AMPF’s Report.

“Russian Informational warfare in Ukraine, U.S. and Europe”.

By Mykola Vorobiov


Links to publication on topic of my research.

Johns Hopkins University (SAIS)


https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qfoXhs2vyb8&t=8s

http://transatlanticrelations.org/event/un-treaty-prohibition-nuclear-weapons/

https://transatlanticrelations.org/publication/can-u-n-peacekeeping-operation-bring-stability-donbas-mykola-vorobiov/ (Can a U.N. peacekeeping operation bring stability in Donbas ?)

https://transatlanticrelations.org/publication/next-ukrainian-revolution-ready-mykola-vorobiov/:

https://transatlanticrelations.org/fellows/mykola-vorobiov/


Conferences at SAIS:

http://transatlanticrelations.org/event/panel-discussion-concept-neutrality-east-central-europe/

Media appearances in Ukraine:

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=R9UjvOTF6u0&t=8s

https://www.facebook.com/atr.channel/?hc_ref=ARR0fpxETboqcEHBUiJYSyIYtXwhv54nokF9-wJCqDoUas8fft3nsbSiPikQLZhja0&pnref=story

As Austrian Marshall Plan Foundation fellow I participated in Young Professional Program (YPP) at The Jamestown Foundation where I participated as Austrian Marshall Plan Foundation Fellow contributing my articles to this Institution:

https://jamestown.org/analyst/mykola-vorobiov/

https://jamestown.org/program/babchenkos-staged-assassination-political-consequences-for-ukraine-and-the-west/

Atlantic Council:
Since the collapse of the USSR in 1991, Kremlin elites didn’t hide its strong ambitions for a revenge after the Soviets were defeated in the Cold War. Perhaps, only a short period of eight years of the presidency of Boris Yeltsin in 1991-1999 marked a relative thaw in the Western – Russian relations. After president Yeltsin nominated his successor Prime minister Putin for power who became elected in March 2000, it brought Soviet KGB system back to the Kremlin. Such change in Russian politics sparked another turn of confrontation with the West.

Throughout Yeltsin’s presidency and in the first years of Putin’s presidency, the Kremlin’s main concerns were to restore domestic political stability and to stabilize and grow the economy. Russia was weak and the Western assistance along with investments were critical. Moscow could not afford a foreign policy that challenged the West directly. Therefore, it pursued its frozen conflicts policy far from prying Western eyes; it complicated but took no serious counter measures as NATO and the EU took in former Warsaw Pact members.

In the meantime, after coming to power Yeltsin and his entourage accomplished a lot to be considered as “pro-Western” authorities. There are number of explanations why Yeltsin’s policy of “democratization” and liberalization of Russia has eventually failed. One of the main reasons was a sharp economic declining which resulted in country’s subsequent economic default in 1998. That time Russia was forced to default on its sovereign debt, devalue the ruble, and declare a suspension of payment by commercial banks to foreign creditors. On the other hand, investors’ perception of Russia’s economic continued to decline when Lawrence Summers, one of America’s top international-finance officials, was denied a meeting with Russian

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2 “The Eastern Question. Russia, the West and Europe’s Grey Zone” (article of John E. Herbs “Forsaken territories ? The Emergence of Europe’s Grey Zone and Western Policy, page 194)
PM Kiriyenko. Right afterward world spread of this incident and big investors began to sell their government bond portfolios and Russian securities, concerned that the relationships between U.S. and Russia were strained. At the same time, foreign reserves held by The Central Bank of Russia of the Russian federation (CBR) were so low that the government could no longer defend the currency by buying rubbles³.

Another serious challenge for Russian population in Yeltsin’s times were two Chechen military campaigns First in 1994-1996 and the Second in 1999-2000 which cost country over 100.000 of lives including ethnic Russian and Chechen population with even more injured and millions replaced from their homes⁴.

First Russian–Chechen Peace Treaty, signed by the Russian president Yeltsin and the newly elected president of Chechnya Aslan Maskhadov on May 12, 1997 was considered by most of population as Russia’s defeat in this conflict and capitulation before Chechen rebels in which Yeltsin’s administration was badly accused. According to this Treaty Mr. Yeltsin pledged “never to use force or threaten to use it in relations between the Russian federation and the Republic of Ichkeria”. It was the Russian president first use of the name the rebels gave their republic to symbolize its independence⁵.

The Second Chechen campaign became a result of dissatisfaction of Kremlin on newly organized republic which could cause secession from Russia of other republics in the future especially in the North Caucasus.

All these factors resulted in series of mass protests across Russia which weren’t seen since the biggest opposition rally who weren’t satisfied with Yeltsin’s ruling calling for his resignation and restoration of the USSR in March 1992.

In October 1998 thousands of Russians staged massive series of protests in Vladivostok, Saints Petersburg, Moscow, Saint Petersburg and other biggest Russian cities against president Yeltsin’s seven-years rule which, in protestors view, caused unpaid wages, economic inflation, soaring prices and job losses⁶.

Kremlin’s failure to resolve two military campaigns in Chechnya, deep economic stagnation, dissatisfaction among population, erosion of governmental institutions

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³ https://files.stlouisfed.org/files/htdocs/publications/review/02/11/ChiodoOwyang.pdf (page 9,13, 14)
⁴ https://etd.ohiolink.edu/rws_etd/document/get/osu1339684125/inline
and unsatisfactory of president’s health conditions lead to Yeltsin’s resignation which he announced in person in New Year’s Eve of 1999.

In the same time 47-years-old KGB officer Vladimir Putin was appointed as acting Russian president at a private Kremlin ceremony. In three months after that in March 27 in 2000 Mr. Putin became elected president of Russian federation while he captured 52,57 % of votes compared to 29,45 % for his main competitor and leader of the Russian Communist Party Gennady Zyuganov .

As former Senior Associate at Carnegie Endowment for International Peace and then appointed 7th U.S. Ambassador to Russia in 2012-2014 Michael McFaul stated in his testimony before the U.S. Senate Committee on Foreign Relations right after the Russian elections in April 2000:

“For the first time in Russia’s history, power within the Kremlin changed hands though an electoral process. The election did occur and was conducted as prescribed by the constitution, no small achievements for a country with Russia's authoritarian history. More than two-thirds of the eligible voters participated, and they appeared to make informed choices between a range of candidates who offered alternative platforms, policies, and leadership styles. At the same time, this election did not occur on a level playing field. Vladimir Putin enjoyed tremendous resource advantages that tainted the process. Although weak in some arenas, the Russian state still enjoys too much power regarding the electoral process, while societal organizations -- political parties, civic organizations, trade unions, and independent business groups -- remain too weak to shape the outcomes of elections”.

In the meantime, Michael McFaul explained Putin’s victory as “Putin was chosen by Yeltsin and his band of oligarchs as a loyal successor, who would (1) keep them out of jail, and (2) preserve the basic system of oligarchic capitalism, in which oligarchs make money not by producing goods and services sold for a profit in the market, but by stealing from the state. To get him elected, they had to provoke a war with Chechnya as a way to boost Putin's popularity”.

Putin’s victory on elections in 2000 marked a period of a broad expansion of Russian Secret Services (FSB) into the Kremlin. His success in breaking of oligarchs which endorsed Putin for presidency was not possible if he acted alone, instead it

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was thousands of his colleagues or so-called “siloviki” from FSB which was the most powerful organization during the USSR. Since then most of its power and sources were transferred to FSB where Putin grew professionally while he worked at his office in St. Petersburg and was spent five years in Eastern Germany. Therefore, when Putin came to power he rather represented all sophisticated machine of Russian secret services rather than just himself. In this regards an important question remains: who brought Putin to power, which mechanism and tools were used by these people and why he subsequently won the campaign?

In our view one of the key explanations of his success were private media which mostly belonged to Russian oligarchs. During Putin’s presidential campaign media played key role having a very strong impact on Russian voters. That time there were at least seven influential oligarchs who stood behind Putin’s presidential campaign, among them were businessmen Vladimir Vinogradov, Vladimir Husinsky, Boris Berezovsky, Michael Friedman, Vitaliy Malkin, Aleksander Smolensky, Mikhail Khodorkovsky and then Roman Abramovich. Generally, these oligarchs controlled over 70% of TV and up to 92% of radio and broadcasting stations.

When Mr. Putin was named prime minister in August 1999, only two percent of voters said they would vote for him if the elections were held in the next Sunday. However, as the war in Chechnya begun and public support for it grew, the public support a Putin presidency also grew. Between October and November 1999, the percentage of people who said they would vote for Putin for president if the elections were held on the nearest Sunday went from 21 percent to 40 percent – nearly double. At the same time, 51 percent of those polled felt that Russia should “advance” in Chechnya.

With support fueled by a popular war and a lack of credible challengers, acting president Putin has seen no need to clearly lay out his positions on issues of importance. On the other hand, voters seem willing to vote for Putin despite knowing little or nothing about what he will do as president.

One of key roles in Putin’s subsequent victory played Russian propaganda which was presented by main media which were owned by local oligarchs who endorsed Putin for power. The Kremlin’s current attitude toward press freedom and the

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9 https://www.theguardian.com/world/2011/oct/03/abramovich-berezovsky-clash-london
media’s informative and propagandist functions originated in the early 2000s with Vladimir Putin’s rise to power. Of course, oligarchs wanted Putin to pay them back for his victory since they invested a high degree of time and finance to promote him to the top position in Russian. Meanwhile, it turned out that Putin and his FSB apparatus decided to use these media principles against their yesterday’s sponsors.

As political analyst Olga Irisova noticed in her article, after being elected Putin issued a decree on the “Concept of Information security” which divided media into “good” and “bad”. In this decree, a separate clause was dedicated to what the Kremlin deems one of the most dangerous internal threats to Russia’s informational security in relation to its foreign policy – the “information propaganda activity of political forces, NGOs, the media and individuals who misrepresent the country’s foreign policy strategy and tactics”\(^{11}\).

Right after Putin became elected president he has launched unprecedented crackdowns against mentioned oligarchs whom supported him during elections. In July of 2000 Putin hold meeting with 21 Russian oligarchs when he told them that their power over Kremlin “has come to an end”. A well know U.S. researched William Tompson states in his paper “Putin and the oligarchs: a two sided commitment problem” that these tensions between business and the Kremlin were aggravated by the escalating factional conflict within the Kremlin and the government. In four years after Putin’s rise to power both economic, policy making and the most important state and private companies reminded overwhelmingly in ownership of president Yeltsin’s family. While the “siloviki” and other representatives of military and security services had increasingly colonized large parts of the state during the first Putin’s term in power”\(^{12}\).

As a result, the system of oligarchs which was created during Yeltsin’s period was replaced by Putin’s apparatus of FSB which launched unprecedented pressure on opposition oligarchs, businessmen, journalists, politicians and activists. It’s worth emphasizing that during Yeltsin’s presidency Russian media in particular were used as an essential element of political struggle and also fostered his victory during the second term elections. Meanwhile, due to intense competition between different oligarchic and interest groups on the West Russian media were characterized as relatively free and independent.

\(^{11}\) http://intersectionproject.eu/article/society/lie-truth

\(^{12}\) “Putin and oligarchs: A two sided commitment problem” William Tompson, April 2004 (page 7-8)
In the last year of Yeltsin’s presidency in 1999 Freedom House ranked Russia as “party free” and after five years of Putin in power country was ranked as “not free” by the same organization\textsuperscript{13}. As it was mentioned above through relative pluralism and independence in media President Yeltsin still tied to uphold his pro-Western course showing to Russian population that this country can apply freedom of speech.

After already experiencing power of media which brought him presidential position, first of all Putin’s main strategy was to obtain control over the federal TV channels which remained under oligarchic control. The first serious step was arrest and subsequent imprisonment of the richest Russia oligarch and the largest “Yukos” oil company CEO Mikhail Khodorkovsky. His company “Yukos” has grown increasingly powerful, completing a merger with its smaller rival Sibneft to become the world’s fourth largest oil producer \textsuperscript{14}.

In 2001 another Russian oligarch Vladimir Gusinsky who also supported Putin for presidency among other oligarchs was persecuted and pressured financially because of his ownership of the main TV-channel NTV which became more critical towards Kremlin after Putin became president in March of 2000. After Mr. Gusinsky was detained by FSB and spent several weeks in jail he refused from his ownership of main shareholding of NTV giving this media under the control of state owned Gazprom Holding.

This was his key pillar after Putin came to power. After the crackdown against key Russian media and its nationalization by the Kremlin, remained independent media were kept marginal and presented to challenge to the regime. As a result, after four years of Putin’s ruling most of key media went under control of the Kremlin. In the next 18 years Putin and his entourage created an effective mechanism of control of the media, which targets not only open to Kremlin opposition, but also those who has “anti-Putin” or/and “anti-governmental” view and some sympathy to the West. Such strategy of seizing and then control of media by KGB turned FSB didn’t change after Russian secret services was found. This was a way how Russian informational warfare was found and still successfully operates under Putin’s administration.

Another essential tool of Kremlin’s informational warfare became propaganda which was established and still works effectively throughout all Putin’s period in power. In his own view which Putin, probably, studies being a KGB officer propaganda through controlled media should be applied not only at the domestic but

\textsuperscript{13} https://freedomhouse.org/report/freedom-world/2005/russia
also at the international level. Since the developing of Kremlin official propaganda, for those who are oppose to official position Russian authorities apply the narrative of “national-traitors and “the agents of the foreign influence”, which has been seriously enforced in the country after the first wave of mass protests in the center of Moscow which took place after the elections in 2011-2012.

An important feature of Kremlin propaganda is that it constantly changes and use different ways for its improvement. After seizing control over country’s key media the regime went deeper and shortly after mentioned protests Russian parliament (Duma) introduced “Russian foreign agent” bill which was supported by the majority\(^{15}\).

This law made nearly impossible for the Russian NGOs and other initiatives connected with politics to work in the country. In two years after the Russian annexation of Crimea during his presidential speech to the Federal Assembly of 2016 Putin introduced the same narrative of “national-traitors”. In the Kremlin’s new national strategy doctrine the discourse of “national-traitors” and “foreign agents” has become a dominant one\(^{16}\).

After Putin came to power Russian propaganda followed the approach which was suggested by Vladislav Surkov, who is a close adviser of president Putin. It can be summarized by the documentary of Adam Curtis of BBC: Surkov turned Russian politics into bewildering, constantly changing piece of theater. He sponsored all kinds of groups, from neo-Nazi skinheads to liberal human rights groups. He even backed parties that were opposed to president Putin.

But the key thing was, that Surkov let it be known that this was what he was doing, which meant that no one was sure what was real or fake. As one journalist put it: “it’s a strategy of power that keeps any opposition constantly confused”\(^{17}\).

Adding to this since 2000 when Putin came to power Russian propaganda has been dramatically evolved. In the beginning of usurpation of media, the Kremlin was mostly focused on TV and print media which were a serious threat for establishing

\(^{15}\) https://www.theguardian.com/world/2017/nov/15/russia-to-register-international-media-as-foreign-agents

\(^{16}\) https://www.theguardian.com/world/2017/nov/15/russia-to-register-international-media-as-foreign-agents

\(^{17}\) https://www.realclearpolitics.com/video/2016/10/12/bbcs_adam_curtis_how_propaganda_turned_russian_politics_into_a_circus.html
of the autocratic regime. Along with the developing of social media in Kremlin also found more sophisticated tools on how to manipulate with information.

In this regards Kremlin carefully and systematically implemented rules to control and exclude anti-Putin and anti-government messaging. By “cleansing” the media of contrary viewpoints, he ensured his presentation as an infallible, untouchable leader. Any perceived mistakes were the fault of bureaucrats or enemies – never of Putin and his cronies. Independent media are tolerated only insofar as they offered ostensible evidence of freedom of speech, and necessary outlet for critical thinkers to express discontent online18.

Besides an important role of Russian media which brought Putin to power, Kremlin’s regime uses this instrument not only for staying in power but also for conducting pressure on its international “rivals” in neighboring countries of the former USSR and far beyond.

In 2007 Putin famously decried the American-driven international system “I’m convinced that we have reached that decisive moment when we must seriously think about the architecture of global security”. Shortly thereafter in 2008 Russian forces attacked Georgia. Six years later Russian invaded Ukraine. The first action followed a verbal commitment by NATO to Georgia’s eventual membership, the second followed Ukraine’s revolution over the country signing an Association Agreement with the EU. Both aimed to interrupt these countries further integration into Euro-Atlantic structures. Last year Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov reiterated forcefully Russia’s denunciation of the current global system and its push for a “post-West world order”19.

At the international level Kremlin’s manipulation of social media utilizes unattributed political ads of officially organized bots, trolls, cyborgs (human/bot combination), and other means of mounting and masking disinformation campaigns. Defending against its complexities on a new level. The culture of social media has left that industry vulnerable to exploitation “at the line” of legality, and social media companies have until recently denied the problem20.

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18 “Improving the Western strategy to Combat Kremlin Propaganda and Disinformation” Anton Barbashin, Atlantic Council’s Eurasia Center, May 2018
19 Sergey Lavrov “Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov’s address and answers to questions at the 53th Munich Security Conference”. Munich February,18, 2017. The Ministry of Foreign affairs of Russian Federation
20 http://www.atlanticcouncil.org/images/publications/Democratic_Defense_Against_Disinformation_FINAL.pdf (pages, 4-5)
Therefore, one of the main objectives for Russian propaganda is to use “enemy’s” informational field for spreading its propaganda through social media, TV, talk-shows in Russia and overseas. As a result, many users can lose their trust in established news outlets, and they tend to consume information that affirms, rather informs, their views. For increasing of effect of disinformation on viewers Kremlin appears to also have invested in additional personnel to influence the domestic online social media debate, developing “troll army” to complement bots, or automated social media accounts. These capabilities were likely then adapted and expanded to be used abroad.\(^{21}\)

However, the notion of Russian propaganda is rather characterized by a mix of mechanisms of control span popular media. As a result, a main audience gets confused about what is a real and what is a false news, stories, statements and other sorts of information. In this regards Russia’s informational long-standing strategy is to weaken its adversaries, particularly countries on its periphery such as Ukraine, Georgia, Moldova, Kazakhstan including those in NATO and the U.S. by any means available, and its information warfare targets social cohesion and political systems toward this aim.

It’s important to admit that first Kremlin uses its propaganda among mostly post-Soviet countries with its further expansion to the Western countries and beyond. Such strategy continues from the twentieth century when the Soviet Union exploited freedom of expression in the West by planting and spreading fake news stories. In the last decade, the rise of social media has made this task vastly simpler. And at least since 2016, Moscow has also exploited the sophisticated advertising networks used by legitimate companies and political campaigns to precisely target audiences for disinformation.\(^{22}\)

Russian-language Kremlin propaganda in these bordering countries draws on aspects of those countries’ shared legacy as post-Soviet states. Themes include a common feeling that the West in the late 1990\(^{th}\) betrayed them by failing to deliver on promises of prosperity; the supremacy complex of having lost superpower status; the idea that Eurasian civilization is founded on traditional conservative values, such as family and orthodoxy; and, finally, a shared fear of

\(^{21}\)http://time.com/5168202/russia-troll-internet-research-agency/

\(^{22}\)https://www.cfr.org/report/countering-russian-information-operations-age-social-media
violent revolutions, in which protests are portrayed as slippery slopes to bloody civil wars\textsuperscript{23}.

As Finnish journalist Jessikka Aro states as with all professional media system, pro-Russian online disinformation designed to meet the needs of as many target audiences as possible. As an example, the primary target group for the St. Petersburg troll factory seems to be ordinary citizens, but politicians and other public figures are targeted as well. Spreading disinformation online is cheap compared to television and print methods. It can also be multiplied and spread across borders very efficiently ... Pro-Kremlin disinformation materials is first published on unreliable and non-journalistic media, including Russian state media websites, Vkontakte, Youtube, Twitter, Facebook, blogs and special websites\textsuperscript{24}.

In the meantime, Russians actively exploit their domestic social media. One of the most popular social network is Vkontakte which is actively used against the West and Russian opposition which includes anti-west public groups.

Today over 13\% of Russian population are already using social media as a primary source of information with users steadily growing\textsuperscript{25}. Russian social media were relatively independent and free until anti-government protests which took place in Moscow and other big cities in 2011-2012. That time new media helped to mobilize a significant political opposition and activists which took to the streets because of mass manipulations with presidential elections which brought Putin to his fourth term in power. Right after that government finally took significant action\textsuperscript{26}.

In this regards Russia has no need to create new divisions in target societies when it can exploit already existing fault lines including ethnicity, political, gender and other issues which are highly debatable in Western societies. Now as during the Cold War, the strongest defense against malign Russian influence is to identify the divisions and social ills that provide Russia with leverage.

\textsuperscript{23} Andrei Soldatov and Itina Borogan “The Red web”: The struggle between Russia’s digital dictators and the new online revolutionaries (page 18-19)
\textsuperscript{25} Plugotarenko S. 2014 Glavniy analitichesky doklad agregiruushu informacii po sostoyaniyu razvitiya Runeta, Rossiysky Internet forum, accessed July 2015
\textsuperscript{26} “Information war and the Russian Media Ecology: The case of Panama Papers”, Pavel Schelin’s report at Central European University in Budapest (Hungary)
Remedies of these problems are complex and require significant resources and time.

Putin as master of judo can strength of his enemies against themselves. As a result Kremlin doesn’t need to create additional tools for informational influence unless they can use Facebook, Twitter, YouTube and other international social media. At this point the most successful informational operations against the West including meddling of elections were conducted through mentioned social media.

In this case a state funded Russian television (TV) network, Russia Today (RT), broadcasts abroad in English, Arabic and Spanish. State-controlled news websites, such as Sputnik, disseminate news in about 30 languages. Russia also coordinates its covert information activities, such as cyber-warfare and non-attributed social media trolls or bots, with its more public media campaign, as was reported in the 2016 U.S. elections (see Office of the Director of National Intelligence, 2017).

The Kremlin initially weaponized trolls and bots at home, suing them to amplify pro-Kremlin and anti-democratic messages through domestic media. Once their effectiveness become apparent, Russia unleashed them abroad. In big Russian cities such as St. Petersburg and Moscow Russian authorities found whole industry of so-called “troll factories” which hired thousands of full-time employees who works in this industry disseminating of fake news, stories and other materials. As it was mentioned by Sam Woolley of Digital Intelligence Lab stated: In the words of one bot builder … its like the wild West. They can do anything in terms of political outreach, political columns, political advertising, and its very hard for them to get caught.

Since democratic movements in the neighboring countries is the beginning of 2000s, another strong fear in Kremlin became an expansion of “Color revolutions” which in Putin’s view are inspired and orchestrated by the West with a key role of Department of State of the United States. In a meeting with his advisory Security Council, Mr. Putin stated explicitly: “We see what tragic consequences the wave of

so-called “Color Revolutions” led to … for us this is a lesson and a warning. We should do everything necessary so that nothing similar events happen in Russia.  

In this case Kremlin significantly weaponizes its media to counter possible “color revolutions” inside Russia and among its partners.

As Dr. Katherine Hinkle writes in her dissertation “Russia’s reaction to the color revolutions”: “while Russia was unable to prevent the color revolutions in 2003-2005, future democratic revolutions in former-Soviet countries may still be avoided. For example, in Belarus, Putin and Belarussian leader Aleksandr Lukashenka have cooperated in ways that protect Belarus from the onrush of democratic ideas…. Furthermore, Putin and his allies in the Russian government claimed that possible color revolution in Russia would be a return to Yeltsin’s era of a weak state and economy. While other officials claimed the color revolutions violated principles of national sovereignty and advocated a concept of sovereign democracy, which would better fit Russia that the Western conception of Liberal democracy.”

In the same time in its propaganda the Kremlin doesn’t pretend on truth stressing that every media lies so for viewers it would be better to consume “our lie”. Among the most powerful and effective tools of Russian propaganda abroad are the following: Russia Today (RT), Sputnik, Ria-Novosti, troll-factories on Facebook, twitter and other social media. All of listed tools were broadly used during the U.S. presidential campaign which could affect its results in 2016.

For vast majority of Russians, federal channels are still the main source of news; they form a significant part of their picture of the world. Being under the control of the authorities, these channels distort information so much that what for the rest of the world is undoubtedly Russia’s aggression and unacceptable behavior is presented to Russians as protection of national interests and defensive tactics.

In 2016 Russia invested heavily in the Internet Research agency to help carry out its disinformation strategy far beyond its “near abroad” mostly focusing on the EU and U.S. Special Counsel Mueller’s indictment describes how, dating back to 2014, it had a monthly budget $1.25 million to purchase adds on social media and to fund an army of bots, trolls and fake personas to conduct its activities in advance of the

29 https://inosmi.ru/asia/20110313/167305328.html
30 https://calhoun.nps.edu/bitstream/handle/10945/52991/17Mar_Hinkle_Katherine.pdf?sequence=1&isAllowed=y (page 23-25)
31 http://intersectionproject.eu/article/society/why-russians-are-not-unique
In the case of the United Kingdom’s 2016 referendum on EU membership, one study uncovered that 419 Russian-backed Twitter accounts that were active during the U.S. presidential elections were also active during that campaign. In Spain Prime Minister Mariano Rajoy has claimed that half of the Twitter accounts that amplified the issue of Catalan independence were registered in Russia, while another study found that the speed of Twitter traffic that promoted pro-Kremlin actors’ tweets, including Julian Assange’s, indicated the “intervention of bots” during the Independence referendum called by the region’s government in 2017.32

Disinformation is broadly used by Kremlin as an essential part of warfare which is aimed not only to manipulate with facts, but also to change public opinion in favor of Kremlin position towards any developments inside the country and overseas. Quiet often such informational aggression is used as pretext for then real military actions as it was in the recent conflicts in Georgia (2008), Ukraine (2014), Syria (2015). In all these cases Kremlin used its propaganda and disinformation to prepare Russian population for upcoming military, economical and geopolitical conflicts. Any of these aggressive actions cannot become effective without public support which can be only achieved through state media. Therefore, Kremlin’s main strategy isn’t just convincing people in its policy but also to engage population in that actions. As example thousands of Russian mercenaries fought in Chechnya, Georgia, Moldova, Ukraine and other military conflicts because they consumed information from state media which systematically spread propaganda about Russian involvement.

In the meantime, Russian disinformation has different messages for different audience. There are different messages for Russians and for non-Russians including those who live in different parts of the world. Such messages could be different for different regions, socioeconomic groups, based on their age, education, income, status and occupation. Disinformation that is used to have a short-term effect on people involved in decision-making process will be different from the messaging that tries to influence more general public opinion over the longer term.33

In 2013 Ukraine became a ground for Russian propaganda and disinformation which started with the beginning of “Euromaidan” revolution in November. Since

32 “Russia as a spoiler. Projecting divisions in Transatlantic Societies” Brittany Beileieu and Steven Keil (pages 8-9)
then Russian state media has aggressively spread disinformation about the developments in Kyiv. Among the most widespread messages were “genocide” in Donbas, while Russia and its population “will not stay on the sidelines”. President Putin even predicted that a massacre like Srebrenica could happen in Ukraine, and Russia “will not allow this”. Contrary to this, no evidence of a threat of a genocide were found in Donbass and in any other part of Ukraine.

Another popular message spread by Kremlin propaganda was that newly elected Ukrainian authorities which came to power after the “Euromaidan” are “sliding even deeper into fascist darkness” which was also absolute false statement from Russian government officials. One of the techniques used at the St. Petersburg “trolls factory” is to assign keywords that will raise the needed topic higher up search engines.34

In his statement the Press Secretary for the President of Russia Dmitry Peskov underlined that: “the Kiev regime ordered combat aircraft to fire at civilian towns and villages, launching a “punitive operation” (against so-called rebels of Donbas) and effectively destroying all hope for the viability of the Geneva agreements”35.

These false public statements from the top Kremlin officials served as a direct invitation to war in Donbas for thousands of Russian mercenaries along with “patriots” which were misinformed by Russian officials through multiple state media. On the other hand, those Russian speaking population which resides in Donbas was strongly influenced by Kremlin media which was available in that region. Such kind of disinformation persuaded thousands of local separatists to take up weapons against regular Ukrainian army. Among the most popular Russian state media which spread disinformation were Russia Today (RT), Russia-24, “Perviy kanal” (ORT), “Zvezda” and other popular TV-channels.

After Ukraine Russian disinformation has become a serious problem to the EU and U.S. In particular, for the European governments in the last two years, Kremlin-backed campaigns have spread false stories alleging French President Emmanuel Macron was backed by the “gay lobby”, fabricated a story of a Russian-German girl

35 https://www.npr.org/sections/parallels/2014/05/03/309006428/russia-condemns-ukraine-with-comparisons-to-nazis
“raped by Arab migrants”, and spread a “litany of conspiracy theories” about the Catalan independence referendum, among other efforts\(^\text{36}\).

As Peter Pomerantsev, a famous publisher on Russian disinformation stressed in his op-ed: “At the core of this strategy is the idea that there is no such thing as objective truth. This notion allows the Kremlin to replace facts with disinformation. We saw one example when Russian media spread a multitude of conspiracy theories about the downing of Malaysia Airlines Flight 17 over eastern Ukraine in July, from claiming that radar data showed Ukrainian jets had flown near the plane to suggesting that the plane was shot down by Ukrainians aiming at Mr. Putin’s presidential jet. The aim was to distract people from the evidence, which pointed to the separatists, and to muddy the water to a point where the audience simply gave up on the search for truth”\(^\text{37}\).

Therefore, many experts on the West recognize Russian information operations and statecraft are unique, a “sharp power” influence that is “not principally about attraction or even persuasion; instead it centers on distraction and manipulation”\(^\text{38}\).

**Conclusions.**

Given all above mentioned, Kremlin informational warfare must be considered as a matter of the National Security especially for those countries which are suffering from such sort of aggression. As a result, serious measures must be undertaking for deterring Russian informational warfare.

A good example for countering Russian disinformation was adopted in Germany’s “Network Enforcement Act” which came into effect in January, while France and Spain also consider counter disinformation legislation of their own\(^\text{39}\).

Another progressive step for countering Russian disinformation in the EU became The East StratCom Task Force which was launched in March 2015. Its goal is to explain the EU’s policies toward members of what is known as the Eastern Neighborhood of Eastern European countries including Georgia, Ukraine and Moldova which includes proactive strategic communication campaigns, based on focused analysis that explains key policy areas and creates a positive EU narrative; ad-hoc communication on topical and relevant EU policy issues. At the same time,

\(^{36}\) https://foreignpolicy.com/2018/05/25/disinformation-wars/
\(^{37}\) https://www.nytimes.com/2014/12/12/opinion/russias-ideology-there-is-no-truth.html
\(^{38}\) Christopher Walter and Jessica Ludwig, “The meaning of sharp power: how authoritarian states project influence”, Foreign Affairs, November 16, 2017
current initiative support media environment with focus on Eastern Partnership region\textsuperscript{40}.

The NATO Strategic Communications Centre of Excellence which was established in January 2014 in Riga, Latvia is a multi-nationally constituted and NATO-accredited international military organization as a meaningful contribution to NATO’s efforts\textsuperscript{41}.

In December 2016 U.S. Senators Rob Portman and Chris Murphy introduced Countering Disinformation and Propaganda Act which was signed into law as a part of the FY2017 National Defense Authorization Act (NDAA). The first priority of document was developing a whole-of-government strategy for countering the foreign propaganda and disinformation being waged U.S. and its allies.

In my view in addition to these measures, the US government should improve and restructure its state media making it more convenient for the digital age. In this regards more resources have to be allocated for US state media including Voice of America (VOA), Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty through launching of separate programs with a targeting of the audience which can be affected by disinfection in the U.S. and abroad.

Another effective measure should be disclosure requirements for political ads and other sort of advertisement especially among foreign actors which try to undermine National Security of the U.S. including within elections. American companies which provide such services should bear responsibly and disclose campaign-related communication activities. Those organizations which refuse to provide all needed information should be persecuted in accordance with the U.S. law. In case if any foreign actors try to influence any domestic issues of the US and its allies, the U.S. government in coordination with Europe and the G7, should impose financial sanctions on malign actors which try to undermine democratic institutions and their supporters. For this, social-media platforms should clearly identify the sponsors and funders of any content which is aimed to undermine democratic institutions.

On the other hand, American tech companies such as Twitter, Facebook, Google and others should take steps to limit the effect of disinfection. For example, it should identify and label the likes of Russian propaganda media including RT and

\textsuperscript{40} http://collections.internetmemory.org/haeu/content/20160313172652/http://eeas.europa.eu/top_stories/2015/261115_stratcom-east_qanda_en.htm
\textsuperscript{41} https://www.stratcomcoe.org/about-us
Sputnik which also has to be required for registration as foreign agents under FARA disclosure act.

Additional useful tool was proposed in “Democratic Defense Against Disinformation” report by expert of Atlantic Council. It includes counter-disinformation coalition which means establishing of a public/private group, bringing together on a regular basis like-minded national government and nongovernmental stakeholders, including social media companies, traditional media, ISP firms, and civil society⁴².

In this regard, civil society could counter Russian disinformation through fact-checking labeling Russian bots, trolls and cyborgs especially in social media.

In the meantime, the West should promote the benefits of democratic values through specific examples which are based on real stories. Such narratives should be promoted through media literacy and modern technologies which also could be a part of “coalition”. Quality journalism must be stimulated as well. Information consumers must be educated properly to check the experts and sources used by pro-Russian sites.

To combat the Kremlin’s propaganda the West should bring more investments in long-term tools of resistance. While an outright ban of Kremlin’s media such as RT or Sputnik would not resolve the problem, the West should focus on improving of its own media standards and defense strategies against Russian disinformation.

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⁴² http://www.atlanticcouncil.org/publications/reports/democratic-defense-against-disinformation