

1. Mark your confusion.
2. Show evidence of a close reading.
3. Write a 1+ page reflection.

Vladimir Putin's Global Orwellian Campaign to Undermine the West

Source: *The Week*, May 12, 2015

What is Russia doing?

Since it annexed Crimea a year ago, Russia has launched an all-out disinformation campaign on multiple fronts. State-run international news channels and websites such as RT and Sputnik give a pro-Kremlin slant to real news stories, and spread outright lies and outlandish conspiracy theories. State agencies and private firms employ platoons of bloggers who scour Western and Russian news sites for articles about Russia or Ukraine and swamp them with pro-Kremlin comments. Russian agencies have set up news websites in several East European languages. The order to create this propaganda campaign, on which the Kremlin spends an estimated \$600 million a year, came straight from the top: President Vladimir Putin said in 2012 that Russia would develop "a matrix of tools and methods to reach foreign policy goals without the use of arms but by exerting information and other levers of influence." The propaganda is surprisingly successful in sowing confusion. "Journalists are taught to report both sides," said Rick Stengel, former managing editor of *Time* and now a U.S. undersecretary of state. "When the Kremlin says there are no Russian soldiers in Crimea, they have to repeat it. How do you combat someone who just makes stuff up?"

What tools does the Kremlin use?

One primary tool is the television network RT, which was called Russia Today until authorities renamed it to obscure the Russian connection. RT has cable and satellite channels in English — including RT America, which potentially reaches 85 million viewers. It covers current events in the U.S., focusing on police brutality, protests, and poverty, but it also produces wacky segments investigating whether, for example, the CIA created Ebola. Few Americans watch RT, and one of its anchors quit after publicly disavowing the "lies" that she and others were ordered to tell about the conflict in Ukraine. But the web version, RT.com, does have reach. It became the first news channel to rack up 1 billion views on YouTube. In the past year, the main theme has been the supposed rise of neo-Nazi groups and fascism in Ukraine — making pro-Russian separatists the good guys.

How are stories faked?

StopFake, a Ukrainian myth-busting site run by journalism students, has documented hundreds of fake photos spread by Russian news sites and social media. Peter Pomerantsev, a leading authority on Russian propaganda efforts, says that stories alleging that Ukrainian fascist gangs, trained by NATO, had murdered children were popping up all over these sites in early 2014, when Russia was taking over Crimea and fomenting unrest in eastern Ukraine. StopFake traced the photos back to their original sources and found that some were from past Ukrainian conflicts, some were from crime scenes in other countries, and some were actually stills from movies. The group also discovered that Russian news shows were using actors to play weeping or wounded victims and tell tales of Ukrainian government brutality. Russians call this maskirovka, or masquerade — an information war to accompany actual war.

What about East European sites?

Dozens of pro-Russian news sites have cropped up in the Czech Republic, Slovakia, Hungary,

and Bulgaria. Fluently written in the local languages, the sites carry the same kinds of faked photos and articles about supposed Ukrainian fascism as well as skillfully argued analyses extolling Russia's benevolent intentions. Czech counterintelligence has flagged one of the sites, Aeronet.cz, as "a source of dangerous pro-Russian propaganda." Earlier this year, when a NATO convoy passed through Czech territory, several of these Czech sites reported that the local population was outraged by the incursion of "foreign" troops. In fact, the convoy was greeted with Czech throngs waving U.S. flags.

What do the Kremlin's bloggers do?

Russia has a 24-hour "troll factory" in St. Petersburg, where hundreds of employees work in 12-hour shifts writing pro-Putin comments on Western and Russian news articles, fabricating their own news stories, creating and posting satirical videos, and posting tweets and Facebook updates from fake profiles. "They bombard the websites of CNN and the BBC," says one former employee, Marat Burkhard. One day's assignment, he said, was to assert that NATO troops had been embedded with Ukrainian forces all along. Another was to call President Obama an uncultured "monkey" for chewing gum during his January visit to India. "You work in the Ministry of Truth, which is the Ministry of Lies, and everyone kind of believes in this truth," says Burkhard. "It's Orwell."

What's the ultimate goal?

To give the Kremlin plausible deniability of its aggressive activities, and create sympathy for Russia in the old Soviet bloc. In eastern Ukraine, Pomerantsev says, Russian media managed "to create a parallel reality where 'fascists' have taken power in Kiev, ethnic Russians in eastern Ukraine are in mortal danger, and the CIA is waging a war against Moscow." Russia recently launched a similar campaign in former Soviet republic Estonia, which has a large ethnic Russian population. In March, Russian-language television in Estonia broadcast a faked clip purporting to show Estonian government support for Nazism — a clear attempt to foment another pro-Russian uprising. "This is a new idea of war," Pomerantsev says. "This is information-psychological war with endless subversion."

Putin's movie star pals

To bolster Vladimir Putin's cult of personality, the Kremlin cultivates washed-up Western movie stars. Action hero Steven Seagal, for example, is a personal friend of the Russian leader. Both men have black belts in martial arts, and palling around with Seagal helps bolster Putin's ultramacho image. "He is one of the greatest world leaders, if not the greatest world leader, alive today," Seagal has said of Putin. On a boxing tour of Russia last year, actor Mickey Rourke wore a Putin T-shirt and said Putin was "a real good regular guy." Another Putin admirer, French actor Gérard Depardieu, even accepted Russian citizenship as a way of avoiding French taxes. He has praised the Russians' "powerful temperament," adding, "One must be very strong to be Russian."

Possible Response Questions:

- Should the U.S. respond to Russia's propaganda war? Explain.
- How do you find unbiased news in today's world? Explain.
- Select any passage and respond to it.