Wilfried
Martens Centre
for European Studies

Muzzling the Bear

Strategic Defence for Russia's Undeclared Information War on Europe

Salome Samadashvili

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. . . You will know the truth,
and the truth will set you free . . .

John 8:32

Credits

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The Wilfried Martens Centre for European Studies is the political foundation and think tank of the European People's Party (EPP), dedicated to the promotion of Christian Democrat, conservative and like-minded political values.

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Editor: Ingrid Habets, Research Officer, Martens Centre
External editing: Communicative English bvba
Layout and cover design: RARO S.L.
Typesetting: Victoria Agency
Printed in Belgium by Drukkerij Jo Vandenbulcke

This publication receives funding from the European Parliament.

ISBN (to come)

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Keywords Information warfare – Hybrid warfare – Non-linear war – Russia – Ukraine – Cyberwar – Internet trolls – Propaganda – Non-state actors – Free speech – Freedom of information – Challenge to European values

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Martens Centre profile

The Wilfried Martens Centre for European Studies, established in 2007, is the political foundation and think tank of the European People's Party (EPP). The Martens Centre embodies a pan-European mindset, promoting Christian Democrat, conservative and like-minded political values. It serves as a framework for national political foundations linked to member parties of the EPP. It currently has 30 member foundations and three permanent guest foundations in 24 EU and non-EU countries. The Martens Centre takes part in the preparation of EPP programmes and policy documents. It organises seminars and training on EU policies and on the process of European integration.

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About the author

About Salome Samadashvili

Ambassador **Salome Samadashvili** is the former Head of Georgia's Mission to the European Union and Ambassador to the Kingdom of Belgium and Grand Duchy of Luxembourg. Prior to her diplomatic career Ambassador Samadashvili was a member of the Georgian Parliament and Deputy Chair of the Committee on Foreign Relations. After leaving the diplomatic service of Georgia, she joined the Wilfried Martens Centre for European Studies as a visiting fellow, following which she served as the Resident Governance Director for Libya for the National Democratic Institute for International Affairs. Currently, she is Executive Director of Samadashvili International Consultants, an independent consultancy specialising in public and government affairs. Ambassador Samadashvili is also a founder of the Centre for Strategic Communications and Democracy in Georgia.

Acknowledgements

On the balmy spring night of 9 April 1989, the Soviet army ruthlessly crushed the peaceful Georgian demonstrators in Tbilisi. While demanding democracy and independence for their country, thousands of Georgians greeted the Russian tanks with flowers and applause, in the naïve hope that the Russians would sympathise with their striving for freedom. Amongst the victims were young and old, mostly women and several teenage girls. Georgia mourned its dead . . .

Just a few days later, I watched Russian General Igor Rodionov speaking to the Soviet Supreme Council in Moscow. He denied that the deaths were the responsibility of the Soviet death squads. On that terrible night in Tbilisi, he said, the demonstrators had crushed each other in an outbreak of public panic. As I witnessed this grown man lying on TV, I could not hold back the tears of a child's helpless anger. This was my first exposure to the monstrosity of totalitarian lies.

Twenty-five years later Putin's regime, identifying itself as the proud heir of the USSR, continues to lie, deceiving the people it is supposed to serve and the rest of the world. However, these lies have become more difficult to decipher. They are also more dangerous, seeking to undermine the values underpinning the foundations of the free world.

Countering Putin's lies will require concerted and forceful action from the West. This paper is a modest attempt to outline some of the possible steps that could be taken in this direction, with recommendations for the EU and its member states.

Executive Summary

Russia's annexation of Crimea in 2014 opened a new chapter in European history. The hope harboured by many in the West that confrontation between Russia and Europe was no longer imaginable had turned out to be an illusion. As Europe watches the disintegration of the world order that has existed since the Second World War, some policymakers in the West are still reluctant to come to terms with the new reality. Multiple voices in Europe continue to insist that the Cold War belongs to the distant past, never to be repeated again. Many are eager to consider Russia's aggression against Ukraine, just as they had the Russian military invasion of Georgia in 2008, another unpleasant page in history—one that can be turned quickly, so that Europe can go back to 'business as usual' with Russia.

It is not easy to come to terms with the reality that Europe is once again facing an adversary at its borders. Making a shift in Europe's policy towards Russia would be painful, with too many interests involved and too many years of demanding diplomatic work going to waste. However, the sooner Europe reconciles itself to the reality that Russia has been engaged in an undeclared war against the liberal values underpinning the peace and prosperity of Europe, the sooner it can find the right policy response.

Information warfare is an integral part of Putin's assault on Europe. The scale and intensity of Russia's information warfare capability has fully come to light in the country's aggression against Ukraine. But, as this paper argues, these capabilities have been cultivated over many years and constitute an integral part of Russia's new strategy for 'hybrid' or 'non-linear' warfare. This strategy uses military, criminal, intelligence, business, diplomatic, media, cyber and political techniques to achieve Russia's goals.

Taking into account technological developments which have made information a cheap commodity to disseminate and an easy one to obtain, the new Russian military doctrine treats information as a dangerous weapon. This fear of information has been particularly exacerbated by the string of 'colour revolutions' in Russia's neighbourhood and by the Arab Spring. This is because Putin's regime believes that these democratic uprisings were 'manufactured' by the West, with information technologies playing a key role.

Over more than a decade of Putin's rule, Russia has carefully built up a line of defence against what it believes to be a powerful adversary—the West. Putin's regime has done this by curtailing the freedom of information in Russia and subjecting its citizens to propaganda indoctrination which is even more cynical than that of Soviet times. It has also attempted to monopolise the information flow in all the Russian-speaking countries of the former USSR. At the same time, on an offensive front, Russia has acquired considerable

assault capabilities by penetrating Europe's media outlets and policymaking circles, and cultivating a formidable cyberwarfare arsenal. While Moscow remains a fortress to policymakers in the West, the Iron Curtain has been replaced by a one-way mirror through which the Kremlin can carefully observe the West, while remaining completely invisible and inscrutable.

This paper analyses the main elements of Russia's vast, well-integrated and well-organised information warfare capabilities. It also deciphers the main messages of Russia's propaganda machine in the West, concentrating on Russia's efforts to undermine faith in liberal values and legitimise its claim to former constituent parts of the USSR. The paper examines how Russia is using its allies in European business and political circles to spread its message. It also provides recommendations for policymakers and non-governmental actors, with a view to countering Russia's propaganda. Europe is at war—an information war. Like any other war, this requires a defence strategy.

Developing such a strategy is challenging because the West should not try to respond to Russia in kind. Liberal democracies cannot restrict the right to free speech and freedom of information. Nor can they design a vertically integrated control and command structure for their efforts, similar to the Russian one. While some policy action is required, the West's response should be led predominantly by the broad array of non-governmental organisations, think tanks, political parties, journalists and other non-government actors. With the emphasis on non-governmental players in mind, the Western response or counter-strategy for Russia's information offensive should pursue two strategic objectives. On the one hand, it should build a defence capability by attempting to limit—within the liberal framework of freedom of speech—the exposure of European citizens to the impact of Russia's propaganda machinery, as a kind of defence capability. On the other hand, the policy should attempt to develop offensive capabilities though fostering access to objective analysis of and information on Putin himself; the goals he pursues vis-à-vis Europe and the former Soviet countries; and the reality facing the Georgians, Moldovans and Ukrainians.

Europe is at war—an information war. Like any other war, this requires a defence strategy

The West's response to the Russian challenge should be better information, not more propaganda. Designing such a response will require developing delicately crafted policy options, constructing an ap-

propriate institutional framework, allocating the necessary resources, and finding the right messages and messengers.

Introduction

When the Berlin Wall came down 25 years ago, many happily declared ‘the end of history’ and celebrated the unchallenged victory of Western liberal values. The propaganda war, much like the nuclear arms race or the ‘proxy’ wars between the West and the USSR in the countries of the developing world, was considered to be a closed chapter in European history. Russia was declared a ‘strategic’ partner of Europe, en route to democracy, with great potential for mutually beneficial economic cooperation, and a newly opened land of opportunity for European business.

The world today might be a better place if these assumptions had turned out to be true. However, a quarter of a century later, instead of democracy, Russia has rapidly transitioned back into an authoritarian system of government, which the Kremlin’s ideologues call ‘sovereign democracy’. Russia is also reasserting its control over parts of its former empire, resorting to military means to dismember sovereign European countries, first Georgia, and, more recently, Ukraine.

As we observe the developments in Russia’s domestic and foreign policies over the course of the last 15 years, we have to admit that ‘the end of history’ has turned out to be wishful thinking. Russia has once again positioned itself as an adversary of the West and issued a new challenge to European security at its borders. It is also ideologically challenging the Western model of political and economic liberalism. How the EU responds to this challenge might define Europe for the foreseeable future. Designing strategies to counter Russian propaganda in Europe should be one of the central components of Europe’s response to Russia’s challenge.

The ‘information war’ as an integral part of ‘hybrid’ warfare strategies

Almost a decade ago, Sir Robert Cooper famously warned EU policymakers that the major threat to European security over the next decade would originate from 'non-state actors'.[1] Looking at the Russian strategy and tactics for challenging European security today, it is clear that Russia has indeed decided to engage 'non-state' actors in its policy of destabilisation, ranging from the 'green men' in Eastern Ukraine and the Russian-funded non-governmental organisations (NGOs) in both Western countries and former Soviet states, to the army of Internet 'trolls'. But these are merely the weapons used to implement the vertically integrated and centralised system which embodies the well-coordinated strategy of the Russian security agencies with their substantial resources. As such, these non-state actors are even more dangerous than conventional non-state actors, which lack such organisation and structure. They constitute the army in the 'hybrid' or 'non-linear' war which Russia has declared on the former constituent parts of the USSR. Russia's goal in these states is to achieve 'limited sovereignty'—that is, to secure Russia's veto over major domestic and foreign policy decisions. They are also the army which Russia deploys against the West. After all, Ukraine is just the current theatre for the war which Putin has declared on the West with the aim of reshaping the world order to his own liking.

Taking into account the technological developments which have made information a cheap commodity to disseminate and an easy one to obtain, the new Russian military doctrine treats information as a dangerous weapon.

The main element of Russia's strategy for 'hybrid' warfare has been spelled out in an article by Russian Chief of the General Staff Valery Gerasimov.[2] This doctrine outlines how Russia can destroy and subvert states without engaging in direct military confrontation. The author's main message is that the role of non-military means for achieving the strategic objective of destabilising a target has in fact exceeded the importance of traditional military capabilities. Gerasimov argues for the broad use of political, economic, informational, humanitarian and other non-military measures to pursue Russia's adversaries. As NATO Deputy Secretary-General Ambassador Alexander Vershbow asserted in a speech: '. . . the trust in Russian words has hit rock bottom. Disinformation, propaganda and deniability have always played their part in creating the fog of war. But now they are an essential strategic weapon in Russia's arsenal and NATO needs to work out how to counter them.'[3]

1 R. Cooper, *The Breaking of Nations—Order and Chaos in the Twenty-first Century* (London: Atlantic Books, 2004).
2 M. Galeotti, '"The Gerasimov Doctrine" and Russian Non-Linear War', *In Moscow's Shadows*, 6 July 2014.
3 A. Vershbow, 'Security Challenges in the Baltic Region in the Perspective of the Wales NATO Summit: Remarks by NATO Deputy Secretary General Ambassador Alexander Vershbow at Multinational Corps (North East), Szczecin (Poland)', *NATO.int*, 19 September 2014.

Russia's new warfare strategy includes the use of military, criminal, intelligence, business, diplomatic, media, cyber and political techniques to achieve its goals. 'The key element of the Russian strategy is the notion that the war is essentially staged in the minds of the participants. . . . Thus, asymmetric and non-linear warfare's objective is the creation of a sociopolitical environment conducive to destroying the opponent's economic and political structures . . . Information operations have a great role to play . . . '[4]

Taking into account the technological developments which have made information a cheap commodity to disseminate and an easy one to obtain, the new Russian military doctrine treats information as a dangerous weapon. As with any effective weapon, Russia's strategy for information is to curtail the stockpiles of its adversaries, while strengthening its own ammunition. The international legal framework sets out a more or less comprehensive regulatory framework for both the manufacturing and trade of weapons or weapons-grade material. However, where information is concerned the legal framework is much less clear or is still evolving (as is the case with cybersecurity, for example). Russia has been exploiting these ambiguities with great success, as it has the liberal framework for freedom of speech and information in Europe. 'Russia uses democratic tools to fight against democracy itself.'[5]

Over the course of the last 15 years, Putin has achieved a considerable advantage in both defence and assault capabilities. He has built a defence system which has secured his monopoly on 'information-manufacturing' for the Russian audience, while solidifying the infrastructure for his 'assault capabilities' in Europe.

[4] J. Bērziņš, 'Russian New Generation Warfare: Implications for Europe', *European Leadership Network*, 14 October 2014.
[5] Ibid.

Russian views on information warfare

Using information to strategic advantage is not a new concept for Russia. After all, as the successor to the USSR, Russia inherited a long tradition of propaganda warfare. *Spetspropaganda* (special propaganda) theory used to be taught as a separate subject in the Soviet Union in all the relevant higher education institutions. However, Putin's Russia has taken propaganda to its next level, taking advantage of technological advancements, especially in social media, and completely disregarding reality. In essence, Russia has succeeded not only in spreading misinformation, but in creating new, alternative virtual realities. 'Russia practices information warfare (propaganda) with a level of sophistication and intensity not seen even during the Cold War. This confuses and corrodes Western decision-making abilities.'[6]

It seems that rebuilding its depleted information warfare capabilities was an integral part of Putin's plan for Russia. Shortly after he and his security apparatus consolidated political power, Russia started to carefully cultivate its information warfare capabilities. Putin, a former KGB colonel, would have been introduced to the value of propaganda while still studying with the security agency. However, we might also assume that he realised that there was a need to expand information warfare capabilities during the war in Chechnya, waged in 1999–2000. While there were very few international protests against the military campaign, which cost thousands of civilian lives (estimates vary between 25,000 and 200,000) in Chechnya, Russia did receive some unwelcome publicity at the time. For one reason or another, the subject of information warfare was given a substantial boost in the Russian academic establishment as early as 2000. For example, propaganda was reintroduced as a subject at the Military Institute of Foreign Languages of Russia, now the Military Information and Foreign Languages Department of the Military University of the Ministry of Defence of the Russian Federation. Today, diplomatic training courses at the Moscow State Institute of International Relations and the Diplomatic Academy of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, as well the curricula in the sociology, philosophy and political science departments of other universities, all include subjects such as situation analysis, network communication technology, and information and network wars. The subject of information warfare has been given the status of an academic science.[7]

In essence, Russia has succeeded not only in spreading misinformation, but in creating new, alternative virtual realities.

[6] E. Lucas, 'Russia is Winning', *Delfi Zinios*, 4 September 2014.

[7] J. Darczewska, *The Anatomy of Russian Information Warfare. The Crimean Operation, a Case Study*, Centre for Eastern Studies, Point of View no. 42 (Warsaw, 22 May 2014).

A substantial body of Russian academic research has been devoted to the same subject. The Russian academic establishment views information warfare as 'influencing the consciousness of the masses as part of the rivalry between the different civilisational systems adopted by different countries in the information space by use of special means to control information resources as information weapons.'[8]

An assessment of the academic research by Russian information warfare theorists reveals that in pursuit of social control (influencing society) and social manoeuvring (intentional control of the public with the aim of making certain gains), they identify various information warfare techniques: manipulation—using authentic information in a way that gives rise to false implications; disinformation—spreading fabricated information and intentionally creating false information; and lobbying, blackmail and extortion of the desired information.[9] The same research also makes it clear that Russia treats information warfare as it would conventional warfare, pursuing strategic and tactical advantages, cultivating the 'army' as well as the weaponry, and creating hierarchical structures and a clear chain of command.

The string of 'colour' revolutions in the former USSR, starting with the Rose Revolution of Georgia in 2003, followed by the wave of political uprisings in the Arab Spring countries, have given greater importance and impetus to the work of information warfare theorists and practitioners in Russia. After all, the Russian political, intelligence and academic establishments all are convinced that these political changes were manufactured by the US through the use of social control techniques and information warfare. The victory of the West, in the view of Russian analysts, was guaranteed by its advantage in information warfare.[10] It is this perceived advantage which Russia has set out to put an end to, sparing neither political nor financial resources.

[8] Ibid., 12.
[9] Ibid., 15–17
[10] See, for example, I. N. Panarin, *Informatsionnaia voĭna za budushchee Rossi* [Information Warfare for the Future of Russia], (Moscow, 2008).

The Russian information warfare strategy

The Russian government's information warfare strategy pursues two main and interrelated objectives. On the defence capabilities front it aims to curtail the freedom of information at home in order to avoid a 'colour revolution' scenario, using information as the tool to indoctrinate Russian voters and preferably Russian-speaking populations beyond Russia too. Offensively, it seeks to build and sustain a powerful infrastructure in the West in order to advance Russian interests by influencing public perception.

A monopoly over information in Russia and Russian-speaking countries

The Kremlin has a monopoly over the information space in Russia and would prefer this to be the case in all Russian-speaking countries. The government's systematic crackdown on the freedom of information in Russia has been an evolving problem over the course of the last 15 years. The Kremlin has succeeded in curtailing the freedom of information within its borders by applying pressure on both journalists and free channels of information, such as the Internet and independent electronic and printed media. Russia has become one of the most dangerous countries for journalists. Reporters Without Borders, the international organisation that offers the most authoritative assessment of the freedom of the media, placed Russia in 148th place in its 2013 ranking. This poor performance is explained by the fact that since Vladimir Putin returned to the presidency, repression has been stepped up in response to an unprecedented wave of opposition protests. The country also continues to be set apart by its unacceptable failure to punish all those who have murdered or attacked journalists. In October 2014, in the latest move to further curtail the freedom of the press, Putin signed a law which, from 2016, will preclude the operation in Russia of media outlets which have not succeeded in reducing the share of their foreign ownership to less than 20%. This decision could force CNN, amongst others, to cease broadcasting in Russia.[11]

[11] A. Chandler, 'The End of CNN in Russia', *The Atlantic*, 10 November 2014.

The Russian government's active opposition to any attempts to break its monopoly on information dissemination is not limited to within its borders. The policy also applies to other countries of the former USSR which have large Russian-speaking populations. Russia does not shy away from using its own economic leverage to this end. For example, in 2011 the Georgian public broadcaster launched a Russian-language satellite news channel, First Caucasus News (Pervy Informatsionny Kavkazsky), which was to broadcast six hours a day, covering the territories of Russia, the South Caucasus, Ukraine, Belarus, Eastern Europe, Turkey and Iran. The purpose of the channel was to make sure that views different from those of the Kremlin were offered to the Russian-speaking audiences in these countries. However, shortly after the launch of the channel, the Paris-based satellite operator Eutelsat Communications pulled the channel from its satellite, citing the end of the trial period, and entered into a larger deal with Russia's Gazprom Media Group to allocate capacity on a W7 satellite for its pay-TV provider NATV Plus.[12] Subsequently, the channel managed to restart its broadcasts using a different satellite provider, but with a more limited outreach. However, as one of the steps taken to 'normalise' its relations with Russia, the Georgian government led by the Georgian Dream Coalition (Koalitsia Kartuli Otsneba) shut the channel down shortly after taking power in October 2012. It also promptly reopened the media market to Kremlin-run media outlets which had had limited access to the Georgian audience under its predecessors. Sensing a new opening for its propaganda assault, Russia promptly started to consolidate its position in the Georgian news market.

Russia is also actively considering and implementing some measures to curtail the freedom of cyberspace, as the shadow of the Arab Spring uprisings, in which social media played an important role, has had a considerable impact on the insecurities of the governing regime.

The latest additions to Russia's information capabilities in Georgia and other countries are the radio channels operated by Sputnik International, which has replaced the English-language RIA Novosti service. According to Dmitry Kiselyov—head of Russia Today (RT) and known as 'Russia's propagandist-in-chief'—Sputnik, which only operates outside of Russia, will incorporate several websites and radio stations and have hubs in 30 cities by 2015. The goal: to give information to people who are 'tired of aggressive propaganda' and want a 'different perspective'.[13]

[12] *Civil.ge*, 'Relaunch of Georgia's Russian Language Channel', 24 January 2011.

[13] T. Lokot, 'Tired of Aggressive "Mainstream Propaganda"? The Kremlin is Launching a News Network Just for You', *Global Voices*, 10 November 2014.

Russia is also actively considering and implementing some measures to curtail the freedom of cyberspace, as the shadow of the Arab Spring uprisings, in which social media played an important role, has had a considerable impact on the insecurities of the governing regime. In addition to creating Russian-language alternatives to English-language social networks like Facebook, such as Odnoklasniki ('Classmates') and V konktakte ('Staying in touch'), which are under constant security surveillance, the procedures that must be gone through to be able to use the Internet have become more and more restrictive. Pressure on bloggers and other social media activists has also increased. Some worrying trends in this direction were evident in 2014. For example, a so-called law on bloggers, adopted in 2014, demanded that Russian bloggers register with the country's media and information regulator, Roskomnadzor. This has made them subject to the same regulation as Russia's media outlets. It also obliges bloggers to reveal their identity and store this information on servers located in Russia, ensuring that the authorities have access to it. The Russian authorities also adopted amendments to the law on information security that came into force in February 2014, which has been dubbed a 'political censorship law'.[14] The amendments allow the pre-court blocking of websites instigating riots, and extremist or terrorist actions. 'Coupled with the requirement that Internet Service Providers and telecommunication companies store data for at least six months, this builds an increasingly powerful ecosystem for information and communications control.'[15] Foreign companies view Russia's moves regarding data protection with great concern. If implemented, a requirement that all Internet companies store information on Russian citizens on servers located in Russia could potentially make the operation of Facebook, Twitter and other social networking sites in Russia very difficult. Since October 2014, the Russian National Security Council has also started giving serious consideration to a bill which would allow the authorities to 'switch off' the Internet in the face of a compelling security threat. While the bill has not yet been passed, it sends some very worrying signals.

[14] A. Kulikova, 'Top 8 Major Trends on the Russian Internet in 2014', *Russia Direct*, 24 December 2014.
[15] Ibid.

Using information for ideological indoctrination

While avoiding any potential for destabilisation which, in the Kremlin's view, can be caused by the free exchange of information, the Kremlin also actively uses communications for the indoctrination of the Russian public. The manipulation of information to create the image of an external enemy is essential to maintaining public support for Russia's aggressive anti-Western policies. As Putin challenges Western liberal values and asserts Russia's regained status as a superpower, it has become vital to fuel the patriotic fervour of Russian citizens.

With the firm hand of the Kremlin guiding the editorial decisions on all major Russian TV channels, the news consumed daily by the Russian audience is carefully programmed, edited and organised to achieve the desired effect. The current Russian government has taken Soviet-era propaganda to the next level, by blurring the line between fact and fiction, even in the news. When Russian officials are confronted about fabricated news stories, which Russian television reports as news, they do not even attempt to hide their wrongdoing. Alexei Volin, Russia's Deputy Minister of Communications, when confronted with the fact that the alleged crucifixion of a child in the Eastern Ukrainian city of Sloviansk was actually a fabrication, suggested that all that mattered for the TV channels was ratings.[16] Truth has become an irrelevant concept in the media space in Russia.

In addition to news manufacturing, Russian TV channels also widely use entertainment for propaganda purposes. Russia's military victories and triumphs have become the central theme of Putin's ideological engineering. Over the course of the last decade, the Russian television space has been flooded with a multitude of soap operas about the 'Great Patriotic War'—that is, the Second World War—which, much like the Soviet-era films about the war, concentrate solely on the bravery and sacrifices of the Soviet, or rather the Russian, people in countering Nazi Germany. The Chechen War is another preferred theme for

[16] P. Pomerantsev, 'Russia and the Menace of Unreality: How Vladimir Putin is Revolutionizing Information Warfare', *The Atlantic*, 9 September 2014.

Russian-made series. Following the Russo-Georgian War of 2008, Russia promptly produced a film about this war which portrayed brave Russian soldiers defending the helpless civilians in South Ossetia from Georgian aggression. During Russia's latest offensive in Ukraine, 'Russian TV was turned from a tool of entertainment and misinformation into a weapon of mass destruction . . . The desired world view formed in the infected minds of a zombified nation: Ukrainian fascists wage a war to annihilate the Russian world on orders from the West.'[17]

Anti-Western propaganda is an integral part of the Kremlin's domestic communications. It pursues the general viewpoint of the Kremlin, portraying the liberal Western world as set on destroying traditional values. Russia must thus defend conservative values from the West. Propaganda is instrumental in Putin's drive for 'quasi-mystical chauvinism',[18] which is intended to give the Russians an inflated sense of self-importance, amid the economic decline. It is driven by the ideological doctrine of Alexander Dugin, whom many consider the chief Kremlin ideologist, and is known as the 'fourth political theory'.[19] In its essence, the theory claims that liberalism has exhausted its capabilities and Russia is a post-liberal ideological super-state, fighting for genuine dignity and freedom, defending tradition, conservative values and true liberty.[20] The theory is very convenient for the governing elites, as it gives them a solid ideological foundation for the continued infringement of the civil and human rights of Russian citizens, for corruption and mismanagement, and for criminal behaviour and avoiding both criminal and political responsibility for it.

As Russia's economic performance continues to decline and the country is increasingly isolated in the international arena, the propaganda machine is likely to work even more tirelessly in order to offset the grim reality facing Russian citizens.

Unlike his Soviet predecessors, Putin lays claim to a divine authority and is backed by the Russian Orthodox Church, which is instrumental in the Kremlin's ideological machinery. Included among the most notorious Kremlin propagandists are Orthodox activists. One example is Dmitry Tsorionov, a vehement supporter of the Russian Patriarch and a Christian fundamentalist, who claims that 'all authority comes from God',[21] in an attempt to justify Putin's unchallenged rule in Russia.

[17] M. Shishkin, 'Russia, Ukraine and Europe Haven Been Into Vladimir Putin's Black Hole of Fear', *The Guardian*, 18 September 2014.
[18] Z. Brzezinksi, 'The Ukraine Problem. Confronting Russian Chauvinism', *The American Interest*, 27 June 2014.
[19] A. Tolstoy and E. McCaffray, 'Mind Games: Alexander Dugin and Russia's War of Ideas', *World Affairs*, March/April 2015.
[20] A. Dugin *The Fourth Political Theory* (United Kingdom: Arktos Media, 2012).
[21] O. Sukhov, 'Propaganda Army Speaks Fluent Kremlin', *Kyivpost*, 14 September 2014.

Thanks to the Kremlin's propaganda machinery, Russian society increasingly lives in two parallel worlds—a real one and a virtual one. 'Soviet people got used to living in two parallel realities. They were poor in objective reality, but, in a virtual reality, they felt powerful.'[22] The official propaganda machine continues to attempt to create a parallel reality for Russian citizens. Its main goal is to portray the West as the enemy of the interests of the Russian people. As Russia's economic performance continues to decline and the country is increasingly isolated in the international arena, the propaganda machine is likely to work even more tirelessly in order to offset the grim reality facing Russian citizens.

Infiltrating the West

Another objective which Russia has been pursuing in its information warfare is the creation and maintenance of infrastructure for infiltrating the Western information space in order to trigger the public reactions desired by Russia that will influence policymakers. Russia's strategy for infiltrating the West consists of a complex web of economic interests, public relations and information technologies. While sealing off its own information space, Russia has taken advantage of the open information and economic environment in the West to advance its interests. Scores of public relations companies, experts and journalists, as well as a well-coordinated army of Russian trolls on the Internet, all are instrumental in advancing Russian interests in the West. In a very informative report entitled *The Menace of Unreality: How the Kremlin Weaponizes Information, Culture and Money*, Peter Pomerantsev and Michael Weiss have produced a comprehensive analysis of the Russian technologies used in the West. In summarising the Russian goals in the West, the authors assert that Russia is attempting to buy up Western media, paralyse journalism with threats of libel, confuse the West with mixed messages, seduce experts through high-level forums and divide the West by buying political influence.[23]

[22] Ibid.

[23] P. Pomerantsev and M. Weiss, 'The Menace of Unreality: How the Kremlin Weaponizes Information, Culture and Money', *The Interpreter,* November 2014.

The main instruments or agents of Russia's information warfare in the West are RT and other information outlets, Russian-funded NGOs and experts, and scores of operators on social networks and news websites.

Media outlets

One of Russia's main tools for disinformation is the cable TV channel Russia Today, which is also known by the more neutral name RT. To the uninformed viewer, RT might be just another of the many news sources which are offered by cable operators. According to Wikipedia, RT is 'the second most-watched foreign news channel in the United States (after BBC World News)' and 'the first television news channel in history to reach one billion views on YouTube.'[24] In addition to fabricating news stories, the RT editorial line systematically portrays the US as a land of corrupt capitalism, social injustice, imperialism, militarism, colonialism and consumerism. Rather than inform or persuade the audience of Russia's point of view, RT's sole purpose is to confuse, spreading forms of discourse that kill the possibility of debate and reality-based politics, abusing the ideal of freedom of information for the purpose of spreading disinformation.[25] Recognising the value of RT, the Kremlin had recently intended to increase its funding by 3%.[26] The channel was also planning to start broadcasting in French and German. Overall, despite the country's dire economic performance, Russia had planned to increase its propaganda budget by 250% in 2014.[27] These plans, however, had to be revised following the steep devaluation of the Russian rouble. Earlier this year RT's spending budget was cut by 50% and the expansion plans were put on hold.[28]

In addition to major cable operators like RT, the Kremlin's media outreach in the West includes various TV and radio outlets operated by Russia in the countries of the EU. These mainly concentrate on the audience of Russian-speaking voters in the Baltic countries, but also include those in the countries of Central and Eastern Europe. When questioned by this author about the lack of solidarity with Ukraine among Czech voters, one Czech interlocutor, former journalist and acting politician asserted that it is not surprising, given

[24] *Wikipedia.org*, 'RT (TV Network)'.
[25] Pomerantsev and Weiss, 'The Menace of Unreality', 16.
[26] P. Goble, 'Moscow to Dramatically Increase Spending on "Russia Today"', *The Interpreter*, 1 October 2014.
[27] *Euromaidan Press*, 'Russia to Increase Propaganda Budget by 250%', 23 September 2014.
[28] D. D'Amora, 'Pro-Kremlin Media Sees Cuts, as Russian Economy Slows', *The Moscow Times*, 23 January 2015.

the powerful propaganda machinery that Russia has deployed in the Czech Republic over the course of the last decade, which operates a number of media outlets in the Czech language.[29] In the Baltic countries, both the Russian embassies and the Russian-funded Ruski Mir foundation actively support the activities of media and non-governmental players which help Moscow to implement its propaganda strategies.[30]

Western print media have also happily been supplying Russia with advertising space on their pages, with many major publications running a special 'Russia supplement' in their editions (for example, the French *Le Figaro* and the *European Voice*). While Russia's size and importance on the world stage does not make such supplements strange, a detailed analysis of the content of such publications often makes it clear that they are used by Russia to advance its point of view, albeit in a more sophisticated way than RT.

Over the course of recent years, Russia has also cultivated various Internet-based propaganda tools. For example, one of the better-known sources on Russia—'Johnson's Russia List'—which is widely used in Brussels as a source of information, was recently exposed as too pro-Kremlin by a journalist following developments in the region.[31] The tactic of such publications is usually to mix information from credible sources with elements of Russian propaganda, which makes the compilation of the sources look more credible.

The danger with Internet-based propaganda operations is that, unlike RT, they are masked. The international community is often unaware of either their origin or their ownership structure. For example, Babo, a supposedly independent media project recently launched in London, which received the World Summit Award for innovation, is in fact owned by a former executive director of the Russian holding company News Media, which is sustained by investments from the Kremlin's bankers and owns several TV and news outlets in Russia. The owners, media moguls who also operate news bureaux in several post-Soviet countries, were recently decorated by Putin with Russia's Order of Honour for 'objectivity and professionalism in covering events in the Republic of Crimea.'[32] It would be interesting to know if the World Summit Award

[29] Author's interview with a Czech interlocutor.

[30] A. Kudors, 'Baltic Security over the Decade, Political Threats and the Russia Factor', in A. Sprūds and K. Bukovskis (eds.), *Ten Years in the Euro-Atlantic Community: Riga Conference Papers 2014* (Riga: Latvian Institute of International Affairs, 2014).

[31] *AJM Broadcast Educator* (blog), 'Is "Johnson's Russia List" Too Pro-Kremlin?', 28 October 2014.

[32] F. Tlis, 'The Kremlin's Octopus of International Propaganda—Obvious and Hidden Tentacles', *Eurasia Daily Monitor* 11/202, 12 November 2014.

selection committee was aware of its ownership structure when deciding to award an international prize to this outlet.

Funding experts, NGOs and Western lobbyists

Russia has considerably restricted the possibilities for the presence of foreign-funded NGOs in Russia by using a restrictive legislative framework that includes the 'foreign agents' law, which requires all organisations receiving foreign funding to register as 'foreign agents', and through tax raids and other means of intimidation against NGOs. Meanwhile, Russia actively funds various think tank and NGO activities in Europe. To give just a few examples, the Paris-based Institute of Democracy and Cooperation, while denying that it is a Russian think tank, was founded in 2008 and toes a blatantly pro-Kremlin line, while formally having no connection with the government of Russia. The Institute is headed by Natalya Narochnistkaya, a former State Duma deputy and former Soviet diplomat.[33] Russia operates various other such 'proxy' NGOs and think tanks in both the US and Europe. Another example of a better-known Russian-funded think tank is the Institute for Democracy and Cooperation in New York.[34] The Russian-sponsored operators try to influence public opinion in the US through the Rhodes Forum, also known as the World Public Forum Dialogue of Civilizations, which is sponsored by Putin's close associate and former KGB official, Vladimir Yakunin. Russia has actively used this forum to advance its views on Ukraine during the ongoing conflict. For example, it sponsored an event earlier this year at which it promulgated the view that the roots of the problem were an unjust world order, rather than Russia's quest to restore its rule over the former USSR.[35] The Valdai Forum, an annual gathering of experts and think tankers which discusses Russia and gives the audience a rare chance to listen to Putin (or even have dinner with him in a small, select group), serves a similar propagandist purpose.

Russia has particularly targeted Germany, building a very strong infrastructure there, which was promptly deployed during the Russo-Ukrainian war. In his article 'Germany and the Disinformation Politics of the Ukraine Crises', Andriy Portnov writes:

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[33] N. Kanevskaya, 'How the Kremlin Wields Its Soft Power in France', *RFE/RL*, 24 June 2014.
[34] N. Krastev, 'In the Heart of New York, Russia's "Soft Power" Arm Gaining Momentum', *RFE/RL*, 15 February 2009.
[35] C. Kincaid, 'Russian Influence Operations Target Americans', *Accuracy in Media*, 23 September 2014.

> 'Those who understand Putin' (*Putinversteher*) constitute a heterogeneous group of influential ex-politicians (such as ex-chancellors Helmut Schmidt and Gerhard Schroeder), as well as journalists, political experts, businessmen and retired high-ranking military officers. They are particularly visible on German TV talk shows and social media, where they attack every pro-Ukrainian publication or comment and constantly sow doubt about Western and particularly American actions and intentions.[36]

Some of the better-known Russia experts in Germany, who are often quoted on the issues of Russia and the region, also fail to acknowledge their affiliation with the Russian-owned energy companies.[37]

Russia's public relations campaign in the West is often bankrolled by the government's proxy—the energy sector. The news that one of the spokespersons of the newly appointed Vice-President of the European Commission and High Representative for EU Foreign Policy is married to a member of staff at G+, a company that lobbies for Gazprom, caused something of a stir in Brussels.[38] What often goes unnoticed is that lobbying companies, such as G+, that work for Russia and its energy sector quite often recruit from the European institutions and therefore have privileged access not only to the information, but also to the technologies of the information-making process in Europe. Through this web of networks, the Russians are not only able to spread information, but are also very well informed about all decision-making within the EU. The Kremlin, meanwhile, remains a fortress to policymakers in the West. The Iron Curtain has been replaced by a one-way mirror through which the Kremlin can carefully observe the West, while remaining completely invisible and inscrutable.

The Iron Curtain has been replaced by a one-way mirror through which the Kremlin can carefully observe the West, while remaining completely invisible and inscrutable.

Foreign funding of NGOs has increasingly become an issue in the West, as policymakers have slowly started to wake up to the reality that often, when they believe that they are hearing an impartial Western expert, they are in fact listening to a mouth-piece for various governments, including that of Russia.

[36] A. Portnov, 'Germany and the Disinformation Politics of the Ukraine Crises', *Open Democracy*, 24 November 2014.
[37] Pomerantsev and Weiss, 'The Menace of Unreality'.
[38] R. Coalson, 'Spokeswoman for EU Foreign Policy Chief Married to Gazprom Lobbyist', *RFE/RL*, 7 November 2014.

Allies on the extreme right and left of European politics

Russia's propaganda network in the West might have been less effective if it had not engaged Western allies in its operations. RT often uses European politicians who are happy to conform to its editorial views as respondents. Building on a common platform of aggressive anti-American and Eurosceptic views, Russia has actively engaged both far-right and far-left political forces in Europe in its propaganda. European politicians from the far right are often welcome commentators on RT. The conspiratorial mindset shared with segments of voters in Europe also makes Russia's search for allies in the West easier. Research has shown the high level of attraction that the conspiracy theories promulgated by Russia exert on European voters on both the extreme right and the extreme left. Following the latest European elections, these voices have been brought into the mainstream of European politics and can be heard even more loudly. Russia backs its connection with its preferred political partners in the West with substantial economic resources. It has recently been revealed that one of the main allies of Putin in France, the National Front (Front National), was advanced millions of dollars from Kremlin-backed banks, securing the needed resources for their election campaign in 2017.[39] Russia also seems to have strengthened its position in Europe with the recent victory of the Coalition of the Radical Left (Syriza) in Greece. The party's senior officials, who now are in key positions in the Greek government, have well-known connections to the Russian political and ideological establishment. According to various media sources, Greece's current foreign minister, Nikos Kotzias, has a strong relationship with Alexander Dugin and has been a frequent visitor to Moscow. On his visit to Moscow in May 2014, the current Greek Prime Minister and then opposition leader, Alexis Tsipras, denounced Ukraine for harbouring neo-Nazi elements.[40]

Armies of Internet trolls

As mentioned before, the Russian regime is increasingly targeting social media for censorship, limiting the space for political dissent online. However, it is also using the same social media to spread its message in the West. An analysis of Russia's Internet propaganda machinery shows that it uses the same tools online as in traditional media. Its strategy is based on disinformation, manipulation, information fabrication,

[39] A. Rettman, 'Mediapart: National Front's Kremlin Loan is Worth €40 mn', *EUobserver*, 27 November 2014.
[40] S. Jones, K. Hope and C. Weaver, 'Alarm Bells Ring over Syriza's Russian Links', *The Financial Times*, 28 January 2015.

verbal provocation and intimidation techniques.[41] Given the anonymity of the Internet, information warfare agents can afford to be even more ruthless, aggressive and brutal online. These information *spetsnats* (special forces) are operating at a highly institutionalised level. 'Instead of spontaneously formed discussion groups, these are organised and hierarchical structures controlled by headquarters and commissioners.'[42] This army of Russian Internet 'trolls' goes into action when given the command, and the hierarchical structure allows the chain of command to control their activities. While it is extremely difficult to establish the exact parameters of the trolling efforts, some investigative journalists have revealed that the recruitment of Internet trolls is carried out by seemingly independent companies, which advertise jobs for people who can work on the Internet, produce web content for different types of audiences and rewrite texts. Recruitment is conducted for regular employees as well as managers, who are rewarded with 20% more remuneration.[43]

The extent of Kremlin-operated 'trolling' has become more evident during the Russo-Ukrainian War. Analysing the activities of the Russian trolls has given researchers helpful insights into the operation. Max Seddon conducted a detailed investigation into the activities of Kremlin trolls for the *Buzzfeed* website. He found that they are given explicit work-plans regarding how many times they are supposed to post, how many accounts on Facebook or Twitter they are supposed to maintain and how many subscribers they have to deliver.[44]

> Some of the leaked 'contracts' with trolls reveal the instructions provided to the commenters that detail the workload expected of them. On an average working day, the Russians are to post on news articles 50 times. Each blogger is to maintain six Facebook accounts publishing at least three posts a day and discussing the news in groups at least twice a day. By the end of the first month, they are expected to have won 500 subscribers and get at least five posts on each item a day. On Twitter, the bloggers are expected to manage 10 accounts with up to 2,000 followers and tweet 50 times a day.[45]

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41 Darczewska, *The Anatomy of Russian Information Warfare.*

42 Ibid., 29.

43 *Yle Kioski*, 'Yle Kioski Traces the Origins of Russian Social Media Propaganda – Never-before-seen Material from the Troll Factory', 20 February 2015.

44 M. Seddon, 'Documents Show How Russia's Troll Army Hit America', *Buzzfeed*, 2 June 2014.

45 Ibid.

In the cacophony of voices on the web, it is often difficult to distinguish lies from the truth. People's natural inclination is to believe what they hear many times, which seems to be just what the Kremlin's 'trolling army' has set out to do—make sure that we hear their lies as many times as possible. Intimidation of commentators or authors who oppose the Kremlin's point of view is another task for the trolls.

Cyberwarfare capabilities

While cyberwar is an issue beyond the scope of this paper, it should be mentioned that Russia is becoming increasingly skilful in cyberwarfare and considers it to be an integral part of its information warfare concept. The cyber-threat from Russia, according to experts, far exceeds that from China and could potentially be massively damaging to the West. Cyberwarfare specialists in Europe have focused on countering the Russian threat ever since Russia demonstrated the tip of the iceberg of its capabilities during the 2008 Russo-Georgian War. During the war, Russia's cyber-troops disrupted the operation of the Georgian government's most important websites and some information websites, preventing the Georgian side from effectively communicating its message on the Internet. According to cyberwarfare specialists, Russian malware has been developed over several years and deployed in 'sleep' mode throughout critical infrastructure, in Ukraine and elsewhere.[46] The recent assessments by cybersecurity companies, buttressed by reports from Google Inc. and US intelligence agencies, point to Russian sponsorship of a skilled hacking campaign dating back to 2007.[47] Targets include NATO, the governments of Russia's neighbours and US defence contractors. This offers confirmation that Moscow commands the A-team of Internet adversaries.[48] That said, Russia still views cyberspace as primarily a battlefield for its information warfare, or propaganda.

In the cacophony of voices on the web, it is often difficult to distinguish lies from the truth. People's natural inclination is to believe what they hear many times, which seems to be just what the Kremlin's 'trolling army' has set out to do—make sure that we hear their lies as many times as possible.

[46] P. Paganini, 'Russia and Ukraine: Information Warfare', *INFOSEC Institute*, 18 September 2014.
[47] See, for example, FireEye, *Apt 28: A Window into Russia's Cyber Espionage Operations?* (Milpitas, CA, 2014).
[48] D. Yadron and S. Groman, 'Hacking Trail Leads to Russia, Experts Say', *The Wall Street Journal,* 28 October 2014.

The main conceptual messages of Russian propaganda in the West

The Russian strategy in the information war it has declared on the West advances several broad themes:

• With respect to the former constituent parts of the USSR, it aims to create the perception that Russia's pursuit of influence over these countries is returning to Russia what naturally belongs to it—thus Russia is restoring rule over its 'legitimate sphere of influence.'

• Using its 'soft power' tools, such as the Orthodox Church, media outlets and Russian-funded NGOs, Russia is trying to convince voters in the countries of the Eastern Partnership (EaP) that integration with Europe is threatening their traditional way of life and endangering their economy and statehood. The idea of Western decadence, marked by gay rights, plays an important role in this effort.

• It also aims to portray these countries as 'failed states' which cannot lay claim to the status of sovereign nations. It attempts to convince voters in Europe that developing stronger ties with them would be detrimental to their economic and security interests.

• It misinforms the public about the nature of territorial conflicts in these countries, portraying them as a standoff between what some Western academics used to refer to as 'titular nations' (meaning Latvians, Estonians, Georgians, Ukrainians etc.) and national minorities (ethnic Russians, Abkhaz, Ossetians etc.). It masks the role played by Russian covert operations in manufacturing these conflicts.

• Manipulating historical facts, it creates some false notions which might convince the uninformed Western public that Russia is only laying claim to what is rightfully hers—for example, inventing the notions of 'Eurasia' and 'Novorossiya'.

• It portrays Putin's regime as a legitimate and successful government, enjoying broad democratic support in Russia.

• It attempts to strengthen the perceived threat to the West which might follow a standoff with Russia, overplaying the dependency of Europe on Russia's natural resources. It advances the image of an 'invincible' Russia, which is immune to Western sanctions, and aims to convince European voters that the sanctions will be most harmful to them. Most significantly, Russian propaganda deliberately evokes the

spectre of nuclear war between Russia and the West, thereby playing on deep-rooted fears, especially in Western Europe.

• It aims to create a moral equality between the goals pursued by Putin's government in the international arena and those of the US and Europe: thus that one empire is struggling with another empire, with both using more or less legitimate means.

• It makes considerable efforts to drive a wedge between the US and Europe, emphasising their allegedly different strategic interests and using geopolitical arguments as to why the US should not be part of Euro-Russian cooperation.

• Through the spread of conspiracy theories, it also aims to undermine the trust of Western voters in their own governmental institutions and the values on which Western liberal societies are constructed.

• In that vein, the institutions of European integration are also persistently undermined by Eurosceptic leitmotifs.

At the same time, the Russian message to the West is nuanced for different audiences. 'Russians play on the various motivations of various social groups in the West (using pacifists' fear of war, politicians' fear of unpredictability and entrepreneurs' fear of losses; and explaining to experts why Western models will not work for example in Ukraine).'[49]

[49] Darczewska, *The Anatomy of Russian Information Warfare*, 35.

How should the West respond?

Having established the main features, methods and actors of Russia's information warfare strategy, it is important to address the main problem—what can Europe do to counter Russia's powerful propaganda machine? Designing a response is a challenge, because the West cannot and should not try to respond to Russia in kind. Western liberal democracies cannot restrict the right to free speech and the freedom of information. Nor can they design a vertically integrated control and command structure for their efforts. While some policy action is mandated, the Western response should be predominantly led by the broad array of NGOs, think tanks, political parties, journalists and other non-government actors. With this in mind, the Western response or counter-strategy for Russia's information offensive should pursue two strategic objectives. On the one hand, within the liberal framework of freedom of speech, it should attempt to limit the exposure of the citizens in Europe to the impact of Russia's propaganda machinery, building a defence capability. On the other hand, though fostering access to objective analysis and information about Putin, the goals he pursues vis-à-vis Europe and the former Soviet countries, and the reality facing the Georgians, Moldovans and Ukrainians, the policy should attempt to construct more offensive capabilities. The Western response to the Russian challenge should be 'more neutral information, better analysis, more honest and transparent politicians, and wider education about the threat.'[50] Designing such a response will require the delicate crafting of policy options, construction of the relevant institutional framework, allocation of the necessary resources, and finding the right messages and messengers. NGOs, think tanks, the media and European policymakers all have important roles to play in this design process.

Recognising the threat

First and foremost, the West has to recognise how substantial the scale of Russian propaganda is in its information space, as well as the dangers it entails. One of the great advantages Russia is enjoying in this information war is its capacity to deploy its assault capabilities in a way which precludes the target from knowing that it is subject to an attack. A large majority of the addressees of Russian propaganda in

[50] Bērziņš, 'Russian New Generation Warfare'.

the West do not know that they are subject to an ongoing assault.[51] '. . . Putin has exploited the increasing proclivity of Western journalists to equate balance with objectivity . . . He and his minions have flooded the media with statements that are simply not true, but many Western outlets report them as part of the story, without identifying them as false or even questioning their veracity.'[52] Information warfare is 'total' in its nature and knows no boundaries.[53]

The experts and policymakers working on Russia and the countries of the EaP have grasped the scale of Russia's assault. However, as the constantly changing news coverage, chasing the latest crises, keeps switching the focus of the European public from one subject to another, the large majority of European information consumers have a very limited understanding of the situation. Thus, when reading yet another editorial from a Russian-sponsored pundit in a major Western newspaper which explains how Europe is being hurt by the sanctions on Russia, they do not know that they are consuming Kremlin-produced propaganda. Unfortunately, unlike Ebola or other epidemics, the epidemic of misinformation has no easily identifiable symptoms. It is the job of the independent Western media and public-opinion-forming outlets, such as think tanks and NGOs, to explain to the European public the danger that they are facing.

A suggested course of action for non-governmental players

In a telling sign that they recognise the threat from Russia, Western think tanks have recently started to address the subject of Russian propaganda in a more systematic way. Ukraine, in particular, has provided ample ground for such research. Some recent projects, such as the paper published by *The Interpreter,* quoted above—*The Menace of Unreality: How the Kremlin Weaponizes Information, Culture and Money,*

[51] A. Ilarianov, A Keynote Speech 'A Challenge of Information War for Open Society and Possible Counterstrategy', remarks made at the XIX Forum of the Open Society Estonia Foundation on Soft Power, 18 September, Tallinn, Estonia.
[52] P. Goble, 'Putin Cleverly Exploits Three Weaknesses of the West', *The Interpreter*, 23 September 2014.
[53] Ilarianov, 'A Challenge of Information War for Open Society and Possible Counterstrategy'.

have gone beyond deciphering Russian strategies and have proposed interesting and innovative recommendations on possible steps to combat them. Some of their most relevant suggestions in my view are

- the creation of an NGO that would set an internationally recognised rating system for disinformation and provide analytical tools with which to define forms of communication;
- the creation of a 'disinformation charter' for the international media and bloggers, which would set out a code of conduct for them;
- the creation of 'counter-propaganda editors' at media outlets who would pick apart what might be called news unfit for print;
- the identification and tracking of Kremlin-supported spokesmen, officials and intellectuals;
- the expansion of information campaigns to explain how disinformation works;
- an increase in the self-disclosure of funding by think thanks;
- the creation of a libel fund to protect journalists who would like to write about Russian schemes of corruption and influence peddling;
- the enhancement of NGOs' capabilities through increased use of experienced bloggers and social media operators; and
- the creation of an alternative to the Valdai Forum, bringing together think tanks and experts to counter Russian propaganda.[54]

Expanding on these recommendations and in addition to them, Western think tanks, NGOs and the media community should consider the following:

[54] Pomerantsev and Weiss, 'The Menace of Unreality'.

• Western think tanks need to consider how to develop closer cooperation with the vibrant scene of local NGOs and think tanks in EaP countries, supporting the exchange of experts through temporary fellowships, and co-organising events and conferences. This should be in the form of ongoing and systematic cooperation, in addition to the idea of organising a counterpart to the Valdai Forum.

• Western think tanks should encourage the recruitment of experts from former USSR countries. The large majority of Western experts on the region have a broad specialisation in Russia and the former USSR region. While some of them might be fluent in Russian, the large majority do not speak the languages of the other countries of the former USSR. Thus expert exposure to local-language sources from these countries is limited.

• A large majority of Western academic and think tank experts have come to discover and study the countries of the former USSR after developing an interest in either the USSR or Russia. They have expertise in Russian history and politics. Thus their view of the realities in the former captive nations of the USSR is often clouded by years of exposure to the Russian point of view. The increased complexities of the region and the 20 years of independence of the former constituent parts of the USSR mandate that Western think tanks deepen their expertise in individual countries, such as Georgia and Ukraine, among others. The quickest route to achieving this might be to recruit native-speaker experts and send more Western experts to spend time with host think tanks and NGOs in the countries of the former USSR.

• While there are a number of publications on the region by Western think tanks and media outlets such as Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty (RFL/RL), it would be welcome if, in addition to their news feeds, think tanks invested more resources in producing systematic publications which focus solely on a comparative analysis of how the same news is covered by the Western media and trusted media sources in the EaP countries, and the Russian media. It would be very helpful if a similar comparative perspective was used by the major news media outlets when covering important stories related to the region.

• It would also be useful if more Western NGOs and think tanks invested in study tours for journalists and experts to the countries of the EaP. The familiarity of the European public with the history and the realities facing these countries would be bolstered by such visits and the stories and reports produced as a result of them. While some governments of the EaP countries attempt to support such study tours through their own ‘public diplomacy’ efforts, the means and resources at their disposal are rather limited.

Therefore Western think tanks and NGOs could play an important role in helping these countries to get their message across. For example, immediately after the Rose Revolution in Georgia, the German Marshall Fund of the United States organised a number of such tours to Georgia, bringing mixed groups of Western think tank members, policymakers and media representatives to Georgia. This was instrumental in getting the message of the new Georgian government across in Europe and building a strong network of supporters for Georgia's reforms in the West.

• Organising large-scale think tank and NGO conferences and forums not only in the West, but in the EaP countries too, would also be conducive to such public diplomacy work.

• More resources need to be put into explaining both the history and the hopes and aspirations of the citizens in these countries. To this end, European media could develop partnerships with local media sources in the EaP countries, co-producing feature stories for the news, documentaries, investigative reports and so on.

More effort needs to be put into cultivating networks of celebrities who are willing to participate in exposing Russian propaganda and the crimes of Putin's regime [...].

• The Western media and think tank community should carry out more targeted work to expose domestic and political developments in Russia. The glittering night life of Moscow is as far away from the reality facing the impoverished Russian provinces, as that of London, Paris or New York. A large majority of Russian citizens still live in poverty, still have the lowest life expectancy in Europe and still have a very limited consumer basket. The Russians whom Europeans encounter in the resorts of the French Alps or on the Riviera are just a small segment of the Russian population. Real Russia is still largely poor, authoritarian and dangerous for independent thinkers. The current Russian government has committed some of the worst atrocities in post–Second World War Europe, both in its own country and in its neighbourhood. It is time to expose Putin's Russia for what it is—a rogue regime which has been systematically destroying the principles of international law and denying its own citizens the civil and political rights which voters in Europe have come to take for granted. Hopefully, the informed European public will realise why the current Kremlin regime, its European propaganda machinery and the political actors it supports in Europe could endanger their freedom.

• Supporting the initiatives of local NGOs and think tanks in the EaP countries, as well as the groups that spontaneously appear on social media, is crucial to helping the EaP countries overcome Russian propaganda in Europe. During the Ukrainian crisis, a number of such initiatives emerged and have made a difference. To give a few examples: StopFake.Org, a website operated by a Ukrainian NGO, exposed Russian lies in a systematic fashion; Euromaidan Press was instrumental in providing leadership to coordinate the strategy for damaging Russia's propaganda machine; and a Facebook page titled 'Anti-Putin Propaganda Strategy' has been a helpful resource for researchers. However, these initiatives are spontaneous, mostly operate thanks to free and voluntary contributions from the people, and do not have the support or strength to stand up to the powerful, well-oiled Russian propaganda machine. Identifying such initiatives and supporting them with the necessary funding to develop a more systematic structure and sharper focus could be very helpful.

Setting up a permanently functioning unit tasked with policy coordination for both EU communications in EaP countries and a response to Russian propaganda, which could be housed in the relevant DG, could be an important step forward.

• Using 'star power': more effort needs to be put into cultivating networks of celebrities who are willing to participate in exposing Russian propaganda and the crimes of Putin's regime, including his covert plans to undermine Europe from within, and supporting the rights of Georgians, Ukrainians and others to exist as sovereign, independent nations. To give the most recent example, the decision of George Clooney to support the Ukrainian cause in the ongoing Russo-Ukrainian conflict has probably contributed more to bringing the attention of Western audiences to the efforts of Ukrainians than any CNN or BBC documentary could aspire to do.[55] We live in a world of mass pop-culture, in an age when famous actors or musicians wield more power to mobilise the public than any politician or academic, brilliant as he or she might be, could dream of. Politicians have long recognised this, seeking the endorsement of celebrities for their campaigns. Countering the authoritarianism of Putin and his propaganda machinery in Europe is a worthy cause for any celebrity and could be immensely helpful.

• Supporting alternative sources of information: in cooperation with the Voice of America, RFE/RL has recently launched a news programme in Russian. It will provide audiences in countries bordering Rus-

[55] A. Hornaday 'George Clooney Uses His Star Power to Keep Part of Old Hollywood Alive', *The Washington Post*, 6 February 2014.

sia with a balanced alternative to the disinformation produced by Russian media outlets that is driving instability in the region. *Current Time,* or *Nastoyashchee Vremya* in Russian, is produced in partnership with public and private broadcasters and Internet portals in Georgia, Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania, Moldova and Ukraine. Drawing on a network of reporters in the region, European capitals, RFE/RL's headquarters in Prague, and Voice of America in Washington, DC, it presents a daily, 30-minute mix of live news coverage, interviews, original features and political satire. It offers content that is not otherwise available on state-controlled Russian media in order to provide a 'reality check' on local events.[56] Expanding this initiative and creating an independent Russian-language news channel covering Russia and its neighbourhood could play an instrumental role in countering Russian propaganda.

Building the EU's institutional capacities

In one of his first interviews, the newly appointed EU Commissioner for European Neighbourhood Policy, Johannes Hahn, recognised that Russia has increased its 'communication efforts' that target Western societies and promised that the EU has several ideas for dealing with this.[57] The lack of EU institutional capacity to respond to the Russian challenge does mandate a response at the policymaker level.

The response of the European institutions to Russian propaganda both in Europe and in the countries of the EaP has been ad hoc in nature. For example, when the outbreak of the crisis in Ukraine in the autumn of 2013 exposed how vulnerable European positions were to Russian propaganda, the European External Action Service coordinated the creation of an ad hoc group that included various relevant agencies—the Directorate-General (DG) Communications, DG Development and Cooperation, DG Trade, and itself—to design and implement a communication strategy in Ukraine and the other EaP countries. The ad hoc group was coordinated by the office of the spokesperson for EU Vice-President and High Representative Catherine Ashton. This experience could be institutionalised. Setting up a permanently functioning unit tasked with policy coordination for both EU communications in EaP countries and a response to Russian propa-

[56] *RFE/RL*, 'New TV Show Brings "Facts, Not Lies," to Russian Speakers', 14 October 2014.
[57] *Euractiv.com*, 'Hahn: "We Have Some Ideas How to Deal with Russian Propaganda"', 2 December 2014.

ganda, which could be housed in the relevant DG, could be an important step forward. A permanent unit such as this would be useful for pulling together the relevant financial and human resources, streamlining activities, and strengthening the coordination of the relevant efforts of not only the EU institutions, but also the member states. The fact that the 'Issue Paper on Russia' presented by the European External Action Service to the European Council on 19 January 2015 mentioned the need to counter Russian propaganda as one of its priorities was a welcome step in the right direction.[58]

The approach of the member states to the challenge of countering Russian propaganda in Europe differs from one country to another. For example, the Baltic countries, with significant Russian minorities, clearly attribute more significance to the problem, as their perception of the threat from Russian-sponsored activities is considerably greater. However, as already noted, since Russian propaganda is targeting Europe and the values which underpin the unity of the Euro-Atlantic alliance, greater coordination of the European response between the different member states is a necessary step in crafting a meaningful EU response.

As Russia believes that a well-functioning propaganda machine is an indispensible weapon, it has been willing to spend substantial financial resources on developing one. In order to build the relevant counter-capabilities in Europe, the EU also needs to allocate substantial resources for its own capabilities.

While a coordination unit embedded within the EU institutions could be helpful for coordinating the policy-level response, the non-governmental and private sector is better placed to implement the EU's objectives for countering the Russian propaganda machine in the West. Hence, the EU should consider deploying the resources at its disposal through the NGO and private sector. For example, for specific projects, it might be possible for the EU to engage the services of public relations consultants through a competitive bidding process.

[58] P. Spiegel, (blog), 'Is the EU preparing to re-engage with Russia?', *The Financial Times*, 15 January 2015.

A steering group of lawyers and journalists to establish a legal frame framework

One of the main challenges which designing such a unified response capability presents is establishing the framework that includes the legal principles of freedom of information and freedom of speech. It is clear that, unlike Russia, Western countries do not have the option of restricting the free flow of information and opinion. The cornerstone of the notion of free speech and freedom of information is the principle that in a free information marketplace the public is free to choose what it believes. That said, the legal framework for free speech, as well as journalistic standards, does include possibilities for restricting the freedom of information, as well as the right to free speech. Neither freedom of information nor free speech is an 'absolute right'. The legal framework for the enjoyment of these freedoms sets out necessary provisions to protect against their abuse. These principles include journalistic codes of ethics, legal requirements regarding transparency of the ownership of information sources, limitations on the right to free speech when it incites public violence and provisions against hate speech.

In designing the European response to the challenge of Russian propaganda, one might envisage the creation of a steering group of lawyers and journalists which could produce a white paper on the legal and professional ethical aspects of such a strategy. This strategy could then be enforced both legally and in practice with vigour and consistency. For example, it is a welcome step that the UK media regulator, Ofcom, has put RT on notice over concerns with the impartiality of its coverage of the developments in Ukraine and that any future breaches of the impartiality rules may result in further regulatory action, including consideration of a statutory sanction.[59] It would be a step forwards if the EU could look into taking coordinated EU-wide action of a similar nature, not only against RT, but against all other media outlets which Russia is operating in the EU—for example the radio and TV stations broadcasting in the countries of Central and Eastern Europe.

[59] J. Plunkett, 'Russia Today is Threatened with Ofcom Sanction Due to Bias', *The Guardian*, 10 November 2014.

Internet strategies—'Viral Peace' for Europe

As cybersecurity is becoming an increasingly pressing policy challenge, ways to counter Russian assault capabilities on the cyber-front should also be an important part of the Western response to Russian propaganda. For example, the UK has recently proposed imposing tougher sanctions on Internet trolls, quadrupling the current six-month maximum jail term for Internet trolling. The British government explained its proposed steps as due to the desire to strengthen the response against 'cyber-mobs'.[60] It is clear that, as more and more of our social and political life takes place in a virtual reality, the question of 'fake' online identities is becoming an acute problem of law and order. Online harassment or an assault by a 'cyber-mob' can be menacing and mandates strategic thinking on the ways in which the legal framework addresses it.

Meanwhile, 'counter-trolling' strategies, which either discourage the trolls by exposing them or think of creative ways to use the phenomenon for a positive agenda, should be given more thought. Targeting online Islamists, the US has looked at various possible strategies for online trolling, such as the 'Viral Peace' initiative.[61] This is a non-governmental initiative that empowers local counter-voices to undermine the appeal of violent extremism through the Internet and social media. According to some sources this initiative is funded by the US State Department as a capacity-building programme. Designed to empower and embolden the silent majority of moderates to 'occupy the virtual space that extremists fill',[62] the programme aims to assist credible community leaders to proactively challenge violent extremists online in order to diminish the attractiveness of their message. It would be helpful to assess the possibilities for a similar response to the challenges coming from Russian trolls in Europe.

[60] *BBC News*, 'Internet Trolls Face Up to Two Years in Jail under New Laws', 14 October 2014.
[61] S. Ackerman, 'Newest U.S. Counterterrorism Strategy: Trolling', *Wired*, 18 July 2012.
[62] Ibid.

Conclusion

Designing a response to the challenge from Russian propaganda in Europe will require creative policy-making and thinking, and continued and sustained efforts from European policymakers, think tanks and the media community. Information has always been a powerful weapon. However, in the post-modern world, where the multiplicity of information sources is becoming truly overwhelming, the challenges posed by the misuse of information have also acquired staggering proportions. The liberal framework of freedom of speech and information postulates that citizens should be free to receive information from multiple sources. They should make their own free choices about what to believe. Masterminding a European response to Russia's challenge without giving up on these principles is feasible. It is also vitally important for safeguarding these freedoms. Brussels should follow up on its commitment to prioritise the countering of Russian propaganda with concrete policy solutions—such as, the setting up of a permanently functioning communication unit which focuses on this task and coordinates the work of all the relevant European institutions. It should also back up this policy action with the necessary funding and try to stir discussion among EU member states, as well as non-state actors such as think tanks, NGOs, political parties and journalists, in order to mobilise a broad effort. If Europe finds the right way to respond to Russia's challenge in the undeclared information war which Putin is waging against the West, it will prove that these very freedoms make Europe a stronger, rather than a weaker, adversary.

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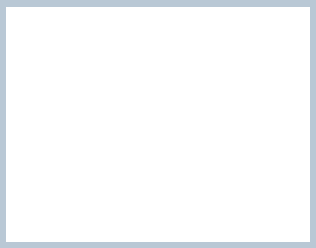

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