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Russia's strategy for influence through public diplomacy and active measures: the Swedish case

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ABSTRACT

Russia, as many contemporary states, takes public diplomacy seriously. Since the inception of its English language TV network Russia Today in 2005 (now 'RT'), the Russian government has broadened its operations to include Sputnik news websites in several languages and social media activities. Moscow, however, has also been accused of engaging in covert influence activities – behaviour historically referred to as 'active measures' in the Soviet KGB lexicon on political warfare. In this paper, we provide empirical evidence on how Russia since 2014 has moved towards a preference for active measures towards Sweden, a small country in a geopolitically important European region. We analyse the blurring of boundaries between public diplomacy and active measures; document phenomena such as forgeries, disinformation, military threats and agents of influence and define Russian foreign policy strategy. In summary, we conclude that the overarching goal of Russian policy towards Sweden and the wider Baltic Sea is to preserve the geostrategic status quo, which is identified with a security order minimising NATO presence in the region.

KEYWORDS Russia; Soviet; Sweden; Baltic Sea; active measures

#Zakharova: Sweden's accession to #NATO would have military & political implications requiring #Russia to take retaliatory steps@RusEmbSwe
– Twitter account of Russia's Ministry of Foreign Affairs
10 September 2015

Russia, as many contemporary states, takes public diplomacy seriously. Since the inception of its English language TV network Russia Today in 2005 (now 'RT'), the Russian government has broadened its operations to include Sputnik news websites in several languages and social media activities. These measures have been complemented with coordinated campaigns, using Western public relations firms, think-tanks and lobbyists to further Russian foreign policy goals. Moscow, however, has also been accused of

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engaging in covert influence activities – behaviour historically referred to as ‘active measures’ in the Soviet KGB lexicon on political warfare. In this paper, we provide empirical evidence on how Russia since 2014 has moved towards a preference for active measures towards Sweden, a small country in a geopolitically important European region. We analyse the blurring of boundaries between public diplomacy and active measures; document phenomena such as forgeries, disinformation, military threats and agents of influence; and define Russian foreign policy strategy towards Sweden and the Baltic Sea region.

An increasing amount of disinformation, forged telegrams and fake news items have surfaced in the Swedish information landscape. These developments have taken place in the context of a deteriorated security situation in the wider Baltic region, following Russia’s annexation of Crimea in February 2014. Russian politicians and diplomats have proactively intervened in Sweden’s domestic political affairs; and a number of pro-Kremlin NGOs and GONGOs have become operational in Sweden. In social media, troll armies are targeting journalists and academics, including the ‘hijacking’ of Twitter accounts. Disinformation on NATO and suspected intrusions by foreign submarines have appeared in Swedish media, themes which were picked up by Sputnik, RT and other sources of Russian public diplomacy and broadcast to an international audience. Lastly, there exist examples of important target groups in Sweden, such as political actors, NGOs and newspapers, who wittingly or unwittingly have performed a role as interlocutors of disinformation.

The significance of covert influence activities as instruments of statecraft in global affairs, and the increased presence of Russia within this domain, has been discussed in the last decade by academics, journalists and analysts in the wider expert community.¹ Covert warfare and deception as such have ancient roots, and its specific iteration in the form of Soviet international propaganda was analysed already in the early post-war period and the Cold War.² In the last years, governments, academia and NGOs have initiated work to identify and respond to ‘Russia’s ongoing disinformation campaign’,

¹Steve Abrams, ‘Beyond Propaganda: Soviet Active Measures in Putin’s Russia’, *Connections: The Quarterly Journal*, 15/1 (2016) 5–31; Ilya Yablokov, ‘Conspiracy Theories as a Russian Public Diplomacy Tool: The Case of *Russia Today* (RT)’, *Politics*, 35/3–4 (2015) 301–15; Jessikka Aro, ‘The Cyberspace War: Propaganda and Trolling as Warfare Tools’, *European View*, 15/1 (2016) 121–32; Peter Pomerantsev, ‘The Kremlin’s Information War’, *Journal of Democracy*, 26/4 (2015) 40–50.

²Harold D. Laswell, ‘The Strategy of Soviet Propaganda’, *Proceedings of the Academy of Political Science*, 24/2 (1951) 66–78; Mikhail Agursky, ‘Soviet Disinformation and Forgeries’, *International Journal of World Peace*, 6/1 (1889) 13–30; George H. Bolsover, ‘Soviet Ideology and Propaganda’, *International Affairs*, 24/2 (1948) 170–80; Zygmunt Nagorski, ‘Soviet International Propaganda: Its Role, Effectiveness, and Future’, *Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science*, 398 (1971) 130–39; Frederick C. Barghoorn, ‘The Soviet Image of the United States: A Deliberately Distorted Image’, *Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science*, 295 (1954), 42–51; David Wedgwood Benn, ‘New Thinking in Soviet Propaganda’, *Soviet Studies*, 21/1 (1969) 52–63; Myron Rush, ‘The War Danger in Soviet Policy and Propaganda’, *Comparative Strategy*, 8/1 (1989) 1–9.

as evidenced by the European Council's establishment of the East StratCom Task Force in March 2015.³ A number of troubling events – the Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MFA) campaign against the Chancellor of Germany, Angela Merkel, over the so-called Lisa Case in January 2016; the abduction of an Estonian security officer by Russian special forces on 5 September 2014 and Moscow's financial support for Marine Le Pen's Front National – have challenged observers to rethink their understanding of Russia's foreign policy strategy towards European Union member states.

Although it is difficult to ascertain accurately the political effectiveness of Russian active measures, the phenomenon as such merits study: Regardless of whether influence activities prove effective, marginal or counter-productive, they consume considerable resources and are indicative of intent at the highest political level.⁴ We conjecture that Russia takes a differentiated approach towards individual European states, also in the Baltic Sea region, and that Russian behaviour towards the littoral states Sweden, Finland, Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania is not necessarily the same.⁵ Furthermore, a country-specific case study may still provide evidence on issues of wider geostrategic significance: recent examples include Swedish–NATO cooperation, military security in the Baltic Sea region, Baltic Sea energy infrastructure, the EU's Eastern Partnership, EU policies towards Ukraine and the sanctions regime against Russia – issues and policies which in different ways have a divisive impact on EU/Sweden–Russia relations, at least in the opinion of either Moscow or Brussels/Stockholm.

Moscow is communicating to different target populations, but it remains to be properly understood exactly what is being said. The establishment of a Swedish language Sputnik news website in April 2015 was in this respect helpful. In order to give a vision of the dominant Russian metanarratives, we have created a database detailing all Swedish Sputnik articles published during the news portal's first year of existence (in total 3963 articles, April–December, 2015). This quantitative content analysis of a key Russian public diplomacy tool is complemented with a descriptive analysis of a broader spectrum of active measures, including the dissemination of forgeries, military threats, mobilisation of local actors or agents, support of pro-Kremlin

³For more information on the EEAS, see James Panichi, 'EU Declares Information War on Russia,' *Politico*, 27 Aug. 2006, <<http://www.politico.eu/article/russia-propaganda-ukraine-eu-response-disinformation/>>.

⁴Max Holland, 'The Propagation and Power of Communist Security Services Dezinformatsiya,' *International Journal of Intelligence and Counterintelligence*, 19/1 (2006) 1–31; Herbert Romerstein, 'Disinformation as a KGB Weapon in the Cold War,' *Journal of Intelligence History*, 1/1 (2001) 54–67; Ladislav Bittman, 'The Use of Disinformation by Democracies,' *International Journal of Intelligence and Counterintelligence*, 4/2 (1990) 243–61.

⁵On Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania, see Rod Thornton and Manos Karagiannis, 'The Russian Threat to the Baltic States: The Problems of Shaping Local Defense Mechanisms,' *Journal of Slavic Military Studies*, 29/3 (2016) 331–351.

movements and important target groups for entering Russian influence in Sweden (including, e.g. political parties, NGOs and media).

Our case study contributes to five areas in the current literature. First, we contribute to the growing body of literature highlighting how the boundary between Russia's public diplomacy and active measures has become blurred.⁶ Second, our paper emphasises the continuity between Soviet active measures and behavioural patterns in Russian foreign affairs, and therefore complements research which has focused primarily on the role of mass media, technology and cyber threats.⁷ Third, the hypothesis that behavioural patterns from the Cold War period are reemerging suggests a need to take history seriously. We therefore contextualise Russian policies towards Sweden in the history of international relations before 1989. Fourth, we seek to understand to what extent Russia selects a differentiated approach towards individual states, analysing the case of Sweden in its broader geostrategic environment. Lastly, our main contribution is a detailed and broad empirical analysis of Russian public diplomacy and active measures towards an individual country, which helps us define Russian foreign policy strategy and enables comparisons for future research; we do not attempt to contribute directly to the scholarly literature on Russian military doctrine or thinking, although our findings could potentially contribute to and inform this discussion as well.⁸

On the basis of our detailed case study, we attempt to ascertain the main policy objectives of Russia and answer some general questions: What metanarratives dominate Russian public diplomacy towards Sweden? What can these metanarratives explain about Russia's wider strategic objectives towards Sweden, the Baltic Sea region and/or the EU? How tailored are the Russian metanarratives for a specific target audience? Are there any contradictions between certain elements of the Russian narratives, and how are they handled? How do metanarratives in Russian public diplomacy complement or contradict active measures such as disinformation and

⁶Before 2014, scholars and observers sometimes distinguished between post-Soviet states (targets of active measures) and Western states (targets of primarily public diplomacy). See: Saari Sinikukka, 'Russia's Post-Orange Revolution Strategies to Increase its Influence in Former Soviet Republics: Public Diplomacy po Russkii', *Europe-Asia Studies*, 66/1 (2014) 50–66.

⁷Timothy Thomas, 'Russia's Information Warfare Strategy: Can the Nation Cope in Future Conflicts?', *Journal of Slavic Military Studies*, 27/1 (2014) 101–130; Bettina Renz, 'Russia and "Hybrid Warfare"', *Contemporary Politics*, 22/3 (2016) 283–300; Mark Galeotti, 'Hybrid, Ambiguous, and Non-Linear? How New is Russia's "New Way of War"?', *Small Wars & Insurgencies*, 27/2 (2016) 282–301; Alexander Lanoszka, 'Russian Hybrid Warfare and Extended Deterrence in Eastern Ukraine', *International Affairs*, 92/1 (2016) 175–195.

⁸The focus of our paper is not contemporary Russian military doctrines or thinking on security as such, but rather the practices which flow from Russian strategic thinking and established behavioural patterns. For a more detailed description of Soviet military doctrine, see John Dziak, *Soviet Perceptions of Military Power: The Interaction of Theory and Practice* (New York: National Strategy Information Center 1981). For an English language overview of contemporary Russian military doctrine, see Keir Giles, 'Russia's' New 'Tools'. See also Olga Oliker, 'Unpacking'.

forgeries? How and where do Russian metanarratives appear in the wider Swedish media climate? Is it possible to trace disinformation to specific actors, or agents of influence, in the Swedish public?

The first part of our paper summarises the literature on public diplomacy and active measures and explains how Russia has adapted traditional Soviet thinking to changes in technology and international affairs during the last 25 years. The second part describes Soviet active measures towards Sweden during the Cold War and highlights continuities, legacies and changes in current Swedish–Russian relations. The third part details our quantitative content analysis of Swedish Sputnik and discusses the dominant metanarratives in Russian public diplomacy. The penultimate part describes Russia's use of active measures towards Sweden, that is, the use of disinformation, forged documents, agents of influence and front organisations. The last part concludes.

Public diplomacy and active measures

Public diplomacy has been defined as 'an international actor's attempt to manage the international environment through engagement with a foreign public'.⁹ In the case of Russia, an operating assumption among many of its diplomats and politicians is that negative opinions about the country can be explained by the global dominance of Western media – which tend to favour 'anti-Kremlin' narratives – and therefore a general lack of appropriate or sufficient information.¹⁰ Public diplomacy thus becomes an important tool, helping Russia convey its alternative narratives and engage with important target populations abroad.¹¹ Furthermore, specific characteristics of Russia's political system – that is, its hierarchical decision-making structure and tightly regulated media climate – have predisposed Russian public diplomacy to convey a narrative consistent with the opinions of the Kremlin.¹²

⁹N.J. Cull, *Public Diplomacy: Lessons from the Past* (Los Angeles, CA: Figueroa Press 2009), 12.

¹⁰At a seminar at the Swedish Institute of International Affairs in May 2016, the head of the Committee for Foreign Affairs of the Federation Council of the Russia Federation, Konstantin Kosachev, emphasised that European Union policy towards Russia was based on 'misunderstandings in Western media'.

¹¹Thomas Just, 'Promoting Russia Abroad: Russia's Post-Cold War National Identity and Public Diplomacy', *Journal of International Communication*, 22/1 (2016) 82–95.

¹²Russian public diplomacy is similar in its approach to that of other countries such as China, Iran and Venezuela, whose ranking in terms of democracy, press freedom and human rights is lower than or similar to that of Russia's. They all tend to centralise public diplomacy, even when they create TV networks and news sites in different languages and regions. In the United States or the European Union, where there is more diversity of various mass media, public diplomacy of governments regularly competes with actors such as private business groups and NGOs, whose agendas and views are not necessarily identical. Russian and Chinese TV networks such as RT and CCTV, in contrast, were created with the explicit aim of projecting globally the opinions of their owners, and face no strong competition from alternative domestic broadcasters. See: Christopher Walker, 'The Hijacking of "Soft Power"', *Journal of Democracy*, 27/1 (2016), 49–63.

The role of international broadcasting in foreign policy was recognised by the Soviet government in the 1920s. Beginning with the two Chechen wars (1994 and 1999) and the Russia–Georgia war in 2008, shaping public perceptions on the global scale reemerged as a priority in Moscow’s foreign relations. Under President Vladimir Putin, these developments have mirrored domestic trends towards political control over news broadcasts on the national television networks.¹³ Russian thinking on information security has a strong domestic component. In its most recent national security strategy, signed into law by Putin on 31 December 2015, Russia identifies Western information warfare against its population as one of the country’s main security threats.¹⁴ ‘We are currently in a state of information warfare with the trendsetters in the information space’, Putin’s spokesperson Dmitry Peskov opined on Twitter in March 2016, ‘most notably, with the Anglo-Saxons, their media’.¹⁵ US-led governments in the West, argue Russian political and military leaders, seek to foment a ‘colour revolution’ also in Russia. From this point of view, it is a short step to establish a framework not only for domestic information security (including control over media and communication technologies) but also for overt and covert operations towards foreign target audiences as a threat-neutralising and defensive measure.¹⁶

In traditional Soviet military thinking, the systematic effort to influence outside developments covertly is the so-called active measures.¹⁷ The main difference between public diplomacy and active measures is that the latter serves to hamper the target country’s ability to generate public support in pursuing its policies. Active measures are conducted secretly, based on the principle of plausible deniability, where the desired result is to influence decision-making in a direction favourable or at least not harmful to the Kremlin. Active measures rely on disinformation, which is the deliberate dissemination of carefully constructed and false messages into the communication system of a target group in order to deceive decision-making elites or public opinion.¹⁸ Different channels can be exploited, including forgeries,

¹³Scott Gehlbach, ‘Reflections on Putin and the Media’, *Post-Soviet Affairs*, 26/1 (2010), 77–87; Ruben Enikolopov, Maria Petrova, and Ekaterina Zhuravskaya, ‘Media and Political Persuasion: Evidence from Russia’, *American Economic Review*, 101/7 (2011), 3253–85; Miguel Vázquez Liñan, ‘Putin’s Propaganda Legacy’, *Post-Soviet Affairs*, 25/2 (2009), 137–159.

¹⁴Olga Oliker, ‘Unpacking Russia’s New National Security Strategy’, *Center for Strategic and International Studies*, 7 Jan. 2016, <<https://www.csis.org/analysis/unpacking-russias-new-national-security-strategy>>.

¹⁵*Sputnik News*, ‘Russia at War with Anglo-Saxon Media’ – Putin Spokesman’, 27 Mar. 2016, <<https://www.rt.com/news/337335-russia-anglo-saxon-media-war/>>.

¹⁶Stephen Blank, ‘Russian Information Warfare as Domestic Counterinsurgency’, *American Foreign Policy Interests*, 35/1 (2013) 31–44.

¹⁷In China, the corresponding military concept is referred to as ‘Three Warfares.’ See Michael Raska, ‘China and the “Three Warfares”’, *The Diplomat*, 18 Dec. 2015, <<http://thediplomat.com/2015/12/hybrid-warfare-with-chinese-characteristics-2/>>.

¹⁸Romerstein, ‘Disinformation’, 56–67.

manipulative political actions, agents of influence, front organisations and rumours. A disinformation operation is most likely to succeed when it enters a target group's independent media climate, as the originator of the planted story can then refer to 'credible' Western sources in its own official communication, effectively collapsing the border between active measures and public diplomacy. Therefore, the distinction between active measures and public diplomacy is not always easy to discern, as coordination also occurs between the two.

The concepts active measures (*aktivnye meropriyatiya*) and disinformation (*dezinformatsiya*) herald from the Soviet KGB lexicon on political warfare.¹⁹ '[T]echniques and methods displayed by Russia in Ukraine [since 2013]', as noted by Keir Giles, 'have their roots in traditional Soviet approaches' but have also been developed to include new domains such as cyber and telecommunications.²⁰ As was noted above, contemporary Russian security doctrines – more specifically the Military Doctrine of 26 December 2014,²¹ the National Security Strategy of 31 December 2015²² and the Information Security Doctrine of 6 December 2016²³ – are similar to Soviet precursors, defining information warfare as a defensive measure and a strategic priority in peacetime and wartime alike and requiring coordination between many government agencies, security services and the media. One difference is that modern information warfare includes technological aspects such as cyber warfare, which is conducted jointly with influence operations (i.e. psychological operations). In peacetime, information warfare might include the spread of disinformation and use of military threats – all of which can be described as traditional Soviet active measures adapted to modern conditions.

Soviet active measures in Sweden

Behavioural patterns in Russia's foreign policy towards Sweden have precedents in the Cold War period, when the military balance in the Baltic

¹⁹ Another related concept is reflexive control (*upravlenie refleksivnoe*). Reflexive control occurs when the controlling organ is able to convey to a target group motives and reasons that cause it to make decisions in a desired direction, the nature of which is maintained in strict secrecy. Reflexion, in this context, is a 'psychological term that denotes that each opponent bases his decision on a "model" of both himself and his adversary.' See Clifford Reid, 'Reflexive Control in Soviet Military Planning', in Brian Dailey and Patrick Parker, (eds.), *Soviet Strategic Deception* (Massachusetts: Hoover Institution Press 1987), 294.

²⁰ Keir Giles, 'Russia's 'New' Tools for Confronting the West. Continuity and Innovation in Moscow's Exercise of Power', Chatham House. *The Royal Institute of International Affairs*, Mar. 2016, <<https://www.chathamhouse.org/publication/russias-new-tools-confronting-west>>.

²¹ 'The President Signs into Law a New Version of the Military Doctrine 26.12.2014' (Prezident utverdil novuiu redaktsiiu Boennoi doktrini), <<http://kremlin.ru/acts/news/47334>>.

²² 'A New Strategy of National Security of Russia' (Utverzhdena Strategiia national'noi bezopasnosti Rossii), <<http://kremlin.ru/acts/news/51129>>.

²³ 'Decree of the President of the Russian Federation 05.12.2016 No 646' (Ukaz Prezidenta Rossiiskoi Federatsii ot 05.12.2016 No 646), <<http://kremlin.ru/acts/bank/41460>>.

region was different from the present era. After the Second World War, Moscow dominated politically and militarily the territories from Vyborg in the east to Rostock in the south: The Baltic States were occupied and incorporated as Soviet republics; Polish borders were shifted westwards and East Germany was founded as a Soviet satellite state. Finland and Sweden reaffirmed their military non-alignment, while Norway and Denmark became cofounding members of NATO in 1949. The geostrategic position of Finland and Sweden was not lost on Moscow, and in the 1980s, Soviet and Warsaw Pact states are believed to have operated somewhere about 160 intelligence officers on Swedish territory, engaged primarily in the systematic illegal collection of information and recruitment of local and foreign agents. Although Moscow always rejected this allegation, testimonies from Soviet defectors confirmed Sweden as one of the highest priorities in Soviet and Warsaw Pact espionage activities.²⁴

Historical evidence affirms the efficiency of Soviet security services. In the Nordic states, the Soviet security agency, the KGB (*Komitet gosudarstvennoy bezopasnosti*), recruited Norwegian political secretary Arne Treholt in the 1970s, whose responsibility included high-level negotiations with Moscow on the demarcation of the Norwegian–Soviet border in the Barents Sea. In Sweden, the KGB recruited Stig Bergling, an officer in the Security Police, and Stig Wennerström, a military attaché stationed at different points in time at the Swedish embassies in both Moscow and Washington. Leaking information to Moscow on defectors from the KGB, Bergling paralysed for many years Swedish counter-intelligence. Wennerström provided his Soviet counterparts details on Swedish military planning and defence industry, information which allegedly enabled the shooting down of Swedish aircraft carrying out radio and radar signals intelligence-gathering by Soviet fighter jets over international waters in the Baltic Sea in 1952 (the ‘Catalina Affair’).²⁵

As elsewhere in Europe, Moscow infiltrated parts of the wider political, economic and media climate in Sweden; even though it is disputed to what extent precisely this was the case. It has been established how left parties, friendship unions, peace movements, student organizations and other related organizations were approached, and sometimes managed or used, by representatives of the Soviet Communist Party. The Swedish Communist Party received direct and indirect financial support from Eastern Bloc countries and maintained official ties to most communist regimes.²⁶ The first case of Soviet disinformation we have established relates to the Soviet

²⁴Geoffrey R. Weller, ‘Scandinavian Security and Intelligence: The European Union, the WEU, and NATO’, *Scandinavian Studies*, 70/1 (1998) 69–86.

²⁵J. J. Widen, ‘The Wennerström Spy Case: A Western Perspective’, *Intelligence and National Security*, 21/6 (2006) 931–958; Petter Wulff, ‘The Impact of a High-Tech Spy’, *Intelligence and National Security*, 28/2 (2013) 159–180; Weller, ‘Scandinavian’, 69–86.

²⁶Lars Björlin and Morten Thing, *Guldet fra Moskva: Finansieringen af de nordiske kommunistpartier 1917–1990* (Copenhagen: Informations forl 2012).

kidnapping of Swedish diplomat Raoul Wallenberg in Budapest 1945. The Soviets initially provided the Swedish government misleading information on Wallenberg's real whereabouts, denying his presence in Soviet custody, and later planted disinformation in the US journal *Reader's Digest* that Wallenberg upon his arrest had been in possession of jewellery and gold hidden in the gasoline tank of his car. The campaign to discredit Wallenberg fell flat in the post-war period, but the jewellery and gold theme reemerged as late as 2012 in an authoritative Wallenberg biography.²⁷

When the Soviet submarine S-363 ran aground in 1981 on the south coast of Sweden, a forged telegram soon appeared in media purportedly written by the Swedish ambassador to Washington, Wilhelm Wachtmeister. The telegram expresses the ambassador's profound disappointment over a secret agreement between Stockholm and Washington, providing US submarines access to Swedish military bases in wartime. The telegram was immediately revealed as a Soviet forgery, but its content continued to circulate in the Swedish debate.²⁸ Disinformation and forged telegrams with similar narratives began to appear again in 2014 in the wake of the Russia–Ukraine War, a renewed Swedish NATO debate, and observations that foreign submarines may have intruded the Stockholm archipelago. As illustrated by the Wallenberg case – and possibly the Wachtmeister forgery – the longevity of false information in a target group's information climate highlights the time perspective behind the use of active measures, where immediate impact may be less important than the continuous alteration of a target population's perceptions and belief systems over a long time period.

Metanarratives in Russian public diplomacy: the case of the Swedish Sputnik

This section establishes the dominant metanarratives in Russian public diplomacy towards Sweden, using the Swedish language Sputnik news site as a proxy. As Richard Shultz and Roy Godson did in their work on Soviet propaganda themes during the 1960s and 1970s, we use classification and statistical tabulation in order to examine systematically the substance of Russian mass communication towards a specific target group (Sweden), its dominant narratives and variation over time.²⁹ Sputnik International, which replaced Voice of Russia on 10 November 2014, launched its Swedish language version on 15 April 2015. Before the Swedish language version

²⁷ Johan Matz, 'Did Raoul Wallenberg Try to Leave Budapest in January 1945 with Jewelry and 15–20 kg of Gold Hidden in the Gasoline Tank of his Car? On Sensationalism in Popular History and Soviet Disinformation', *Journal of Intelligence History*, 15/1 (2016) 17–41.

²⁸ Martin Kragh, 'Media Warfare, a Russian Specialty' (Medial krigföring en rysk paradgren), *Svenska Dagbladet*, 14 Apr. 2016, <<http://www.svd.se/medial-krigforing-en-rysk-paradgren/av/martin-kragh>>.

²⁹ Richard Shultz & Roy Godson, *Dezinformatsia: Active measures in Soviet strategy* (Washington: Pergamon 1984).

was terminated and removed from the web in spring 2016, we were able to collect and categorise all its articles published in 2015, in total 3963 news items. Our analysis provides the dominant Russian metanarratives towards Sweden, and possibly other Western states.³⁰

From the total, we were able to categorise 3344 Sputnik articles according to ten general themes, with 619 articles being of such a unique or miscellaneous subject matter they could not be classified at all.³¹ As shown in [Figure 1](#), the most common themes in 2015 were 'Crisis in the West' (705 articles), 'Positive image of Russia' (643) and 'Western aggressiveness' (499). These pervasive categories are followed, in descending order, by the themes 'Negative image of countries perceived to be in the West's sphere of influence' (424), 'West is malicious' (309), 'International sympathy and cooperation with Russia' (304), 'Western policy failures' (112) and 'Divisions within the Western alliance' (72).³² Thematically, the continuity with Soviet mass communication themes is very strong, with a general emphasis on anti-Western narratives. Swedish Sputnik published on average circa 400–500 articles per month, with a drop in activity during Russia's vacation period in August.³³

EU, NATO and the United States

The most frequently appearing targets in Swedish Sputnik reporting are the EU (698 articles), NATO (321) and the United States (1018). The EU is depicted as an organisation in terminal decline, beset by major crises such as the Greek economic crisis and the influx of migrants to Europe from the Middle East and Africa. European bureaucrats and decision makers are described as incompetent and puppets of the US government.³⁴ NATO is described as both a US instrument of war and the chief architect of Western policy towards Russia. The encirclement hypothesis, which argues that the United States and its allies are threatening Russian security with the instalment of military bases near Russian borders, dominates as the analytical framework.³⁵ The narrative of a Russia under siege is not a novel one, and

³⁰By Spring 2016, all Nordic language Sputniks had been terminated. Sputnik International has never provided any explanation for its decision.

³¹Examples of articles we could not categorize include: 'Flood in Sochi', 'NATO to Send Astronauts to Mars', 'Nobel Peace Prize to Tunisia'.

³²The two last categories, 'clickbait' and 'human interest', have no Soviet equivalent. Such categories of articles were presumably included as Sputnik news in order to attract attention of social media users.

³³The category labelled 'clickbait/human interest stories' concern news items such as 'Putin has started to practice yoga', 'Pamela Anderson invites Putin to a meeting', 'New-born white lion cubs sunbathing at a Zoo in Crimea', and 'A bear in a swimming pool'.

³⁴Examples of articles critical of the West include: 'The Crisis of the American Dream', 'Sweden in Flames', 'EU Cannot Cope with Refugee Flows', 'EU Waiting for Armageddon'.

³⁵Examples of articles on a Western threat against Russia include: 'US Actions Provoke Tensions in South China Sea', 'NATO Missile Tests an Attempt to Scare Russia', 'The US is Placing Attack Jets in Estonia', 'NATO Forces Near the Border Threaten Russia'.



Figure 1. Metanarratives in Swedish Sputnik articles, April–December 2015.

Source: Authors' own calculations.

recalls the Soviet critique of capitalist states encircling the 'Socialist Fatherland'.³⁶

What about Sweden? Although Sweden is referenced on several occasions (303 articles dealing mostly with migration), other countries such as Germany (390), France (360) and Finland (332) actually receive more mentions. Ukraine is referenced 882 times, almost without exception in an extremely unfavourable light (with 'fascism', 'corruption', 'authoritarianism' and 'belligerence' as some of the most recurring themes). Members of the EU and NATO, such as Germany, the United Kingdom and France, are largely portrayed as pawns of US foreign policy. Why the Swedish language Sputnik did not actually concern itself so much with Sweden per se might have different reasonable explanations. First, Sweden was simply not a priority, or the editorial team did not possess sufficient resources to cover its domestic affairs. Second, criticism of the EU and NATO – constituting circa 60% of all articles – could actually be the dominant narrative which Russia wants to communicate also to the Swedish target audience.

Operating mode

One example of Sputnik's operating mode is the way the news site reported on Ukraine and Syria in 2015. [Figure 3](#) highlights how attention towards Ukraine radically diminished in August, at the same time as coverage of Syria began to increase. In May, Ukraine was mentioned 182 times in comparison to 31 times for Syria. In October, after Russia's intervention on the Syrian theatre on 30 September, mentions of Ukraine drop to 57, whereas coverage of Syria increased to 200 mentions (see [Figure 2](#)). The Syrian war had been consistently intense for months, if not years, prior to the entrance of Russian airpower to the conflict, and there were no major changes to the situation in Ukraine to motivate such a rapid loss in interest. The shift merely reflected how Sputnik reporting, as an instrument of Russian public diplomacy, shifted *pari passu* with changes in Russian foreign policy.

Although the general narratives remain the same, the specific subjects of Sputnik reporting are largely dictated by current events. In pushing the theme of 'crisis in the West', Sputnik covered extensively the Greek economic crisis in the summer of 2015 and the migration crisis in the fall – a trend highlighted in [Figure 4](#) showing the increase in articles mentioning 'refugee'. One can argue that conventional news media also focused on the same pressing topics, according to a similar news cycle dealing only with a few topics at the same time. What sets sites such as Sputnik apart is the tendentious and biased manner in which the outlet filters and then reports on news items. The Eurozone crisis and the refugee situation are portrayed

³⁶Lasswell, 'Soviet Propaganda', 75.

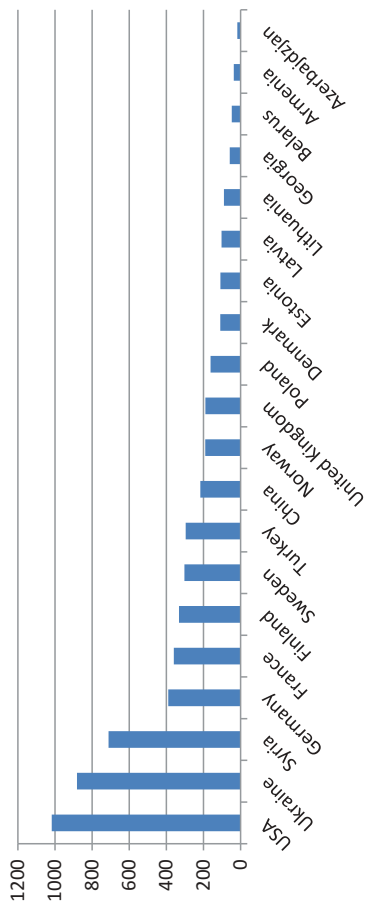


Figure 2. Mention of countries in Swedish Sputnik articles, April–December 2015.
Source: Authors' own calculations.

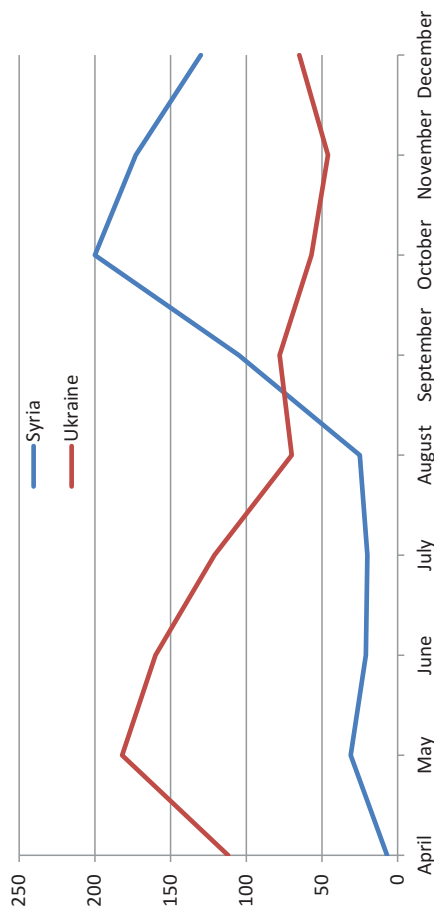


Figure 3. Mention of Syria and Ukraine on Swedish Sputnik, April–December 2015.
Source: Authors' own calculations.

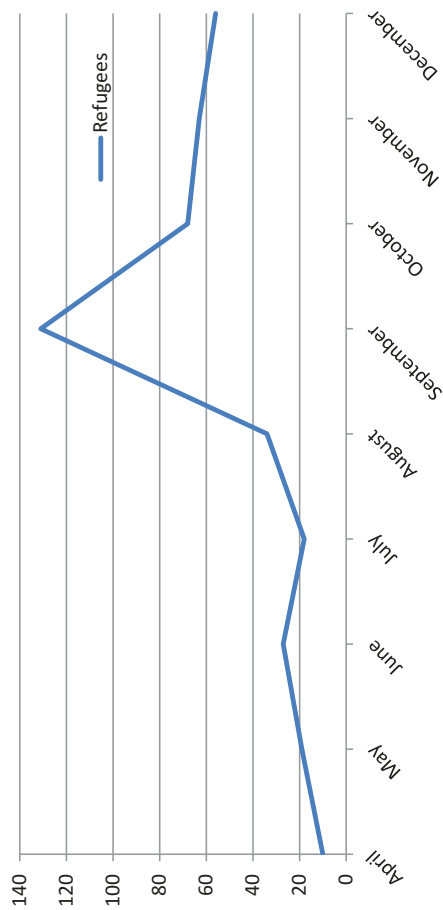


Figure 4. Mention of word 'Refugee' on Swedish Sputnik, April–December 2015.
Source: Authors' own calculations.

in such a way as to give readers the impression that the EU is in an irreversible decline and facing imminent collapse.³⁷

Outright fabrications occur on a limited scope. The most prominent example is the counter-hypothesis supported by Russia that the civilian airliner MH17, which crashed in the Donbass region of Ukraine in July 2014, was shot down by a Ukrainian fighter jet rather than a surface-to-air missile operated from rebel held territory. Some of the very few articles which were actually signed by an existing Swedish person, 'Boris', dealt with the alternative MH17 theory. 'Boris' is a pro-Kremlin activist of Russian origin living in Sweden and founder of a Facebook group critical of Ukraine, NATO and Western foreign policy towards Russia.³⁸ On a broad scale, however, tendentious news items and rewrites are more commonplace than pure fabrications. Misleading half-truths, such as the narrow focus on far right elements in Ukrainian politics or the deployment of NATO troops in Europe, are the norm.

Like Soviet propaganda, Russian public diplomacy today can also be wildly inconsistent. The West is portrayed as weak, but at the same time a near existential threat to Russia. Europe is described as both xenophobic towards refugees, and foolish for allowing so many of them to seek asylum. The point however might not be to present the target groups with a coherent alternative narrative. Tools such as Sputnik can also serve to spread confusion and encourage disunity. Furthermore, the Swedish language Sputnik relied, with very few exceptions, on rewrites of already existing news stories from established media outlets. A paradox thus arises between the common accusations against 'mainstream Western media' as being biased and anti-Russian in their orientation, and the reality of the dependency on the very same Western media as the source for Sputnik publications. When sources did appear, references were usually made to Reuters (103 citations) and the Russian state-owned RIA Novosti (163 citations). Finnish news outlets such as state television YLE (86 citations) were cited more often than any Swedish source, such as the daily newspaper *Dagens Nyheter* (24 citations) or Swedish state television SVT (4 citations).

Andrew Wilson's theory on Russian 'nudge propaganda' finds support in our study.³⁹ Sputnik regularly published articles pandering to pet-narratives with potential target groups, such as NATO expansion (the left, peace movements), opposition to GMOs (environmentalists and conspiracy movements) and the chaos in Europe in the wake of the migration crisis (far right and populist movements). By targeting different groups with pre-existing

³⁷Representative articles include themes such as 'Europe is a paradise – for immigrants', 'Europe is dying due to tobacco, alcohol and obesity', and 'Merkel's migration policy broke the EU'.

³⁸We have chosen to anonymise names of individuals who are not established public figures or decision makers.

³⁹Andrew Wilson, 'Four Types of Russian Propaganda', *Aspen Review*, 4 (2015), 77–81.

'anti-establishment' and anti-NATO/EU sentiments, Sputnik can be said to have operated on the premise that these sentiments could be 'nudged', that is, further strengthened. As was noted already by Harold Laswell in 1951, Soviet propaganda regularly focused on maintaining an air of plausibility. Post-war examples included allegations of mass unemployment in the capitalist system, criticism of discrimination against Blacks in the United States, and imperialism resulting from capitalist rivalries over the control of raw materials and markets. False or not, these stories rang true to millions of people, both inside the Soviet Union and abroad. A similar operating mode can be seen in how Russia conducts its public diplomacy today. The Iraq war (2003) was a violation of international law, the Libyan intervention (2011) did not end hostilities on the ground, and the EU is facing considerable economic and political challenges. As previously with Soviet propaganda, Moscow's criticism of the 'West' today rings true to important target groups who can be nudged towards accepting the Kremlin's established view of world affairs.⁴⁰

Russian active measures towards Sweden

Increasingly since 2014, Sweden has been the target of a wide array of active measures: Disinformation, forged telegrams and fake news items have surfaced in the information landscape; Russian politicians and diplomats have intervened in Swedish domestic political affairs on NATO and Baltic Sea security; pro-Kremlin NGOs and GONGOs have become operative in Sweden and revelations of a Russian owned company in Sweden connected to party financing in the European Union have emerged in media. In social media, troll armies are targeting journalists and academics, including the 'hijacking' of Twitter accounts. Russian state TV has castigated Swedish politicians as agents of Washington and falsified interviews with Swedish citizens, and Swedish journalists and diplomats working in Russia have been targets of harassment and espionage activities.⁴¹ Lastly, there exist examples of actors in Sweden, such as politicians, academics and newspapers, who wittingly or unwittingly perform a role as agents of influence or interlocutors of disinformation. Among the Nordic states, similar phenomena on a comparable scale have emerged primarily in Finland – the second militarily non-aligned country in the region.⁴²

⁴⁰Laswell, 'Soviet Strategy', 74.

⁴¹*Expressen*, 'Espionage towards Swedish Television in Moscow', (Avlyssning mot SVT i Moskva – Säpo utreder), 15 Oct. 2014, <<http://www.expressen.se/nyheter/avlyssning-mot-svt-i-moskva—sapo-utreder>>.

⁴²Aro, Jessikka, 'The Cyberspace War'.

Forgeries

Political use of forgeries has a distinguished tradition in Russian history. The best example, the notorious *Protocols of the Elders of Zion*, was an accomplishment of the Tsarist police, the impact of which is felt until this very day. In the 1920s and 1930s, Soviet authorities invented fake conspiracies, planted fake defectors in European capitals and published misleading books, articles and pamphlets in several world languages. The most well-established cases of disinformation in the post-war period include the claims that John F. Kennedy was murdered by the CIA, HIV was invented by the Pentagon and that the US Army engaged in bacteriological warfare in Korea.⁴³ From the *Protocols* to the Kennedy assassination myth, millions of people around the world have held these fabrications to be true.

A number of forgeries and fake news items have emerged in the Swedish information landscape.⁴⁴ In most instances, they have originated in a similar fashion, usually through an obscure Russian and/or Swedish language website. Some forgeries have utilised fake letterheads and purport to be written by Swedish decision makers, in order to gain credibility and an aura of authenticity. We have identified ten forgeries relating exclusively to Swedish affairs, of which at least one entered conventional Swedish media reporting. As shown in [Figure 5](#) and [Table 1](#), no less than 26 forgeries in total have appeared in the Swedish information climate since December 2014, of which 14 appeared in 2015 and 11 in January–July 2016 (no forgeries have appeared in the third and fourth quarters 2016). Their sharp increase in a short time period is perhaps disturbing but should not be surprising. In contrast to the Cold War, when planting of forgeries was laboriously time consuming, use of internet resources reduces the cost of disseminating information. Once inserted into different digital media outlets, forgeries and disinformation exist in a target environment over very long time periods, and their origins are easily concealed.

Linkages to Russian sponsored originators exist, for the most time indirectly. Forgeries and accompanying explanatory ‘news articles’ have many times appeared for the first time on websites such as *cont.ws* and *politrus-sia.com* (Russian language websites), then in Swedish translation at *Pressbladet* (a website not dissimilar in superficial appearance from Sweden’s most popular news site, *Aftonbladet*), and later on websites in different languages (such as *indymedia.org.uk*, *cyberguerilla.org* and CNN’s *iReport*, where forgeries in many languages are uploaded regularly). Most of these websites allow users to self-publish material. The most active social

⁴³Agursky, ‘Soviet Disinformation’, 13–30.

⁴⁴In the article, we use the terms ‘information landscape’ or ‘information climate’ to denote information appearing in various sorts of media, including established mass media (news papers, radio, TV), social media (Facebook, Twitter), and online forums on the internet.

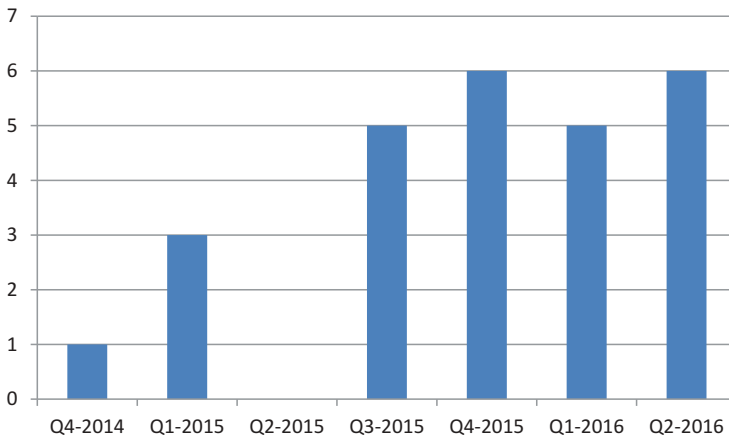


Figure 5. Quarterly number of forgeries and fake articles appearing in the Swedish information climate, 2014–2016 (second quarter).

Source: See Table 1.

media account used for disseminating Swedish language forgeries is 'George Kobzaru' (a fake name), who is also present on pro-Kremlin Facebook groups.

Some of the fake articles and forgeries appearing in the Swedish information climate have nothing to do with Sweden per se, that is, 'evidence' of NATO opposing the UN; Western states lobbying for Ukrainian politician Nadia Savchenko to be Secretary General of the UN; Polish politician Jarosław Kaczyński being mentally ill; Ukraine's Minister of Finance Natalie Jaresko covertly undermining the Dutch referendum on Ukraine's EU association agreement and German politicians conspiring against Turkey using Kurdish proxies.⁴⁵ Forgeries on Swedish politicians and decision makers focus on similar narratives, that is, conspiracies involving Ukraine, terrorist organisations and NATO. Their level of detail, and the instrumental exploitation of non-household names such as Tora Holst, a Swedish prosecutor, and Diana Janse, a Swedish diplomat, suggests that the originators of the documents have access to comprehensive intelligence on Swedish society.

Of the ten forgeries regarding Swedish political affairs, we scrutinise three representative examples which are also reproduced *in extenso*. Of those

⁴⁵The forgeries can be located on the following websites (accessed 8 Aug. 2016): Savchenko forgery: <<http://www.svenskpress.se/papers/pressbladet/articles/view/savtjenko-ar-ban-ki-moons-eftertra-dare>>; Ukraine-Holland forgery: <<http://www.svenskpress.se/papers/pressbladet/articles/view/ukraina-struntar-i-nederlandernas-opinion>>; Germany-Turkey forgery: <<http://www.pressbladet.se/articles/view/tyskland-vacker-kurdiska-fragan-for-att-kontrollera-erdogan>>; Kaczyński forgery: <<http://www.svenskpress.se/papers/pressbladet/articles/view/arftlig-sjukdom-hos-kaczynski>>; NATO against UN forgery: <<http://www.pressbladet.se/articles/view/toppmote-i-warszawa-nato-motsatter-sig-fn>>.

Table 1. Timeline of 26 forgeries and fake articles appearing in the Swedish information climate, 2015–July 2016.

| Theme | Date of appearance in Swedish | Note |
|---|-------------------------------|---|
| Savchenko next UN General Secretary | 19 July 2016 | References English language forgery of Ukrainian diplomat Pavlo Klimkin |
| NATO to undermine the UN | 10 June 2016 | Article text, no references |
| Swedish security threat at Eurovision 2016 | 28 April 2016 | References fake research article in English |
| Dutch referendum on Ukrainian EU association agreement | 11 April 2016 | References forgery of Ukrainian politicians' correspondence |
| Ukraine disregards the Dutch EU-referendum | 1 April 2016 | References English language forgery of Natalie Jaresko |
| Sweden did not prevent terror attack in Brussels | 29 March 2016 | Fake English language news site |
| Sweden supports the Islamic State | 3 March 2016 | Forged letter from Islamic State to Swedish government |
| Kaszynski is mentally ill | 24 February 2016 | Forged English language document |
| UK ferments unrest in Middle East | 29 January 2016 | Fake Arabic English language news site |
| Migrants and the end of Europe | 26 January 2016 | Migrants are compared to cockroaches |
| Indonesia supports the Islamic State | 15 January 2016 | Defunct link to fake news site |
| Money is more important than security | 30 December 2015 | Link to fake Spanish language news site |
| Germany supports Kurds against Turkey | 25 December 2015 | Forgery of German–Kurdish correspondence |
| Terrorism needs to be defeated | 17 November 2015 | Article text, no references |
| Swedish nationalists seek EU alternative | 15 October 2015 | Defunct reference to far right website Nordfront |
| OSCE hides Ukrainian corruption problem | 25 October 2015 | Forgery of OSCE correspondence |
| New Maidan in Moldova | 21 October 2015 | Link to English language forgery |
| Sionist Kyiv seeks European far right's support | 7 October 2015 | Link to forgery on CNN iReport |
| Swedish cover-up of Ukrainian war crimes | 2 September 2015 | Forgery of letter from prosecutor Tora Holst |
| Swedish PR-firm Kreab supports Poroshenko | 19 August 2015 | Kreab establishes 'link' to Carl Bildt |
| Pro-EU party in Ukraine is extremist | 24 July 2015 | Link to forgery on CNN iReport |
| Ukraine seeks nuclear weapons | 18 July 2015 | Link to 'Wikileaks', resembles superficially Wikileaks |
| Poland demands explanation regarding Swedish–German cooperation in World War II | 25 February 2015 | Forged letter from Poland's Minister of Foreign Affairs Grzegorz Schetyna to Swedish government |
| Sweden's secret military aid to Ukraine | 21 February 2015 | Forged letter from Minister of Defence Peter Hultqvist |
| Near SAS plane collision in airspace was NATO's fault, not Russia's | 13 February 2015 | Fake satellite imagery |
| Party of Swedes interview with Right Sector leader Dmitro Yarosh | 17 December 2014 | Fake 'Anonymous' YouTube video with text snippets from Party of Sweden website |

three documents, two deal with covert military cooperation between Sweden and Ukraine, including the covering-up of war crimes. The third one deals with a conspiracy between the Swedish government and the Islamic State (IS). (Two more forgeries are reproduced *in extenso* in the

Appendices. Spelling errors and grammatical mistakes are preserved as they occur in the original documents).

On 21 February 2015, a letter signed by Swedish Minister of Defence Peter Hultqvist appeared on social media through a Twitter identity of a well-known Swedish military affairs journalist.⁴⁶ In the letter, sent to Magnus Ingesson, CEO of BAE Systems Bofors AB (Sweden's largest weapons manufacturer), Hultqvist writes how he is

grateful to [Ingesson] for setting up the presentation for our Ukrainian partners. They admired the Archer System capabilities. Even the initial order may amount up to 12 units. In fact, according to Ukraine's Ministry of Defence if the operating experience is successful, a wide range of options will be available to BAE Systems Bofors AB.

Ukraine's Armed Forces are critically in need of cutting edge artillery systems. I am sure you will successfully take the opportunity. You have my congratulations and my full support in this matter.

Best regards,
Peter Hultqvist

The letter has a number of marks of a forgery, including factual mistakes: Ingesson is the previous CEO of BAE Systems Bofors AB; since 2012, he is based at the Swedish embassy in Washington. Furthermore, Hultqvist's signature had been retrieved from a source in the public domain, and for logically inexplicable reasons, the letter was written in English. Nevertheless, the claim that Sweden was planning to export the advanced Archer artillery system to Ukraine surfaced on a German news website and has since reappeared on pro-Kremlin websites and social media.

A second forgery appeared as a letter signed by Tora Holst, head of the International Public Prosecution Office in Stockholm. It was uploaded to CNN's Istory website by the social media account 'doubtingstevens' on 2 September 2015, and later broadcast on Russian state television and pro-Kremlin media.⁴⁷ The letter, addressed to Oleksiy Pokotylo at the 'Head Department for National Security and Defence Affairs' in Ukraine, confirms an investigation regarding war crimes committed by a Swedish citizen in Ukraine and rejects a 'request' from Ukrainian authorities that the case should be dismissed.⁴⁸

⁴⁶Karin Thurfjell, 'Sweden Offers to Sell Weapons to Ukraine in Fake Document', (Sverige erbjuder sig sälja vapen till Ukraina i förfalskat brev), *Svenska Dagbladet*, 21 Feb. 2015, <<http://www.svd.se/sverige-erbjuder-sig-salja-vapen-till-ukraina-i-forfalskat-brev>>.

⁴⁷*Doubtingstevens*, 'Sweden has Refused to Disclose Information on Military Crimes of the Ukrainian Army', 2 Dec. 2015, <<http://doubtingstevens.blogspot.se/2015/09/sweden-has-refused-to-disclose.html>>.

⁴⁸Olle Nygårds, 'Fake Swedish Letter on Russian TV: "Unknown Author"', (Falskt svenskt brev i rysk tv: 'Okänd avsändare'), *Svenska Dagbladet*, 13 Sept. 2015, <<http://www.svd.se/falskt-svenskt-brev-i-rysk-tv-okand-avsandare>>.

Dear Mr. Pokotylo,

Thank you for your letter to Ministry of Justice Morgan Johansson. I have been authorized to make a reply.

Unfortunately, Swedish Ministry of Justice can't fulfill your request to the full extent and dismiss the investigation into the activities of a Swedish citizen suspected of committing war crimes in Ukraine, since unquestionable evidence of his guilt is available to us. Nevertheless, we are ready to grant you access to every document concerning the case which is in possession of the legal investigators. We assure you that any information which can pose a threat to national interests of Ukraine shall be kept confidential. We understand this issue is highly important for both Ukraine and the international community, therefore every court session on the case will be held behind closed doors.

Rest assured that Swedish law enforcement agencies conduct no criminal investigation into the activities of Ukrainian citizens under the case. However we are convinced that impartial investigation of war crimes will benefit not only Sweden but democratic Ukraine as well.

Sincerely,
Tora Holst

Also, This letter also bears the marks... of a forgery, including factual mistakes. The letter purports to be sent from the International Public Prosecution Office but carries the official letterhead of the Swedish government; Pokotylo is not head of the 'Head Department for National Security and Defence Affairs', but deputy head of the 'Department of National Security with the Presidential Administration'. Furthermore, Swedish prosecutors do not usually receive..., nor would they reply to, requests from a foreign government. It is also doubtful that a prosecutor in the Swedish legal system would apply expressions such as 'unquestionable guilt', nor that the 'national interests of Ukraine' would be considered to the extent that a court would grant Ukrainian authorities 'access to every document' or conduct its trial 'behind closed doors', since the Swedish legal system explicitly prohibits use of secret trials and evidence presented to court is public.

Our third forgery example appeared on 23 March 2016, when the social media account 'Olle' uploaded an article to the website *Pressbladet*.⁴⁹ In the article, 'Olle' alleges to have uncovered a conspiracy between Sweden and NATO in order to secretly relay weapons via Turkey to the IS. The article refers to a letter sent to the Swedish MFA, written by 'Nada al-Qahtani', commander of a 'Daesh female assault team'. In the letter, the IS commander petitions the Swedish government for military support. Since Sweden is

⁴⁹'Sweden Sells Weapons to IS Forgery' <<http://www.svenskpress.se/papers/pressbladet/articles/view/fredsreglering-genom-skapning-av-terrorceller-islamiska-staten-vantar>>. See also Patrik Oksanen, 'Fake Letter from "Daesh" to the Swedish Government' (Förfalskat brev från 'Daesh' riktat mot svenska regeringen), *Hela Hålsingland*, 7 Apr. 2016, <<http://www.helahalsingland.se/opinion/ledare/forfalskat-brev-fran-daesh-riktat-mot-svenska-regeringen>>.

militarily non-aligned, the letter writer argues, the Swedish government is aptly positioned to support the IS without the risk of 'NATO sanctions'.

Dear Minister Wallström,

The war in Syria started five years ago and for all this time Europe tells about its support to everyone who opposes Assad and his allies, but all their support is just in their words. This is not enough, especially now when our Mujahideen brothers are in unequal battle with the forces of infidels while my sisters from newly created battalion are forced to take weapons and go to the frontline. Is that your support? European citizens voluntary join us in our fight. In 2015 only from Britain 60 women joined us, also we have women from Sweden. And today all of them after combat training stay with us in Al-Hasakah waiting for the upcoming battle. So why does Europe do nothing and keep promising?

Recently Margot Wallstrom said that Sweden will be fighting any aggression and will support everyone in need and give these people weapons and everything they will need to fight. Now forces that fight Assad and his allies are in urgent need of Sweden's support. So why not to start by helping Syria and help our assault battalion? You will never give us soldiers, but don't prevent your citizens who ready to fight for us. Besides you can give us weapons and ammunition through Turkey. Sweden is not NATO member so the Alliance can't protest against country which truly help and support us thereby this country is defending itself. The time of promises is gone and now the moment to give us real help and show which side you accept has come.

With your help we can establish in Syria the legitimate power for which the truly faithful people are ready to give their lives away.

Nada al-Qahtani

Commander of the first DAESH female assault battalion

Why this letter is a forgery is easily discerned. The IS does not self-identify as Daesh, a derogatory name used by the organisation's enemies; IS is not widely known to promote women soldiers, especially not in the capacity of commanders, nor do they typically petition Western governments for support. Furthermore, Sweden has provided aid to the IS opposition, such as military training of Kurdish forces in northern Iraq; as a member of the EU and in accordance with the Lisbon Treaty obligations, Sweden supported France with weapons and logistical operations after the IS assault in Paris in 2015. Lastly, it is not obvious why Sweden in its capacity as a militarily non-aligned country would be positioned to support IS without the threat of Western 'sanctions'.

Other forgeries appearing since 2015 include stories of Sweden appropriating fertile soil from Ukrainian farmers, Poland lambasting the Swedish government for the country's neutral position during World War II (see [Appendix B](#)) and civilian nuclear energy company Westinghouse fomenting nuclear accidents in Ukraine with its sub-quality fuel (produced in Västerås, Sweden).⁵⁰ The

⁵⁰The forgeries can be found on the following websites (accessed 8 Aug. 2016). 'Forgery on Ukrainian Farms': <<https://cont.ws/post/99338>>. 'Forgery on Polish-Swedish relations': <http://doubtingstevan.blogspot.se/2015/02/sweden-is-demanded-that-expiation-of_25.html>. 'Forgery on Westinghouse': <<http://www.pressbladet.se/articles/view/westinghouse-experimenter-i-ukraina-leder-till-katastrof>>.

most frequently appearing target in the forgeries uncovered in our research is Sweden's former Minister of Foreign Affairs Carl Bildt (2006–2014), a politician known for his criticism of Russian foreign policy and support of Ukrainian EU integration. In May 2016, an article appeared on Russian and English language websites claiming that Bildt had proposed the creation of an organisation to counter EU-scepticism and develop closer EU–Ukraine ties. Appended to this article was a forged Swedish language article, edited graphically to appear as an authentic news item from the website of *Dagens Nyheter*, Sweden's largest daily newspaper.⁵¹

On 2 March 2016, cyberguerilla.org published a forged e-mail correspondence from the 'hacked' account of David Chantladze, a Ukrainian official and acquaintance of former President of Georgia Mikheil Saakashvili, since 2015 governor of Odessa (see [Appendix A](#)). The Chantladze correspondence reveals an intricate conspiracy between Swedish diplomat Diana Janse and Jed Barton, mission director at the US Agency for International Development. According to the correspondence, Janse and Barton were in cahoots to install Bildt as Prime Minister of Ukraine.⁵² Furthermore, the correspondence includes cryptic discussions on 'particularities about Sudan' and 'dirty' business between Saakashvili and Bildt which might derail the whole process, in case this information would become publicly known (*sic*).⁵³ The claim that Bildt would be Prime Minister of Ukraine later appeared on RIA Novosti, RT and Sputniks in different languages as an authentic news story; *Dagens Nyheter* did not doubt its relevance and published the information as well.⁵⁴ Another false story has connected the Swedish PR-firm Kreab, where Bildt was previously head of the board of directors, to a Western push to keep Ukrainian President Petro Poroshenko in power.⁵⁵

The systematic dissemination of forgeries through various media channels suggests a coordinated campaign even if it remains to be established precisely where and how the forgeries have been generated. As illustrated

⁵¹*Dagens Nyheter*, 'Fake DN-webpage Used in anti-EU Propaganda', (Falsk DN-sida använd för anti-EU-propaganda), 30 May 2016, <<http://www.dn.se/nyheter/sverige/falsk-dn-sida-anvand-for-anti-eu-propaganda/>>.

⁵²Diana Janse has previously worked for Bildt. In 2010 she was installed as the Swedish Ambassador to Georgia. Since September 2015, she serves as Senior Foreign Policy Advisor to Moderaterna, the main opposition party in Sweden, and its party leader, Ms. Anna Kinberg Batra.

⁵³The Diana Janse forgery has appeared in Swedish, English and Russian (accessed 8 Aug. 2016). Diana Janse Forgery in Russian: <<https://cont.ws/post/223633>>; Diana Janse Forgery in Swedish: <<http://www.pressbladet.se/articles/view/karl-bildt-mellan-fangelse-och-ukrainas-statsministerpost1>>; Diana Janse Forgery in English: <<https://www.cyberguerilla.org/blog/e-mail-correspondence-of-odessa-politician-david-chantladze/>>.

⁵⁴To their credit, Bildt's denial was included in the article as well. The broader issue is the problem of conventional news outlets reporting disinformation at all. Robert Hollender and Mattias Carlsson, 'Russian Media: Bildt May be Minister in Ukraine' (Ryska medier: Bildt kan bli minister i Ukraina), *Dagens Nyheter*, 26 Jan. 2016, <<http://www.dn.se/nyheter/varlden/ryska-medier-bildt-kan-bli-minister-i-ukraina/>>.

⁵⁵See: <<http://www.pressbladet.se/articles/view/valkampen-borjar-i-ukraina>>.

by our two historical cases – the forgeries regarding Raoul Wallenberg and a secret Swedish–US military agreement – false information can continue to pollute the information climate of a target population many decades after the event. In order to be successful, forgeries need to contain a kernel of truth or at least refer to a loosely related story which happens to be true. For example, it is an undeniable truth that Swedish prosecutors have initiated investigations regarding war crimes committed by a Swede in Ukraine, and the Swedish government has supported Ukrainian EU integration. Radicalised Swedish citizens have joined IS, and NATO-member Turkey has been accused of supporting IS also by its allies.⁵⁶ By relating truth to lies, forgeries are successful if they rely on the speed of social media, exploit the short attention span and bias of users and manage to reappear in new media contexts hiding their actual source of origin.

Disinformation: the case of NATO

Disinformation is intentionally false or inaccurate information that is spread deliberately and should be distinguished from misinformation which is the unintentional dissemination of false information. Ladislav Bittman likened disinformation to a game, where participants may assume one of three roles: an *operator* who is the author of the disinformation, an *adversary* that is a foreign state and an *unwitting agent* who is unwittingly exploited by the operator as an interlocutor of disinformation in order to attack the adversary.⁵⁷ The efficiency of Russia's annexation of Crimea in February 2014 is usually explained in part with reference to the rigorous use of disinformation, and the narratives are by now well established: Kyiv is operated by a 'US/NATO-led fascist junta'; murderous gangs threaten peaceful residents in Crimea and eastern Ukraine; and millions of citizens in Donetsk and Luhansk wish to join the Russian Federation.

In the Swedish information climate, disinformation on two issues pertaining specifically to the Nordic context has emerged since 2014 – that is, the Swedish–NATO host agreement and the case of unidentified foreign submarines suspected of intruding into Swedish territorial waters in 2014 and 2015. In May 2016, Swedish lawmakers ratified an agreement that allows NATO to more easily operate on Swedish territory during training or in the event of a conflict or other crisis. The legislative proposal for a so-called host nation support agreement with NATO was initiated by the Social Democrats, which in 2014 formed a minority government with support of the Green Party. The Swedish NATO agreement has a clear geostrategic component,

⁵⁶*The Local*, 'Swedish Man Probed over Ukraine "War Crimes"', 6 Aug. 2015, <<http://www.thelocal.se/20150806/swede-probed-over-alleged-war-crimes-in-ukraine>>.

⁵⁷Ladislav Bittman, *The KGB and Soviet Disinformation: An Insider's View* (Washington: Pergamon-Brassey's 1985), 50–52.

altering the military balance in the Baltic Sea region: From a NATO perspective, the agreement simplifies reinforcement of the allied Baltic States in a potential military confrontation. From a Russian perspective, the agreement alters unfavourably their regional superiority. From a Swedish perspective, the agreement simplifies military cooperation with neighbouring states, including Finland which has ratified the same NATO agreement.⁵⁸

In spring 2016, Swedish Minister of Defence Peter Hultqvist issued a statement, describing certain criticism of the NATO host agreement as 'disinformation'.⁵⁹ More specifically, he referred to criticisms made by certain members of parliament, peace movements and former diplomats. The most regularly occurring narrative among critics of the agreement has raised legal qualms regarding the agreement. NATO, it has been argued variously by critics, will be allowed to place nuclear weapons on Swedish military bases, use Swedish territory to launch a first-strike attack on Russia, and enjoy legal immunity for crimes committed by NATO-troops on Swedish territory.⁶⁰ All three claims are questionable, considering how any foreign military activity on Swedish territory still needs the consent of the Swedish government,⁶¹ but the claims have nevertheless reappeared frequently in Swedish media and public debate. It is not possible, however, to refer to the Swedish domestic debate as 'disinformation,' as it implies the deliberate dissemination of knowingly false information to the general public, or the influence of a third actor.

The legend of US navy vessels secretly utilizing Swedish military bases appeared for the first time in the Soviet forgery from 1981, described above. Several forgeries of more recent origin have also framed NATO cooperation in similar negative light. No linkages between the Swedish debate between competing perspectives and such attempts to influence public opinion exist, however. Russian politicians and diplomats have been openly critical of a furthered Swedish NATO-cooperation, but never with reference to disinformation. The official Russian position is that such cooperation contributes to military escalation in the Baltic Sea region, forcing the Russian military to

⁵⁸Charles Duxbury, 'Sweden Ratifies NATO Cooperation Agreement,' *Washington Post*, 25 May 2016, <<http://www.wsj.com/articles/sweden-ratifies-nato-cooperation-agreement-1464195502>>. On Russia's position on NATO, see Alton Frye (2000) *The new NATO and relations with Russia*, *Journal of Strategic Studies*, 23:3, 92–110.

⁵⁹*Svenska Dagbladet*, 'Hultqvist Rejects Nuclear Concern' (Hultqvist avfärdar kärnvapenoro), 9 Feb. 2016, <<http://www.svd.se/hultqvist-s-sprids-mycket-desinformation>>.

⁶⁰Jabar Amin et al, 'Shall NATO Be Allowed to Place Nuclear Weapons in Sweden?' (Ska Nato få placera kärnvapen i Sverige?), *Aftonbladet*, 22 Feb. 2016, <<http://www.aftonbladet.se/debatt/article22295859.ab>>; Maj Britt Theorin and Pierre Schori, 'It is Better to Talk to Russia than Join NATO' (Prata hellre med Ryssland än gå med i Nato), *Expressen*, 13 Apr. 2016, <<http://www.expressen.se/debatt/prata-hellre-med-ryssland-an-nato>>; Anna Ek, 'Tomorrow We May Take the Final Step to Join NATO' (I morgon kan vi ta sista steget in i Nato), *Aftonbladet*, 24 May 2016, <<http://www.aftonbladet.se/debatt/article22870846.ab>>.

⁶¹*The Local*, 'Sweden Votes Yes to Controversial Nato Deal', 25 May 2016, <<http://www.thelocal.se/20160525/sweden-votes-yes-to-controversial-nato-deal>>.

'take retaliatory steps.' Those words – or thinly veiled diplomatic threats, depending on one's perspective – were communicated by the Russian MFA via Twitter on 10 September, 2015, and repeated by the Minister of Foreign Affairs, Sergei Lavrov, six months later. There have also been direct threats; in March 2015, Russia's ambassador to Denmark threatened to use nuclear... missiles against Danish warships if the country joins the NATO ballistic missile defence system, in October 2016 a Russian politician warned Norway the country was on Moscow's 'list of targets for our strategic weapons,' following the deployment of 330 US marines to Værnes.⁶²

Disinformation: the case of submarines

In October 2014, the Swedish navy initiated a week-long operation in the archipelago off Stockholm in search of a foreign submarine. The operation was launched in a period of already heightened tensions in the Baltic Sea region. In September, the same year, two Russian Su-24 attack jets had violated Swedish airspace over the Baltic, prompting Sweden's air force to scramble its own fighters. Shortly afterwards, Finland complained that the Russian navy had twice harassed one of its environmental research ships in international waters, ordering it to change course and later sending a helicopter and submarine to pass close by. A year before, in March 2013, Russian attack jets had simulated an attack against Swedish military targets – an event which at the time was reported on Russian television as a glorious success, although a Russian official later denied such an exercise had ever occurred.⁶³ These events unfolded against a broader historical context, with memories of the intense and widely publicised submarine search operations in the 1980s still present in the collective memory of the Swedish public.

The Swedish navy did not locate or identify any submarine in its October 2014 search operation, but a final assessment by the Swedish Armed Forces concluded that 'it remains beyond any reasonable doubt that Swedish internal waters were violated in the Stockholm archipelago in October 2014'. No nationality of the vessel could be established, and no state has been officially accused of committing the violation.⁶⁴ Since evidence presented included a sonar image of (what is presumably) sub-sea tracks left behind a mini submarine, however, journalists and other non-state observers have speculated that the vessel must have been a Russian one.⁶⁵ Russia's Ministry of Defence denied any 'irregular situation' involving its ships and claimed the vessel was a Dutch submarine triggering Sweden's

⁶²Michael Winiarski, 'Russia Issues NATO Warning to Sweden', *Dagens Nyheter*, 29 Apr. 2016, <<http://www.dn.se/nyheter/sverige/russia-issues-nato-warning-to-sweden/>>.

⁶³Mikael Holmström, 'Russia Practiced Nuclear Attack Against Sweden' (Ryssland övade kärnvapenfall mot Sverige), *Dagens Nyheter*, 2 Feb. 2016, <<http://www.dn.se/nyheter/sverige/ryssland-ovade-karnvapenfall-mot-sverige/>>.

alert after carrying out exercises in the area – a claim with no supporting evidence which was also denied by the Dutch Ministry of Defence.⁶⁶

Three ambiguous reports on submarines have appeared in Swedish media. On 18 October 2014, the journalist and expert on defence and security Mikael Holmström published in Sweden's daily newspaper *Svenska Dagbladet* an article claiming hard evidence on a direct Russian submarine trail.⁶⁷ An emergency call in the Russian language, followed by an encrypted radio signal from the Swedish archipelago to Kaliningrad, had reportedly been intercepted by signals intelligence units during the search operation. We do not dispute Holmström's reporting, but the article's dilemma is this: the Swedish Ministry of Defence has not officially confirmed the interception of any emergency call or radio signals; no mention of signal intelligence implicating a Russian vessel was made in the Ministry of Defence's final report; and no further media investigations have added additional supportive evidence. As a result, Holmström's claim – although based on sources within the Swedish Armed Forces – cannot be independently confirmed.

Another ambiguous report emerged in relation to a separate search operation in Swedish waters conducted in April 2015. An article published in June 2016 on the website of the Swedish public broadcaster, Sveriges Radio, revealed the sensational news – based on an anonymous source within the Swedish Armed Forces – that the Swedish Armed Forces had identified the nationality of a submarine intruding Swedish territorial waters as 'likely German', and 'likely not Russian'. Furthermore, the article reported that the 'conclusive [piece of] evidence' of an intruding vessel from the search operation in October 2014 had now been discarded by the Swedish Armed Forces.⁶⁸ Both claims in the Sveriges Radio article were ambiguous, as no official report has been able to determine the nationality of intruding submarines, not in October 2014, nor in April 2015, and the German Ministry of Foreign Affairs has denied any irregular activities of German submarines in Swedish waters.⁶⁹

Another instance of misinformation on submarines occurred in August 2015, when a private diving company, Ocean X Team, reported the discovery of a sunken 'Russian submarine' on the seabed of Swedish territorial waters. After an initial phase of media confusion, it transpired that the wreck was not of recent origin – as the diving-company had pretended – but that

⁶⁴Swedish Armed Forces, 'Beyond All Reasonable Doubt' (Utom allt rimligt tvivel), 23 Sep. 2015, <<http://www.forsvarsmakten.se/sv/aktuellt/2015/09/utom-allt-rimligt-tvivel/>>.

⁶⁵*Telegraph*, 'Sweden Releases Mystery Submarine Evidence,' 15 Nov. 2014, <<http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/worldnews/europe/sweden/11232820/Sweden-releases-mystery-submarine-evidence.html>>.

⁶⁶*BBC News*, 'Sweden Steps up "Mystery Sub" Hunt off Stockholm Waters', 20 Oct. 2014, <<http://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-29686756>>.

⁶⁷Mikael Holmström, 'Search for Damaged Russian Submarine in Archipelago' (Skadad rysk ubåt söks i skärgården), *Svenska Dagbladet*, 18 Oct. 2014, <<http://www.svd.se/skadad-rysk-ubatt-soks-i-skargarden>>.

of an Imperial Russian Navy *Som*-class submarine which sank in 1916. Furthermore, peculiar circumstances about the company Ocean X Team reveals the whole operation as a deliberately deceptive marketing stunt at best: Its expedition was financed by a Russian principal who generously made available gratis a 55-m ship, would not disclose his sources of financing and provided the exact coordinates for the wreck – suggesting its location must have been confirmed in a previous diving expedition.⁷⁰

The two or three instances of misinformation or ambiguities entering Swedish media on suspected intrusion of foreign submarines have been exploited by RT and Sputnik International in order to castigate Swedish ‘submarine mania’ to an international audience, and their reporting has blurred the different search operations.⁷¹ Conventional Swedish media reporting, in other words, reappeared through Russian public diplomacy tools in order to sow doubt and confusion on the quality of the Swedish Armed Forces while framing Swedish politicians and media as ‘Russophobe’. The submarine theme is useful not least as it is relatively well established. Since 1981, when a Soviet submarine ran aground in the Swedish archipelago, the inability of the Swedish Armed Forces to provide definitive evidence on other suspected intrusions has been widely criticised and ridiculed by journalists and peace activists in Sweden and abroad. When the Russian Embassy in Sweden in 2015 and 2016 publicly lamented Swedish authorities over media reporting on ‘phantom submarines’ as expressions of ‘awkward confusion’ and hostility towards Russia’s peaceful intentions, it merely retrieved well-established narratives from the height of the Cold War.⁷²

Target groups and interlocutors of disinformation

As elsewhere in Europe, pro-Kremlin sentiments can be identified within different political communities. In contrast to the Soviet communist era, these groups exist not only to the far left but also the far right of the political spectrum, as well as within more peripheral groups such as libertarians, conspiracy movements, peace organisations and environmentalists.

⁶⁸*Sveriges Radio*, ‘Suspected Submarine Sound was Swedish Source’ (Misstänkt ubåtsljud kom från svensk källa), 11 Jun. 2016, <<http://sverigesradio.se/sida/artikel.aspx?programid=83&artikel=6451214>>; *Sveriges Radio*, ‘Probable German Submarine in Swedish Waters’ (Sannolik tysk ubåt i svenska vatten), 8 Jul. 2016, <<http://sverigesradio.se/sida/artikel.aspx?programid=83&artikel=6469624>>.

⁶⁹*Radio Sweden*, ‘Submarine Seen Last Year Thought to be German’, 8 Jul. 2016, <<http://sverigesradio.se/sida/artikel.aspx?programid=2054&artikel=6470131>>.

⁷⁰Within a few days, the Russian Minister of Defence, Sergei Shoigu, proposed a joint Swedish-Russian expedition to investigate the submarine in more detail. Niklas Wiklund, ‘Something Fishy About the Submarine Story’ (År något skumt över hela ubåtshistorien), *Svenska Dagbladet*, 7 Aug. 2015, <<http://www.svd.se/ar-nagot-skumt-over-hela-ubatshistorien>>.

⁷¹*Sputnik News*, ‘West Uses Fake “Russian Submarines” to Justify Its Conflict With Moscow’, 16 Jun. 2016, <<http://sputniknews.com/politics/20160616/1041466997/west-russian-submarines-moscow.html>>.

Another specific group is the pro-Kremlin community within the Russian diaspora. Very often, there is overlap between several of these categories, and they cannot always be easily distinguished from each other. What they have in common is the belief that Russia under President Vladimir Putin represents an anti-establishment alternative to specific features of Western society which are disliked within the group, such as 'US hegemony', NATO, immigration, or 'degenerated European values'. With 'pro-Kremlin', we mean groups or actors who either spread disinformation or who otherwise defend or relativise Russian foreign policy, even when it is pursued in violation of international law. On a pan-European level, the groups can combine to be relatively large and influence also EU policies, and with access to newspapers, publishers and social media, they can reach a potentially even wider group of targets.

The openly pro-Kremlin elements in the Swedish far right include the fascist organisation Nordic Resistance (Nordiska motståndsrörelsen). Nordic Resistance has cooperated with two Russian organisations, the Rodina party and the Russian Imperial Movement; their international network is the World National-Conservative Movement,⁷³ which has also donated an unspecified sum of money to Nordic Resistance.⁷³ In Sweden, people in the far right environment (or 'new right'/'identitarianism' as they sometimes self-identify) have founded the publishing house Arktos, whose publication list includes the English translation of the book *The Fourth Political Theory* (2012) by Russian academic and fascist ideologue Aleander Dugin, and the mining company Wiking Mineral, allegedly a source of finance for the group's political activities. The web-based platform Fria Tider, with organisational ties to the identitarian movement, actively promoted Swedish Sputnik content in 2015. A Swedish citizen affiliated with the ideological current is the anti-Semitic author and Wikileaks representative in Russia, Israel Shamir.⁷⁴ Shamir writes for the newspaper *Zavtra*, whose editor-in-chief is the ultra-nationalist Alexander Prokhanov; another regular contributor to *Zavtra* is Alexander Borodai, the first Prime Minister of the self-proclaimed Donetsk People's Republic in 2014.

The Swedish far left includes different communist, 'anti-war' and 'anti-imperialist' organizations stemming from the Cold War period. The far left has its own separate journals and media channels, but the most important interlocutor of a 'left' narrative on Russia and Ukraine since 2013 has been the culture pages of the Swedish tabloid *Aftonbladet*, one of the largest evening newspapers in the Nordic countries.⁷⁵ In 2014, *Aftonbladet Kultur* published more than 30 articles on developments in the former USSR, where the main themes were fascism in Ukraine (characterized as the country's emerging political force), and criticism of Carl Bildt, the EU and NATO – narratives which have been described as taking the Kremlin's perspective for granted.⁷⁶ There are articles critical of Vladimir

⁷²The official Facebook account of the Russian embassy in Sweden, 30 Jun. 2015.

Putin, but the general tendency has been towards criticism of Ukraine, although the country since February 2014 has been the victim of Russian military aggression. Furthermore, three *Aftonbladet Kultur* contributors have participated in pro-Kremlin social media; two of them have published on events in Ukraine/Russia.⁷⁷

Aftonbladet Kultur has promoted the left organization Borot'ba, described as Ukraine's authentic socialist alternative.⁷⁸ However, claims that Borot'ba is a Kremlin operated front began to surface in 2014, when its leaders defended Russia's annexation of Crimea and the creation of a Donetsk People's Republic, and dismissed the democratically elected government in Ukraine as a 'fascist junta'.⁷⁹ In June 2014, Boris Kagarlitsky, an academic considered to be close the Kremlin, organized a two-part conference in Yalta, on Russian-occupied Crimea; the first part hosted representatives of the European far left, including among others Borot'ba and the Swedish environmental activist referred to above, the second part the European far right, with participants such as Shamir and politicians affiliated with the 'Izborsky Club,' an organization whose members include Borodai, Dugin and Prokhanov.⁸⁰ An article in *Zavtra* later claimed that the two groups had socialized and 'exchanged perspectives' during their stay in Yalta.⁸¹ Borot'ba's Kremlin connection was confirmed in 2016, when Ukrainian hackers released the e-mail correspondence between Putin aide Vladislav Surkov and representatives of the DNR.⁸²

In his capacity as Wikileaks representative in Russia, Shamir has marketed and offered to sell select material to journalists. He has also handed over a 'Belarus dossier' with information on Belarusian dissidents to government officials in Minsk. Shamir's son, Johannes Wahlström, was on his father's recommendation installed as Wikileaks representative in Sweden. Wahlström is most widely known for his article 'Israel's Regime Controls Swedish Media' and contributes regularly to *Aftonbladet Kultur* and other media outlets on topics critical of Swedish or Western policies towards Ukraine and Georgia. An important foreign policy goal of the US government, Wahlström has argued, is to prevent Russia from 'rising up' to 'challenge its global dominance'; Swedish democracy support is described as covert regime change technology in order to help achieve this larger agenda.

⁷³ Anton Shekhovtsov, 'Russian Fascists Give Money to Swedish Counterparts', 19 Sept. 2015, <<http://anton-shekhovtsov.blogspot.se/2015/09/russian-fascist-militants-give-money-to.html>>.

⁷⁴ Alex Gibney, 'Can We Trust Julian Assange and WikiLeaks?', *New York Times*, 8 Aug. 2016, <<http://www.nytimes.com/2016/08/08/opinion/can-we-trust-julian-assange-and-wikileaks.html>>.

⁷⁵ For an in depth argument, see Aino Huxley and Jakob Ljungman, 'Russian Narratives and the Swedish Debate on Foreign Policy', in Katri Pynnöniemi and András Rácz, eds, *Fog of Falsehood. Russian Strategy of Deception and the Conflict in Ukraine* (Helsinki: The Finnish Institute of International Affairs), 200-202. For a somewhat contrarian view, see Stefan Olson, *Vilseledning: [Kriget i Ukraina i svenska medier]* (Stockholm: Timbro 2016).

⁷⁶ Russia's foreign policy towards Ukraine is blamed on the Swedish Minister of Foreign Affairs. 'Putin's behaviour cannot be defended, but perhaps the situation would have looked differently if Carl Bildt – a hawk also by European standards – would have acted differently.' Åsa Linderborg, 'We Are No Friends of Putin' (Vi är inga Putinvänner), *Aftonbladet*, 19 Mar. 2014, <<http://www.aftonbladet.se/kultur/kronikorer/linderborg/article18571565.ab>>.

His articles have been distributed via the official Wikileaks Twitter account, thus disseminating the narratives to a global audience. The Wikileaks nexus is an interesting one, considering how its founder Julian Assange has repeatedly castigated Russia as a victim of US-operated aggression from inside the Ecuadorian embassy, where he since 2012 is hiding in order to evade extradition to Sweden on sexual assault allegations.⁸³

Kremlin sponsored political technologists engage virtually any group which can be potentially useful for inserting influence in European politics. German Die Linke and French Front National are two examples of ideologically separate parties whose views on Russia's foreign policy converge.⁸⁴ In Swedish parliament, the Left Party and the Sweden Democrats have not followed suit, but criticism was raised against the Sweden Democrats in 2014 and 2015 as a fraction within the party tried to shape developments in a similar direction.⁸⁵ Previously, in 2011 and 2012, the international aid organ (VIF) of the Left Party transmitted 219,000 SEK (circa 22,000 euro) to Borot'ba, money which allegedly was transferred to the personal bank account of a Borot'ba member in Donetsk. A more peculiar situation occurred in Die Linke in June 2014, when its party leadership was forced to distance itself from one Borot'ba leader living in Germany, due to his work with an author related with the Russian neo-Nazi group National Unity. No funds were transferred from VIF to Borot'ba after 2012, but the case is an

⁷⁷In total, the two persons have published three articles in *Aftonbladet Kultur*, and a separate article in *Aftonbladet Kultur* has promoted their 'Ukraine Bulletin', a publication explicitly critical of the Poroshenko government and the 2014 'Maidan Revolution of Dignity', as the best source on Ukrainian politics in the Swedish language. The Facebook group of the bulletin is one of the sources where forged telegrams and disinformation on Ukraine has appeared in the Swedish information climate. After this article was published online, we received heated criticisms from *Aftonbladet Kultur*. For a summary, see Karin Olsson, 'The Secret Names in Study of Kremlin Suck-ups' (Hemliga namnen i studien om Kremfjask), *Expressen*, 18 Jan. 2017, <<http://www.expressen.se/kultur/hemliga-namnen-i-studien-om-kremfjask/>>.

⁷⁸The most visible promotor of Borot'ba in Sweden has been "Andrei", a Russian political refugee living in Sweden. He was previously active in the Russian political party Left Front, created by former Russian Member of Parliament, Ilya Ponomarev. According to an account on Ponomarev's personal website, the Left Front was originally created with the participation of person related to the GRU. There is no evidence linking "Andrei" to any irregular activity, however, and other members of the Left Front have been targets of Russian political repression. On the other hand, one person from the Left Front was also instrumental in the creation of Borot'ba. See Ponomarev, Ilya, 'We Continue to Argue if the Left is Pro-Kremlin' (Prodolzhaem razbiratsya, prokremlevskie li levye), 4 Nov. 2014, <<http://ilya-ponomarev.livejournal.com/641358.html>>.

⁷⁹RIA Novosti Ukraina, 'Novorossiya – An Element in the Disturbance of World Order' (Novorossiya – eta element razrusheniya miroporiyadka), 4 Aug. 2014, <<http://rian.com.ua/interview/20140804/355630168.html>>.

⁸⁰Anton Shekhovtsov, 'Boris Kagarlitsky, a Kremlin's Mole in the Leftist Movement (updated)', 9 Sep. 2014, <<http://anton-shekhovtsov.blogspot.se/2014/09/boris-kagarlitsky-kremlins-mole-in.html>>; *Workers' Liberty*, 23 Jul. 2014, 'A Popular Front for Russian Nationalism', <<http://www.workersliberty.org/story/2014/07/23/popular-front-russian-nationalism>>

⁸¹Zavtra, 'Yalta Manifesto' (Yaltinskii Manifest), 17 Jul. 2014, <<http://zavtra.ru/content/view/yaltinskij-manifest/>>.

⁸²Copyleft, 'Borot'ba and Surkov: Documentary Evidence of Cooperation' (Borot'ba i Surkov: Dokumental'nye podtverzheniia sotrudnichestva), 5 Nov. 2016, <www.medium.com>.

illustration of the difficulties and potential risks involved in foreign political aid.⁸⁶

As the indirect outcome of a larger power struggle, the Sweden Democrats purged a contingent of members with links to the identitarian and far right movement in 2015. In some respects, however, ties may not have been completely severed. A website managed by one of its leading members, *Avpixlat* (among the top 20 most visited Swedish websites), has favourably compared Russia's political system to that of the European Union.⁸⁷ Furthermore, a report has revealed attempts by a Swedish businessman to influence the Sweden Democrats in their view on Russian foreign policy. The Russian-owned company "R Capital", of which the man is CEO, has ties to well-connected Kremlin oligarchs such as Alexei Miller (CEO of Gazprom) and Igor Rotenberg (a confidant of Vladimir Putin).⁸⁸ In April 2016, according to *The Guardian*, the company's chairman of the board of directors donated £400,000 to the Tories in the United Kingdom, demonstrating a link between "R Capital" and European party financing.⁸⁹

As regards EU–Russian affairs, traditional ideological divisions between European parties have ceased to function as areas of conflict over policy, and unity between different ideological communities is found across shared metanarratives such as anti-EU, anti-NATO and 'anti-establishment' sentiments. As elsewhere in Europe, RT and Sputnik in Sweden have attracted readers and contributors from the far right, the far left, populists, libertarians, conspiracy theorists, Wikileaks supporters, peace organisations and environmentalists. A Swedish–Russian Friendship organisation was reinvigorated in 2016, with the participation of the Russian Embassy and a board of directors from pro-Kremlin communities within the Russian diaspora and the far left. The same constituency is active in pro-Kremlin social media, primarily Twitter and Facebook. A constant in their activity is criticism of Swedish journalists and academics writing on Russian foreign policy, some of which have been victims of systematic trolling.⁹⁰ Furthermore, the same individuals perform a visible role within the Swedish peace and anti-NATO movements; a yearly conference includes them as speakers alongside Left Party members of parliament. They also lobby sympathetic members of

⁸³David Leigh and Luke Harding, 'Holocaust Denier in Charge of Handling Moscow Cables', *The Guardian*, 31 Jan. 2011, <<https://www.theguardian.com/media/2011/jan/31/wikileaks-holocaust-denier-handled-moscow-cables>>.

⁸⁴Mitchell A. Orenstein, 'Putin's Western Allies: Why Europe's Far Right Is on the Kremlin's Side', *Foreign Affairs*, Mar. 25, 2014.

⁸⁵Patrik Oksanen, 'Swedish Friends who Support Russia' ('Sverigevänner' som vurmar för Ryssland), *Expressen*, 31 Dec. 2016.

⁸⁶The Left Party has issued a statement, arguing that no irregularities regarding their project has been found. See *The Local*, 'Claims Left Sent Money to Pro-Russian Rebels', 11 Mar. 2015, <<http://www.thelocal.se/20150311/claims-swedens-left-sent-cash-to-pro-russian-rebels>>; Left Party, 'Ukraine and the Cooperation with Borot'ba', 11 Mar. 2015, <<https://www.vansterpartiet.se/ukraina-och-samarbetet-med-borotba>>.

parliament directly and through petitions and participate in pan-European conferences and gatherings.

Concluding discussion

The main purpose of our article has been to establish whether Russia is targeting individual EU-states in order to influence the political development in a direction favourable to the strategic interests of the Kremlin. Further, if the answer is yes, to establish which means are applied in order to achieve these goals. The main contribution of our case study on Sweden, a littoral state of the Baltic Sea region, is the empirical analysis of how and to what extent Russia since 2014 has applied public diplomacy and active measures in order to influence policy making in Sweden in at least two important areas: Swedish–NATO cooperation and Swedish/EU support for Ukraine.

As borne out by our detailed content analysis of Swedish Sputnik, dominant metanarratives in Russian public diplomacy have converged in order to convey a few consistent messages, framing NATO as an aggressor and military threat, the EU as in terminal decline, and Russia as under siege from hostile Western governments. Furthermore, Russian authorities have applied active measures ranging from military threats to forgeries, disinformation and agents of influence. Systematising these various phenomena, our contribution confirms the growing body of research highlighting Russia's increasing use of active measures as a foreign policy tool towards Western states since 2014. In this respect, the Swedish case needs to be seen in its wider geostrategic context, and Russia's strategic goal to minimise or remove NATO presence in the country's 'near abroad'.

Metanarratives in public diplomacy and active measures towards Sweden have acted as communicating vessels, where Russian media outlets have filtered and broadcast internationally false information appearing in the Swedish media climate in order to sow doubt about the integrity of Sweden's political system. In the Nordic region, non-aligned Finland is the only country which has registered a similar experience during the last 2 years. The timing, narratives and intensity of the campaigns suggest to us that a key goal of these campaigns was to influence Swedish decision makers and public

⁸⁷*Avpixlat*, 'Russian Appeal to People of Europe' (Rysk vädjan till Europas folk), 20 Nov. 2015, <<http://avpixlat.info/2015/11/20/rysk-vadjan-till-europas-folk/>>.

⁸⁸An interesting feature of the company, which conducts public procurement projects in Russia, is its lack of any business activity in Sweden; raising the question of why the company was incorporated with Swedish and not Russian statutes (Russian law prohibits foreign companies from participating in public procurement).

⁸⁹*The Guardian*, 'May Must Explain Donor's Links to Russia, Says Labour MP', 27 Aug. 2016, <<http://www.theguardian.com/politics/2016/aug/27/may-must-explain-tory-donors-links-to-russia-says-labour-mp>>.

⁹⁰The most well-known case is that of Finnish journalist Jessikka Aro. See Aro, 'The Cyberspace War'.

opinion, in order to hinder the implementation of a NATO host agreement in May 2016 and Swedish NATO integration overall. No other narrative – such as criticism of Ukraine or the EU – appears as systematically in Russian active measures and public diplomacy as the anti-NATO theme.

The disinformation and forgeries entering the Swedish information climate highlight that their originators possess sophisticated knowledge on Swedish officials, diplomats and decision makers. Forgeries and disinformation have appeared not only in the Swedish information climate but on Russian state television, social media and other tools of mass communication. Mistakes and spelling errors occur in many forgeries, but this is in fact not a deviation from norm and of secondary significance. The massive explosion of fake information targeting the Ukrainian population since 2013 could be revealed by fact checking organisations such as *Stopfake*, precisely because of obvious impossibilities in Russian propaganda which an investigation could easily reveal.⁹¹ Mistakes, logical loopholes and spelling errors were confirmed as a characteristic of Soviet forgeries already during the Cold War.⁹² Low quality of consistently marketed disinformation, however, has in the history of mankind so far not prevented large population segments from accepting certain false stories as true.

A consistent flow of disinformation polluting a target population's information climate, and the unpredictable long run consequences of such phenomena, suggest that active measures can be politically efficient. For active measures to be politically efficient in a given situation, only the perceptions and belief systems of a strategic minority needs to be altered. For example, the EU sanctions regime against Russia requires unanimity among member states, where the withdrawal of one state cancels the entire policy. In May 2016, an alteration in the votes among a fraction of Green Party and Social Democrat members of parliament would have sufficed to shift the scales towards a majority against the NATO host agreement. Therefore, as long as Russian decision makers are convinced that active measures can influence political processes in a target country on the margin, these measures are likely to continue.

Use of active measures can be counter-productive, especially in the case of clumsy attempts to influence public opinion, although degree of success or failure can also be seen in various perspectives. For a foreign state in whose interest it is to influence a foreign target population, use of public diplomacy and active measures can achieve at least three aims. At a minimum, false information such as Swedish decision makers being involved in illegal weapon sales or NATO submarines violating Sweden's territorial waters can reinforce the image of the West/Sweden as corrupt, even barbaric. Second, its aim is to hinder support for Ukrainian EU integration or Swedish–NATO cooperation. Finally, it would justify Russian use of military and non-military tools as 'legitimate' and even 'necessary' self-defence, in light of the West's

conspiracies and encroachment on Moscow's 'traditional sphere of interest'. However, even when active measures accomplish nothing and are politically ineffective, their use reveals intent and Russian strategic thinking.

In summary, we conclude that the overarching goal of Russian policy towards Sweden and the wider Baltic Sea is to preserve the geostrategic status quo, which is identified with a security order minimising NATO presence in the region. In order to achieve this strategically defensive goal, Russian authorities have been willing to draw on many different levers of influence. The use of active measures fits into contemporary Russian military and security doctrines and has clear historical precedents in the Cold War period, a legacy which to some extent has conditioned Russian policies towards Sweden. Whether Russian influence activity towards Sweden is politically effective or not is hard to determine conclusively, as potential impact in the long term is difficult to discern in the short run. We are able to establish intent, dominant narratives, behavioural patterns and strategic goals, where the close correlation between Russian public diplomacy and active measures suggest the operation of a coordinated campaign. Lastly, an increasing reliance on covert techniques of influence has undermined the quality of traditional Russian diplomacy, as evidenced by the reckless use of nuclear threats (as against Denmark and Norway) or the stirring up of ethnic tensions by Russian diplomats in the EU (as in the German 'Lisa' case). In this sense, the boundary between Russian public diplomacy and active measures has become more ambiguous.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

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⁹¹For more information on the fact checking website *Stopfake*, see <www.stopfake.org>.

⁹²Agursky, 'Soviet Disinformation', 13–30.

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Appendix A. Fake correspondence between Diana Janse, David Chantladze and Jed Barton, 26 and 29 February 2016.

From Diana Janse
Senior Foreign Policy Advisor at the Moderate Party, Sweden

To David Chantladze
Member of Odessa Regional State Administration, Ukraine

Hello David. We are really worried by lack of progress on our issue. Time is moving on and the situation is most favorable at present but your people did not get in touch with Carl so far. And Mikheil Saakashvili is staying out of touch, too.

From David Chantladze
Member of Odessa Regional State Administration, Ukraine

To Diana Janse
Senior Foreign Policy Advisor at the Moderate Party, Sweden

Hello. All remain in great force. Just as soon as we are done Bildt will get it personally.

From Diana Janse
Senior Foreign Policy Advisor at the Moderate Party, Sweden

To David Chantladze
Member of Odessa Regional State Administration, Ukraine

Further delay may just ruin our plans. In the nearest perspective they may well get things going again on the Carl's case. If this happens Saakashvili will also face problems, no matter whether he avoids contacts with Carl or not.

From David Chantladze
Member of Odessa Regional State Administration, Ukraine

To Diana Janse
Senior Foreign Policy Advisor at the Moderate Party, Sweden

I understand it. Can't you get it out of our way via the Department or CIA? Bildt's premiership is rather long shot. At least he is not alone in the race.

From Diana Janse
Senior Foreign Policy Advisor at the Moderate Party, Sweden

To David Chantladze
Member of Odessa Regional State Administration, Ukraine

Unfortunately, Carl is in no position to play for time anymore. And so you should boost your effort to sort it out with your matters.

From David Chantladze
Member of Odessa Regional State Administration, Ukraine

To Diana Janse
Senior Foreign Policy Advisor at the Moderate Party, Sweden

We are doing our best. I will try to hasten the process but I still can't make any promises.

From Diana Janse
Senior Foreign Policy Advisor at the Moderate Party, Sweden

To David Chantladze
Member of Odessa Regional State Administration, Ukraine

That's really a pity. We used to think of you as the one treating his commitments in a more responsible way. I fear that in case of failure you may as well loose the support of Cecilia. The terms of the trade agreement can be reconsidered and the association process may slow down even after the ratification documents are passed on by the Netherlands in case everything goes the most beneficial way for you, of course.

From David Chantladze
Member of Odessa Regional State Administration, Ukraine

To Jed Barton
The U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID)
Europe Regional Mission Director

Good Day! We are facing difficulties with Bildt's appointment. Poroshenko hesitates while in Sweden they are ready to let the case Bildt-Saakashvili go forward. A certain risk appears that some new particularities about Sudan may come up. Shortly speaking, the situation is tense. Bildt, Malmstrom Janse and their colleagues now can any time turn their back on us, complicating thus the implementation of our plans.

(Continued)

Appendix A. (Continued).

>From Diana Janse > To David Chantladze > Thursday, 25 February 2016

>That's really a pity. We used to think of you as the one treating his commitments in a more responsible way. I fear that in case of failure, you may as well loose the support of Cecilia. The terms of the trade agreement can be reconsidered and the association process may slow down even after the ratification documents are passed on by the Netherlands in case everything goes the most beneficial way for you, of course.

| | | |
|-------------|---|--------------------|
| From | David Chantladze | Thursday |
| | Member of Odessa Regional State Administration, Ukraine | 25 February |
| To | Diana Janse | 2016 |
| | Senior Foreign Policy Advisor at the Moderate Party, Sweden | |

I will certainly convey all your words but personally I can't anyhow affect the process. Mikheil doesn't want to be involved. If any dirt on his business with Bildt gets out it will automatically mean the end of his political career. Poroshenko gave his promise and for now we didn't get any refusal from him. I have no idea why everything's still up in the air. They promised to contact Bildt once everything is ready. All what I can now is to convey your indignation. Try to find direct contacts to reach Poroshenko or Mr. Kosiuk.

| | | |
|-------------|---|--------------------|
| From | Jed Barton | Monday |
| | The U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID) | 29 February |
| | Europe Regional Mission Director | 2016 |
| To | David Chantladze | |
| | Member of Odessa Regional State Administration, Ukraine | |

We had a talk with Poroshenko about Bildt. He promised to settle all the issues one of these days. Report any problems immediately to me. And be sure to get in touch with me as soon as he arrives.

| | | |
|-------------|---|--------------------|
| From | David Chantladze | Monday |
| | Member of Odessa Regional State Administration, Ukraine | 29 February |
| To | Jed Barton | 2016 |
| | The U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID) | |
| | Europe Regional Mission Director | |

Hello. Got it. I will inform you immediately.

| | | |
|-------------|---|--------------------|
| From | David Chantladze | Monday |
| | Member of Odessa Regional State Administration, Ukraine | 29 February |
| To | Diana Janse | 2016 |
| | Senior Foreign Policy Advisor at the Moderate Party, Sweden | |

The situation is moving from its lethargic point. Seems like we got a deal with Yatsenyuk's people. The other day Carl is going to receive a plan of his further actions.

Zavtra, 'Yalta Manifesto' (Yaltinskii Manifest), 17 Jul. 2014, <<http://zavtra.ru/content/view/yaltinskij-manifest/>>.

Appendix B. Fake letter to Swedish Minister of Foreign Affairs, Margot Wallström, from Poland's Minister of Foreign Affairs Grzegorz Schetyna

Minister of Foreign Affairs
Grzegorz Schetyna

Warsaw, 12 February 2015

Ms. Margot Wallström
Minister for Foreign Affairs
Kingdom of Sweden

Dear Minister Wallström,

We are grateful to you for your prompt reply and positive assessment of our plans to conduct a joint meeting. We believe that during the most difficult and tragic for Europe and Poland years of World War II Sweden was committed to relative neutrality while at the same time maintaining trade and economic relations with Berlin, which actually helped it significantly, strengthen its industrial capacity and lay the foundation for sound economic growth in the post war times. Now Sweden is given an opportunity to atone for the past mistakes by showing solidarity with the countries which had fallen prey to Hitler's aggression. Sweden could as well contribute to creating a united front for standing up to new threats to European civilization, which primarily come from conservative politicians still adhering to barbarian methods of achieving their imperial ambition.

Taking into account our mutually beneficial cooperation in the currently intense international circumstances, as well as our joint stance on Ukrainian issue and successful resistance to threats from the unpredictable eastern neighbor, we ask you to make it known to the leaders of Sweden that a visit to Poland on 8 May 2015 for commemorating the 70th anniversary of Victory in World War II is a perfect chance to manifest that our countries are firmly united to fight the regimes which threaten global principles, fundamentals of democracy and human rights and territorial integrity of neighboring states.

At the same time we ask you to expound on the attitude of Sweden authorities to our suggestion and specify the difficulties which could possibly emerge during the preparation for the visit. Scope of the event and its venue are close to being finally determined. Resulting from a number of consultations is a decision that the most suitable venue for commemorating the 70th anniversary of Victory Day should be the city of Gdansk. Leaders of the United States, Great Britain, Norway, Australia, Canada and New Zealand whose countries which have been members of the Anti-Hitler coalition and paid the highest price for the sake of victory over fascism, are planned to be invited to the official ceremony including the visit to the memorial complex on the Westerplatte peninsula. Besides, current partners of Poland, particularly leaders of Germany, Italy, Japan and Finland will be invited as well.

We hope you have a correct understanding of our position and we await Prime Minister of Sweden Stefan Löfven with his wife as well as members of Parliament and royal family if possible.

Hopefully you will attend the meeting too.

Best regards,
[Blank]