

*Lincoln Flake***US Department of Defence***

Russia and Information Warfare: a Whole-of-Society Approach

The Russian Government has become relatively proficient at deploying disinformation as a tool of statecraft. The 2014 events in Ukraine and the 2016 US presidential election brought the issue to the forefront of the contemporary political debate and scholarly inquiry. While the reach and effectiveness of the Russian information operations is often exaggerated by western commentators, the Kremlin certainly has grand ambitions in the information domain. Indeed, statements by the Kremlin seniors underscoring the need to compete in the information sphere have been myriad since 2012. The talk has translated into capabilities and capabilities have turned into operations on numerous occasions. Always changing to incorporate 'lessons learned', Russia's approach to information warfare is fluid. This article examines a particularly novel twist to that approach, i.e., the inclusion of civil society entities to proliferate the Kremlin's messaging. Institutions not typically associated with information dominance have become increasingly operationalized to serve the regime's interests abroad. Many have followed the same path as journalism – subjugated to the Kremlin's wishes early in Putin's reign; exploited as a tool for domestic control; and finally, employed externally with near seamless coordination within state information campaigns. While this whole-of-society approach is still in an early stage of development and might not appear too disconcerting at the moment, countries that are particularly vulnerable to Russian meddling would be wise to recognize the trend and consider countermeasures.

Introduction

Since 2016, the West, and particularly the media and political class in the U.S., have been preoccupied with Russian influence campaigns. This has raised awareness to a genuine phenomenon, but has also been hyper-politized. Objectivity and proportionality have been in short supply as Russia's meddling operations are credited with almost supernatural efficiency. In truth, information operation campaigns may sound ominous on paper, but their effectiveness

* *Dr Lincoln Flake* is a senior analyst with the US Department of Defense. He has worked for 15 years at different agencies, including supporting the North Atlantic Treaty Organization. He was previously on the adjunct research faculty at the U.S. National Intelligence University and a visiting fellow at Wolfson College, Cambridge University. Address for Correspondence: PO Box 1061, Huntingdon, Cambridgeshire PE28 0QA, UK, office phone: 44 07487 735891; email: lincolnflake@yahoo.com

** All statements of fact, analysis, or opinion are the author's own and do not reflect the official policy or position the Department of Defense (DoD), or the United States government.

<https://doi.org/10.47459/lasr.2020.18.7>

© Lincoln Flake, 2020

© Military Academy of Lithuania, 2020

often dissipates when put into practice. Fortunately, academia largely recognizes this reality and hence scholarly discourse is more measured and discerning. For instance, there is a general consensus that Russia's use of information warfare through traditional and non-traditional media has gradually increased in scope and sophistication since 2013. It has also become more ambitious at times and displays a greater coordination with other state levers of power resulting in what is often referred to as Russia's whole-of-government approach.

Many long-time Russia watchers, most recently Mark Galeotti¹, have helped draw back the curtain on Moscow's strategy of employing non-military means to achieve strategic objectives. While complete consensus is always elusive, most agree that Russia relies upon numerous arrows in its quiver for effect. This article does not refute this line of reasoning, but rather adds to it by suggesting that the breadth of the Kremlin's strategy might be even greater than many appreciate. Recent developments in Russia suggest a more expansive approach - one that incorporates historically benign non-governmental institutions to establish a narrative undermining the social and political stability of targeted nations and affecting the decision calculus of adversaries. I argue that elements of civil society, not typically associated with information confrontation, such as Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs), the Russian Orthodox Church, and academia, are increasingly functioning as 'voice multipliers' since the annexation of Crimea. While likely not as effective as more traditional dissemination methods, Russian officials hope these entities can reverberate the Kremlin's messaging. The aim of the article is not to add to the alarmist narrative of Russia's malignant influence, but to identify one potential change to the Kremlin's tactics, techniques, and procedures related to information warfare.

1. Early Ingredient for Success

Before addressing the civil society dimension directly, it is important to provide context in terms of overall strategy and desired effect. First with regard to strategy, Russia's last two National Security Strategies have highlighted the intensification of "the global information struggle" and the need to repurpose tools to win that struggle.² To do that, Russia's approach to information warfa-

¹ See 2019 *Russian Political War: Moving Beyond the Hybrid*, Routledge

² Russian National Security Strategy to 2020, May 12, 2009 <https://www.files.ethz.ch/isn/154915/Russia's%20National%20Security%20Strategy%20to%202020%20-%20Rustrans.pdf> (Accessed May 10, 2020); Russian National Security Strategy, December 2015, <http://www.ieee.es/Galerias/fichero/OtrasPublicaciones/Internacional/2016/Russian-National-Security-Strategy-31Dec2015.pdf> (Accessed May 11, 2020)

re is increasingly nested in a broader understanding of how modern conflicts develop, proceed, and terminate. The Chief of the General Staff General Valery Gerasimov articulated this in 2013, but the conceptualization of how to engage successfully in modern warfare predates his tenure and is continuously amended by Russian planners for efficiency. Lessons learned in Ukraine, Syria, and numerous smaller, non-kinetic confrontations have undoubtedly refined Russia's strategy toward interstate conflict. Whether labelled non-linear, hybrid, or whole-of-government warfare, the approach is founded on the belief that war begins long before the first shots are fired. It involves preparing the battlespace by exploiting the vulnerabilities of adversaries across the political, military, economic, social, informational, and infrastructure (PMESII) spectrum.³ This is often done by engaging in malign activities that are non-attributable, asymmetric, straddles the line of war and peace, and generally fall just below an enemy's threshold for an escalatory response.

Gaining advantage in the information domain is of a particular significance in the initial stages of conflict escalation, and may negate altogether the need for kinetic action. In 2010, Russia's military doctrine stated the importance of "the prior implementation of measures of information warfare in order to achieve political objectives without the utilization of military force and, subsequently, in the interest of shaping a favourable response from the global community".⁴ A few years later, Gerasimov asserted that the efficient execution of hybrid warfare should have a four-to-one ratio of non-kinetic to kinetic operations. Russian actions in Ukraine in 2014 may very well have approached that ratio by demonstrating precision and agility in dominating the information domain and shaping Western responses. According to former U.S. General and NATO Supreme Allied Commander Philip Breedlove, Russia's operation in Ukraine was "the most amazing information warfare blitzkrieg we have ever seen in the history of information warfare".⁵

Unsurprisingly, the scholarship on Moscow's approach to information confrontation expanded after the Ukrainian crisis, and was, for the most part, adept at sketching the general contours of strategy and implementation. Hybrid

³Patrick J. Cullen, "Understanding Hybrid Warfare", A Multinational Capability Development Campaign project, January 2017, https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/647776/dar_mcdc_hybrid_warfare.pdf (Accessed April 24, 2020)

⁴Military Doctrine of the Russian Federation, approved by Russian Federation presidential edict on February 5, 2010 (translated). http://carnegieendowment.org/files/2010russia_military_doctrine.pdf (Accessed May 12, 2020)

⁵John Vandiver, "SACEUR: Allies must prepare for Russia 'hybrid war'", *Stars and Stripes*, September 4, 2014 <https://www.stripes.com/news/saceur-allies-must-prepare-for-russia-hybrid-war-1.301464> (Accessed May 10, 2020)

warfare, in general, and information warfare, in particular, has its roots in Soviet and even Tsarist disinformation campaigns.^{6,7} Official statements, state-run media, and social media manipulation traditionally serve as the bedrock transmission channels for Russia's disinformation. In a battlefield setting, the objective is often to foment societal division along the lines advantageous to the Kremlin's aims. An illustrative case occurred early in the conflict in Eastern Ukraine when the citizenry was still choosing sides. A woman described seeing a three-year old child being crucified by Ukrainian nationalists as her mother watched in the key battleground city of Slovyansk. The mother was subsequently tied to a tank and paraded around the main square.⁸ It was all untrue, but likely had the desired effect of stoking animosity among Russian speakers in the region and hardening Russian public support for intervention. Disinformation is not limited to just wartime settings. A special EU task force to track Russian disinformation stories identified more than 8,000 incidents of false news between 2016 and April 2020.⁹ As recently as the spring of 2020, Moscow was busy pushing conspiracies on COVID-19 including that the virus was "probably made in NATO labs".¹⁰ There were 20 similar reports over the course of a single week. Such disinformation campaigns typically fall within the four Ds of dismissing Russian malign action, distorting truth, distracting attention, and dismaying an adversary with bluster and obfuscation.¹¹

At the same time, Russian information warfare goes well beyond simple digital disinformation. Several western scholars have recently noted that Russia's perception of information warfare is not as narrowly defined as in the West.¹² This warfare includes, among other elements, electronic warfare and psychological operations. Liam Collins highlights the integration of electronic

⁶ Taras Kuzio, "Old Wine in a New Bottle: Russia's Modernization of Traditional Soviet Information Warfare and Active Policies Against Ukraine and Ukrainians," *The Journal of Slavic Military Studies*, 32 (4), December 2019, pp. 485-506.

⁷ Mark Galeotti, "Hybrid, Ambiguous, and Non-Linear? How New is Russia's 'New Way of War'?", *Small Wars & Insurgencies*, 27 (2), March 2016, pp. 282-301.

⁸ *Moscow Times*, "State-Run News Station Accused of Making up Child Crucifixion," July 14, 2014 <https://www.themoscowtimes.com/2014/07/14/state-run-news-station-accused-of-making-up-child-crucifixion-a37289> (Accessed April 23, 2020)

⁹ EUvsDiSiNFO, "To Challenge Russia's Ongoing Disinformation Campaigns: The Story of EUvsDiSiNFO," April 22, 2020 <https://euvsdisinfo.eu/to-challenge-russias-ongoing-disinformation-campaigns-the-story-of-euvsdisinfo/?highlight=disinformation> (Accessed May 13, 2020)

¹⁰ EUvsDiSiNFO, "Repeating a Lie Does not Make it True," April 9, 2020 <https://euvsdisinfo.eu/repeating-a-lie-does-not-make-it-true/> (Accessed May 12, 2020)

¹¹ John Emerson, "Exposing Russian Disinformation" June 29, 2015, remarks at an Atlantic Council conference <https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/blogs/ukrainealert/exposing-russian-disinformation/> (Accessed May 6, 2020)

¹² Michael Connell and Sarah Vogler, "Russia's Approach to Cyber Warfare," March 2017, CAN Occasional Paper https://www.cna.org/CNA_files/PDF/DOP-2016-U-014231-1Rev.pdf (Accessed May 22, 2020)

warfare in Russia's information warfare by observing that during fighting in the Donbass, Ukrainian soldiers would receive texts telling them they were "surrounded and abandoned" while their parents received, almost concurrently, messages that "your son was killed in action". Another text told the soldiers to "retreat and live", followed by artillery bombardments on the cellphone's location. Collins summarized that "in one coordinated action, electronic warfare is combined with cyberwarfare, information operations and artillery strikes to produce psychological and kinetic effects".¹³ Perhaps the greatest departure from Western notions of information warfare is that all of Russia's significant cyber activities are by Russian military strategists as a constituent part of the information domain.¹⁴ Cyber methods such as social media hijacking, denial-of-service attacks, and the hacking and release of damaging material are merely means to an end of controlling the information domain. This inclusion of entities not typically associated with information warfare is a vital point as it illustrates that the Kremlin's strategists are not confined in their conceptualisation. It means that a Russian Orthodox priest in Sloviansk, Ukraine can play an equally vital role in information dominance as a presenter on *Russia Today*.

2. Cognitive Operations

The second prerequisite to grasping civil society's role in information warfare is to understand how even diffused, tangential efforts can achieve positive cognitive mapping. Often, individual news reports or isolated cyber actions are not standalone shots at an opponent, but a part of a larger effort to influence the thought processes of a targeted audience. The objective is to establish meta-narratives in targeted population groups in order for them to "order and explain knowledge and experience"¹⁵ within a Russian constructed framework. These meta-narratives act as an interpretative backdrop for audiences to contextualize events, thereby authenticating Russia's perspective.¹⁶ Far from subliminally changing one's beliefs, these metanarratives often

¹³ Liam Collins, "Russia Gives Lessons in Electronic Warfare," July 26, 2018, Association of the United States Army <https://www.ausa.org/articles/russia-gives-lessons-electronic-warfare> (Accessed May 12, 2020)

¹⁴ Michael Connell and Sarah Vogler, "Russia's Approach to Cyber Warfare," March 2017, CAN Occasional Paper https://www.cna.org/CNA_files/PDF/DOP-2016-U-014231-1Rev.pdf (Accessed May 22, 2020)

¹⁵ John Stephens, Robyn McCallum, *Retelling Stories, Framing Culture: Traditional Story and Metanarratives in Children's Literature*, Garland, New York, 1998.

¹⁶ Flemming Splidsboel Hansen, "Russian Hybrid War: A Study of Disinformation," Danish Institute for International Studies, 2017, pp. 38-42.

build upon already established or at least nascent inclinations. For instance, the Kremlin has long sought to imprint on European consciousness the belief that NATO's primary goal is to encircle and isolate Russia. Years of repeating this assertion in various forums has created a cognitive framework against which individual events, such as the U.S. proposal to increase troop strength in Poland, are placed. The desired result is a type of confirmation bias that persuades populations to oppose such actions as too provocative. These cognitive operations are intended to achieve decision bias in favour of Russia through saturating memory and cognitive processes with external cues.^{17,18} Another meta-narrative behind much of Russian disinformation in the West is the belief that the U.S./European democratic system is corrupt and failing. This is partially accomplished by engendering cynicism within Western populations in their political and social institutions.¹⁹ Again, Russian disinformation does not invent out of whole cloth the cynicism, but seeks to ossify pre-existing notions into a conceptual framework to a targeted audience which is advantageous to Russian interests.

These mind-games are also applied to adversarial leadership through what is called 'reflective control'. The idea is to manipulate enemy perception of the battlespace in such a way as to entice foreign decision-makers to unknowingly make choices to Russia's advantage.²⁰ Moscow crafts points of reference through a coordinated information manipulation strategy, which at once constrain and funnel opponents' decision space to an outcome favourable to Russia. This Soviet-era strategy remains central to Russian information warfare. T. Thomas describes the strategy as "a means of conveying specially prepared information to a partner or an opponent to incline him to voluntarily make the predetermined decision desired by the initiator of the action."²¹ These schemes are often unsuccessful, but in the case of Ukraine, a relatively restrained Western response to the annexation of Crimea was likely partially due to the employment of reflective control. Moscow's acumen at setting the narrative

¹⁷ See Marcia K Johnson, Carol L. Raye, Hugh J. Foley, and Mary Ann Foley, "Cognitive Operations and Decision Bias in Reality Monitoring," *The American Journal of Psychology*, 94 (1), March 1981, pp. 37-64; and Andrew Leynes, Alyssa Cairns, and Jarret T. Crawford, "Event-Related Potentials Indicate That Reality Monitoring Differs from External Source Monitoring," *The American Journal of Psychology*, 118 (4), 2005, pp. 497-524.

¹⁸ Teun A. Van Dijk, "Discourse and Manipulation," *Discourse & Society*, 17 (3), 2006, pp. 359-383.

¹⁹ Peter Pomerantsev, "Authoritarianism Goes Global (II): The Kremlin's Information War," *Journal of Democracy*, 26 (4), October 2015, pp. 40-50.

²⁰ Maria Snegovaya, "Putin's Information Warfare in Ukraine: Soviet Origins of Russia's Hybrid Warfare," Institute for the Study of War - Russia Report, September 2015, pp. 1-28.

²¹ Timothy Thomas, "Russia's Reflective Control Theory and the Military," *The Journal of Slavic Military Studies*, 17 (2), 2004, pp. 237-256, 237.

with regard to the peninsula's history, links to Russia, and Ukraine's more general dysfunctionality likely affected the decision algorithms²² of Western leaders. In such a manipulated information environment, they may have quickly accepted the annexation as a *fait accompli* that was impractical to reverse with draconian penalties.

It is important to note that even if these cognitive operations miss the mark in the foreign arena, they often support domestic messaging to bolster the regime. The Kremlin has discovered that success at home and abroad in this endeavour depends largely on the number and trustworthiness of the bodies disseminating external cues. The more numerous the voices and the further removed they are from the state apparatus, the greater the chance is that the disinformation would find resonance. This explains why non-state entities, which always have been a part of the Soviet disinformation campaigns, are increasingly assimilated into Putin's whole-of-government action abroad.

3. Appropriating Civil Society

That assimilation has been made possible by two decades of democratization in Russia. Not long after Putin's ascension to power, the Kremlin began systematically attacking, subjugating, and appropriating nearly every element of civil society. The first and overarching objective was certainly to solidify the regime's grasp on power domestically. However, in recent years a supplementary aim has been to enlist these civil society entities in the service of foreign policy. Journalism is the most obvious example. Putin's first few years in power witnessed the dismantlement of most opposition and independent media. This was facilitated by state or oligarch take-over of outlets. The result is that the vast majority of TV, print, and online news in Russia today is almost indistinguishable from state messaging. Putin's propaganda tsar, Alexey Gromov, meets with all major media managers on a weekly basis to convey the talking points, which are in turn filtered down to regional and local outlets.²³ Representatives from the Kremlin's foreign media arms, RT and Sputnik, are also in attendance. This communication is seamless after years of practice. However, the emphasis on journalism, as a foreign policy tool, has been a relatively re-

²² Mark Mateski, "Russia, Reflexive Control, and the Subtle Art of Red Teaming," *Red Team Journal*, October 13, 2016 <http://redteamjournal.com/2016/10/reflexive-control/> (Accessed May 25, 2020)

²³ Michail Rubin, Maria Zholobova, Roman Badanin, "Master of Puppets: The Man Behind the Kremlin's Control of the Russian Media," *Proekt*, June 5, 2019 <https://www.proekt.media/portrait/alexey-gromov-eng/> (Accessed May 2, 2020)

cent phenomenon – one that arose only after the domestic media coverage was firmly established at the beck and call of the Kremlin. The experience of other civil society elements has followed a similar pattern. The demise of an independent and objective press in Russia is taken for granted. Other entities associated with civil society, which have travelled a similar path of persecution, subjugation, and appropriation, are less known.

In the 1990s, NGOs proliferated in Russia and were surprisingly independent and constructive to public dialogue. The restrictive 2006 NGO Law purged the country of many independent-minded groups in favour of apolitical or Kremlin-friendly organizations.²⁴ This filtering intensified after the sizable 2011-2012 protests against Putin's re-election and subsequent 'foreign agents' law in 2012²⁵ and the 'undesirable organizations' law of 2015.²⁶ Both were meant to place civil society firmly under the thumb of the Kremlin, with the 'foreign agents' law alone cutting the total number of NGOs by a third.^{27,28} By the Ukraine crisis, the majority of NGOs' influential in the political and social spheres were doing the bidding of the state or were outright created by authorities. Vladimir Putin insinuated this in 2017 when he reported to his Presidential Council for Civil Society that "foreign agent" NGOs in Russia had been halved in two years and were being replaced by NGOs taking a "second path" of receiving funding from the Russian state.²⁹ As Orysia Lutsevych of Chatham House points out, many of these are pseudo-NGOs doing the work of Putin's regime by "undermining the social cohesion of neighbouring

²⁴ Leah Gilbert, "Crowding Out Civil Society: State Management of Social Organisations in Putin's Russia," *Europe-Asia Studies*, 68 (9), 2016, pp. 1553-1578.

²⁵ Russia's Foreign Agent Law, "On Amendments to Legislative Acts of the Russian Federation regarding the Regulation of the Activities of Non-profit Organisations Performing the Functions of a Foreign Agent," July 20, 2012 <http://publication.pravo.gov.ru/Document/View/0001201207230003> (Accessed May 13, 2020)

²⁶ Russia's Undesirable Organizational Law, "Federal Law of 23.05.2015 N 129-FZ "On amendments of some legislative acts of the Russian Federation," May 23, 2015 <http://publication.pravo.gov.ru/Document/View/0001201505230001> (Accessed May 22, 2020)

²⁷ Maria Snegovaya, "Stifling the Public Sphere: Media and Civil Society in Russia," National Endowment for Democracy, 2015. https://www.academia.edu/30525589/Stifling_the_Public_Sphere_Media_and_Civil_Society_in_Russia (Accessed May 9, 2020)

²⁸ Charles Digges, "Foreign Agent Law has put 33 Percent of Russia's NGOs out of Business," Bellona Organization, October 20, 2015 <https://bellona.org/news/russian-human-rights-issues/russian-ngo-law/2015-10-foreign-agent-law-has-put-33-percent-of-russias-ngos-out-of-business> (Accessed April 24, 2020)

²⁹ "Meeting of Council for Civil Society and Human Rights," Kremlin, October 30, 2017 <http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/55947> (Accessed April 12, 2020)

states”.³⁰ They can be operationalized, at a moment’s notice, to circulate the Kremlin’s perspective.

The Russian Orthodox Church has also been folded into Putin’s information warfare, albeit in a more gradual and nuanced way. Close church-state relations, or ‘symphonia’, have been a staple of Russian society for centuries. Typically, this translates into the church lending the symbolism and legitimacy of Orthodoxy to the state in return for preferential treatment. However, church backing is now more all-inclusive and unabashed. The protests in winter of 2011-2012 once again served as a catalyst. The patriarchate initially resisted taking sides, seeking to retain credibility as a mediator in the dispute instead. However, after state-controlled media ran stories exposing Patriarch Kirill’s lavish lifestyle, the church denounced the protesters and threw its full weight behind what it labelled as the “miracle of God” in Putin’s rule.^{31,32} The subjugation of the church was not fully realized until the Ukraine crisis. Again, attempting to retain some semblance of autonomy, Patriarch Kirill initially opposed the annexation of Crimea and the media’s attempt to use Orthodoxy to legitimize the opposition forces in the Donbass.^{33,34} The streak of independence was soon extinguished and the church began participating in Russia’s hybrid warfare in Ukraine from the parish to patriarchate level.³⁵ Thereafter, church actions in the broader region and within Eastern Orthodox community became synchronized with the Kremlin’s foreign policy goals. Indeed, regular coordination meetings occur between church and state officials, just like in the case of the media.³⁶

Academia also appears to be falling victim to the governmental control and direction. State control over universities strengthened after 2010, partially

³⁰ Orysia Lutsevych, “Agents of the Russian World: Proxy Groups in the Contested Neighborhood,” Chatham House Paper, April 14, 2016 <https://www.chathamhouse.org/publication/agents-russian-world-proxy-groups-contested-neighborhood?45KJB,LNGSLS,F3T97> (Accessed April 22, 2020)

³¹ Paul Coyer, “(Un)Holy Alliance: Vladimir Putin, The Russian Orthodox Church and Russian Exceptionalism,” *Forbes*, May 21, 2015 <https://www.forbes.com/sites/paulcoyer/2015/05/21/unholy-alliance-vladimir-putin-and-the-russian-orthodox-church/#30b84a7427d5> (Accessed May 12, 2020)

³² Reuters, “Russian Orthodox Church Takes a Gamble on Putin,” April 4, 2012 <https://www.reuters.com/article/russia-church/russian-orthodox-church-takes-a-gamble-on-putin-idUSL6E8F40QX20120404> (Accessed May 23, 2020)

³³ Charles Ziegler, “Russia as a Nationalizing State: Rejecting the Western Liberal Order,” *International Politics*, 53 (5), 2016, pp. 555–573, 561–562.

³⁴ Mikhail Suslov, “The Russian Orthodox Church and the Crisis in Ukraine,” In: Krawchuk A, Bremer T (eds.), *Churches in the Ukrainian Crisis*. Palgrave Macmillan, London, 2016, pp. 132–162.

³⁵ Lincoln Flake, Jeremy Lamoreaux, “The Russian Orthodox Church, the Kremlin, and religious (il) liberalism in Russia,” *Palgrave Communication*, 4 (115), 2018 <https://doi.org/10.1057/s41599-018-0169-6> (Accessed April 12, 2020)

³⁶ Russia Religion News, “Collusion Between Russian Government and Church,” *Credo Press*, April 12, 2019 <https://www2.stetson.edu/~psteeves/relnews/190412b.html> (Accessed May 2, 2020)

as a result of the strongarm tactics of the state accreditation agency, the Federal Service of Supervision in Education and Science (Rosobrnadzor). The European University of St. Petersburg (EUSP) and its relatively liberal curriculum fell afoul of this body and the school's license was pulled in 2017 over a trivial building code violation. Although the EUSP regained accreditation in 2019, other non-compliant schools have likewise been bullied into submission or irrelevance. A 2019 study found Russia to be the 119th worst country in terms of academic freedoms out of 138.³⁷

On the level of individual scholars, self-censorship is on the rise as research that counters the Kremlin's party line can lead to ostracization. The aforementioned restrictive legislations have probably dissuaded many away from collaborating with foreign academics or conducting research that might run counter to Kremlin-approved doctrine.³⁸ Several academic-specific moves have also intimidated scholars into colouring within the approved research lines. In 2009 the 'Presidential Commission to Counter Attempts to Falsify History to the Detriment of Russia's Interests' was established in the wake of the monument removal incident in Estonia.³⁹ Although it was disbanded a few years later, in 2014 Putin signed a law criminalizing the "rehabilitation of Nazism". As it is with most of these laws, the text is vague and more open to interpretation than the title suggests. In this case, the measure outlaws "the spreading of information on military and memorial commemorative dates related to Russia's defence that is clearly disrespectful of society, and to publicly desecrate symbols of Russia's military glory".⁴⁰ Academic output has been more aligned with the Kremlin-approved dogma ever since. Scholarship in support of the state narratives is particularly pronounced in research on the Ukrainian history and the origins of World War II. Moscow routinely engages in 'memory wars' with

³⁷ Katrin Kinzelbach, Janika Spannagel, Ilyas Saliba, "Assessing Academic Freedom Infringements and Their Severity," GPPI Project, 2019 <https://www.gppi.net/project/assessing-academic-freedom-worldwide> (Accessed May 2, 2020)

³⁸ Dmitry Dubrovskiy, "Academic Freedom in Russia: Between the Scylla of Conservatism and the Charybdis of Neoliberalism," *Baltic Worlds*, Special issue on Academic Freedom, 2018 (4) http://balticworlds.com/wp-content/uploads/2019/03/BW_2018_4_dubrovskiy_p4_11.pdf (accessed may 2, 2020)

³⁹ Interfax, "Medvedev created a commission under the President of the Russian Federation to Counter Attempts to Falsify History to the Detriment of Russia's Interests," May 19, 2019 <https://www.interfax.ru/russia/80400> (Accessed April 23, 2020)

⁴⁰ Ivan Kurilla, "The Implications of Russia's Law against the 'Rehabilitation of Nazism,'" Policy Memo 331 PONARS Eurasia, August 2014 http://www.ponarseurasia.org/memo/201408_Kurilla (Accessed May 22, 2020)

its neighbours over historical interpretations.⁴¹ Most recently, ahead of the 75th Anniversary of the end of World War II, academic inquiry appeared increasingly in lock-step with Putin's politically-expedient revisionism.

These civil society entities are tasked to mobilize in defence of the Kremlin's narratives either formally or through cues. They likely do so in a manner that is scalable, allowing amplification of the Kremlin's messaging when this is needed most. For instance, an extensive study conducted in 2018 focussing on the social media behaviour surrounding the downing of the Malaysian Airlines Flight MH17 indicated the strength of individual citizens and civil society groups to curate disinformation in the service of the Russian State. Civil society groups including NGOs, research centres, volunteer news sites, and citizen journalist groups were all enlisted to obfuscate Russian culpability. The study found that posts made by citizens were much more likely to be disseminated further than those of the state media.⁴² Finally, the entertainment is not immune from the state manipulation either. Russian-made films more and more resemble the Soviet-era propaganda supporting state narratives, although they are less time responsive to the Kremlin's needs than the aforementioned elements. Vera Tolz and Yuri Teper assert that since 2016, Russian television coverage has moved from largely de-politicized entertainment to a strategy that "centrally sanctioned communication of ideologized political messages delivered in accordance with the entertainment logic".⁴³

4. Threat Assessment, Recalibration of Countermeasures

It may be too early to speak of the Kremlin weaponizing civil society, but there is clearly a move to operationalize many non-state and non-media entities in support of information warfare. This is significant as these new curators of disinformation are often considered by the public as more trustworthy and politically unaligned. By some estimates, social media posts made

⁴¹ Maria Domanska, "The Myth of the Great Patriotic War as a Tool of the Kremlin's Great Power Policy," OSW Commentary, December 31 2019 https://www.osw.waw.pl/en/publikacje/osw-commentary/2019-12-31/myth-great-patriotic-war-a-tool-kremlins-great-power-policy#_ftn25 (Accessed May 4, 2020)

⁴² Yevgeniy Golovchenko, Mareike Hartmann, Rebecca Adler-Nissen, "State, Media and Civil Society in the Information Warfare over Ukraine: Citizen Curators of Digital Disinformation," *International Affairs*, 94 (5), September 2018, pp. 975–994, 993.

⁴³ Vera Tolz, Yuri Teper, "Broadcasting Agitainment: A New Media Strategy of Putin's Third Presidency," *Post-Soviet Affairs*, 34 (4), 2018, pp. 213–227.

by citizen and non-state profiles during a conflict are 4.3 times more likely to be disseminated further than those posted by commercial or state media profiles.⁴⁴ The resonance dissipates as messaging moves outside of Russia into the Near Abroad and beyond. Inside Russia, the coordinated campaign of indoctrination across all institutions is undoubtedly a factor in creating a social consciousness supportive of Putin's rule. Yet, by the time the whole-of-society approach to information manipulation reaches Western Europe and North America, the efficacy drops dramatically. Years of proactively sowing discord within NATO has yielded few dividends for Russia to date. In addition to this, the recent revelations in the 'Russian collusion' scandal of the 2016 U.S. presidential election cast serious doubt on once airtight claims of Russian hacking of the Democratic National Committee servers.⁴⁵ There is a real danger of overhyping the strength and extent of Russian information manipulation in Western societies.

The sweet spot of Russian information warfare is undoubtedly found in the former Soviet and Warsaw Pact nations. The susceptibility of these nations is conditioned not only by simply their proximity, but it is also affected by the ethno-cultural and historical factors. A soft power struggle between Russia and the West has been raging for years over the affections of these populations, with Russia seeking advantage through disinformation on a daily basis. Fortunately, the Baltic States have deployed countermeasures and raised awareness of the threat. Strong state institutions and a robust civil society have helped dissipate the effect of Russian misinformation. However, other countries, such as Ukraine, Georgia, and Moldova in particular, have no such defences. Western nations and institutions are certainly not ignorant to this regional information clash and considerable effort has been expended to boast counter messaging capabilities. Nevertheless, a more dispersed dissemination approach by Moscow may require recalibration of these capabilities. Simple refutations of 'fake news' stories may no longer be sufficient to negate Russian information methods that have gone well beyond news stories and Facebook posts. As Russia taps into religion, academia, entertainment, and other elements of society to accentuate its messaging, meta-narratives will continue to be harmful to nascent democracies along Russia's periphery.

⁴⁴ Yevgeniy Golovchenko, Mareike Hartmann, Rebecca Adler-Nissen, "State, Media and Civil Society in the Information Warfare over Ukraine: Citizen Curators of Digital Disinformation," *International Affairs*, 94 (5), September 2018, pp. 975–994, 993.

⁴⁵ Executive Session, Permanent Select Committee on Intelligence, U.S. House of Representatives, Washington DC., Interview of Shawn Henry – CROWDSTRIKE, December 5, 2017, pp. 74-77 <https://intelligence.house.gov/uploadedfiles/sh21.pdf> (Accessed May 15, 2009)

These nations and their allies would be wise to be more explicit in exposing and highlighting Russia's meta-narratives and their objectives to targeted populations. Moscow undoubtedly tailors its information posture to each individual country, so the information warfare plan for Estonia is markedly different from the plan for Georgia. Each plan likely has three to five key meta-narratives in which the vast majority of Russian disinformation can be binned. Highlighting these meta-narratives for targeted societies may very well turn the table on Russia's cognitive operations. Education of the populace would enable viewing the pronouncements by Russian news, clergy, film, TV, NGOs, and academia within a Western-created context of pernicious Russian information schemes. Citizens would become experts at seeing through disinformation, regardless of its source. The need for individual refutations of Russian 'fake news' would be obsolete. Whatever the counter-measures are, they need to be based on a more expansive interpretation of Russian information warfare, an approach that is trending toward a whole-of-society application, if it is not already there.

May 2020