

Rewriting the Past, Remaking the Present

Historical Narratives in Russian Disinformation Campaigns

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Historical Narratives in Russian Disinformation Campaigns

The weaponization of historical narratives has been overlooked in efforts to combat Russian disinformation operations. Russia's historically-oriented propaganda alters citizens' understanding of the past, exploiting people's prejudices to shift political debate towards pro-Kremlin interests. To combat this form of disinformation, Washington should empower targeted states to promote factual historical messaging that appeals to the public. This paper proposes collaborating with experts to understand how historical interpretations shape our politics. An awareness of socio-historical dynamics would allow U.S. policymakers to craft effective counter-narratives and limit the spread of disinformation in allied countries.

Introduction

The U.S. foreign policy establishment became acutely aware of the threat posed by the Kremlin's disinformation campaigns in the aftermath of the country's 2016 presidential election, when Russian messaging manipulated existing social divides on a variety of controversial issues.¹ The prevalence of this type of disinformation in the United States overshadowed propaganda seen in other regions of the world that warps the historical record to aggravate tensions between ethnic communities.

Historically based disinformation refers to content that relies on exaggerated or fictitious narratives about the past to catalyze societal upheaval. These distortions exploit grievances within a country's cultural memory to revive ethno-nationalism, while weakening a group's sense of national belonging. By playing on groups' collective anxieties, historical disinformation highlights an often-overlooked dimension of Russian asymmetrical warfare that the United States and its allies must consider.

Political Implications of Ahistorical Narratives

Politicized revisions of the past help antidemocratic leaders justify their actions while sowing divisions at home and abroad.

- Arch Puddington, 2018²

By crafting misleading historical accounts that appeal to target audiences' pre-conceived biases, Russian operations can influence public perceptions at large. This threat extends beyond civil society and has dangerous consequences for policymakers and foreign policy decision makers. These include enabling autocracy, polarizing public debate, and hampering relations among Western states.

- *Enabling Autocracy.* The underlying goal of disinformation campaigns is to erode the credibility of targeted states' political establishment.³ Content that links current politicians' perceived failures with historical blunders creates a sense of decline or threat among the public, leading them to believe that their representatives are ineffectual.⁴ Populist leaders tap into discontent with the political elite, promising a return to national prominence at the expense of democratic values. Ideologues who manage to translate their popular support into political power can promote false narratives that dismantle democratic institutions and cement their rule.⁵
- *Generating Mistrust in Civil Discourse.* Another major aim of disinformation campaigns is to raise doubt about factual events.⁶ Russian disinformation is directed towards controversial topics, manipulating common understandings of past events to exploit existing divides. Russian operations diminish citizens' trust in the free press by challenging historical accounts and offering alternative explanations that appeal to average readers. The perception of the free press as partisan and unreliable boosts the profile of fringe media outlets, while turning citizens away from the mainstream media. Increasing friction between the press and the people sabotages political debate, as tribalism derails bipartisan policymaking.

This shift prevents reporters from shedding light on difficult issues and undercuts attempts to hold leadership accountable for any indiscretions.⁷ The ability of the press to promote transparency in the highest echelons of government is significantly impeded as its credibility is damaged.

- *Fracturing Pro-Western Unity.* By portraying ties with the United States and the European Union as problematic for national autonomy, Moscow's disinformation specialists isolate targeted states from their geopolitical allies and present Russia as an appealing alternative.⁸ These campaigns seek to diminish the appeal of preserving traditional alliances with the West and shift the balance of power to advantage the Kremlin.⁹

The scale and complexity of this multifaceted threat poses significant challenges to democratic societies. Despite awareness of the problem and numerous efforts to contain the threat, Russia has managed to thwart counter-narrative strategies, while successfully shaping discourses in rival states by employing several tactics to “weaponize” information.

“Weaponization” of Information: How Russian Campaigns Work

In response to the expanded Western presence in areas formerly in Russia's sphere of influence, particularly in Eastern Europe, Moscow believes that altering perceptions about the Western liberal order is key to turning states against the Euro-Atlantic coalition.¹⁰ In order to achieve these ends, disinformation operations employ a variety of tactics to ensure that content resonates with readers disgruntled with ineffectual governance at the national level, using language that speaks directly to readers' concerns.

In many cases, content relies on emotionally stirring rhetoric to galvanize agitated individuals into taking action against traditionally disenfranchised groups by citing past traumas.¹¹

Once the subject matter of the message is crafted, a combination of social media bots and human affiliates disseminate these deceptive statements across multiple platforms to ensure campaigns have an extended reach.¹² Historically based disinformation is one of the many tactics employed by Russian operatives to disrupt state-citizen relations in targeted countries.

Basic Tenets of Historical Disinformation Campaigns

Russian intelligence operatives take an adaptable approach that identifies successes in propaganda campaigns before seeking to replicate them across a diverse array of media environments.¹³ Successful elements have included developing connections with fringe political figures, disparaging minority groups for historical grievances, and drawing connections between contemporary affairs and historical events.

- *Co-opting Radical Perspectives.* In spaces where anti-Russian sentiment is high due to historical animosity, agents craft propaganda that draws on the worldviews of ideologues across the political spectrum who hold extremist viewpoints. Producing disinformation that reflects the opinions of popular fringe actors within the domestic media landscape enhances the legitimacy of campaigns, as domestic readers will accept fabricated content as “privileged information” about historical events given their extended exposure to misleading content.

In turn, these domestic actors readily spread misleading content to their audience.¹⁴ Recently, prominent alternative news sites in Georgia trafficked narratives by claiming that NATO expansion into the region would result in Turkish domination. These stories evoked memories of the country’s subordination under Ottoman rule and sought to expose the horrors of living in a “Muslim state”.¹⁵ If narratives come from members of the alternative media who are widely known in relevant circles, then actors are more likely to believe whatever falsehoods are peddled by these outlets.¹⁶

- *Scapegoating Minorities for Historical Traumas.* Russian operatives turn to historical record, particularly moments linked to intense inter-group strife, to develop campaigns that accelerate social fragmentation. Among states that were formerly a part of the Soviet bloc, analysts fear that Russia’s attempts to revive latent hostilities can erase progress towards inclusive state-building within young democracies.

Pro-Kremlin messaging inundated Slovakia’s digital media landscape during the country’s 2017 regional elections that trumpeted the exploits of white nationalist parliamentary candidate Marian Kotleba. Major themes of the disinformation campaign revolved around how the activist would restore national pride, all while framing the politician’s moderate rivals as weak for aligning with Jews and other alienated groups.¹⁷ By stirring feelings of mistrust towards minorities, who have been viewed with suspicion throughout the

country's history, Russian operatives had moderate success creating narratives that tapped into a constituency's collective memory.

- *Connecting Current Events with Past Adversities.* Campaigns often seek to link contemporary affairs with historical events to shape public opinion on contentious issues. Recently, Russian operatives have targeted states with burgeoning populist movements in order to capitalize on growing ethno-nationalism.¹⁸

For example, a 2017 proposal by the Ukrainian parliament to limit the use of minority languages (such as Magyar) provided the fodder for a Russian-based disinformation campaign in Hungary, which claimed that the move was motivated by prejudices stemming from longstanding grievances.¹⁹ Rhetoric focused primarily on the complex history between the two countries' ethnic communities, prompting the speaker of Hungary's National Assembly to decry the law as Kiev's attempt to erase the heritage of a sizable minority.²⁰ Although tensions gradually eased between Ukraine and Hungary, this situation illustrates the larger trend of how Russian campaigns exacerbate rivalries within multiethnic states to trigger disputes.

These principles ensure that disinformation campaigns grab the attention of readers from various demographics. Once disruptive actors are familiar with the media landscape of a country, they then implement a strategy that deepens existing social cleavages.

Use of Social Media to Advance Russian Interests

The advent of social media has allowed Russian disinformation campaigns to reach audiences directly and rapidly. Coordinated social media efforts work in tandem with attempts to infiltrate the print media by reaching audiences exclusively found on online platforms.²¹ Campaigns pursue a strict set of aims to ensure that propaganda is embedded within social networking sites.²²

- *Exploiting Freedom of Speech.* Liberal governments face a potential trade-off between countering foreign-sourced propaganda and protecting citizens' freedom of expression. For many member states of the European Union, debates around whether to provide minority language protections to promote multiculturalism have been co-opted by the Kremlin's agents.²³ Russian intermediaries in Latvia defend their media productions by claiming that the government is infringing on their civil liberties. Disinformation has targeted the state's Russian-speaking minority, which has been ostracized due to their ethnic background.²⁴ Despite accusations of having Russian ties, Latvian sources have evaded prosecution by claiming that their content was intended for an underserved community.²⁵
- *Embracing Digital Anonymity.* Russian operatives cover their virtual paper trail through local proxies who publish their narratives without sources or attributions. In pursuing this path, agents can peddle false narratives about past events, while remaining undetected by fact-checking groups. The difficulty of connecting unaffiliated content to Russian operatives complicates effective countermeasures.²⁶ Without substantive evidence that narratives are the direct product of foreign meddling, prosecutors in targeted states are

unable to press charges. Whether through willing intermediaries or “useful idiots”, current campaigns take advantage of a social media landscape where the speed by which disinformation travels outpaces government action.²⁷

- *Extending Influence in Political Debate.* To delay a targeted state’s integration into multilateral bodies, Russian campaigns use online channels to generate opposition to moderate, pro-European policymakers. Citing historical precedent in blog posts regarding contemporary affairs has proven to be highly effective in mobilizing the public against the established leadership. For countries previously part of the Warsaw Pact, disinformation equates alignment with the Euro-Atlantic alliance with betrayal of national heritage and sovereignty. Furthermore, campaigns have also compared Western actors to Nazi-era fascists, implying that current politicians are willingly accepting another era of oppression and subordination.²⁸

Through a variety of methods, including non-attributed comments on prominent blogs and bot accounts, which inflate page views, the Kremlin has been able to exploit wedge issues in ways that directly impact average readers. And trends indicate that online media will be a central facet of Russian asymmetrical warfare moving forward.

Primary Audience

Although disinformation is intended to appeal to a wide range of readers, there are key sub-populations that have been identified as likely to be receptive to doctored narratives. These include individuals interested in conspiracies, citizens uninterested in their country’s history, and younger readers whose understanding of the past is limited.

- *Conspiracy Theorists.* Campaigns have sought to exploit individuals’ suspicions about their government’s intentions for the country in order to turn citizens against the state. To achieve these goals, operatives have planted narratives that claim that wars and instability throughout history have been orchestrated by nefarious actors in the West.²⁹ While falsehoods feature prominently, many claims include a grain of truth, thereby provoking particularly angry reactions.³⁰ By tapping into the paranoia common among those on the political extremes, they reinforce notions that political systems are dominated by a shadowy elite with devious agendas.
- *Disengaged Citizens.* Manipulating historical events also aims to shape the perceptions of under-informed citizens.³¹ Russian operatives have discerned that these individuals are less likely to accept alternative explanations of past events if it they do not conform to their worldview.³² Betting on the poor judgement of average readers whose critical thinking skills are underdeveloped, campaigns have found that overwhelming readers with fabricated narratives dissuades many from actively seeking out the truth. Without the motivation or resources to seek out credible sources, these individuals will willingly accept information that does not radically challenge their perspective even if its credibility is highly questionable.³³

- *Younger Readers.* Research indicates that younger readers who rely on social media for news struggle to distinguish between credible and questionable sources.³⁴ Moreover, while these individuals are not likely to believe in conspiracy theories, the sheer amount of disinformation found across popular platforms has prompted many to doubt their own analytical capabilities.³⁵ This shortcoming is compounded by a public educational system that does not prioritize critical thinking, making younger populations particularly vulnerable to content that is easily digestible.³⁶ Youths' lack of awareness and familiarity with past events make them vulnerable to historically based disinformation campaigns.

Without the necessary skills to identify fabricated content, these groups are likely to be swayed by convincing disinformation. Recent events in Poland underscore how Russia has been able to shape civil discourse and promote anti-Western sentiment among these segments of society. By manipulating these groups to antagonize other ethnic communities, Moscow's agents have exacerbated tensions and further isolated Warsaw from its European allies.

Case Study: Poland

The political situation in Poland provides a particularly illustrative example of the challenges that arise from historically based disinformation. In recent years, a coordinated campaign spearheaded by the Kremlin has infiltrated public discourse, attempting to exploit existing social divisions.

Given the country's relatively strong anti-Russian attitudes, campaigns have neither highlighted cultural affinity between ethnic Russians and Poles nor emphasized shared historical backgrounds.³⁷ Instead, disinformation has sought to demonize the West for its ineffectual leadership and spark cross-border disputes with neighbors by citing past events.

Contextual Overview

While Poland has championed the cause of Euro-Atlantic integration and democratic expansion among the former states of the Eastern Bloc, contemporary political upheaval has hampered the state's participation in the European project. The 2010 Smolensk Tragedy, which claimed the lives of then-president Lech Kaczyński and numerous members of the country's executive branch, radically changed the political landscape. The incident complicated relations with allies, as countries like the United States saw longstanding initiatives with the government halt overnight.³⁸ Moreover, the tragedy lent credence to a multitude of conspiracy theories that featured prominently in the rhetoric of the late president's political party, Law and Justice (*Prawo i Sprawiedliwość*, abbreviated PiS).

Calm was restored to the country's chaotic political scene during the administration of moderate, pro-European Prime Minister Donald Tusk—his time in office was marked by rapprochement with former rivals, such as Germany and Russia, ushering in a period of geopolitical stability. However, his election to the presidency of the European Council in 2014 created a power vacuum in Warsaw. As Tusk's coalition of centrists collapsed in his absence, a wave of ultra-nationalist sentiment took

hold of civil discourse and propelled PiS into prominence. This dramatic shift reached a climax following federal elections in 2015, in which the conservative party seized control of the executive, while gaining a majority of seats within the parliament.³⁹

Disinformation and the PiS Agenda

Since gaining power, members of the rightist party have sought to cement their hold on Polish civil society by eroding civil liberties. In 2016, the party took control of the country's main broadcasting group and took aim at foreign-owned producers in an attempt to produce content that celebrates "Polish values".⁴⁰ Russian propaganda has taken note of this shift, crafting messages that stoke xenophobic fears in ways that complement the rhetoric of far-right actors.⁴¹ This two-pronged assault on political discourse has drowned-out moderate opposition and created a situation where extremist sentiment is normalized.

General Themes of Disinformation in Poland

Russian disinformation campaigns have tailored content to the Polish cultural context and crafted messages that speak to specific segments of the population. To bypass intense anti-Russian sentiment, the Kremlin has collaborated with local proxies to draw attention away from their intervention. In order to achieve these ends, disinformation campaigns draw on a series of country-specific trends to craft propaganda that speaks to the experiences of Polish citizens.

- *Reviving Historical Antagonism.* While there is no "pro-Russian" party with a large following in the country's political system, analysts note that rhetoric employed by sympathetic groups mirrors propaganda produced by the Kremlin. The majority of disinformation attempts to blur the line between ardent xenophobia and devoted patriotism, arguing that tolerance of vulnerable groups (such as Ukrainians, Lithuanians, and Jews) is a sign of disloyalty to the Polish nation.⁴² The following examples illustrate the ability of disinformation to revive dormant hostilities between ethnic communities and the current government's impotence in tackling the problem.
 - Example #1: The Volhynia massacres have featured prominently in the disinformation campaign aimed at dividing Polish and Ukrainian ethnic communities. These incidents refer to a series of mass killings against ethnic Poles by Nazi-aligned Ukrainian insurgents between 1943 and 1945. Narratives have painted Ukrainians as not only unrepentant for their crimes, but also sadistic in their various monuments to these war criminals.⁴³ Moreover, this argument has been employed by PiS politicians, most notably in a 2016 bill, which labeled the tragedy as a "genocide" and inflamed tensions with their neighbors to the east.⁴⁴

- Example #2: Russian disinformation campaigns have focused on Kresy, a historical territory that belonged to the Second Polish Republic during the interwar period, to revive ethnic tensions. While the region was seized during the 1939 Soviet invasion and divided among three successor states (Lithuania, Ukraine, and Belarus), propaganda has sought to galvanize Polish right-wing groups into reclaiming their historical ethnic homeland.⁴⁵ Though the current government has no plans to reassert sovereignty in the region, these campaigns have succeeded in reviving anti-Ukrainian sentiment.⁴⁶

- Example #3: In May 2018, authorities deported five individuals suspected of having ties to Russia for circulating anti-Ukrainian propaganda focused on historical grievances, asserting that those in question were part of a larger network dedicated to disrupting relations between the two states.⁴⁷ Though the individuals were charged with committing crimes of information warfare on behalf of a foreign agent, evidence suggests that the bulk of disinformation may have originated from domestic sources. The episode highlights the disparities in combating foreign-sourced and locally made content, as officials readily tamp down any messages that appear to be promoted by Russians, while ignoring propaganda that is created domestically and furthers the party's agenda.

- *Revising National History.* Though PiS claims to be critical of Moscow and wary of their aggressive foreign policy in Central Europe, both rhetoric and policymaking seem to echo ideas peddled by Putin allies. Disinformation that is foreign sourced and locally made has embraced an anti-establishment mentality, championing a return to nationalism and arguing that the Western liberal order has failed to deliver on its lofty promise of progress.
 - Example #1: Poland's culpability in the Holocaust has been a sensitive topic in the 70 years since the end of the Second World War. However, PiS has politicized the issue in recent years to an unprecedented degree. In February 2018, President Andrzej Duda signed a bill that criminalized any public reference to "Polish death camps" or other crimes against humanity committed by Polish nationals.⁴⁸ While the legislation was eventually repealed after stiff international opposition, particularly from Israel and the United States, PiS officials maintain that any claim of Polish complicity in the ethnic cleansing of Jews is completely unfounded.⁴⁹

 - Example #2: Propaganda produced by PiS also sought to raise the profile of the "cursed soldiers", a band of rebels from the Polish Home Army and other guerrilla movements who retaliated against Soviet occupiers during the height of the Second World War. These militants are controversial figures in Polish history, as historical accounts have revealed that many supported or participated in massacres of non-Polish civilians.⁵⁰ In spite of their checkered record, PiS has framed these partisans as model patriots, while minimizing the sacrifices of those involved in other resistance struggles, such as the Warsaw Uprising.⁵¹

- Example #3: Narratives framed the 1989 Round Table Agreement, in which representatives from the pro-democracy *Solidarity* trade union brokered a deal with communist officials that paved the way for political reform, as an outright “betrayal of national sovereignty”.⁵² In the view of PiS politicians, this hallmark moment in Polish modern history has been viewed as an instance of cowardice by the liberal establishment in which Warsaw traded Soviet rule for Western dominance. In reinterpreting key moments in recent Polish history, younger generations who do not have firsthand knowledge of this critical period of time are provided a slanted, partisan account of the past.
- *Reinterpreting Contemporary Affairs.* Analysts have posited that PiS’ electoral success is due in large part to convincing disinformation that triumphed nationalist causes, while disparaging progressive movements. In tapping into the frustrations of disgruntled citizens, who feel that they have been left behind by previous administrations, commentators have concluded that “traditionalist, anti-gender, ultra-conservative messages” may be more popular among the public at-large.⁵³
 - Example #1: Veiled references to Nazi Germany are used to describe the EU’s perceived overreach into Polish affairs, a position that is resonant with Eurosceptic detractors.⁵⁴ Additionally, PiS politicians have contended that their limited engagement with their German counterparts is mainly a result of historical enmity. Leading figures have noted that officials in Berlin share many of the same characteristics as their Nazi predecessors.⁵⁵ Domestic opposition has viewed this rhetoric with alarm, as they have seen the effectiveness of narratives that equate Poland’s integration into the European Union with the abandonment of traditional values.
 - Example #2: The student protests of March 1968, a seminal moment in modern Polish history where young people lobbied for greater freedom of speech in the face of fierce opposition from the communist party, have also emerged as a major topic of debate. Liberals remember the event as a shameful occasion when Polish Jews suspected of harboring sympathies for student groups were exiled from public life, while conservatives ignore claims of anti-Semitism and blamed the purges on bureaucrats in Moscow.⁵⁶ In recent years, PiS officials have attacked the liberal opposition using anti-Semitic rhetoric that closely mirrors propaganda produced over 50 years ago.⁵⁷
 - Example #3: Turning their attention to the recent past, PiS officials sought to co-opt the legacy of the *Solidarity* movement in order to position the rightist party as the legitimate heir to the activist group. To achieve these ends, party officials have argued that Nobel laureate and former Polish President Lech Walesa was a “communist informant” who betrayed the nation for his political aspirations.⁵⁸ Moreover, they also elevate the achievements of one of Walesa’s lieutenants, Jarosław Kaczyński, who would found PiS in 2001.⁵⁹

These themes not only guide public debate, but also shape the decisions of policymakers. For example, PiS has politicized formerly non-partisan issues of museum funding and historical commemorations to further their agenda. Considering the party's interest in exploiting historical memory for political gain, the government's course of action may indirectly benefit the Kremlin.

PiS propaganda has been successful partially because it has characterized liberal voices that seek to hold the administration accountable as hostile and culturally alien.⁶⁰ These actors are accused of not taking Polish interests into consideration, as their opposition to the PiS agenda is equated with rejection of patriotic values. Disturbingly, numerous actors across Polish civil society have likened the current government's assault on the free press and monopolization of public media to the tactics of propagandists from the Soviet era.⁶¹

Existing Responses to Russian Disinformation

Coordinated efforts to tackle foreign interference have sought to contain this multifaceted threat. However, a clearer conceptualization of the Russian threat is needed to address the problem.

- *“Top-Down” Approaches.* In addition to actively prosecuting those suspected of colluding with Russian agents producing false or exaggerated narratives, Poland has employed a variety of tactics to address disinformation. The country is a sponsoring nation of NATO's Strategic Communications Center of Excellence (STRATCOM COE), a group dedicated to countering information operations throughout the Euro-Atlantic alliance.⁶² Moreover, previous governments have funded civil society groups, such as the European Endowment for Democracy, which have focused on the dangers posed by rampant disinformation to the welfare of the citizens within Europe. Through these various forums, Polish authorities have sought to uproot Russian networks embedded within civil discourse that stoke inter-ethnic tensions (particularly with Ukrainians).
- *“Bottom-Up” Approaches.* The country's non-governmental sector also plays a prominent role in shielding civil society from disinformation. Several think tanks, particularly the Foundation for Joint Europe, have been active in the digital sphere. These civil society groups have used their platform to highlight the necessity of factually correct information within civil discourse through various websites and blogs. Outside of mainstream academia, journalists have also devoted considerable attention to the issue and have launched a grassroots campaign to expose disinformation within Polish daily life. A Twitter page entitled “Disinfo_Digest” has become a hub of activity for countering asymmetrical warfare within Poland, as the group seeks to expose the cyber activities of foreign instigators. Their social media monitoring program is highly regarded among regional analysts, providing a model for other targeted states to follow.⁶³

While considerable energy has been devoted to countering the Russian propaganda within civil discourse, there are a number of factors that have impeded the state's ability to take decisive action against the Kremlin.

- *Inattention to Hybrid Threats:* A review of national defense documents produced by the Polish government reveals that the state is primarily focused on the physical challenge posed by Russian aggression. Members of the military establishment have stressed the importance of bolstering border security, arguing that intensive collaboration with NATO allies will be crucial for containing their regional rival.⁶⁴ However, plans make only tangential references to information operations and place foreign-backed disinformation campaigns under the umbrella term of “cyberspace threats”.⁶⁵ An inadequate understanding of the problem has also impacted existing initiatives, as two of the leading strategic communications programs launched by the government operate under a mandate that does not clearly define disinformation. Without being properly prioritized within national security circles, the threat posed by disinformation will remain unaddressed.
- *Dependence on Multilateral Institutions:* The Polish government has emphasized increased cooperation with EU and NATO allies in the domain of cyber-defense, emphasizing that joint ventures will be crucial for effectively countering threats that emerge in the digital sphere.⁶⁶ While their enthusiasm for bilateral partnerships has been warmly received, regional analysts caution that Poland's dependence on Western partners for military support has diminished the urgency to develop their own strategies to repel Russian interference. This concern has been magnified in recent months, as PiS leadership has grown increasingly close to U.S. President Donald Trump and has supported the latter's plans for a re-militarization of Europe's eastern flank.⁶⁷ Unequal relationships with international actors not only risks upending dynamics among states in the Euro-Atlantic alliance, but also impairs Poland's ability to accurately assess the extent of Russian meddling.⁶⁸
- *Conflict with PiS Agenda:* Aggressive political rhetoric on Russian disinformation has not translated into substantive policy. Regional analysts speculate that the government's inaction on disinformation could be related to their own interest in peddling nationalist propaganda.⁶⁹ The ruling party has made historical revisionism a central facet of their campaign platform, as they have sought to leverage their power to produce a new generation of conservative and patriotic Poles.⁷⁰ Moreover, the group's control over public media has transformed once politically neutral outlets into vehicles for disseminating their doctored content to average readers.⁷¹ The jingoistic messaging produced by state-controlled broadcasters shares many of the same characteristics as Russian propaganda, underscoring how central authorities do not have an incentive to expose “fake news” when it aligns with their ideology.

Poland's shifting political landscape has led to a situation in which national interests have been undermined by partisan politics. In the absence of effective leadership committed to stifling all variants of disinformation, civil society has risen to the occasion and has emerged as a frontline

defense against this threat. However, in states without effective safeguards against Russian interference, counter-narrative strategies often fail.

Attributes of Unsuccessful Counter-Narrative Strategies

Outside of Poland, a number of countries have sought to address disinformation with varying degrees of success. Counter-narrative strategies that have struggled to deal with the threat share some common features. Most importantly, states have failed to engage communities that may be vulnerable to Russian disinformation.

- *Untargeted Narrative Messaging.* In Ukraine, authorities launched a public relations campaign to mobilize citizens against Russia aggression in the Donbas region. To achieve this goal, the government valorized the actions of Ukrainian nationalists during the Second World War, citing their struggle against foreign occupiers as a model of resistance. However, pro-Russian factions in the east took issue with the narratives given that they whitewashed leaders' collaboration with Nazis in ethnic cleansing campaigns. The fallout that ensued underscores how officials in Kiev were unfamiliar with their audience and failed to account for local attitudes.⁷²
- *Misguided Media Engagement.* Regional policymakers have noted that the mainstream press should be at the forefront of any counter-narrative strategy. However, this argument ignores the reality that alternate news sources are often cogs in the Russian propaganda machine. In the case of Slovakia, there is a growing concern that the expanded influence of fringe sites will challenge the credibility and legitimacy of the public media.⁷³ As a growing number of citizens turn to alternative news sites to stay connected, politicians must recognize how their belief in the ability of the mainstream press to counter disinformation may be misguided.
- *Staunch Legal Opposition.* For states seeking to counter the threat of disinformation, counter measures run up against the issue of protecting civil liberties. In the Czech Republic, policies to address the broad scope of disinformation by controlling information flows have been crafted but not successfully implemented. Civil rights advocates have argued that such broad powers could lead to significant censorship. Public outcry has stalled the implementation of key strategic policies and has placed intensive scrutiny onto government officials. In turn, this controversy has allowed Russian agents to operate freely without fear of repercussion.⁷⁴

A common thread in these three examples is that government failed to consider the attitudes and perceptions of their audiences. Unsuccessful counter-measures inadequately gauged how public reactions would make or break their carefully crafted strategies. Without taking the time to properly assess citizens' perspectives on media and history, plans to combat outsider meddling encountered substantial difficulties.

Attributes of Successful Counter-Narrative Strategies

Numerous countries have found success countering disinformation campaigns by engaging vulnerable pockets of the wider population. Through outreach and collaboration, states have proactively dealt with this emergent threat without ignoring civil rights considerations.

- *Deliberate Public Outreach.* In spaces where disinformation is presented as a credible source of news for a country's ethnic Russian population, targeted states have sought to create alternative media outlets where minority perspectives can be heard. For example, Estonian authorities have created Russian-language programming to address feelings of alienation among those with foreign heritage.⁷⁵ This proactive step has expanded the media offerings for members of the community, thereby exposing viewers to a variety of viewpoints rarely featured in Russian-language programming. Moreover, this channel of outreach has furthered the process of integration for this marginalized group, which has traditionally remained on the outskirts of Estonian society.
- *Proactive Online Mobilization.* With Russian operatives taking the digital sphere by storm, several countries have sought to fortify their defenses against coordinated attacks. Along with domestic security officials, civil society stakeholders have also played a large part in countering disinformation online. In Lithuania, a group of nearly 5,000 volunteers have sought to expose pro-Russian proxies.⁷⁶ These activists also assist local journalists writing articles about Russian disinformation by ensuring that their research is factually accurate and correctly sourced. Over time, these citizens have helped preserve authentic dialogues on past and present events, while acting as a frontline barrier against outsider manipulation.⁷⁷
- *Robust Journalistic Activism.* The media also has countered Russian disinformation—journalists within Russian-targeted states have published investigative reports on the operations of disinformation campaigns. For example, the Latvian Baltic Centre for Media Excellence (BCME) has been a hub of activity for writers interested in exposing “fake news” outlets. Additionally, several online bloggers have conducted extensive research into how the Kremlin manipulates historical narratives to exploit wedge issues within targeted states.⁷⁸ These analyses of Moscow's tactics in the region have complemented the efforts of those within the Latvian defense establishment by acting as reliable fact-checkers of compelling, but fabricated narratives.

Though these three examples provide a basic model for combating historically based disinformation, these developments are only a starting point for a more comprehensive strategy that includes both public and private cooperation. These successes highlight areas that the United States should consider helping to design policies to contain disinformation campaigns in allied states.

Implications for Counter Narrative Policy

The political consequences of historically based disinformation are formidable, as this form of propaganda has the potential to foment instability within targeted states. Disinformation campaigns increase the likelihood of social conflict within democratic states, by fomenting mistrust of mainstream institutions and reviving animosities between ethnic groups.

- *Government to Government:* While considerable attention has been devoted to curbing disinformation campaigns worldwide, collaboration among targeted states has been limited. This underscores the need for a comprehensive global strategy. To directly confront sources of disinformation, multinational bodies must improve their coordination to respond to threats as they arise.⁷⁹ Moreover, encouraging multinational institutions to consider direct engagement with vulnerable subpopulations in their counter-narrative approaches would help delegitimize radical propaganda.⁸⁰ Coordination with experts who understand a community's internal dynamics will also be crucial. Though certain challenges, such as the public's mistrust of authority, will hamper action by prominent international bodies like NATO, intensive cooperation between agencies is necessary.
- *Government to People:* Officials must understand their target audiences to address citizens' concerns about counter-narratives produced by government agencies. With this in mind, officials should develop relationships with key figures in vulnerable communities and draw on their expertise to identify which messaging themes are most appealing to citizens.⁸¹ By relying on the credibility of those who are already embedded within the community, officials can promote grass-roots counter-narratives that speak to immediate concerns.⁸² This process can ensure that positive messaging not only resonates with a specific audience, but also drowns out disinformation in ways that government initiatives often fail to do.
- *People to People:* The responsibility of teaching critical thinking skills and false media awareness falls to each country's education system. Specifically, incorporating media and information literacy (MIL) into primary and secondary school curriculums will help equip young persons with the tools necessary to understand how content shapes their individual beliefs.⁸³ For younger generations, who regularly frequent online sites, MIL will act as an resource for civic engagement in the digital space by encouraging them to be more aware of current events.⁸⁴ Recognizing the role of the educational sector in creating a more informed populace will enhance the resilience of the public to disinformation.

The task of containing the spread of disinformation does not fall to governments alone, but requires the full participation of actors from across civil society. To craft a response that acknowledges the evolution of the Kremlin's information warfare tactics, stakeholders in society must collaborate to rectify the problem.⁸⁵ In Poland and beyond, failing to rise to this immense challenge will allow Russia to maintain its strategic advantage and erode the bonds of the Euro-Atlantic alliance.

Conclusion

Historically-based disinformation is a neglected aspect of Western counter-narrative strategies that requires greater attention as the Russian threat continues to evolve. In order to properly address this multifaceted problem, greater cooperation between national security and civil society actors will be needed. Moreover, vulnerable subpopulations, particularly young people, will need to be engaged given their susceptibility to fabricated content. Washington and Brussels must survey all the options at their disposal if they are to keep the Kremlin's interference at bay.

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