, we have seen a clear return to Cold War tactics. As part of its global strategy, Russia is using power projection in an attempt to erode U.S. leadership and challenge U.S. influence in the Western Hemisphere (…). While these actions do not pose an immediate threat, Russia's activities in the hemisphere are concerning and underscore the importance of remaining engaged with our partners." (Kelly, 2015, p. 8-9).

The Russian Federation has become aware that an armed conflict with the United States might not be the optimal approach to address its historical adversary due to its large military capacity summed up to considerable international network support. Therefore, limited material and logistical constraints did not stop Russia in the aspiration to increase its support in the American continent. For this reason, non-traditional tools emerged as an ideal alternative to confront its adversary without resorting to the use of force. As a result, Russia employs a mixture of national power elements to pursue its

interests in this geographical area: diplomacy, information, military and economy (Morgus et al, 2019).

Latin America has gradually become an important terrain to explore these areas because even if Russia does not consider it its immediate sphere of interest, it is geographically situated near U.S. borders'. Therefore, it of offers the possibility to weaken its main adversary by damaging influence capability on its near abroad.

In regard to the propagandistic element, throughout the last years Russia frames its interactions with Latin American nations by emphaszising the notion that the United States functions as an imperialistic force. This perspective posits that the U.S. is unlikely to permit complete autonomy for the Latin American governments. Within this context, Russia actively promotes an anti-U.S. and anti-hegemonic narrative, underscoring the U.S. will not cease its imperialistic attitudes in its close neighbourhood. It is not possible with the current information confirm there is a direct correlation between these propagandistic activities and the approach of Russia and some countries from the region. However, the Kremlin is attaining a certain degree of success in its strategy as its participation in multiple regional organisations, in which the U.S. is not invited, demonstrates. Just to name a few, Russia has a seat on the the Community of Latin American and Caribbean States and it also participates n in meetings held by the Central American Integration System (Farah and Reyes, 2015).

Russia's ability to increase its influence in Latin America cannot simply be analysed from a national strategy perspective, as it is crucial to consider the internal factors in the region that make it particularly vulnerable. These internal elements play a significant role in this process and must be contemplated when evaluating the diffusion of propaganda and its impact on society. Due to

historical reasons, there are certain symbolic principles in Latin America that shape the sentiments of a people who once experienced imperialistic domination. Turner (2022, para. 5) summarises this idea noting that "not only does Russia have ideological ties in Latin America, but the region also has a long history of contention with the United States. This primes these individuals to believe anti-U.S. disinformation".

Russia has managed to incorporate these general principles into its propaganda strategy in the region, presenting itself as a friendly ally that shares the same values of sovereignty and non-interference in the internal affairs of foreign countries. With this anti-hegemonic discourse, Moscow intends to reemphasise the United States and the European Union are enemies that cannot be trusted. According to Claudia González Marrero and Armando Chaguaceda (2022, p. 8) "the combination of populist, anti-liberal, and anti-imperialist elements is forging a certain imaginary within Latin American nations, favourable to the fertile insertion of the narrative of global autocracies". On another note, the region is also more susceptible to Russian war propaganda because generally these countries do not have as many state regulation measures to ban the circulation of misleading content and its leaders have explicitly rejected such idea (Ellis, 2022).

After the obvious deterioration of relationships with the Western countries due to the initiation of the war in Ukraine, the Kremlin has notably reinforced its effort to expand its sphere of influence in Latin American countries. This move is driven by the belief that such efforts could potentially counterweight the existing public criticism towards Russia's military actions against its neighbour and, at the same time, erode favourable perceptions within the Latin American society towards the United States and its allies. Therefore, the main objectives for the Russian Federation on utilising a weaponised information strategy in Latin American countries within the context of the war in Ukraine are:

I.   Reduce international opposition to Russian military actions.

II.   Prevent potential assistance from foreign nations to Ukraine.

III.   Strengthen regional partnerships while weakening U.S.-Western influence.

IV.   Garner support in international forums like the United Nations.

To achieve these goals, the Kremlin activated its propaganda machine overwhelming the digital landscape with pro-Russian information in Spanish. The Atlantic Council Digital Forensics Research Lab investigated the strategy followed by the Kremlin to get its message disseminated through falsehood and half-truth messages. Their findings suggest state-backed media outlets digital behaviour, *RT en Español* and *Sputnik News* played a protagonist role (Ponce de León, 2022). These channels have been categorised by media experts as propaganda tools of the Russian government and since their launch in the Spanish language they have been positively received from the audience (Ospina-Valencia, 2022). Only in their Twitter accounts RT (@ActualidadRT) counts with 3,4 million followers meanwhile Sputnik (@SputnikMundo) has an audience of 168,000 followers.

Using a social media monitoring tool DFRLab researcher Esteban Ponce de León found these digital media newspapers were among the most shared domains in the conversations in Twitter around the conflict in Ukraine. In other words, theses newspapers' websites or articles were being broadly shared by users on Twitter when discussing the conflict in Ukraine. "In total, actualidad.rt.com and mundo.sputniknews.com garnered nearly 345,000 mentions" in Twitter, explains Ponce de León (2022 para. 10). Another illustrative example of the engagement capacity of this media outlets in social media is provided by the Equis Institute, which found out only in March RT en Español's Facebook page experiences roughly 75,000 likes, reactions, and

comments on its page daily (Klepper and Seitz, 2022). It is worth noting engagement burst still occurred despite Meta's efforts to demote content from Russian state-backed media outlet's Facebook pages (Culliford and Dang, 2022).

The high-volume production and dissemination of propaganda is fundamental to achieve success. Research on Russian propaganda shows messages that are reproduced in high volume from many different sources will be more persuasive due to the people's assumption of causal relationship between repetitiveness and veracity of the content (Matthews and Paul, 2016). In addition, the views of others on the distributed content maters, "credibility can be social; that is, people are more likely to perceive a source as credible if others perceive the source as credible" (Ibid, p.6). However, on social media it is problematic to detect if engagement -in the form of comments, emoji reactions, etc.- comes from genuine real users' accounts or, if by contrast, orchestrated trolls are behind those messages trying to increase the credibility of the content by artificially supporting the content.

Another interesting finding about Russia's digital propaganda power in the region is its resilience. Following Ukraine's invasion, the European Union immediately countered Russian propaganda by banning immediately RT and Sputnik's content in all state members. European Commission President Ursula von der Leyen justified this measure explaining "Russia Today and Sputnik, as well as their subsidiaries, will no longer be able to spread their lies to justify Putin's war and to sow division in our union. So, we are developing tools to ban their toxic and harmful disinformation in Europe" (Wintour, Rankin and Connolly, 2022 para. 2). Only a few days later, telecommunication companies from Canada and the United States closed these channels in their countries (Kahn, 2022).

None of the Latin American countries initiated similar reforms. The only ban introduced came from the hand of the digital platform Youtube, which tried to restrict pro-Kremlin falsehoods globally. The Atlantic Council DRFLab found out after the platform restricted Russian funded digital media outlets, several channels started uploading content disseminated previously by RT or Spunik. Consequently, the report highlighted that even when restrictions are imposed to fight weaponised information, citizens in Latin America are still exposed to Russian propaganda (Osadchuk, 2023).

In addition to the investigations into Russian media organisations, there is a significant lack of available information regarding instances of propaganda and disinformation originating from Russia in Latin America. This information gap has the potential to diminish the backing for Ukraine during the ongoing conflict and could also weaken the United States' ability to maintain support in its neighbouring regions, as certain aspects of this effort might not be anticipated by the corresponding authorities.

The relatively low costs of utilising propaganda in comparison to traditional warfare resources as well as the many benefits it provides to advance a state's agenda in an inter-state confrontation make it very likely that Russia will continue to harness this strategic tool in its regional activities. Furthermore, this approach not only aligns with the cost-efficiency imperative but also aligns with the trajectory of communication environments, which are expected to be even more characterized by digital interactions in the following decades. Consequently, the investigation intends to delve into a specific facet of Russian propaganda in Latin America which has received little attention to date.

As previously mentioned, besides the studies on Russian media outlets, information about propaganda and disinformation activities remains scarce and deserves better attention. However, the remarkable work done on the matter by

the DFRLab has also pointed out at possible lines of investigation. This institution found out an enormous engagement achieved in Twitter for state-backed media outlets articles and messages covering the war in Ukraine in Twitter. Ponce de León (2022) in "RT and Sputnik in Spanish boosted by Russian embassy tweets and suspicious accounts" calls into question if the engagement corresponds to real citizens participation or if, by contrast, synthetic methods had played a role. His findings reveal that additional channels under the influence of the Russian government played a pivotal role in achieving extensive engagement. Specifically, Russian diplomatic accounts, in conjunction with digital bots and trolls, on the Twitter platform, played an undeniable role in facilitating the dissemination of Russian propaganda to unprecedented levels of digital interaction. Collectively, these embassy accounts garnered in total more than 300,000 followers, resulting in a broad audience base. Consequently, the content they shared, along with links to news stories from related sources, had more chances to be retweeted, mentioned of quoted by other users. The content within these shared media links predominantly encompassed justifications for Russia's participation in the war, conspiracy theories implicating the United States in the conflict, and allegations of manipulation by Western media (Ibid).

The embassies' magnifying role in the spread of propaganda and disinformation on Twitter sparks concerns over the potential tactics Russia might be employing through embassy accounts, pages, or channels to advance its information warfare campaign in Latin America. Apart from the limited existing insights on this region in connection to Russia's weaponised information activities, there is a noticeable absence of studies that scrutinise the content generated and circulated specifically by these embassies.

Vassilena Dotkova's (2023) research is one of the few that covers the disinformation aspect in the war in Ukraine attending to the role of online

Russian embassies. Through an examination of these accounts' behaviour on Twitter after the war began, she noticed a notable rise of 26% in the volume of posts released by these channels. Moreover, the level of engagement with the posts also witnessed a significant surge, interactions with the content grew by 200%. In the opinion of Doktova, the embassies' enhanced participation responds to the necessity of the Russian government to counter the isolation suffered in digital and traditional media. "The main task of Russia's missions abroad is to disseminate and amplify the official positions of the state and the foreign ministry" (Ibid para. 6), explains the expert.

Recognising the current gap in the literature, we considered it was essential to develop an investigation aimed at determining whether these diplomatic accounts exhibit uniform trends or if they are, conversely, tailoring their messaging to suit the preferences of their respective national audiences in Latin America. Therefore, we defend the Russian government has intensified its efforts in Latin American countries, but it is unclear if it has been able to shape the narrative in a way that matches the cultural, political, and socio-economic contexts found across the region. As a result, we will now proceed with an empirical analysis of the content shared by these diplomatic accounts on the platform Telegram, pursuing the identification of patterns, themes, and variations in their messaging.

Investigating Russian embassies' channels on the social media platform Telegram offers certain benefits in comparison to other renowned social networking websites such as Facebook or Twitter. Firstly, its channel-based structure provides a communication dynamic similar to that of traditional media. Therefore, the sender can efficiently reach the audience without the need for interactions to become more visible in the platform. Secondly, there is an advantage when it comes to expressing ideas in a more extensive manner compared to Twitter, where there is a maximum character imposed on each post.

As a result, Telegram's structure is more suitable for providing a more thorough and comprehensive discussion of ideas without the need for heavy editing or condensing. This feature could potentially enable entities like embassies to communicate propaganda and misinformation in a more detailed maner. Last and most importantly, the platform's user base is growing rapidly due to its strong commitment to privacy protection. In 2021, Pavel Durov, the of Telegram, stated Latin America was among the five regions where the platform had witnessed a remarkable surge in user numbers (Nicas, Isaac and Frenkel, 2021). Interestingly, it has been often defined as the "main playing field for extremists, conspiracy theories and information warfare" and the "go to tool for Russian propagandists" (Vsquare, 2023).

To achieve the aforementioned goals, there are three main aspects to be examined for each channel. These factors include:

- Source of Content: this involves identifying where the content originates from, whether it's generated by the embassy itself or if it's shared from other channels.
- Typology of Propaganda: if applicable, the specific type of propaganda being employed will be categorised and analysed.
- Main Topics: The primary themes covered in the content will be identified and examined.

To facilitate this analysis, an initial cribbage will be employed to distinguish between posts written by the embassy and those with reposted content.

7.1. Case study 1: Telegram Channel of the Embassy of Russia in Colombia

Russian Embassy in Colombia (@rusiaencolombia) opened the channel the 4th of March 2022, two weeks after the war in Ukraine started. In the time period

of one year -that is, until the 4th of March 2023- the channel posted in total 172 messages. It is worth noting only 32% (55 messages) of these were original publications from the embassy. The remaining messages were mainly reposts from other Russian institutional channels in Spanish in Telegram, which represented 61% of the total posts. Lastly, only 7% of the messages corresponded to channels which disseminated cultural and historical information about Russia, concretely Rusia Multifacética (@rusiamultifacetica - 374 subscribers), Russia Beyond en Español (@russiabeyondes - 4,441 subscribers) and Rosscongress Directo (@rosscongress - 72 subscribers). Within the group of Russian official channels, it is remarkable the number of posts (89) shared by the Russian Embassy in Colombia in its channel from the Cancillería de Rusia (@MFARussia).

The purpose of each case study is to examine whether the embassy is disseminating propagandistic material amid the ongoing conflict in Ukraine. If this is indeed happening, the focus is on determining whether the content is personalised for the country's audience. Consequently, the content reposted from other accounts will not be profoundly discussed unless it offers pertinent insights into potential Russian propaganda networks that might be operating in the Telegram environment. This choice is also practical, given that both embassies largely share content from the "Cancillería de Russia" channel. This approach prevents redundancy and repetition in the analysis. The main narratives identified in the Russian Embassy in Colombia are presented in the following sections.

- *"Russia is being threatened by a relentless information war in which falsehoods are spread to damage its image."*

After a welcome message to inaugurate the channel, the embassy immediately encouraged its new followers to watch closely the website waronfakes.com/es

(Spanish version), indicating it was a source to dismantle "fake news" about Russia's "denazification military operation in Ukraine" (Rusia en Colombia, 2022a). The post included a link to the website, in which the following presentation defines War on Fakes *raison d'etre*:

> "We don't do politics. But we consider it important to provide unbiased information about what is happening in Ukraine and on the territories of Donbass, because we see signs of an information war launched against Russia. Our mission is to make sure that there are only objective publications in the information space. We do not want ordinary people to feel anxious and panicked because of information wars. We are going to look into every fake and give links to the real refutations. Be safe, be at peace, be with us" (War on Fakes, 2023).

However, a review by independent institutions has shown this "anti-fakes" service is an extension of Russian-backed propaganda services. It utilises the reputation achieved by fact-checking practices in the Western hemisphere (Romero, 2022). The strategy in the publications follows the "4ds" Russian propaganda approach, that is: dismiss, distort, distract and dismay. Therefore, the alleged "fact-checked" claims often include information to critique Russian opponents' views, twisted stories, accusations on events Russian authorities have been accused before or intimidating messages (Andriukaitis, 2019). With this approach, the goal of the War on Fakes website is to create confusion about what is actually happening in the war, as well as to increase the level of suspicion towards Western sources. According to Bret Schafer, the head of the Alliance for Securing Democracy's information manipulation team, Russian propaganda targeting the Latin American audience aims not to attract people to Russia, but rather, as he puts it, "repel them from the West" (Detsch, 2022).

After this initial presentation, the embassy integrates the topic of propaganda and disinformation in the Colombian context. The primary method employed to challenge the alleged information warfare against the country is by reproducing statements made by its representatives. By employing statements attributed to the Russian Ambassador in Colombia, Nikolay Tavdumadze, and the Minister of Foreign Affairs, Sergei Lavrov, the embassy emphasises that it is the subject of a meticulously orchestrated information campaign.

On March 28th Tavdumadze rebuffed claims of Russian interference in the 2022 Colombian presidential elections as stated by national media outlets. Moreover, in the post he expressed disappointment over the choice of some Colombian communication entities to contribute to what he called the "western informative mainstream" characterised by "Russophobia and antagonism to anything Russian-related" (Rusia en Colombia, 2022b). Finally, he underscored the Kremlin's respect for the Colombian citizens' right to shape their own future and their commitment to peace in this "friendly" nation. On other posts this suspected interference is debunked with Western-information-warfare rhetoric.

Media outlets were not the only entities accused of propagating Western falsehoods. The ambassador's statements also serve to accuse Ivan Duque's government of employing disinformation against them. Concretely, this occurred as a response of the Colombian government's use of the word "genocide" to describe the Russian Federation's actions in Ukraine. They condemned this an alluding an "effort to create tensions" (Rusia en Colombia, 2022c) between countries that, according the post enjoy excellent bilateral relationships and share multiple interests in common. Therefore, it is notable how these posts reflect the Kremlin's aim to insert confusion in the Colombian society even about its own media outlets and governmental figures. Additional refutations by the ambassador gathered from the channel challenged the

assertation that Moscow is behind the maritime blockade of Ukrainian cereal transportation. Once again this is done by adopting a defensive position in which Russia's image is meant to be damaged to ensure the Russians do not have access to international trade while this bolsters economic chances for Western countries.

Finally, regarding Lavrov's statements in the embassy's channel it was spread the idea that Western countries have imposed censorship to any Russian journalists and media outlets, thereby rejecting alternative points of view to safeguard their own global interests. Additionally, the posts on this matter used the right to freedom of expression to extend their propagandistic critique.

Hence, the portrayal of Russia as a victim of conflict, a narrative often utilised by the Kremlin to express its worldview, is prominently evident within the channel. Our research highlights that diplomats play a significant part in disseminating propagandistic content, as they actively propagate biased assertions intended to advance the Kremlin's political perspective. This aspect was acknowledged by David Keppler, who stated that with the progressive censorship of Russian state media, the countries' diplomats are "stepping up to do the dirty work" (Keppler, 2022 para. 1).

- *"Russia is a respectful international actor that seeks the establishment of friendly relations between countries and shows itself as an advocate of nations' sovereignty and the non-interference principle."*

The first post on this theme was published on the 31st of March when the Russian Embassy in Colombia published on their feed the words the Director of the Latin American Department of the Russian Foreign Affairs Ministry had said on an interview for the Russian-backed media outlet RT (actualidad.rt.com).

According to the post, Alexander Schetinin had remarked the Russia is an example of a truly neutral international power with an approach:

> "Without ideology, pragmatic, on the basis of friendship relations, of a mutually beneficial practical cooperation (and) that in contrast with the United States does not consider the Latin American continent as a ground for geopolitical games, nor interferes in the internal affairs of the region" (Rusia en Colombia, 2022d).

This example demonstrates how the Embassy strategically employs manipulated information to depict both the United States and the Western world as adversaries not only to Russia but also to the Latin American region. This tactic involves utilising propaganda to shape this perception. This strategy gains further reinforcement through posts detailing the meetings between the Russian Ambassador in Colombia, Nikolay Tavdumadze, and various political figures within the country.

Throughout these posts detailing diplomatic interactions, a consistent underlying message emerges: Russia seeks to bolster collaboration and amicable relations with key players in the region, working together to achieve shared interests. Notably, the communication in these posts emphasises a desire from the Kremlin to engage in a framework of equal and respectful interactions, implying a horizontal relationship.

For this narrative, we found the main weaponised information strategy is propaganda as there is not an exact reference to the falsification of facts. Instead, a discursive methodology is employed to depict a specific portrayal of the Russian Federation, elucidating how is supposedly understands inter-state relationships in a benevolent manner. Furthermore, the channel enthusiastically celebrated the election of Gustavo Petro as the new President of Colombia. The

tone used to relate this event implies that under the previous administration, the friendship between states was at risk, further underscoring the Kremlin's intention to be seen as valuable partner.

- *"Russia's participation in the war was induced by the imminent threat posed by Ukraine to its national security. It became involved out of necessity rather than choice."*

Amid the conflict in Ukraine, the embassy consistently issued messages that aimed to justify Russia's unilateral decision to invade the country. In pursuit of this goal, the channel frequently labelled Ukraine as a fascist-nazi regime. However, independent fact-checking efforts have scrutinised some of the evidence presented on Russian social media, revealing that the claims linking Ukraine to Nazism are either false or misleading (Wesolowski, 2022).

The channel once again resorted to reproduce the statements of important political figures of country. On this occasion, the words reproduced (Rusia en Colombia, 2022e) belong to Maria Zakharova, Director of the Information and Press Department of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation. Zakharova had commented the words of Ukrainian Ambassador in Kazakhstan Dmytro Vrublevsky on murdering "as many Russians as possible" confirmed the Nazi essence of Kiev's regime. While there is evidence supporting these words came out of Vrublevsky's mouth (Eruygur, 2022), their extrapolation and generalisation to characterise the entirety of Ukraine is problematic. This oversimplification could be understood as a malinformation practice, as it exaggerates the scope of the fact to declare Ukraine a fascist state. The Ukrainian government removed the ambassador from all his duties and branded such statement of unacceptable. However, there is no mention to governmental reaction from Ukraine in the channel.

According to the Guardian's Executive Director Mark Rice Oxley (2022) the nazi narrative employed by Russia has its roots in the far-right affiliations of some of the members of the Azov battalion which fought against Russian forces during the Crimea conflict in 2014. It would therefore fit into the disinformation campaign as "there is also no evidence of recent mass killings or ethnic purges taking place in Ukraine. Moreover, labelling enemies Nazis is a common political ploy in Russia, especially from a leader who favours disinformation campaigns and wants to stir up feelings of national vengeance against a WWII foe to justify conquest", explains expert Allan Ripp (2022 para. 2).

Additional claims reported by the embassy's social media communication channel also depict the Ukrainian conflict as an inevitable occurrence. An illustrative instance is a post (Rusia en Colombia, 2023) where the embassy shares a link to an interview with Tavdumadze on the Colombian digital newspaper *El Tiempo*. In this interview, the ambassador's viewpoints echo Russia's primary justifications for its invasion of Ukraine. Russophobia and persecution in areas with Russian-speaking communities and NATO's presence in Ukraine are mentioned. Essentially, what is interesting about this example is how Russian weaponised information is effectively conveyed by diplomats through Colombian national media. This characteristic is also evident in the analysis of the Russian embassy in Colombia.

- *"Russia is a world peace seeker and a human rights' fervent defender."*

While examining the channel's content, a significant feature emerged. The embassy dedicated a substantial effort to convey a commitment to humanitarian principles within the context of the Russian Federation. There are a few posts that share information about the embassy's participation in social causes. For example, information about a new project to offer victims of the Colombian armed conflict the possibility to study in Russian universities (Rusia en

Colombia, 2022f). This humanitarian essence is also conveyed in relation to the war in Ukraine with a post that states officials from the embassy connected funds to transfer humanitarian assistance to Donetsk. In particular, the resources are mean to be allocated to the purchase of a neonatal incubator for a medical centre in this area (Rusia en Colombia, 2022g). However, the lack of public corroborating information raises the possibility that these activities could be classified as disinformation attempts aimed at portraying Russia as a compassionate and generous actor in the conflict. These actions bear a distinctive, customised message, directly addressing Colombian citizens (in the former case) and the Colombian region (in the latter case).

Additionally, this tailored positive image of the Kremlin is further integrated into the Colombian context by a continuous reference in the channel to the desire of a successful resolution of the conflict between the National Government and the rebel group of the FARC-EP. Indeed, the channel disseminated information about the participation of the Permanent Representative Vassily Nebenzia at the United Nations Security Council in regard to the situation in Colombia (Rusia en Colombia, 2022h). According to the post, the governmental representative highlighted his concern over the implementation of the Colombian Peace Accord signed in 2016 with the rebel formation. The post also includes the link to the statement, and it presents various interesting points. First, the Colombian government of Iván Duque is directly considered responsible of the failure to implement the treaty. Secondly, the statement incorporates constant references to human rights' violations as a result of the conflict. Thirdly, the speech concludes by remarking Russia will keep making as many efforts as possible to ensure the peace process finally occurs without recession.

Although Russia's communication ostensibly portrays the country as a committed actor which desires a successful and durable peace in Colombia, an alternative perspective emerges when considering how this information is

integrated into the channel's content. During Duque's presidency, Colombia officially aligned itself with Western's perspective on the war in Ukraine and openly criticised Russia's military incursion. Additionally, the country positively responded to NATO's calls to provide humanitarian aid to Ukraine (Infobae, 2022). Therefore, by invoking the backdrop of the Colombian peace process, there was an underlying criticism towards Duque's government. Additionally, by anchoring Nebenzia's remarks within the Colombian peace process, a concealed resistance against President Duque's administration becomes evident. This strategic approach enables the embassy to present Russian's opposition to the stance taken by Colombian government as a broader concern for Colombia's peace and stability. Not surprisingly, the narrative diametrically changed when Gustavo Petro became the Colombia's President.

The channel shifted its stance from expressing scepticism towards Colombian government and emphasising the lack of progress in the Colombian Peace Agreement process to applauding the progress and achievements under the new Colombian president's leadership. In this regard, the embassy once again shared an intervention by a Russian representative at the United Nations. on this occasion, the statement was marked by consistent approbation for the new Colombian administration (Rusia en Colombia, 2022i). Interestingly, in other messages disseminated by the embassy, they appraised Petro's refusal to send Russian-manufactured equipment held by the Colombian state to Ukraine, in response to a request from the United States.

This information suggests the embassy is using propaganda strategically in the Colombian context. When President Duque was in power and aligned with Western perspectives, the embassy criticised his government's stance and highlighted lack of progress. However, when Gustavo Petro became president and his Administration rejected supporting the West's sanctions and actions in Ukraine, the tone shifted dramatically to praising Petro's advancements in the

peace process. It is worth noting these propagandistic statements are tailored to the context and, if widely disseminated, could enhance public dissatisfaction with their national government. Therefore, the embassy demonstrates a potential capability to exploit foreign internal circumstances of a country on its own benefit.

7.2. Case study 2: Telegram Channel of the Embassy of Russia in Mexico

The second channel under scrutiny presents certain particularities that make it, with no prior evaluation of its content, succinctly different from the Channel of the Embassy of Russia in Colombia. First and foremost, it possesses a consolidated wider audience with over 11,000 subscribers, and it was created on February 26th, only 9 days before its Colombian counterpart. This variance could be attributed to the substantial volume of content, reaching more than 400 posts within the span of a year.

Another notable difference can be seen when attending to the source of the content. In the case of the Russian Embassy in Mexico (@embrusiamexico) out of the 411 messages present on the channel, 272 were original posts from the embassy. In other words, 66% of the information present in the channel was not reposted from any other sources. However, similarly to the Russian Embassy in Colombia, from the remaining messages Cancillería de Rusia (@MAERussia) remained as the main source for reposted content. 22% of the total content on the channel had its origin in this other institutional account.

Regarding the remaining content it is noticeable a more diverse variety of non-official channels from which the embassy had reposted content. Although the content of such publications will not be covered, it is still relevant to mention the embassy included messages that originated from sources known for being disseminators of Russian disinformation and propaganda. Specifically, from the

Sputnik Mundo Telegram channel (@SputnikMundo – 39,029 subscribers), ¡Ahí les Va! (@ahilesvaALV – 45,464 subscribers) and WAR CRIMES IN UKRAINE (@grigoriev_maxim – 8,470 subscribers). The former is, along with RT, the main media outlet funded by the Russian government to project false or misleading information aligned with the country's interests. Its main difference from RT is its focus on targeting social media users (Watanabe, 2018)

The significance of ¡Ahí les Va! was reinvigorated when the Kremlin's main channels for propaganda and disinformation, RT and Sputnik, confronted content restrictions. This media entity is a well-known affiliated programme of the media outlet RT, however it has demonstrated a fierce capability to circumvent restrictions and disseminate "witty video clips about international news from a lens of conspiracism, anti-Westernism, and Russian victimhood" (Motta, 2022 para. 2).

Lastly, Maxim Grigoriev's channel is presented as a recollection of "witnesses' evidence of war crimes by Ukrainian neo-Nazis and their accomplishes that occur in Donbass" (WAR CRIMES IN UKRAINE, 2023). The channel is a reflection of the work produced by the International Public Tribunal on Ukraine, an institution created by the Kremlin to "gather information about military crimes in liberated territories, confirmed the Russian News Agency (Russian News Agency, 2023 para. 4). Nevertheless, doubts arise regarding the genuine transparency and dedication of this organisation to human rights. As indicated by the Centre for Information Resilience, the channel appears to function as another propaganda instrument aimed at spreading the frequently reiterated assertion that Ukraine is under the rule of a Nazi regime, which purportedly condones violence in the region (Thomas, 2022). The content from these channels being featured on the Embassy's account serves to emphasise it presents a more provocative approach.

The inclusion of this channels in the embassy's feed highlights one characteristic that distinguishes it from the case of Russian Embassy in Colombia Telegram Channels: a more overt presence of Russian false propaganda, that is, disinformation.

During the monitorization of this channel an analytical inconvenience arose. This channel featured more originally created content overall. However, over 50% of it consisted on reproduction of statements made by the top-level Russian authorities -such as President Vladimir Putin, Serguei Lavrov, Nikolai Patrushev and María Zajarova- in regards to the on-going Russian-Ukrainian conflict.

The concern is that if the analysis were to cover all the different claims and statements made by these officials in the channel it could make it difficult to clearly understand the embassy's specific propagandistic characteristics. In other words, the central goal to shed light on how the embassy is engaging in propaganda could be unclear. Furthermore, many of the statements from these high-level figures often revolve around a particular narrative of warfare that has already been discussed. Because of this recurring repetition and the fact that these narratives have already been addressed in the prior selected case study, the choice has been made to concentrate exclusively on content that avoids reiterating these extensively discussed official viewpoints. In essence, the analysis will encompass elements within the channel that diverge from the situation observed in the Russian Embassy Telegram Channel in Colombia. This selective approach allows for a deeper understanding of this embassy's unique efforts in shaping the propaganda within the Mexican context.

- *"Mexican media is often contaminated by Western influence and needs to be more objective."*

Over the timeframe selected, Russian Embassy in Mexico has reiterated to its audience a supposedly subjectivity of national media outlets. This goes in the line with Russian propaganda characteristic of seeding doubt about news from any source that presents a negative view of the Kremlin and its actions. Moreover, this narrative can be understood as a defined strategy to insert division and confusion on the Mexican public opinion by reiterating the idea that they should question each piece of information about the war, as it might be presented with a biased viewpoint.

Among the statements connected to this issue, we found the Embassy criticised one article published by *Milenio* for including "nazi" terminology (Embajada de Rusia en México, 2023). Specifically, the referred publication utilised the slogan "Slava Ukraini", which has become one of the linguistic symbols of Ukraine's resistance against the invasion (Kaniewski, 2018). Besides this specific example, the embassy repeatedly criticised national newspapers and even ironically stated "we imagine the title of the next publication from the Milenio journalists' will be *Russian soldiers drink blood from Ukrainian children*" (Embajada de Rusia en México, 2022a). Similarly, it questioned the objectivity of El Universal when this one published an article on Vladimir Putin's health (Embajada de Rusia en México, 2022b).

Furthermore, in other publications, this same idea regarding the biased coverage of the war by Mexican national media was reiterated. Although the embassy expressed its content with the absence of censorship in the country towards RT or Sputnik's content, it also demanded greater "objectivity" in national media (Embajada de Rusia en México, 2022c). Whether used as justification or as a consequence, the embassy's feed includes numerous links to interviews with the Russian ambassador in Mexico, Viktor Koronelli. The channel's feed shows that the spectrum of digital newspapers in which the ambassador has been interviewed is wide, including *La Jornada, El Universal, El Economista, La*

Octava and Buzos de la Noticia. Regarding the brief annotations on the channels' post on these interviews highlights Koronelli's active role in the dissemination of pro-Russian propaganda in the country.

Additionally, other website links portrayed on the feed redirect the user to articles written by supposedly independent journalists. However, a brief analysis on the information provided in the mentioned articles shows the content aligns meticulously to the Russian Federation's main narrative lines on the Ukraine's war. *Buzos de la Noticia* is the newspaper in which these publications are contained. However, they are all written by the same journalist: Nydia Egremi. The open information about this journalist is limited, but there are signs that could indicate a potential linkage with Russian institutions. Indeed, Egremi's narrative meticulously reproduces the defining narrative lines of the Kremlin propaganda during the conflict[2]. Additionally, it is interesting the way she redirects all the blame towards the United States, reinforcing conspiracy theories about the country, including the one about biological weapons development.

Although the investigation sought to find how the embassies could be using the narrative to weaken the image of the United Stated in the region, these allegations are rather occasional. This does not mean the channel does not contain anti-US language, but it is mostly conveyed through the statements made by the high-level figures of the Russian Federation. Nevertheless, we sustain the inclusion of Egremi's work in the channel illustrates the desire of the channel to contribute to a deterioration on the social perception of the Western bloc. Overall, the articles alluded justify Russia's military actions and suggest

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[2] For more information and in-depth analysis, consult of Egremi's articles is recommended. The following links display each of them:
https://buzos.com.mx/index.php/nota/index/10858
https://buzos.com.mx/index.php/nota/index/10714
https://buzos.com.mx/index.php/nota/index/14462

the United States orchestrated the rise of anti-Russian sentiment in Ukraine and unlawfully incorporated Ukraine -with European collaboration- to its sphere of influence. A last remark on these articles is that they also convey the idea that the United States' is trying to counter Russia's growing influence in the Latin American region with false and misleading information. Therefore, the investigation shows Russian propaganda is represented on national media as different newspapers include the ambassador's interviews and, there are suspicious journalists projecting Russian vision of the war for national audience. The United Sated and the Western bloc's reputation could be threatened as the evidence indicates a considerable exposure to Russian propaganda by Mexican society.

The embassy also intends to strengthen the credibility of the Russian Federation to the Mexican audience by remarking the Government's position on the matter. In this sense, the social media channel shows gratitude to Andrés Manuel López Obrador's decision of not sending military equipment to Ukraine. Although this decision of the Mexican government is real, its lecture by the Russian Federation could be understood as a malinformation practice. Indeed, when they report this decision, the channel often conveys the message of Mexico supporting Russia in the war, meanwhile Obrador's government has reiterated its neutrality (EuropaPress, 2023).

- *"Ukraine is a heartless state that indiscriminately murders civilians during the military conflict with Russia."*

The Russian Embassy Communication Telegram channel in Mexico is characterised by an unquestionable leadership of the ambassador Viktor Koronelli. Analysing the posts within the specified timeframe, the content in the feed can be categorised into four main areas: promotion of Russian historical and cultural aspects, coverage of diplomatic events hosted at the Embassy,

presentation of the Russian official perspective on war developments and the persistent presence of disinformation claims. In the fourth category, Viktor Koronelli assumes a pivotal role as the embassy constantly incorporates unsupported claims about war events. Indeed, after the scrutinisation of Koronelli-related content on the channel it was found many of his statements were clear examples of disinformation about Ukraine's military forces in the war.

The Russian channel in Colombia had insisted in the humanitarian nature of the Kremlin showing support for important Colombian causes such as its commitment to the Peace Process. In this instance, it is noticeable the regime's alleged good nature is presented by Koronelli from an alternate angle: portraying Ukrainian forces as cruel aggressors targeting civilians. In this regard, the channel covers in various occasions the statements of the ambassador on the brutality of Ukrainian troops. He conveys in the channel the message of Ukrainian forces targeting public infrastructure, residential buildings and hospitals. However, a few representative examples of these reported incidents by the ambassador have been categorised by independent researchers as false. EUvsDisinfo corroborated Russian forces are responsible for various human rights violations and atrocities during the war. In fact, they have been identified as the perpetrators of the missile attack on the railway station of Kramatorsk. (EuvsDisinfo, 2022a) and the bombing of a maternity hospital in Mariupol (EuvsDisinfo, 2022b). The ambassador had openly blamed the Ukrainian forces for these events on the Telegram channel.

Consequently, the analysis has revealed that the Russia Embassy Telegram Channel in Mexico harbours a greater prevalence of propaganda in the guise of disinformation. In addition to this characteristic, the embassy has exhibited limited content tailored to the specific context of Mexico. Nonetheless, it is noteworthy that the embassy consistently disseminates information regarding

events connected to Russian culture, ostensibly in an effort to foster increased engagement with Mexican society.

8. Conclusions

This research aspired to expand the current literature on state-sponsored propaganda. This aspiration came to light after a terrible war exploded in Eastern Europe when Russian troops invaded Ukraine. Since that moment, the confrontation did not only occur in the battlefield, but every individual on Earth with access to the Internet also became a distant participant as both sides used the digital sphere to communicate their own vision of the war. Indeed, the war in Ukraine is the latest development of a worrisome tendency to utilise the digital environment to advance an actor's agenda.

However, malicious information being interchanged on a daily basis has become so frequent that the phenomenon of state-sponsored propaganda is often not well comprehended. For this reason, the investigation dedicated a large part to address the terminological complications that arise while examining what is propaganda, what is the importance of the online environment in its dissemination and how certain nation states have recognised its power to influence public perception in a way that favours their global interests. Therefore, the conceptualisation around the concepts of "propaganda", "disinformation", among other terms, was fundamental understand it is not its mere existence what threatens society but a deliberate use of it to manipulate society according to one's own preferences.

Specifically, this was exemplified through the case of Russia, the primary focus of this project. To underscore the significance Russia places on online propaganda and disinformation activities as powerful sources of power a brief overview of military doctrine was provided. This highlighted how the Kremlin has adopted a wide conception of information security in which propaganda and disinformation are assets as important as cyber-attacks. However, it is worth

noting that for the Kremlin this information security conception is derived from the fact it believes that other actors are constantly threatening its existence, legitimacy, and main values. Therefore, the propagandistic actions the Russian Federations employs are seeing by their high-level officials as necessary reactive measures in a permanently hostile environment.

Nevertheless, the weaponisation of information by the Kremlin has not been a linear process. Through the examination of Russian military confrontations in Georgia, Crimea, and Ukraine it was revealed Moscow's remarkable adaptative capabilities. This analysis showcased that Russian propaganda activities have undergone a remarkable transformation and currently possess arguably the most sophisticated structure globally. However, the investigation's empirical part was designed to portray a potential new development of Russia's propaganda machine: a wider geographical reach.

A few months after the war in Ukraine started, many journalists pointed out to the fact that Russia has increased its propaganda and disinformation activities in the Spanish language. Up until that moment and due to the vast amount of literature on Russia's malicious information dissemination in Europe, the researcher of the investigation had never reflected on how Russia could update its strategy to counter the increased isolation that is facing in its surrounding area. Therefore, the investigation delved into Russia's informational activities the Latin America region because some research was already highlighting its increase presence. The existing literature mainly addressed the topic from a general perspective, looking at digital Russian media outlets such as RT (Russia Today) or Sputnik's propaganda dissemination in the region through social platforms such as Facebook or Twitter.

However, what current research had not yet explored was if the increased Russian propaganda activities were being tailored to each country's specific socio-political conditions. More precisely, no study had investigated whether the misleading or false information disseminated by the Kremlin in this region had tailored components depending on the specific country of deployment.

To solve this gap, the empirical part of this investigation examined two Russian diplomatic channels in Telegram: the Russian Embassy in Colombia Telegram channel and the Russian Embassy in Mexico Telegram channel. The main goal was observing if they portrayed customised messaged for the audience and also, examine if they conveyed a message of distrust and suspicion over the United Stated and the Western bloc. Regarding the first aspect, there were certain elements that pointed to a partly tailored propaganda. The channel in question criticised the Colombian government's handling of the Peace Agreement with the FARC guerrilla group. Notably, these criticisms were linked to the Colombian government's previous alignment with Western nations. Another noteworthy finding from the research is that while the content could be further tailored for specific audiences, the means to communicate this potentially customised propaganda are readily available. This is evident in the case of both embassy social media channels, where it became apparent that Russian ambassadors and journalists with pro-Russian leanings were disseminating propaganda and disinformation on national newspapers.

Furthermore, the investigation identified instances of criticism directed at the United States. However, these criticisms took a generalised form, employing similar narrative frameworks as those seen in European countries. In light of this, it is crucial for both the Western bloc and the United States not to become overly self-assured. Russia's global aspirations are clear and the Kremlin has identified in the Latin American countries an attractive opportunity to expand its influence and potentially achieve such geopolitical ambitions.

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g) Rusia en Colombia (@rusiaencolombia) (September 16th 2022) "Funcionarios de la Embajada recolectaron recursos para comprar una
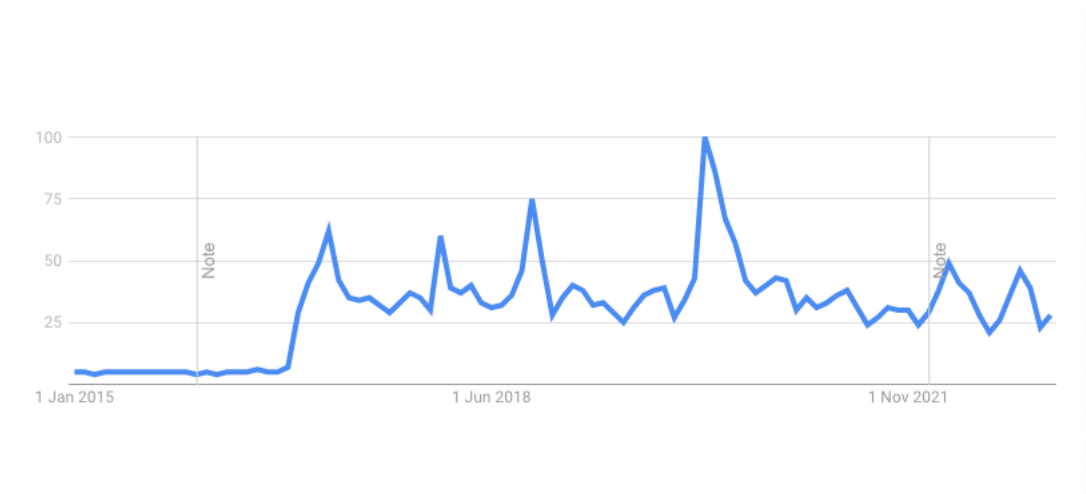
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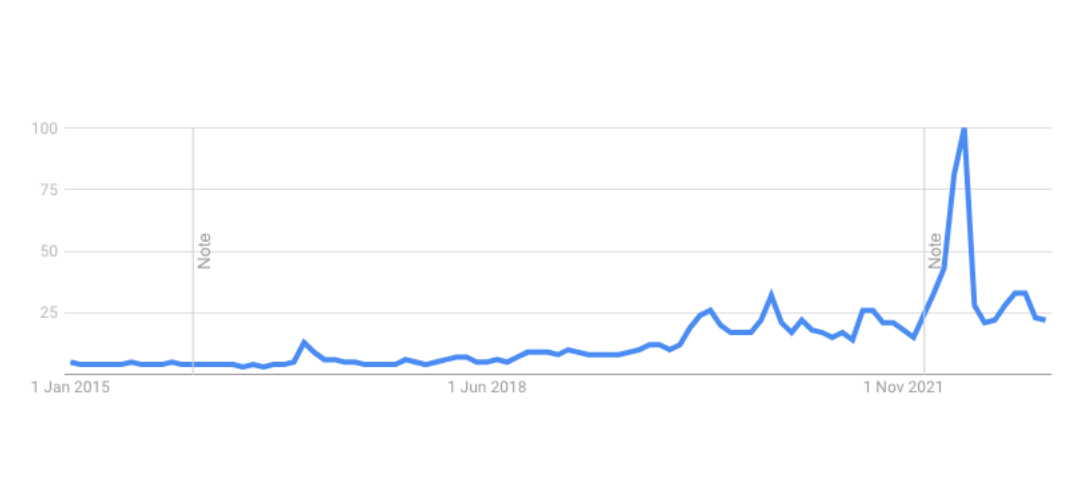
<u>**Appencices**</u>

Appendix 1. Google Trends results (January 2015 – January 2022) for the terms "fake news", "disinformation", "malinformation" and "propaganda"

- *Fake news*

Source: https://trends.google.com/trends/explore?date=2015-01-01%202023-01-01&q=fake%20news&hl=en-GB
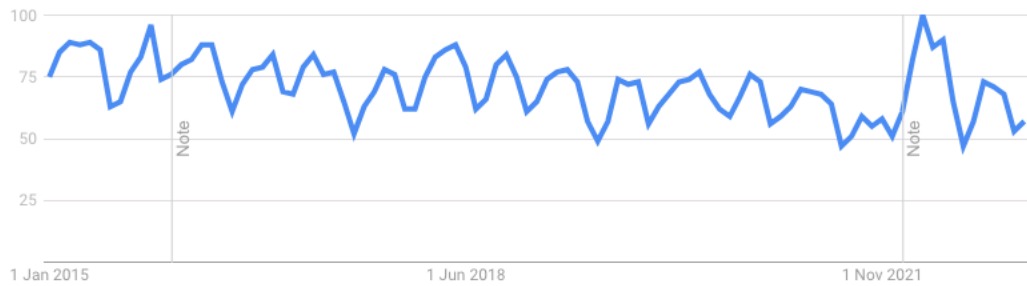
- *Disinformation*

Source: https://trends.google.com/trends/explore?date=2015-01-01%202023-01-01&q=disinformation&hl=en-GB

- *Malinformation*

Source: https://trends.google.com/trends/explore?date=2015-01-01%202023-01-01&q=malinformation&hl=en-GB

Propaganda

Source: https://trends.google.com/trends/explore?date=2015-01-01%202023-01-01&q=propaganda&hl=en-GB