

## Rewriting the Past, Remaking the Present Historical Narratives in Russian Disinformation Campaigns

### PIPS White Paper 11.3: *Executive Summary*

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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 targeted existing social divides on a variety of controversial issues. The prevalence of this type of disinformation in the United States, however, has overshadowed Russia's historically-based disinformation, which warps the historical record to aggravate tensions between ethnic communities.

Historically-based disinformation refers to content which 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.

To combat this form of disinformation, greater cooperation between national security and civil society actors will be required between governments and within states. Governments should cooperate and coordinate in their direct engagement with vulnerable subpopulations and their counter-messaging. 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. Education systems should incorporate media and information literacy into primary and secondary school curriculums to better equip citizens to spot disinformation and understand how actors can shape historical understanding to undermine social cohesion.

#### *"Weaponization" of Information: Basic Tenets of Historical Disinformation Campaigns*

Moscow believes that altering perceptions about the Western liberal world order is key to turning states against the Euro-Atlantic Alliance. Disinformation campaigns use language that speaks directly to readers' concerns to ensure that content resonates with disgruntled citizens. Historically-based disinformation is one of the many tactics employed to disrupt state-citizen relations in targeted countries.

- *Co-opting Radical Perspective.* In spaces where anti-Russian sentiment is high, agents craft propaganda that fits into the worldview of popular fringe actors. Appealing to these ideologues gives campaigns credibility and ensures that content will be disseminated to a wider audience. Because fringe actors are mistrustful of the free press, they will treat disinformation as “privileged information” and are more likely to share it.
- *Scapegoating Minorities for Historical Traumas.* Russian operatives turn to historically divisive issues to develop campaigns that accelerate social fragmentation. Among post-Soviet states, Russian revival of hostility can erase progress towards inclusive state-building.
- *Connecting Current Events with Past Adversities.* Disinformation ties contemporary affairs to past adversities as a way to promote anti-establishment sentiment. It points to the shortcomings of the current liberal world order by emphasizing a country’s complicated history with the West.

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 targeted country, they are then prepared to extend their influence and manipulate vulnerable communities.

### *Primary Audience*

Although historically-based disinformation is intended to appeal to a wide range of readers, there are key sub-populations that are especially vulnerable to Russian narratives.

- *Conspiracy Theorists.* Campaigns appeal to conspiracy theorists by planting narratives that claim that wars and instability throughout history have been orchestrated by nefarious actors. By tapping into the paranoia of political extremists, Russian efforts reinforce notions that political systems are dominated by a shadowy elite with devious agendas.
- *Disengaged Citizens.* Citizens who are apathetic about their country’s history are unlikely to seek out credible sources that disprove disinformation. Because propaganda is crafted to compliment their worldviews, uninformed individuals will willingly accept information, even if its credibility is highly questionable.
- *Younger Readers.* Younger readers who lack critical thinking skills struggle in distinguishing between credible and questionable sources. A lack of awareness about past events similarly makes them vulnerable to historically-based disinformation campaigns.

These vulnerable audiences are connected by their reliance on social media for news and information. Because Russian actors are skilled in coordinated online efforts, they are able to reach targeted groups directly and rapidly.

## *Operational Shortcomings of Existing Responses*

Though governments have launched coordinated efforts to tackle foreign disinformation, more strategic conceptualization is needed to address this threat. Governments like Poland often suffer from inattention to hybrid threats. Though aware of the threat, governments often focus on the physical challenge posed by Russian aggression and only make tangential references to campaigns as “cyberspace threats.” Without proper prioritization of the threat within national security circles, the implications of disinformation will remain unaddressed.

Efforts, such as the NATO Strategic Communications Center of Excellence (STRATCOM COE), have been launched to focus on the dangers posed by disinformation. Though these efforts should not be overlooked, governments must not slip into an over-dependence on multilateral institutions. States should not allow cooperation with multilateral institutions to diminish the urgency of developing country-specific strategies.

## *Policy Considerations*

In order to properly address this complex threat, greater cooperation between national security and civil society actors will be required. Policy considerations should extend beyond fact-checking and “myth-busting” and consider dynamic engagement of vulnerable audiences.

- *Government to government.* Collaboration between targeted states has been disjointed, underscoring the need for a comprehensive global strategy. Multinational bodies should improve their coordination to respond to threats, and should consider direct engagement with at-risk citizens. Enhancing information-sharing and encouraging member states’ independent countermeasures is necessary to contain disinformation.
- *Government to People.* To craft successful counter-measures, governments must understand their target audiences. By familiarizing themselves with constituents’ concerns, they can ensure that factual narratives will resonate with vulnerable communities and increase their resilience to Russian disinformation. Cooperation with key figures in such groups will promote organic counter-strategies that speak to immediate concerns. This process can ensure that messaging not only appeals to a specific audience, but drowns out disinformation in ways that government initiatives—lacking local knowledge—often fail to do.
- *People to People.* Public sphere education is a crucial component of curbing Russian propaganda. Incorporating media information literacy into primary and secondary school curricula will help equip young persons with critical thinking skills. These skills will encourage younger generations, who frequent online sites, to be more aware of current events.

The task of containing historically-based disinformation does not fall to governments alone. Counter-measures require the full participation of actors from civil society and necessitate collaboration between stakeholders to rectify the problem.

## *Conclusion*

Historically based disinformation has the potential to upend civil discourse within targeted states and radically alter individuals' understanding of history. Russian campaigns foment mistrust in mainstream institutions and revive animosity between ethnic communities. They are designed to appeal to audiences' worldviews, playing on deep-rooted fears to disrupt constructive relations between societal actors. To address this threat, there must be a recognition of collective responsibility, an understanding that disinformation can only be curbed when entire societies come together to address this multifaceted problem.