

Russia's New Information War: What It's Like and What to Do About It

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Introduction

As soon as he took control of Russia in the last hours of 1999, Vladimir Putin leveraged information warfare and propaganda to destroy his domestic opponents before moving to undermine its neighbors, the United States, and American global interests.

Inaction from three successive American presidents empowered Putin and unwittingly gave Moscow undue capability to wage war, sometimes without firing a shot. The Kremlin's new information warfare and propaganda capabilities, while innovative for a government, merit concern mostly because of the West's weak and delayed response.

The capabilities and actions present a strategic challenge. With the grave exception of subversion of the U.S. political system, they hardly merit the breathless reportage and commentary from many political observers, because they have been building up visibly for more than a decade.

Putin's unnecessarily aggressive infocentric actions now give the U.S. and its partners the pretext to exploit the potentially profound vulnerabilities of the KGB man's regime, and the fragilities that, if exploited, could widen many existing splits within the Putin regime itself and the Russian Federation at large.

All this, of course, lowers the threshold of conflict to the level of classical espionage, propaganda, and subversion, at which the Kremlin has excelled for the past century, with a modern digital twist. The U.S. and its allies generally have opted not to engage, out of principle or ignorance. After a long period of not wanting to see, they now find themselves surprised and alarmed at being on the receiving end of what historically is a simple and manageable method of statecraft.

Propaganda, information warfare, and information war

We will approach the matter first by defining two different yet complementary methods for the purposes of this chapter. *Propaganda* refers to the content of messaging and other communications methods to influence and manipulate the perceptions, thought processes, opinions, beliefs, and ultimately actions of target audiences. "Disinformation," a literal translation of the Soviet-era Russian word *dezinformatsiya*, is an element of propaganda. For the sake of polite discourse, we

will pretend that only the opposition, in this case Russia, engages or should engage in propaganda.

Properly done, propaganda is waged in concert with other methods of persuasive communication like diplomacy, public diplomacy, journalism, education, entertainment, and other messaging to influence perceptions and attitudes. Those are done most effectively through subversion of institutions and values, and advanced by psychological warfare to shape cognition of the human brain; and by political action and political warfare to provide direction and move the targets toward the perpetrator's desired outcomes. The Russians have a magnificent term for this spectrum of conflict, literally translated as "active measures." The U.S. has had no official term, because it never was seriously in the game.

"Propaganda" was always a popular official term in Soviet tradecraft. But the Putin regime recognizes the limitations among Western audiences. What the Kremlin used to call propaganda, it now calls "information war." This is an important change for practical reasons beyond the aesthetic: Putin revived the concept that information is a weapon of war, and that his regime can wage this type of war in what the West still considers peacetime. Information war of the Russian strain is not to be confused with "information warfare" of the American variety.

In the West, *information warfare* is the use of computers and other information systems to disrupt or destroy targets during a kinetic military conflict. Many in the U.S. will differ with this definition based on their responsibility or perspective, and confusion about the meaning among competing authorities in the military, but the fact is that the term did not exist before the digital age. Information warfare can include the neutralization or destruction of civil communications or military C³I networks, banking and financial systems, navigational systems, energy power grids, and logistics and supply chains through manipulation of information systems. The military terms "cyber warfare" and "information operations" are components of information warfare. This is mainly the 1's and 0's of digital communication and processing, the flow of electrons in software that operates computing, sensory, and mechanical systems. This chapter pays little attention to cyberwar capabilities as understood in the West. The point is that Russia under Vladimir Putin has shown a new and creative capability in the propaganda and information warfare spaces, combining excellent Soviet tradecraft with modern tools and methods.

This chapter will try to draw distinctions between propaganda and information warfare as understood in the West, while recognizing the even grayer area that Moscow calls information war.

Reinforcing Putin's personal power base

Russia's new offensive capabilities for waging both propaganda and information warfare abroad occurred as Putin built a cult of personality around himself

domestically to be the only viable leader of Russia. Building that cult required stamping out most independent news and information for the domestic population.

Putin combined domestic propaganda with enforcement mechanisms to impose self-censorship and to destroy the viability of any threats to his political power. His regime built an information warfare capability used on at least two major occasions to date to launch cyber attacks on foreign sovereign governments, as one would launch a military attack but without provoking a kinetic response. It also built a cyber espionage capability to spy on domestic and foreign targets, and use the products of that espionage for propaganda and political warfare purposes.

Building those capabilities coincided with a centralization of political authority in Russia, to weaken the already weak federal system by appointing regional governors instead of allowing citizens to elect them, and to suck economic wealth from the regions to finance the central regime. As the ultimate enforcement, Putin used domestic intelligence collection for propaganda purposes to destroy his opponents politically, financially crippled them so they would flee Russia for good, co-opted them internally through positive incentives or neutralized them through intimidation, or had the most stubborn holdouts murdered.

What happened to the old Soviet networks

Old Communist networks are effectively gone. Russia no longer maintains the old Soviet Communist Party (CPSU) overt and semi-overt active measures networks of controlled party organizations and international front groups. The command-and-control system, CPSU Central Committee International Department, long disappeared, though some of their younger functionaries remained active. Those Communist parties and fronts, with national units around the world, were means of coordinating and executing action-oriented Soviet active measures campaigns globally, on an overt and semi-overt basis.¹ Their organization embraced specific themes, such as peace and disarmament, youth and students, clergy and laity, organized labor, women, Afro-Asian solidarity, and national self-determination.

The Moscow-funded national Communist parties whose controlled cadres ran the host-country chapters of those fronts have largely evaporated or morphed into different parties and movements in their respective countries. Recruitment efforts for younger successor personnel are believed to have died out.

KGB and its successors survived. While the obsolete old Soviet Communist Party front organizations are gone or ineffective, the covert machinery and tradecraft of the KGB, a state institution, survived. Soviet leader Mikhail Gorbachev reluctantly split them into separate services in late 1991, and Russian President Boris Yeltsin

¹ See "[Soviet Influence Activities: A Report on Soviet Active Measures and Propaganda, 1986-87](#)," U.S. Department of State, 1987.

preserved them along with their chekist bureaucratic culture.² Yeltsin resisted calls to abolish or purge the old KGB services, reveal their past crimes, or establish civil oversight mechanisms, and there was no pressure from the U.S. and other democracies to do so.³

The KGB's active measures division, Service A, sat within the KGB First Chief Directorate for foreign intelligence, as was Service S to handle "illegals" operating under deep cover, and the service for handling recruited agents among citizens of targeted countries. The First Chief Directorate spun off intact and un-reformed in late 1991 to become Russia's present External Intelligence Service (SVR).⁴ In addition to espionage, the SVR continued to run influence operations worldwide through controlled agents in mainstream news organizations, business, religious organizations, universities and think tanks, political parties and movements, and government policymaking positions.

The FBI and CIA no longer issue unclassified reports for the public and Congress about Russian influence campaigns (nor does Congress call for those agencies to issue them), so little is public from the U.S. intelligence community. Those agencies did not appear to collect or analyze much information in the area until 2015.⁵ By then, the damage was done. Western counterintelligence services generally conduct *counterespionage* – against spies who steal secrets – but rarely against agents of influence, so it is safe to say that they seldom target SVR assets for propaganda and disinformation. This presents a combination of "known unknowns" and "unknown unknowns" that stymies a solid assessment of Russian propaganda, information war, and subversion, and how to build proper countermeasures and defenses.

Legacy information outlets. Domestic and international state information and propaganda outlets, such as TASS (the cryptonym for Telegraph Agency of the Soviet Union), the RIA-Novosti network that claimed lineal descent from Stalin's Soviet Information Bureau, and the government ministry for press, broadcasting, and mass communication, remained. RIA-Novosti, in particular, enjoyed a post-Soviet reputation as an excellent source of quality journalism.

² See J. Michael Waller, *Secret Empire: The KGB In Russia Today* (Westview, 1994), for how the KGB was split apart during the Soviet collapse of 1991, and how Russian President Boris Yeltsin preserved the KGB's five main sections, including the old First Chief Directorate, immediately when the Russian Federation seceded from the USSR in December of that year.

³ *Ibid.*

⁴ A. Soldatov, "The New Nobility of the KGB," *Public Affairs*, 2011, p. 184, as cited in Yevhen Fedchenko, "[Kremlin Propaganda: Soviet active measures by other means](#)," *Estonian Journal of Military Studies*, 2016. Fedchenko is the Ukraine-based founder of StopFake.org, which monitors and exposes Russian propaganda and disinformation.

⁵ Peter Foster, "[Russia accused of clandestine funding of European parties as U.S. conducts major review of Vladimir Putin's strategy](#)," *Telegraph* (UK), January 16, 2016.

Russia's new media competed for audiences either through paid advertising or some sort of subsidy, usually from a business network or oligarch who either genuinely supported of a free press or, more commonly, used media holdings as weapons of economic and political power. The Russian media offered lively, interesting, and generally uncontrolled news and entertainment for practically everyone, with a few quality outlets that flourished.

Putin saw freedom of information as a threat to his own personal and political security. Preparing to remove or eliminate any potential rival, Putin began to close in on Russia's media organizations in 2004, while hiring American and European public relations firms to plant positive stories in the press.⁶

Russia's centralized, decentralized media machine: To elevate Putin at home and abroad

Moscow's crown jewel media machine, an information entity called Rossiya Segodnya (Russia Today), is a domestic and international satellite television and multimedia conglomerate that emerged from preparations for the country's 2006 presidential campaign and Putin's quest to make Russia great again.

The present order of battle works like this: Alexei Gromov, Putin's deputy chief of staff, coordinates the official government line to Russian editors. Reporting to Gromov, the All Russia State Television and Radio Broadcasting Company, under direct Kremlin control,⁷ owns Russia Today, with programming in Russian, English, Arabic, Spanish and other languages under the RT brand.⁸ Other media are concentrated under direct state control, or indirectly through parastatal entities like the Gazprom natural gas conglomerate.

Russia Today was the brainchild of Michail Lesin, an engineer-turned-advertising tycoon who was the ailing Yeltsin's spinmaster during the 1996 re-election. Lesin's story is an important indicator of the nature of Putin's information war machine.

Lesin served as Minister of Press, Broadcasting, and Mass Communications as Putin readied to ease Yeltsin out of the presidency in 1999. Putin retained the imaginative Lesin on as minister, using the central government's political powers to destroy Putin's political opponents and build the Russian leader's cult of personality.

Nicknamed "Bulldozer," Lesin launched revolutionary changes to Russian domestic journalism and to international propaganda. With the power of the Kremlin, he used government power to take over Russia's media through a combination of cash

⁶ Peter Pomerantsev and Michael Weiss, "[The menace of unreality: How the Kremlin weaponizes information, culture and money](#)," *The Interpreter*/Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty, November 22, 2014, p. 12.

⁷ Bill Powell, "[Pushing the Kremlin line](#)," *Newsweek*, May 20, 2014.

⁸ Bill Powell, "[Pushing the Kremlin line](#)," *Newsweek*, May 20, 2014.

payments and privilege, extortion, forced or fraudulent purchases of independent news companies and their property, and outright theft. He transferred prominent media enterprises to Gazprom Media, the information division of the colossal natural gas company that Putin would ultimately revert to state control. Lesin pulled the Yeltsin-era licenses that had allowed Radio Liberty and the Voice of America to broadcast on commercial stations inside the country, effectively silencing most U.S.-sponsored programming as RT established its U.S.-based operations.

These and other measures would elevate Putin's public stature as the country's unchallenged – and unchallengeable – leader. There could be no alternative.

Journalists devoted to freedom of the press had little future. "The lucky ones, intimidated, fled into exile," as John R. Schindler notes, "while the less fortunate became martyrs – most famously the muckraking reporter Anna Politkovskaya, a harsh regime critic who was gunned down in her Moscow apartment building on Mr. Putin's birthday."⁹

Eyeing the 2006 election, Putin elevated Lesin as an unofficial superminister of propaganda in 2004, making him a "special adviser" on media affairs and reputedly granting him almost at-will presidential access. In that capacity, Lesin inspired the 2005 creation of Russia Today, which would later rebrand itself as RT.

With RT running strong, Lesin became chief of Gazprom Media in 2013, the cash-rich company that gobbled up and operated the television stations taken from the opposition. His brash manner alienated him from many Russian elites, and Lesin finally had a falling out with Putin the next year. He abruptly left Gazprom Media in 2015, went on his own to California and Washington, D.C., where his story ended.

On an evening that November, Lesin missed a fundraiser at the Woodrow Wilson Center for Scholars. Two days later, he was found dead in a Dupont Circle hotel. Before District of Columbia authorities began the autopsy, state-controlled Russian media reported that Putin's 57 year-old former propaganda chief had died of natural causes. RT announced passively, "It has been reported that Lesin had been suffering from a prolonged unidentified illness."¹⁰

A D.C. medical examiner autopsy later revealed that Lesin was killed from blunt-force trauma to the head, and the body suffered blunt-force trauma to the neck, limbs, and abdomen.¹¹

⁹ John R. Schindler, "[Another defector dead in Washington](#)," *New York Observer*, March 16, 2016.

¹⁰ "[Media tycoon & former Russian press minister Lesin dies from heart attack at 57](#)," RT, November 7, 2015.

¹¹ David Smith and Shaun Walker, "[Former Putin press minister died of blow to head in Washington hotel](#)," *The Guardian* (London), March 10, 2016.

Russia Today/RT

Russia Today launched in 2005 as a multimedia public diplomacy channel to present “Russia’s view,” presenting a fresh, young face to the world. An early intent was to become a peer of the Qatar-owned Al Jazeera.

RIA-Novosti named a politically loyal 25 year-old as Russia Today’s director, jumping over a generation of experienced journalists and message-makers to staff the new operation with people mostly under age 30. Russia Today hired scores of young and inexperienced foreign journalists, mostly British at first, paying them six-figure salaries and generous benefits for relatively little work.¹²

The channel limped along until Moscow’s 2008 war against the republic of Georgia. Its nearly exclusive access to Russian combat forces and officials in Moscow made the channel indispensable for anyone following the military campaign. (In another dimension of Russia’s information war development, that war included a massive cyber attack against Georgia, a repeat of the attack on Estonia’s cybergrid the year before.) Still, Russia Today struggled for the desired international viewership. The collapse in oil prices that year forced the Kremlin to tighten its belt almost across the board, but RT proved itself a value play.

Though directed from the Kremlin, RT staff also had freedom, within boundaries, to innovate from the bottom. It became clear that world audience had little interest in news about Russia. The combination of cynicism within Russian politics and journalism as a whole, big perks for youthful and inexperienced writers and staff, and the proliferation of global social media enabled the regime accomplish its purposes by appealing to angry and cynical audiences on all edges of the political spectrum.

No longer would it be Russia’s “voice” around the world, in terms of a coherent message from Moscow. With exceptions, Kremlin direction would not be in the form of an old Soviet-style party line designed to convince audiences and mobilize them. The power of suggestion would be sufficient enough for most RT writers and announcers. The new party line was simple. Play up the extreme as the new normal. Hack away at the West. Do nothing to undermine Putin. Seek to deepen growing foreign audiences’ often justified frustrations and fears about their own governments, institutions, leaders, and societies. And accept the occasional tactical orders and meddling from Moscow Center.

To look less Russian, Russia Today repackaged the name of its channels to RT, and in English-speaking countries waged an advertising campaign urging people to “question more.”

¹² Julia Ioffe, “[What is Russia Today? The Kremlin’s propaganda outlet has an identity crisis](#),” *Columbia Journalism Review*, September-October 2010.

This change occurred just before Secretary of State Hillary Clinton pushed the famous “re-set” button in 2009.¹³ Soon, RT began outperforming more established satellite and Internet channels. Russia Today strove to become unconventional and outrageous in its English-language programming.¹⁴ It sought an openly sexy array of young presenters, with edgy graphics and special effects. From a new, advanced studio and production facility in Washington, D.C. with a staff of 100, RT began more in-depth, serious reporting on American society. It became the most popular foreign television channel in all U.S. cities. As it built its market share, RT reverted to its antagonistic, anti-U.S. tone, portraying itself as the anti-CNN. By 2010, RT expanded its global staff to 2,000, with new channels in Arabic and Spanish.

In a trophy move, RT hired the dated but iconic American news talk host and CNN veteran Larry King. RT became the first TV channel to get a billion views on YouTube.

As Russia’s economy sagged and its standing in the world declined during the “reset” period, RT became more antagonistic and cynical. Programming goaded Europeans to question their American ally, and for RT’s growing American viewership to question their own country. RT heralded the Edward Snowden defection and scandal-mongered the National Security Agency (NSA). RT pushed conspiracy theories again, alleging that the Russian-born jihadist terrorists behind the Boston Marathon bombing were part of a U.S. government plot. Washington might be responsible for the ebola virus, RT hinted, and the Ukrainian government was to blame for the shutdown of Malaysia flight MH17. Especially with the latter, RT’s line became magnified virally through government-sponsored and politically motivated networks of bloggers, tweeters, and trolls.

Putin rewarded his unconventional investment. He multiplied RT’s annual budget tenfold, from \$30 million in 2005 to \$300 million in 2013.¹⁵ Claiming a global audience of 700 million, with 1.5 million subscribers on YouTube alone, RT has built what has been called “a largest cult following on the fringes of the left and right in the West.”¹⁶

Well positioned among the declining and atomized global media sector as a somewhat mainstream news service that Soviet propaganda outlets never reached in North America and Europe, RT created an online wire service designed ultimately to become a peer to Reuters. Sputnik News generally takes a more balanced line than RT, appearing more credible but still fun to read, and therefore engaging to target audiences. Unlike RT, whose reporters and bureau chiefs are frequently

¹³ Ioffe.

¹⁴ Ioffe.

¹⁵ Benjamin Bidder, “[Putin’s weapon in the war of images](#),” *Der Spiegel* Online, August 13, 2013.

¹⁶ John O’Sullivan, “[Russia Today is Putin’s weapon of mass deception. Will it work in Britain?](#)” *The Spectator*, December 6, 2014.

countermanded from Moscow, Sputnik is decentralized. Its local editors say they are free to publish what they want, though they admit in private that they are mindful of who pays them.

In Washington, Sputnik America presently has a staff of eight, some of whom are veteran journalists and scholars who say they could find no other employment amid the collapsing media business. They crank out a heavy output, with each writer producing an average of five short articles per day, or 40 a day from the Washington bureau alone. The Washington office does not employ young left-wing hipsters. Several of its employees are politically conservative, some with a long documented record critical of Moscow. Sputnik America hired at least four individuals who had been contractors for an online U.S. psychological operations program, and lost their jobs after Congress cut off funding.¹⁷

General themes and target audiences

The new thematic approach has worked. Soviet political propaganda targeted left-wing and soft-left audiences in a controlled setting, with soft propaganda channeled through compromised or fully recruited agents of influence Western journalists, academics, think tank experts, and politicians into the mainstream.

Today, however, Moscow targets much varied audiences – and with significant success. RT claims a global audience of 700 million viewers of its programming in English, Arabic, and Spanish, appearing in three million hotel rooms worldwide, and boasting more than 1.5 million subscribers to its YouTube channels. Indirect viral distribution improves RT's credibility because friends and affinity groups validate the RT message by passing it along to those who trust them. By prompting people to “question” what they are told, RT appeals to critical thinking while producing a stream of content that does precisely the opposite.

Through Moscow-funded NGOs, the Kremlin has funded extreme causes in the West that RT then denounces as a “fascist revival” to discredit Ukraine and frontline NATO allies.¹⁸

Targets: Frustrated and angry people. RT's English-language services appeal to American and European audiences on the left, as well as environmentalists, anti-globalists, nationalists, conservatives, right-wingers, and sectors of the financial elite. It plays on their often legitimate suspicions and fears of their own governments, the European Union superstate in Brussels, and of the centralized overreach of U.S. leadership and security agencies. The information network also targets conservative Christians who hold traditional moral values at a time when the

¹⁷ J. Michael Waller, [“Putin propaganda picks up ex-Pentagon contractors,”](#) AMI Newswire, February 11, 2016.

¹⁸ Orysia Lutsevych, [“Agents of the Russian World proxy groups in the contested neighbourhood,”](#) Chatham House (London) April, 2016, pp. 17-19.

political and cultural leadership in their societies drift further from them, or impose objectionable views as matters of policy and law.

The propaganda strategy is paired with a subversive strategy of funding anti-establishment, patriotic or nationalist political parties, movements, and leaders.¹⁹ This activity extends to the United States, to undermine public confidence in political and constitutional institutions.²⁰ As the left-wing activists for unilateral disarmament denied or justified Moscow funding during the Cold War, their counterparts on the right do so today. Calls are rare to keep their causes pure from Kremlin cooptation. In the U.S., mainstream conservatives (including the Drudge Report) and libertarians often circulate RT content as part of their news diet, giving it further reach and credibility.

RT tries to evoke an eclectic, perverted libertarianism and diversity of traditionalism without true respect for either. Sputnik, says that its mission is to “point the way to a multipolar world that respects every country’s national interests, culture, history and traditions.”

Blended into its high-volume, often overwhelming content, RT promotes extremist fringe elements from both sides of the Atlantic, passing them off as mainstream or at least authoritative. Former NSA contractor Edward Snowden, who defected to Moscow under FSB control, and his collaborator, WikiLeaks founder Julian Assange, are free speech victims. Holocaust denier “Ryan Dawson” is portrayed as a human rights activist. Neo-Nazi Manuel Oschenreiter is hosted as a “Middle East analyst,” and so on.²¹

RT accuses Western societies of restricting freedom of speech in the name of security, while pointing to Russia’s few irrepressible journalists to show how free media flourishes under Putin. Its director, Dmitry Kiselev, had once been a junior Soviet international propaganda bureaucrat.²² He now portrays himself not as a propagandist but as an “abstract journalist” who is “the first and so far the only journalist to be targeted by coordinated E.U. sanctions.”²³

“East and West appear to be trading places,” Kiselev wrote in an op-ed for London’s *Guardian*. “In Russia we now take full advantage of freedom of speech, whereas in

¹⁹ Melik Kaylan, “[Kremlin values: Putin’s strategic conservatism](#),” *World Affairs*, May-June, 2014.

²⁰ Dana Priest, Ellen Nakashima, and Tom Hamburger, “[U.S. investigating potential covert Russian plan to disrupt November elections](#),” *Washington Post*, September 5, 2016.

²¹ Adam Holland, “[Ryan Dawson: RT’s ‘human rights activist,’ a Holocaust denier who’s friends with hate criminals](#),” *The Interpreter*, June 10, 2014; and Holland, “[RT’s Manuel Oschenreiter](#),” *The Interpreter*, March 21, 2014.

²² Pomerantsev and Weiss, p. 9.

²³ Dmitry Kiselev, “[Russia and the west are trading places on freedom of speech](#),” *Guardian*, April 10, 2014.

the West political correctness, or political expediency in the name of security, have become arguments against freedom of speech.”²⁴

RT created what has been called a clash of narratives to confuse audiences and sow greater doubt and anger in order to “exacerbate divides and create an echo chamber of Kremlin support.” The effect is not to persuade, as with public diplomacy, or even to be considered credible, “but to sow confusion via conspiracy theories and proliferate falsehoods.”²⁵

By contrast, the Soviets claimed to have their own version of truth. “Even if they were lying they took care to prove what they were doing was ‘the truth,’” said Gleb Pavlovsky, who had worked on Putin’s election. “Now no one even tries proving the ‘truth.’ You can just say anything. Create realities.” Pavlovsky should know. “I first created the idea of the Putin majority – then it became real. Same with the concept of there being ‘no alternative’ to Putin,” he said.²⁶

In a fully Orwellian way, the Putin regime is creating new realities through its peacetime information war. Domestically, as before, the cynical Russian public pretends to believe and is rewarded with content that appeals to their cynicism. Back in Soviet times, military doctrine posited quantity being a quality of its own. The same theory holds true with Putin’s information war doctrine. RT emphasizes sheer mass of information over journalistic integrity. A 2016 Rand Corporation study called RT and the entire state media model a “firehose of falsehood.”²⁷

“The aim of this new propaganda is not to convince or persuade, but to keep the viewer hooked and distracted, passive and paranoid, rather than agitated to action. Conspiracy theories are the perfect tool for this aim,” according to a research report by journalists Peter Pomerantsev and Michael Weiss. “Linguistic practices aimed at breaking down critical thinking” help keep cognitive functions passive.²⁸

Russia Today’s model proved so successful that the Kremlin authorized it to take over the respected RIA-Novosti news service and the international Voice of Russia radio. Moscow’s 2016 budget for state media was about \$1.3 billion, with \$415 million going to Russia Today, up from \$30 million when it was created.

²⁴ Dmitry Kiselev, “[Russia and the west are trading places on freedom of speech](#),” *Guardian*, April 10, 2014.

²⁵ Pomerantsev and Weiss, p. 6.

²⁶ Pomerantsev and Weiss, pp. 9-10.

²⁷ Christopher Paul and Miriam Matthews, “[The Russian ‘firehose of falsehood’ propaganda model: Why it might work and options to counter it](#),” *Perspective*, Rand Corporation, 2016.

²⁸ Pomerantsev and Weiss, p. 11.

Online reach

The Internet makes it easier than ever for the Kremlin to spread its influence worldwide through all the obvious means. To add some nitrous oxide to its overt information war, Moscow has adeptly exploited social media. As with the rest of RT, the goal is not to persuade, but to lower the quality of debate, discourage rational discussion, intimidate others, and frustrate legitimate journalists.

With high-paced, intensive online production of entertaining and emotional content, Russia creates its own reality; there is no need for fact-checking of multiple sourcing as with real journalism. Objective reality matters little. First impressions matter most. Multiple sources thus spread similar message, with quantity substituting for quality. The sources earn multiple “likes” or endorsements, and get passed along, boosting reader acceptance, with reinforcement from the recipients’ peer groups. Items of relatively little interest in terms of volume rely on trusted experts to legitimize them. Items that prove to be popular build credibility on the frequency with which they are “liked” or otherwise legitimized, and passed along. Repetition begets familiarity. Familiarity begets acceptance.²⁹

Army of trolls. To attack opposing views online, Moscow has built its own army of Internet trolls. A troll is someone who posts comments online to disrupt, provoke, or otherwise ruin reasonable discourse. Many trolls are simply troubled individuals. Some companies, political groups, and governments hire people to act as trolls to attack their opponents. The Kremlin’s information war effort has raised its own virtual army. According to a former Russian paid troll, Moscow hires troll cadres to operate 24 hours a day, seven days a week, in 12-hour shifts, with a daily quota of posting 135 comments of at least 200 characters each.³⁰

Trolling is done in concert with Russian military objectives. A scientific Latvian study of Russian trolling in support of its military objectives in Ukraine and against NATO found that Moscow seeks “to create confusion and mistrust” among its target audiences in a giant online psychological warfare campaign.³¹

²⁹ Paul and Williams, pp. 3-6.

³⁰ Dmitry Volchek and Daisy Sindelar, “[One professional troll tells all](#),” Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty, March 25, 2015. Also see Viktor Rezunkov, “[The trolls who came in from the cold](#),” Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty, March 16, 2015.

³¹ [Internet trolling as a hybrid warfare tool: The case of Latvia](#) (Riga: NATO Centre of Excellence for Strategic Communication, 2016).

Human influence apparatus and networks

As in Soviet times, the Putin regime attempts to co-opt Western influencers by providing them with special access in exchange for cooperation. “Other senior Western experts are given positions in Russian companies and become de facto communications representatives of the Kremlin,” Pomorantsev and Weiss comment in their study, providing examples who include prominent political and business figures. Subsequent to that study, the U.S. Congress instructed the intelligence community to collect on these efforts.³² Moscow funds think tanks to divide NATO member states from one another, the alliance as a whole, and the United States.³³ Public relations companies like Ketchum in New York operate on a paid consultancy basis to serve as covert and overt propaganda placement agents in the Western media.³⁴

Though not controlled in the sense of a recruited agent, these influencers – in journalism, academia, think tanks, politics, culture, religion, and business – temper any criticism and exaggerate praise in order to maintain special access and treatment in Russia, and to build or keep the prestige and value that comes with that access.

Privatization of state property, and the warfare among bureaucrats and oligarchs for the spoils, reached an equilibrium under Putin, who brought the strategic industries and most powerful oligarchs into line and under state control, or at least domination. The Kremlin utilized them to finance political influence operations around the world. The tricks relied on the subtlety of using state control to provide or deny access, grant simple preferential treatment for doing business in Russia, post leading Western political and business figures on the boards of major Russian businesses, and to place Russians on the boards of Western companies. They also involved targeted Russian investment in Europe and the United States, helping to subsidize, leverage, or even bail out businessmen of political importance.³⁵

To temper the attitudes of Western leaders in business, journalism, academia, and politics, Putin created a prestigious Valdai Forum as an annual gathering to meet top Russians, including the Russian president himself. The Kremlin uses the Valdai Forum to grant privilege to foreign figures of influence who in turn increase Putin’s prestige at home and abroad, and to tame experts by making them fear losing access and professional stature.³⁶ The public pattern fits the old Soviet KGB pattern of cultivating foreign individuals to serve as witting or unwitting agents of influence, as

³² Peter Foster, “[Russia accused of clandestine funding of European parties as U.S. conducts major review of Vladimir Putin’s strategy](#),” *Telegraph* (UK), January 16, 2016.

³³ Elisabeth Braw, “[The Kremlin’s influence game](#),” *World Affairs*, March 10, 2015.

³⁴ Pomerantsev and Weiss, p. 6

³⁵ This has been called the “weaponization of money.” Pomerantsev and Weiss, pp. 22-23.

³⁶ Pomerantsev and Weiss, pp. 20-21.

described in a captured KGB training manual from the late Soviet period.³⁷ But the pattern ranges on a larger scale through oligarchs dependent on the regime leadership.

Meanwhile, Moscow maintains and expands its inherited Soviet network of controlled agents of influence around the world, including in the United States. Not much is publicly known about them today, but if Soviet precedent is an indicator, they would be nationals of their own countries, or Russian emigres, as well as Americans dependent on special access for their professional advancement, recruited to act in any position of influence in the media, universities, politics, culture, and business.

Disinformation, fakes and forgeries

Moscow revived the Soviet-era use of disinformation, fakes and forgeries, but this time on an accelerated level through electronic media. A study published in an Estonian military journal examined more than 500 instances of Russian falsehoods with 18 main narratives that accompanied the military campaigns against Ukraine in Crimea and the Donbass. State-controlled Russian media took advantage of democratic rhetoric by passing off the disinformation as simply a different point of view.³⁸

Quality varies, but the fakes and forgeries appear in such volume, generating high concentrations of stories online, that they overwhelm any efforts to expose and discredit them. Even so, a variety of nonprofit or volunteer groups has emerged, mostly in Ukraine and frontline NATO countries, to document the forgeries and press for government capabilities to counteract them and other Russian information war.³⁹ The U.S. government has proven too slow to act capably.

Intelligence-driven propaganda

Effective strategists worldwide have collected intelligence for the purpose of using it as propaganda, but Moscow has long excelled at the art for both domestic and foreign purposes.

Internally, Russian regimes have used *kompromat*, the exploitation of compromising situations and information to blackmail, blackball or discredit an opponent. The

³⁷ USSR KGB, *Political Intelligence from USSR Territory* (Moscow: USSR KGB Yu. V. Andropov Red Banner Institute, 1989), trans. from original политическая разведка с территории СССР (Москва: Краснознаменный институт КГБ СССР имени ю. в. Андропова, 1989), *passim.*, in author's collection.

³⁸ Yevhen Fedchenko, "[Kremlin propaganda: Soviet active measures by other means](#)," *Estonian Journal of Military Studies* (Estonian National Defense College), 2016.

³⁹ Excellent examples of such groups include the multilingual [Stopfake.org](#) in Ukraine, and [The Interpreter](#), a project of RFE/RL.

Putin regime pioneered kompromat for TV purposes. As Yeltsin's security chief, Putin had a state-controlled television channel broadcast covert camera footage of Prosecutor General Yuri Skuratov in a sexual tryst. Skuratov had been working with the Swiss to investigate corruption of Yeltsin's family members. The kompromat-on-TV setup finished Skuratov's career.⁴⁰

RT creator Mikhail Lesin, then head of the All-Russia State Television and Radio Broadcasting Company, helped prepare Putin's FSB footage of Skuratov for public viewing. That operation is believed to have cemented Lesin's relations with Putin, and caused Yeltsin to reward Lesin with the cabinet position as press minister in 1999. RT provided the perfect edgy, entertainingly scandalous platform to inject kompromat into the mainstream for domestic political purpose, and to intimidate others into "voluntarily" cooperating with authorities.

Internationally, Russian intelligence went beyond RT to steal information and release it, perhaps for the purposes of kompromat (we do not know for a fact), but certainly to disrupt, demoralize, discredit, and divide political and social institutions in other countries. The United States has been the prime target.

First came WikiLeaks, founded in 2005 – the year after Putin's decision to weaponize information – as what it calls an "international journalistic organization" devoted to the anonymous posting of classified information for all the world to see. WikiLeaks exploited public frustrations with restrictive and often poorly-conceived security measures during the Global War on Terror. It exposed colossal quantities of classified information, mainly from U.S. government agencies, complicating American relations with other countries and damaging Washington's image at home and worldwide. WikiLeaks, and its apparently independent image, encouraged frustrated U.S. government employees and contractors, among others, to download classified information for online publication abroad.

It remains to be seen whether WikiLeaks and its founder, Julian Assange, are or controlled assets of the Russian government, but there is no dispute that their interests match.⁴¹ Seasoned counterintelligence authorities recognize an agency relationship with the Russian services.⁴² Regardless, WikiLeaks and Assange were instrumental in enabling the defection of disgruntled NSA contractor Edward Snowden to Russia in 2013 after stealing a vast amount of classified data from the U.S. government.⁴³ Assange and Snowden frequently appeared on RT to denounce

⁴⁰ Vitaly Portnikov, "[The monster is dead: How Mikhail Lesin managed to kill Russian journalism](#)," *Ukraine Today*, November 11, 2015.

⁴¹ Jo Becker, Steven Erlanger, and Eric Schmitt, "[How Russia often benefits when Julian Assange reveals the West's secrets](#)," *New York Times*, August 31, 2016.

⁴² John Schindler, "[WikiLeaks is a front for Russian Intelligence](#)," *20Committee.com*, August 31, 2015.

⁴³ Michael B. Kelley, "[Edward Snowden walked right into a bizarre alliance between Wikileaks and Russia](#)," *Business Insider*, August 3, 2013.

the United States and its powers at home and abroad. For the purpose of mapping the Russian information war, WikiLeaks and Assange are important components.

Another component of Russia's intelligence-driven propaganda is the hacking into classified U.S. government information systems, state government systems, and private data systems, for the purpose of waging information war. Russian or Russian-backed hackers broke into state electoral database in what authorities termed an attempt to manipulate the 2016 elections.⁴⁴ The hackers stole internal data from the Democratic National Committee (DNC) and other party organizations, reporters from the *New York Times* and other news organizations, think tanks, and other entities involved in shaping U.S. public opinion, policy, and leadership.⁴⁵ WikiLeaks published more than 20,000 internal DNC emails, prompting the abrupt resignation of the party chairwoman.

The effort must have been massive, as both Russia's Federal Security Service (FSB) and its GRU military intelligence service were caught doing their own separate hacking operations of the campaigns of Hillary Clinton and Donald Trump, and pro-Republican political action committees, though the cyber attacks on Republicans received less publicity.⁴⁶ The private emails of former secretary of state Colin Powell, among others, were hacked and made public.

FBI advance warnings of the hacks prompted many who had been blind to the issue to suddenly become counterintelligence-conscious, and the issue quickly became politicized along partisan lines during the campaign. The revelations added an extra bitter and too-late-to-prove set of issues of the already hostile political atmosphere, further fueling suspicions and motivations of each of the two major presidential nominees, with Assange promising an "October surprise" just before the election. Major mainstream news organizations raised the possibility that Russia's espionage-driven propaganda was designed to aid Republican Donald Trump against Democrat Hillary Clinton.⁴⁷ RT gleefully reported on the new aspect of an already ugly campaign.⁴⁸

⁴⁴ Andy Greenberg, "[Hack brief: As FBI warns election sites got hacked, all eyes are on Russia](#)," *Wired*, August 29, 2016.

⁴⁵ Evan Perez and Shimon Prokupez, "[FBI investigating Russian hack of New York Times reporters, others](#)," CNN, August 23, 2016.

⁴⁶ Ellen Nakashima, "[Russian government hackers penetrated DNC, stole opposition research on Trump](#)," *Washington Post*, June 14, 2016. Joe Uchill, "[Site connected to Russian hackers posts Republican emails](#)," *The Hill*, August 12, 2016; Ben Schreckinger, "[FBI investigating hack of GOP operative's email](#)," *Politico*, September 29, 2016.

⁴⁷ See Del Quentin Wilber, Tracy Wilkinson, and Brian Bennett, "[FBI investigating whether Russians hacked Democratic Party's emails to help Donald Trump](#)," *Los Angeles Times*, July 25, 2016.

⁴⁸ "[Democrats ask FBI to probe alleged Trump-Russia connections over DNC hack](#)," RT, August 31, 2016.

The U.S. leadership failed to respond effectively to the FBI warnings. Apart from angry diplomatic words, it lost the opportunity to turn the tables by preparing accurate material from the vast amounts of intelligence collected on the corruption and other foibles of Putin and his inner circle, sanitizing it, and releasing it in-kind. Such an action would have had an equalizing effect and served to deter future intelligence-driven political warfare.

The FBI warned election officials in all 50 states of Russian hacking threats to manipulate voting records and election results.⁴⁹

'Curious incident' – The dog that didn't bark

U.S. officials probably learned about the strategic design and intent of Russian propaganda and information war when a marginalized former member of Putin's inner circle bought multimillion-dollar real estate properties in California and came under federal investigation for money laundering. That individual was Mikhail Lesin, the Putin image-maker and media mogul who conceived of RT and the new strategy of information war.

Lesin was believed to be talking to the FBI in November, 2015, perhaps to make a deal, when he disappeared for a couple days before being found in his Washington, D.C. hotel room, dead from blunt-force trauma to the head and neck.

The strangest part of the violent death, just blocks from the White House, of a former trusted aide to Putin, may not be the death or who was behind it. One might expect a former Putin insider, in trouble with the FBI, to die that way before he could talk. The strangest part was that the apparent murder of the creator of RT never became a Russian propaganda theme.

Somehow, RT and other state-controlled outlets "knew" within hours of the discovery of the body that Lesin had died of natural causes due to a long illness brought on by excessive drinking and smoking.

For nearly a century, "died after a long illness" has been a staple of Kremlin propaganda to explain away inconvenient deaths. Shortly after news of Lesin's demise, a Kremlin spokesman issued a statement saying that Putin "highly appreciates the enormous contribution Mikhail Lesin made to the formation of the modern Russian media."⁵⁰

⁴⁹ Mike Levine, "[FBI chief responds to concern over cyberthreats to US election system](#)," ABC News, August 30, 2016; and Levine, "[FBI warns Donald Trump and Hillary Clinton staffers to beware of foreign spies in US](#)," ABC News, September 1, 2016.

⁵⁰ Chris Johnson and Alan Yuhas, "[Police investigate after Putin ally Mikhail Lesin found dead in Washington hotel](#)," *The Guardian* (London), November 7, 2015.

Hours after news of Lesin's death, RIA Novosti cited an un-named "family member" saying that Lesin "died from heart stroke." TASS sourced an anonymous Russian Embassy official in Washington who supposedly said that "police found no signs of foul play."⁵¹ RT simply quoted from those multiple, unsourced, and apparently mutually-confirming reports.

The Russian Foreign Ministry claimed to know nothing. Four months later, after a long silence during an exhaustive test of Lesin's body for an assassin's chemicals or radioactive matter, District of Columbia authorities released the forensic information that revealed massive blunt-force trauma to Lesin's head, neck, torso, and limbs. They did not state how the trauma occurred. With the news of the violence of Lesin's death now public, the Russian Embassy in Washington blamed U.S. authorities for providing no information.⁵²

The media outlets that Lesin had created or directed reported on the autopsy results, but cast doubt on any Russian involvement, sometimes hinting that the U.S. government murdered Putin's former confidant, and saying that "conspiracy" stories about a hidden Russian hand were a deliberate "false lead." RT quoted a writer for the *Executive Intelligence Review* as an authority floating the "false lead" story, implying that the publication was somehow connected to the U.S. intelligence community⁵³ when, in fact, it is published by the fringe Lyndon LaRouche organization.

In a 1950s glass-and-yellow-brick curved building, the Dupont Circle Hotel where Lesin was last seen alive is considered "relatively downscale" and outdated, a far cry from the lifestyle of super-rich Russians such as he.⁵⁴ The hotel's rates, though, are within the ossified per diem structure of the FBI, with its limited funds to support defectors from abroad. Lesin may have been talking to the FBI to prevent his prosecution and to be allowed to remain in the U.S.⁵⁵

Was Lesin indeed murdered as it appears? If so, by whom? The short answer is that we do not know for a fact. The Washington, D.C. police stated in 2016 that "the incident remains an active Metropolitan Police Department investigation."⁵⁶ RT

⁵¹ ["Media tycoon & former Russian press minister Lesin dies from heart attack at 57,"](#) RT, November 7, 2015.

⁵² David Smith and Shaun Walker, ["Former Putin press minister died of blow to head in Washington hotel,"](#) *The Guardian* (London), March 10, 2016.

⁵³ ["Blunt injuries' killed Russian media tycoon Lesin in Washington DC – forensic data,"](#) RT, March 10, 2016.

⁵⁴ Damian Paletta and Alan Cullison, ["Former Putin aide died of blunt force in Washington in November,"](#) *Wall Street Journal*, March 10, 2016.

⁵⁵ Steven Lee Myers, ["Mikhail Lesin's strange death in U.S. follows a fall from Russia's elite,"](#) *New York Times*, April 2, 2016.

⁵⁶ ["Joint Statement from the District of Columbia's Office of the Chief Medical Examiner and the Metropolitan Police Department,"](#) March 10, 2016.

continued to report that there was no foul play,⁵⁷ and the Russian Embassy made little more of the supposed lack of information.

The silence indicates that someone at the top of the Kremlin told the controlled media not to make a big deal about Lesin's death, and if anything, to imply that the Americans might have done it. Sherlock Holmes creator Arthur Conan Doyle might have termed the silence a most "curious incident." In the 1892 mystery about a stolen race horse and murder of its trainer (also by blunt force trauma to the skull), Holmes deduced the perpetrator by what *did not* happen: the guard dog that didn't bark. In solving the mystery, Holmes mentioned "the curious incident of the dog in the night-time." But, responded another detective, "The dog did nothing in the night-time."

"That was the curious incident," said Holmes. "Obviously the midnight visitor was someone whom the dog knew well."⁵⁸

Weak U.S. response

Part of Putin's propaganda and information war success has been the weak response of the United States and NATO. The West did little to discourage the crackdown on free news and entertainment media in Russia or support the free media meaningfully. Washington did nothing when the Kremlin put the squeeze on traditional U.S.-sponsored media like Radio Liberty and the Voice of America, while it permitted Putin's own information war machine to grow inside the United States. The failure to press Moscow on Lesin's apparent murder had the added benefit to Putin of showing, yet again, that the U.S. cannot protect defectors from harm.

Options/Recommendations

The United States needs to re-learn how Moscow waged active measures in the past, and learn how it has refined those methods to the information age today. Policy options are endless. As a first start, U.S. leaders must carry out the following inexpensive and rapid actions that are relatively easy to do with the proper strategy, people, and authority:

- Show Moscow that two can play that game:
 - Collect, process, sanitize, and release selective intelligence to the public on key members of Putin's present inner circle and family to expose corruption and other crimes, and personal behavior that is unacceptable to Russian culture.

⁵⁷ "[Death of Russian media tycoon Lesin in DC believed natural despite criminal investigation – US media](#)," RT, April 4, 2016.

⁵⁸ Sir Arthur Conan Doyle, "Silver Blaze," in *The Memoirs of Sherlock Holmes* (London: George Newnes, 1894).

- Develop a divisive strategy to exploit: (1) internal fissures within the Putin inner circle and regime; (2) tensions within economic and industrial sectors in Russia and abroad that are vital to the survival of that regime; (3) political and economic tensions between the centralized power of Moscow center and the Russian regions; (4) regional, ethnic, linguistic, and cultural tensions that, if exacerbated, could cause the dissolution of the Russian Federation in a manner similar to the collapse of the Soviet Union.
- Prepare and execute the above strategies when necessary.
- Use the presidency as a megaphone, the way President Reagan did against the Soviets, to expose Russian information war strategies and practices, and mandate every relevant executive agency to do the same.
- Start a new presidential administration with a clean slate.
 - Deny political clearances and appointments to any individual who willingly participated in Russian state-controlled propaganda activities since 2004.
 - Instruct U.S. officials not to grant access to, or interviews with, any Russian state-controlled media;
 - Deny political or policy access to any individual or organization that willfully participated in Russian state-controlled propaganda activities since 2004.
 - Deny U.S. government contracts, grants, and clearances to any individual or company that willfully participated in any Russian state-controlled propaganda activity since 2004.
 - Encourage leaders of Allied and partner countries to do the same.
- Use existing law to impose reciprocity on Russian state-controlled media, by matching Moscow's shutdown of U.S. government-funded RFE/RL and VOA with a reciprocal U.S. shutdown of Kremlin-funded media in the United States.
- Empower the FBI to monitor and apprehend U.S.-based, Russian government-controlled, agents of influence in politics, academia, think tanks, journalism, public relations, business, and culture, as current law requires.
- Strengthen the 1930s law governing foreign agents in the United States, to impose stiffer penalties, including imprisonment.
- Require the FBI and CIA to issue joint annual reports, both classified and unclassified, on the nature and extent of Russian propaganda and information war against the United States and its interests.
- Prioritize intelligence collection and competent analysis of corruption, criminal behavior, and other behavior that Russian society finds intolerable, to have as a deterrent to, and retaliation against, Kremlin propaganda and information war.
- Strengthen the abilities of friendly countries to retaliate in-kind, especially where U.S. law or procurement procedures limit or handicap such capabilities.

Conclusion

Moscow's strength in waging international information war has less to do with its own unique capabilities, and more with the West's learned helplessness to prevent, deter, or retaliate. The Kremlin has modernized Soviet methods with mainly American communications technologies and channels to create a nimble, entertaining, interesting, and frustratingly persistent firehose of falsehood designed to undermine, divide, and demoralize its Western targets. Russia's information war easily exploits gaps in U.S. and allied worldview and doctrine. For all the domestic demographic, economic, industrial, territorial, and other problems Putin faces, the Russian leader has freed the Kremlin from its Cold War-era bureaucratic and legalistic inefficiency and slowness. The West has not done the same for itself.

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