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Russian disinformation finds fertile ground in the West

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STANDFIRST: Russian disinformation exploits social problems in foreign states to undermine people's trust and breed conspiracy theories. Tackling it is difficult but feasible.

A few words used in Russian can be recognized in English. Dezinformatsiia (or disinformation) – is one of them, widely popularized during the Cold war time – which meant misleading or made-up information specifically aimed at disorienting the targeted social community. In the war of capitalist and socialist ideologies of the 20th century, it was crucial for the Soviets to confuse the enemy, to blacken the reputation of its politicians and essentially sow mistrust into the political system. Therefore, disinformation was one of the key tasks of the KGB or similar agencies. (Galeotti, 2019). Among the biggest successes of the Soviet disinformation abroad was the spread of the rumour that the AIDS virus was developed deliberately in a US biolaboratory to be spread among ethnic minorities in the US (Selvage, 2019). Very few KGB operations have had such long-lasting outcomes: the belief of the lab-leak arranged by the FBI still haunts many vulnerable communities around the world (Heller, 2015).

Amidst Russia's war in Ukraine, I find clear parallels between the Soviet and Russian disinformation practices. Although the world has massively changed since the 1980s – the last decade of the Cold war – there was one thing preserved from the heritage of the KGB in the Russian disinformation campaigns. In short: planting doubts in people's minds by diluting facts with misleading information and numerous versions of reality. This was observed in the US presidential elections in 2016 (Marineau, 2020), during the COVID pandemic (Dubow et al, 2021) as well as these days on all media platforms that cover the war in Ukraine (Scott, 2022). Why suddenly did the Russian political establishment decide to return to its methods? To understand the answer, we need to have a quick glance at the post-Soviet period and explore the ideological roots of Kremlin's post-Soviet disinformation.

In the aftermath of the Soviet collapse in 1991 the Russian political leadership was busy reforming Russia and surviving the tumultuous changes of the young democracy in transition. Boris Yeltsin, the first president of Russia who ousted Mikhail Gorbachev and oversaw the demise of the Soviet Union was a pro-western politician at his core. He understood the faults of the Soviet regime and that its ideology had become exhausted by years of disbelief of the Soviet population in the 1917 socialist revolution's cause (Colton, 2008). On the one hand, there was nothing sacred in the

Soviet past that could have been transferred into the new democratic society. On the other hand, the USA, the USSR's fiercest enemy throughout the Cold war years, turned into a close partner. Millions of Russians embraced the changes and the new pro-western agenda of the government. Even Yeltsin's successor, Vladimir Putin, in the early years of his rule was not an anti-Western hawk: he even spoke of the possibility of Russia joining NATO (Hoffman, 2000).

What we now understand as a tide turn, with an amplified reinvestment in old Soviet strategy, took place in the mid-2000s, in a way as a reaction to the US' advancement in the post-Soviet countries. US President George Bush Jr's first administration (2001-2005) called for the promotion of democracy around the world, and this call had a profound effect on Putin's office (BBC, 2005). It represented an existential threat to Putin's rule, to which he publically responded in his famous 2007 speech at the Munich Security Conference: he expressed the view that a unipolar world led by the US was turning the planet into a dictatorship of one country and Russia should stand against it and take the risk to challenge the global US hegemony (President of Russia, 2007).

Just within the year the Kremlin had the chance to experience the power of this purported hegemony: during and after the five-day war between Georgia and Russia in August 2008, images of the Russian army invading the independent post-Soviet republic resurrected the ghosts of the Cold war in the West and triggered the conservative and anti-Western turn in Kremlin's politics (Sakwa, 2012; Hamilton, 2018). This arguably became a watershed moment: the stand against the US promotion of democracy in Moscow's backyard and the global humiliation when Moscow tried to show its teeth. Moscow's establishment realized that fighting with the mainstream opinion about Russia in the West was pointless. What would be expedient instead would be to present alternative narratives and promote dissenting voices.

Russia's public diplomacy tool, international television channel Russia Today, was rebranded into RT in 2009, most probably to hide the clear links to the Russian government (Yablokov, 2015). After an aggressive campaign to expand in the English, Spanish, German and French speaking countries throughout the 2010s, the channel became the most visible source of Russia's disinformation campaigns abroad. The analysis of its broadcasts shows the adoption of KGB approaches as well as of the utilization of novel tools provided by the global online environment (Yablokov and Chatterje-Doody, 2021).

To begin with, RT's US output tapped into the rich American culture of conspiracy theories by running a story entitled '911 questions to the US government about 9/11' (Yablokov, 2015,). The piece exploited one of the most fertile grounds for conspiracy theories among US Americans in the 21st century: the terrorist attacks on the World Trade centre on September 11, 2001. The piece raised questions such as: who stood behind the terrorist attacks of 9/11? How did the Bush administration benefit from the suffering of ordinary Americans? Did the US intelligence know about the terrorist

attacks and if it did why there was nothing done to prevent it? The style is one now widely recognized as a tool of sowing doubts: the author just asked 'reasonable' questions without making any evidence-based conclusion.

Who is the audience of this story and who could potentially be targeted by such content? As Bratich argued, 9/11 represents a prototypical case of 'national dissensus' among Americans and an apparently legitimate case for raising concerns about the transparency of the US authorities (Bratich, 2008). It is indicative that whoever designed the launch of RT US knew how polarizing it would be to ask the questions about the most painful part of the recent past. No matter whether right wing or left wing, anyone could find the reasonable arguments to criticise the US government or the mainstream corporate media for the way how the 9/11 terrorist attacks have been covered and how many questions the media have asked the government in their aftermath. 'Question more' – a universal mantra of contemporary conspiracy theorists – was adopted as a slogan by RT after the war in Georgia, when the channel presented itself as an underdog-truth teller that takes on the elites of the Western world.

In this regard, conspiracy theories came to be a convenient tool to interrogate the uneven spread of power in the Western countries, especially in the aftermath of the global financial crisis when millions of people were suffering from inadequate state's support. Conspiracy theories that provide the names of the beneficiaries of the political, social and economic disasters help navigate the complexities of the globalized world and give simple answers on who is right and who is wrong. If you add to this global communication technologies that help rapidly develop and spread all sorts of conspiracy theories, these theories turn into a powerful tool to target subnational, national and international communities and spread chaos and doubt. The smog of subjectivity created by the user-generated content and the crisis of expertise have become the true gift of the Kremlin's propaganda.

This environment became key for spreading pro-Kremlin hoaxes. RT's reports laughed at the allegations that Kremlin-associated actors committed crimes (e.g. the Salisbury poisoning of the double-agent Sergei Skripal), highlighted potential inconsistencies of the story, questioned the professionalism of the accuser (in the Skripal case, the international investigative consortium Bellingcat) and accused them of being the stooges of the CIA (Yablokov and Chatterje-Doody, 2021). All these reports and allegations, which were aired 24/7 on all channels and in online communities of the RT network, have added to the complex world full of uncertainties about genuine and alleged misdeeds of the western elite.

Yet, what helps Russian disinformation to spread is the social polarisation which became even bigger problem after 2008, when the Kremlin re-launched its global disinformation conquest. In the 2016 US presidential elections, in addition to hacker attacks, Russian troll farms used divisive topics such as gun control and racial conflicts

to polarize voters and plant disinformation (Abrams, 2019). Scholars observe similar approaches during the Ukrainian war. The Russian troll farms evidently use bots to target the populations of the BRICS countries, which could be more prone to the Kremlin messaging regarding the war in Ukraine. These bots do anything to avoid association with the Kremlin. They post on local languages, tap into local political agenda, spread anti-US/UK memes, which are shared by many in the developing countries. Once in a while they post and share messages related to the Russia-Ukraine war that should spread favourable for Moscow narratives (Miller et al, 2022).

RT's operations were shut down in most European countries and in the US in February and March 2022. This active de-platforming of Russian disinformation might have positive outcomes. Tougher legislation could probably be one of the instruments to prevent the spread of disinformation. At the same time, educating online users about the basics of online literacy can help avoid disinformation travelling further than a messenger of a user's phone (Weir, 2020). Finally, disinformation is unescapable if society suffers from inequalities: distrust will be an eternal driver of anti-democratic movements (Zuckerman, 2021). To avoid that, political elites should not trade democracy's core values for short term political or financial gains. Propaganda works when there's a fact that can be twisted in the way favourable for the propagandist. Therefore, political polarization and growing social inequality create an incredibly fruitful soil for Russian disinformation. To solve these problems should be the primary goal of Western establishment. If this is (ever) achieved, there would be no room for Russian disinformation.

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