

# [***Putin's Information War Is Absurd—and Effective | Opinion***](https://advance.lexis.com/api/document?collection=news&id=urn:contentItem:6BS6-CXD1-DY68-10M6-00000-00&context=1516831)

Newsweek.com

April 10, 2024 Wednesday 12:41 PM EST

Copyright © 2024 Newsweek Inc. All Rights Reserved



**Length:** 1165 words

**Byline:** Ariel Cohen

**Highlight:** Russia's disinformation efforts go well beyond the Crocus City terror attack and, thanks to social media, have spread all over the globe.

**Body**

A terror attack on a Moscow suburban concert hall [*killed more than 130 civilians*](https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/2024/03/25/moscow-concert-hall-attack-russia-isis/) on March 22. The Islamic State Khorasan (ISIS-K) claimed responsibility that same day, [*followed by body camera footage to prove it*](https://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-68652380). ISIS-K is a predominantly Afghanistan-based branch of [*ISIS*](https://www.newsweek.com/topic/isis?utm_source=Synacor&utm_medium=Attnet&utm_campaign=Partnerships), with a massive deployment on the Afghanistan-Tajikistan border, which has a long and bloody history with Russia. After wars against Muslims in Afghanistan and Chechnya, Russian, Iranian, and Syrian forces decimated ISIS in Syria, and ISIS has [*retaliated*](https://slate.com/news-and-politics/2024/03/isis-k-moscow-putin-crocus-mall-terrorist-attack.html) a number of times against Russia's soft targets.

Before the attack, the State Department publicly [*cautioned American citizens*](https://ru.usembassy.gov/security-alert-avoid-large-gatherings-over-the-next-48-hours/) in Russia not to attend large gatherings; and U.S. intelligence reportedly [*warned Moscow*](https://www.washingtonpost.com/national-security/2024/04/02/us-warning-russia-isis-crocus/) about the pending attack on the Crocus entertainment complex. The State Department further indicated that ISIS had likely been planning the massacre for weeks––but that's not what Russian President [*Vladimir Putin*](https://www.newsweek.com/topic/vladimir-putin?utm_source=Synacor&utm_medium=Attnet&utm_campaign=Partnerships) wants you to believe.

Instead of fact-finding or retaliating against ISIS, the Kremlin seems intent on using this tragedy to further its war against Ukraine. High-level Russian officials have repeatedly accused Kyiv of ordering the attack on Crocus City Hall. Putin insinuated that Ukraine [*had tried to aid the gunmen's escape*](https://apnews.com/article/russia-moscow-krasnogorsk-gunmen-concert-hall-fire-97e321c3c477ece36d4fb32f50fa0e8a). While unsubstantiated and absurd, these claims could presage what's to come in the Russo-Ukrainian conflict.

For years, the Kremlin has trotted out similarly ridiculous false claims, such as the evil "Brzezinski Plan" to dismember Mother Russia, named after President [*Jimmy Carter*](https://www.newsweek.com/topic/jimmy-carter?utm_source=Synacor&utm_medium=Attnet&utm_campaign=Partnerships)'s scholarly National Security Advisor Zbigniew Brzezinski. Regarding Ukraine, this might translate into a pretext for intensifying attacks or even marching into another former Soviet state, as [*Baltic leaders*](https://news.sky.com/story/ukraine-war-why-the-baltic-states-on-natos-frontline-with-russia-are-urging-their-allies-to-wake-up-13084332) are warning.

[*Recruitment numbers released by the Russian Defense Ministry*](https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/2024/04/03/russia-terror-attack-blame-us/) substantiate this, as mere days after the attack, Defense Minister Sergey Shoigu announced the [*creation of two new field armies*](https://kyivindependent.com/shoigu-russia-to-form-2-new-armies-by-the-end-of-2024/#:~:text=The%20Russian%20Armed%20Forces%20will,defense%20chiefs%20on%20March%2020.), including 14 divisions and 16 brigades. A concerted effort to instrumentalize the Crocus City attack against Kyiv is underway.

Russia's disinformation efforts go well beyond this incident and, thanks to social media, have spread all over the globe. While garnering some traction in the Global North (OECD countries plus the Antipodes), it's in the [*Global South*](https://www.stimson.org/2022/red-cell-2-is-the-west-losing-the-global-south/) that Russia has reaped the most significant rewards. The popularity of the Kremlin-controlled TV station Russia Today is high, and support for Ukraine is low, partly due to the mismanagement of Western information operations. Many countries outside the West are apathetic toward the war in Ukraine and view it as a "European war." Economic factors are also at play. Many [*depend on cheap Russian and Ukrainian grains and energy to sustain their economies,*](https://www.csis.org/analysis/russia-ukraine-and-global-food-security-two-year-assessment) and unless the West offers alternatives, this dependence will continue unabated. Instead of taking responsibility for its own aggression, Russia dissimulates, insisting that [*sanctions against Moscow are increasing food prices*](https://www.state.gov/disarming-disinformation/russias-disinformation-cannot-hide-its-responsibility-for-the-global-food-crisis/) and blaming Washington and Brussels.

Still, the Global North is far from immune to Russian propaganda. Some commentators on both the left and right seem eager to embrace Kremlin-sponsored narratives. The United States seems receptive. Social media posts [*framing immigrants as criminals*](https://apnews.com/article/russia-election-trump-immigration-disinformation-tiktok-youtube-ce518c6cd101048f896025179ef19997) and encouraging the U.S. to build a border wall are mainstays on pro-Russian accounts calling to block aid to Ukraine. Certain members of [*Congress*](https://www.newsweek.com/topic/congress?utm_source=Synacor&utm_medium=Attnet&utm_campaign=Partnerships) have fallen victim to these efforts; among them is Rep. Marjorie Taylor Green (R-GA), who, on X (formerly known as [*Twitter*](https://www.newsweek.com/topic/twitter?utm_source=Synacor&utm_medium=Attnet&utm_campaign=Partnerships)), [*referred to the Ukrainian army as Nazis*](https://www.nytimes.com/2024/03/01/briefing/putin-republicans-trump-tucker-carlson.html), invoking the [*same language used by Putin*](https://www.state.gov/disarming-disinformation/to-vilify-ukraine-the-kremlin-resorts-to-antisemitism/)'s propaganda.

Jackson Hinkle––a far-right pro-Russia and antisemitic influencer with 2.5 million followers on X and the founder of "[*MAGA Communism*](https://www.vice.com/en/article/88qk4b/what-the-hell-is-magacommunism)"––[*suggested*](https://twitter.com/jacksonhinklle/status/1771566048178852131) that the West was the real culprit of the Moscow massacre. For years, denizens of X would accuse the U.S. of founding ISIS alongside Israel. This feeds into existing narratives promoted by Russians and Islamists that the [*U.S. is complicit*](https://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-13173581/kremlin-accuse-britain-terrorists-russia-moscow-attack.html) in global terror activity.

Few can hide from Russia's propaganda machine, and even fewer are invulnerable. Propaganda's insidious impact is that [*it need not be correct or believable to be effective*](https://www.bbc.com/future/article/20161026-how-liars-create-the-illusion-of-truth). Flagrantly false propaganda can generate political turmoil, set nation against nation, and undermine U.S. foreign policy. It can also reframe the debate, where flagrant propaganda replaces discussions of reality itself, as happened after the horrific [*Hamas*](https://www.newsweek.com/topic/hamas?utm_source=Synacor&utm_medium=Attnet&utm_campaign=Partnerships) attack on Israel on Oct. 7.

Western governments must take substantial action to prevent the spread of disinformation. The merger of U.S. Information into the State Department under President [*Bill Clinton*](https://www.newsweek.com/topic/bill-clinton?utm_source=Synacor&utm_medium=Attnet&utm_campaign=Partnerships) was an epic failure. It is time to set up an interagency body that coordinates between the State Department, the Intelligence community, and the [*Pentagon*](https://www.newsweek.com/topic/pentagon?utm_source=Synacor&utm_medium=Attnet&utm_campaign=Partnerships) and has the capacity to launch information operations worldwide without the official stamp of the U.S. government on its materials.

Those who deliberately disseminate enemy propaganda should be identified and criminally prosecuted when breaking the law. The images of pro-Axis radio propagandists [*Lord Haw Haw*](https://www.nationalww2museum.org/war/articles/william-joyce-capture-and-execution) and [*Tokyo Rose*](https://www.fbi.gov/history/famous-cases/iva-toguri-daquino-and-tokyo-rose) live in our memory forever.

Congress must act to convince additional social media platforms to embrace a [*community-notes-like*](https://help.twitter.com/en/using-x/community-notes) concept, as featured on Twitter (now X). Meanwhile, Chinese-owned [*TikTok*](https://www.newsweek.com/topic/tiktok?utm_source=Synacor&utm_medium=Attnet&utm_campaign=Partnerships), Russia's Sputnik Radio, [*Al Jazeera*](https://www.newsweek.com/topic/al-jazeera?utm_source=Synacor&utm_medium=Attnet&utm_campaign=Partnerships), and others must be examined to determine whether they are potential vectors for influencing U.S. foreign policy. TikTok's [*anti-Ukraine disinformation has already been exposed.*](https://www.cnbc.com/2023/12/15/fake-tiktok-accounts-spread-russia-ukraine-war-propaganda-to-millions-.html)

The U.S. and the West must also re-examine and revamp their information policy in the Global South and address their concerns. In the case of the U.S. and our allies, that means exporting more energy and food, not less, and not putting up roadblocks that inhibit future exports. The West also needs to do more to expose Russian and Chinese propaganda, hence the need for a new interagency body with global reach.

Reframing and reshaping information spaces and influencing U.S. ***politics*** is a cheap and effective way for Moscow to win the war in Ukraine and prosecute Cold War v2.0. If the West does not act, it will find itself in an unwinnable competition with an adversary who weaponizes and abuses information in general and social media in particular, sewing division with misinformation.

*Ariel Cohen, Ph.D., is a nonresident senior fellow at the Atlantic Council's Eurasia Center and a Council of Foreign Relations member. He is a recognized authority on international security and energy policy and a leading expert on Russia, Eurasia, and the Middle East. Cohen is also the managing director of the Energy, Growth, and Security Program (EGS) at the International Tax and Investment Center (ITIC). Cohen is the author of* Russian Imperialism *(Praeger, 1998), six other books and numerous book chapters and articles on Russia.*

*The views expressed in this article are the writer's own.*

[*Link to Image*](https://d.newsweek.com/en/full/2376436/putin-latest-tech.jpg)

**Graphic**

Putin on the Latest Tech

MIKHAIL METZEL/POOL/AFP via Getty Images

In this pool photograph distributed by the Russian state agency Sputnik, Russia's President Vladimir Putin visits the 344th Army Aviation Centre in the Tver region of Russia on March 27.

**Load-Date:** April 10, 2024

**End of Document**