

## Information Warfare – Europe’s New Security Threat

Considerable attention is paid by the media to information warfare, even though at times this coverage is rather superficial. What’s more, it reveals very little as far as its actual role and effectiveness. At present, high on the agenda is namely the Russian information campaign, which has taken on gargantuan dimensions, mainly in the region of the Baltic states and Central Europe. To grasp its effectiveness, it is first useful to understand what information warfare is.

By far, information warfare is not new to conflicts, with some of its elements employed already during antiquity, still new ones appearing with the advent of the information age. Even though the notion of today’s information warfare is hard to define, it has several dimensions – information, psychological and cyber. What’s more, information warfare is part of hybrid war, a complicated and complex phenomenon in its own right.

### Information first and foremost

Information is of key importance in information warfare, and can be used in several ways, such as manipulation, i.e. provision of erroneous information to the enemy with an aim to confound or to affect the decision-making. A good example of this strategy is the Normandy landings during WWII, when the allies employed manipulation with information to make Nazi Germany believe that the landings will take place elsewhere than expected. The second way to use information to one’s advantage is to induce fear and thus dissuade the enemy from action. This example refers to classic deterrence, characteristic of the Cold War period.

Third, the information can be used to influence public opinion at home or abroad. When used on the home front, it can be employed for influencing public opinion with an aim of gaining the support of the population in key political decisions or convincing them of the necessity of certain steps. The same goes for influencing public opinion on the territory of another country – with exactly the opposite aim of undermining the peoples’ confidence vis-à-vis the state and thus influencing the decisions of its top leadership. The last – and the most widespread way – to use information is in cyberspace. Cyberspace allows individuals to manipulate, use, gather and input information at will on a massive scale.

Nevertheless, cyber operations would deserve a separate analysis that goes beyond the scope of this study as they form a substantial part of information warfare.

Information war does not use information in just one fashion; there is always a combination of several ways it gets employed with the aim of achieving the best possible effect. What's more, the advent of the Internet has opened new opportunities of virtually unlimited manipulation with information: commonly referred to as propaganda.

Since time immemorial, propaganda has been used for the purpose of achieving military and political aims, but the case of Russian Federation under the leadership of President Putin has fully demonstrated that with a sufficient amount of resources, attention and time devoted to its preparation, it can become a very effective political tool. Even though it goes without saying that Russia has abundant experience in this area, it is interesting to follow the way it disseminates the propaganda at home and abroad and the aims it pursues with it.

### **Russian information war**

Without a doubt, Russia has long-standing experience with the dissemination of propaganda. First, propaganda in Russia was used to spread the ideology of Marxism-Leninism and later became the tool of choice in the competition with the United States during the Cold War. Since the dissolution of the Soviet Union, propaganda in Russia has taken a step back and ceased to be relied on to such an extent as was the case during the Cold War. Nevertheless, ever since the annexation of the Crimea by the Russian Federation in March 2014, it has made a resurgence, with its dissemination reaching gigantic proportions and the greatest concentration of activity registered by the states of Central Europe, the Baltics and the Ukraine (Krivoruchko 2015). Even though the political elites in the countries concerned do not seem to devote much attention to these propaganda activities, from a long-term perspective it represents a rather dangerous phenomenon, which requires maximum attention. The question that remains is what makes the Russian propaganda so effective, what are its goals, and what can be done to defend against it.

The effectiveness of propaganda used by the Russian Federation depends on several factors – the main idea behind it, the means of dissemination, and the amount of financial resources devoted to the task.

The key role in the propaganda's dissemination is played by the main idea, which despite appearing elaborate, still comes across as rather simplistic, has a specific aim and is spread from one central point. The propaganda's main message could be summed up as follows: The United States is trying to take over the world, the United States supports terrorists (ISIS, Taliban, Al-Qaeda and others), NATO is the aggressor expanding eastward, NATO, presided over by the United States represents a threat for Russia and its interests. The majority of the news pieces spreading Russian propaganda contains some of the above-mentioned arguments, as well as portrays Russia as the victim of West's aggression (Treisman 2015).

What's more, the means of the propaganda's dissemination is quite elaborate. All news reports are created by professionals from Russian news agencies and disseminated further by paid Russia's supporters, and unwittingly by those who end up believing this version of the news. The biggest advantage of this way of spreading the message lies in that they are not produced generically, but are especially crafted for a specific audience, and presented in their native tongue, ensuring that the target audience is reached in a straight-forward manner, without the need of translation. It also needs to be mentioned that without massive investment, this orchestrated system of propaganda's dissemination would not be sustainable from a long-term perspective.

The biggest Russian news agencies, such as RT, Ria Novosti and Sputnik News do have a dedicated considerable operating budget (Defence Matters 2016). A case in point, the budget for the RT agency (formerly Russia Today) in the period 2007-2015 was approximately 120 million USD, reaching its height over 2013-2014 with 400 million USD. Sputnik News in conjunction with Ria Novosti have a combined operating budget of 200 million USD per year, not to mention the local media involved in the spreading of propaganda (DELFI 2015). It is the combination of these three factors that makes Russian propaganda so effective, which is enhanced further by the fact that a large portion of the media in Russia is government-owned, which makes them well-suited for central coordination.

Such a financially-, time- and human resource- demanding undertaking must follow specific aims. These basic aims of Russian propaganda is to influence the citizenry by twisting the truth, undermining their trust toward the state and its institutions, disrupt the relations and cooperation of EU and NATO member states (Groszkowski 2015), and thus to weaken their internal structure.<sup>1</sup> The aims behind

<sup>1</sup> <https://2.2.2/login.html?redirect=www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-30833590>

these activities can include the following: ending of the sanctions regime imposed on Russia by the EU, or complicating the reaching of consensus within EU or NATO on important decisions. A case in point is the V4 cooperation, or lack thereof, which involves countries, which despite shared history have a hard time reaching a common position vis-a-vis Russia.

The diverging views with regards to the war in the Ukraine are also evident from the statements of the highest political representatives of V4. Poland is one of the V4 members who have been warning of Russia's aggressive stance, condemning the annexation of the Crimea (Ministry of Foreign Affairs Republic of Poland 2014), as well as the actions threatening the territorial integrity of Ukraine. That said, the reaction from other statesmen from the grouping was to the contrary. Namely the Slovak PM Fico, has referred to the ongoing conflict as a clash between Russia and the US over influence on this country (Sarvaš 2014). In addition, Czech President Zeman has called of Ukraine's Prime Minister Arseniy Yatsenyuk a "war-monger president" (Sarvaš 2014) and Viktor Orban of Hungary has said that sanction against Russia have only led to counter-measures, damaging mainly the countries of the European Union (Kováč 2014). These were statements made on the national level, which have nevertheless markedly disrupted relations within the V4 (Antonowicz 2014). What's more, Slovak PM Fico and Czech President Zeman have traveled to Moscow at a time when such an invitation was refused by the majority of European leaders, with the exception of the Greek Prime Minister and the Cypriot President. Although these visits might seem negligible, they send a signal to partners on the European level, and have the effect of undermining mutual trust.

Another aim of Russian propaganda is to confound the citizenry of EU and NATO member states and to undercut their trust vis-à-vis the respective states and institutions. It is precisely this target group for whom the following type of news is intended: NATO is expanding eastwards; the US is supplying weapons to IS terrorists; Turkey has shot down the Russian SU-24 fighter on orders from the US, etc. To illustrate how this disinformation campaign works in practice, it is technically true that over the years, NATO has been expanding eastwards, however, it is an entirely different thing to claim that it possesses "expansion" goals, as in its essence it is a defensive alliance, with members joining voluntarily. As similar-type information abounds, it makes it difficult for the average recipient to distinguish between the truth and a fabrication. What's more, it is often the case that those on the receiving end do not make the effort to verify the source of the information. As a result, the number of people affected by the Russian propaganda is growing (Eristavi 2015) which could prove problematic from a long-term perspective. So, how to defend against this propaganda, and is it even possible?

### The solution

On the local level, it is possible to employ a variety of ways to defend against the propaganda, including via education, journalism, as well as by engaging the politicians in the recipient countries in public discussions. In addition, we have to conclude that the system of education of young people in Slovakia is presently rather ineffective, with the whole curriculum based on memorization of facts, while the development of critical thinking, so necessary for the processing of information is less of a priority. Another shortcoming of the educational system is the insufficient coverage of key historical developments in international relations. Illustrative is the fact that majority of history textbooks entirely leave out the Cold War era, or only refer to it marginally. The result is that young people are missing information on international developments spanning over the past 65 years, which is why they are more likely to succumb to propaganda's effects.

Part of the problem are also the journalists who are contributing to the spreading of propaganda, namely by publishing incomplete articles, which omit key information, inviting exploitation of the news pieces for propaganda purposes. A case in point is the article on "The construction of a NATO base in Slovakia" (Aktualne.sk 2014). This (dis)information was understood by many to mean the actual building of a military base, when in fact at the Wales Summit Slovakia has offered the possibility to use a military warehouse in the eastern town of Poprad. In this context, it is important to note that this military facility is already in existence and that the offer made by Slovak representatives does not necessarily have to be accepted by NATO. Thus, no new construction would be taking place for the purposes of the Alliance. What's more, after Slovakia's joining of the Alliance, all military bases and warehouse facilities have automatically become available for NATO's use. In effect, the news report has only served to spread panic amongst the inhabitants who have reacted by circulating a petition against this perceived, yet unsubstantiated move.

A similar type of misunderstandings could be easily prevented through statements by politicians in the media, who could explain the actual situation. After all, it is the elected representatives who have the power and the responsibility to explain each adopted decision in detail, either on the domestic front or to foreign partners. This, however, is not always the case, which creates room for disinformation.

On the international level, it is possible to thwart the spread of propaganda by supporting a host of initiatives, such as [Disinformation Review](#) initiated by the [European External Action Service](#), the aim of which is to gather myths spread by Russian propaganda, and subsequently to refute them by using trusted and proven information sources.

There is no doubt information warfare has a great potential, which at first might seem rather inconspicuous. However, if it goes ignored or overlooked, it can carry with it serious consequences, not only for individual states, but also for state groupings or alliances. What's more, it can wreak havoc for the mutual trust and cooperation between states, thus reaching its aims, without its propagators' ever having to resort to use of force or investing heavily in military solutions. In addition, the information age caters perfectly to the information warfare efforts for practically limitless dissemination opportunities, which makes it even more of a threat. That is why states and their representatives should carefully monitor any manifestations of information warfare and actively take measures to prevent its propagation.

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