

European Parliament

Subcommittee on Security and Defence; Special Committee on Foreign Interference in all Democratic Processes in the European Union, including Disinformation

Russian Disinformation and Propaganda in Relation to the War Against Ukraine

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Washington, DC
May 17, 2022

Ladies and Gentlemen:

I am honored to appear before you today to discuss Russia's information warfare playbook.

As you all well know, the impact of Russia's war in Ukraine extends far beyond Ukraine's borders. This is not just a war on Ukraine; this is a war on Europe's cultural and civilizational values. The scale of this threat requires a proportional response. Europeans have the power to determine the outcome of this conflict, if only we have the courage to use it.

The threat that Russia poses to Europe is clear. President Vladimir Putin has invaded two of his neighbors, Georgia and Ukraine, partly to stop them from aligning with NATO and the West. He has given cover to Bashar al-Assad's use of chemical weapons, and Russian agents have used chemical weapons in attempted assassinations in Europe. Moscow has frequently threatened the use of nuclear weapons. And Moscow has interfered in elections and domestic political discourse across the globe, including in the West.

I will focus my testimony today on three key points. First, I will explain how Russia strategically uses information operations. Second, I will show how Russia is attempting to use these operations to shape global perceptions of the war in Ukraine, at the expense of Europe. Third, I will discuss how Russia is exploiting Europe's vulnerabilities in the information space.

Putin seeks to replace the rules-based liberal international order with an order that is safe for authoritarianism and features Russia as a global power and power broker, entitled to a sphere of influence over its "near abroad." Putin's quest to dominate Ukraine is at the forefront of this broader struggle.

Given Russia's military shortcomings in Ukraine, many in the West are already celebrating his failure. However, it is too early to do so, in part because Putin still has a powerful non-military tool at his disposal: information weapons. The Kremlin does not limit itself to hacking our computers — it also wants to hack our minds, aiming to disrupt our democracies, polarize our societies, and sow fear and doubt among our populations.

The importance of information operations is clear to anyone who follows Russia closely. The Soviets were known for "active measures." They used disinformation campaigns to shape the information space abroad and influence events in other countries; they often referred to these campaigns as "political warfare."

Russian active measures today do not differ in their goals. The only difference is in the technology used to pursue them. Social media platforms allow Russia both to increase its reach and to target specific audiences when conducting information operations, which Moscow uses both for political warfare and to augment conventional military operations. Last year, Russia published a new National Security Strategy, in which it devoted an entire section to "information security." Similarly, Russian Minister of Defense Sergey Shoigu declared that "information has become a weapon." In 2017, Russian officials acknowledged the establishment of information warfare troops.

Moscow's information operations and other hybrid warfare undertakings in Europe aim to undermine European security and NATO unity.

Russia's information campaigns are integral part of its hybrid warfare strategy. Russian information operations against Ukraine kicked into high gear in 2014. When the war started, Russia used disinformation to shape the information space. For instance, Moscow claimed that NATO's enlargement was a threat to Russia. Russia and Putin have spread a long line of such falsehoods about Ukraine. Moscow claimed that Russian-language speakers in Ukraine faced "genocide" at Kyiv's hands and would welcome a Russian invasion. Moscow denied Ukrainian statehood, claiming Ukraine has always been part of Russia and framing its "special military operation" as necessary to "liberate" Ukrainians from their "Nazi leader." This messaging was intended to be consumed inside Russia, in Ukraine, and globally. Ukraine, which has been strengthening its information operations tools for over a decade, has achieved notable victories in this space since the war began.

Then Russia's government blamed the West (and the United States and Germany, in particular) for operating imaginary biolabs in Ukraine that would be employed against the Russians. The Kremlin blamed the West for using drones armed with chemical weapons and also accused the United States of training migratory birds to deliver Ukrainian bioweapons to Russia. Although this may sound humorous, these and similar messages have been spread across the world. During the war in Ukraine, Moscow has used Russian government-controlled traditional and social media platforms to deliver propaganda, which at times has been picked up by media platforms in the West and elsewhere. This is just a small taste of Russia's extensive information operations since the war began.

While Russian forces are struggling to gain ground in eastern Ukraine, Russian information operations have successfully convinced many non-Western audiences that the West, not Russia, is ultimately to blame. Russia has previously used the Internet Research Agency to manipulate several elections in Africa. Now, pro-Russian media content is spreading across Africa, claiming NATO is the aggressor in Ukraine and Moscow is on a humanitarian mission. Similar messages campaigns continue across the Middle East, Latin America, and Asia.

Why does this matter to Europe and the rest of the West? Because Russia is using information warfare to build coalitions comprising like-minded nations in the non-Western world and even certain countries in Europe. The EU and its allies must respond in kind.

Speaking of Europe, Russia is searching for weak links on the continent. In particular, Russia is exploiting Moldova, Georgia, and the Balkans as potential new avenues to undermine Europe. Moscow does not need to roll tanks into Belgrade, Tbilisi, or Chisinau. Instead, Russia resorts to its well-known playbook of exploiting existing divisions.

In Moldova and its separatist region of Transnistria, the Kremlin is already executing anti-Ukraine disinformation campaigns and provocations. Similar messaging is now occurring in Georgia, where the Kremlin-backed regime in the separatist region of South Ossetia is planning a referendum on joining Russia. In the Balkans, Europe's soft underbelly, Russian information operations seek to polarize former Yugoslav states across religious and ethnic lines. Moscow

also manipulates narratives through the Russian Orthodox Church and invests in far-right groups. For example, Moscow has heavily invested in media in the Balkans, and its Sputnik propaganda channel operates out of Belgrade. The Kremlin also uses local media to mirror narratives from Russian media. Given new secessionist threats in Bosnia and Herzegovina, Russia is playing with fire in the Balkans.

To prevent further Russian escalation, the EU should counter Russia's information operations in Moldova, Georgia, and the Balkans; sanction media platforms and individuals that threaten Europe; and cease funding for governments that are destabilizing Europe.

I applaud Europe for taking preventive measures to protect the continent from Russian disinformation, such as banning Sputnik and RT, which aggressively amplify Putin's lies and propaganda. These efforts should continue, including by targeting other overt and covert mediums Russia uses to spread disinformation and propaganda. However, the EU also needs to develop a strategy to fight back by using the truth to counter Russian narratives aimed at sowing discord within the West.

In addition, the EU should help the Russian people gain access to the truth. As Russia's war in Ukraine continues, Putin is attempting to ban the free flow of information within Russia, clearly concerned about domestic opposition to his war. Putin has shuttered what was left of Russia's independent media and restricted Russians' access to Instagram, Facebook, Twitter, and various Western news agencies. On March 4, the Russian leader signed a law threatening prison time for deviating from the Kremlin's talking points on the war or Russia's military. Hardliners in Moscow hope eventually to isolate Russia from the global internet.

Promoting digital democracy inside Russia is not only morally right but is also critical for European security. The EU must contest the Russian information space within the Russian Federation. While the West primarily focuses on social media platforms such as Twitter and Facebook, these platforms are now banned in Russia. The EU and its officials should invest in their presence on Russian social media platforms such as Telegram or VKontakte to maximize their reach among the Russian people.

The EU and its allies must develop a coherent and comprehensive approach to countering Russia's information operations, not only in Europe, but globally. The EU cannot win the hybrid war with Russia if it loses the information space.

Thank you. I look forward to your questions.