

## GLOBSEC Policy Papers

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The Central European Policy Institute, member of the Strategy Council, is a Bratislava-based regional think tank, which links top research institutions and experts from across Central Europe. CEPI is devoted to improving the quality of the region's contributions to European and transatlantic debates on today's key challenges. We believe that Central Europe should take on more responsibility in the EU and NATO for issues ranging from defence, energy and the digital agenda to the continuation of the enlargement process in Europe's neighbourhood.

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This paper is part of a series of activities by the Central European Strategy Council whose aim is to contribute to a positive change in public perceptions of NATO and the European Union, while at the same time increasing the resilience of society against discourse that undermines the anchoring of our nations in the family of liberal democracies. We do this by promoting open debate, objective information, institution building and civic activism.

# Anatomy of an Info-War

**Ben Nimmo**

One of Russia's great successes in its campaign around Ukraine has been what Peter Pomerantsev and Michael Weiss call its weaponization of information. It uses a network of officials, journalists, sympathetic commentators and internet trolls to create an alternative reality in which all truth is relative, and no information can be trusted.

The effects of this campaign are already distorting Western perceptions of the conflict. Claims that NATO promised not to expand into Central and Eastern Europe (CEE) after German reunification, and that Russia's fear of that enlargement is justifiable, have entered the mainstream media, creating the impression that the West is to blame for Russia's direct assault on Ukraine.

However, while Russia's propaganda network is sophisticated, its messages are not. They are repetitive and predictable, and therein lies their weakness.

Russia's narrative is based upon the thesis that the United States is trying to encircle and destroy Russia through ever-greater engagement in CEE and the "near-abroad". This narrative has become a litany of paranoia in which any Western initiative there is taken as a threat, regardless of the extent to which it actually impacts on Russia.

Thus NATO's missile defence system and the European Union's Eastern Partnership are both portrayed as anti-Russian plots, abetted by "hysterical" CEE governments. Russian officials have used the same narrative to justify the annexation of Crimea, attack EU foreign policy, explain the fall in world oil prices and dismiss Russia's credit downgrade.

The narrative is simple, striking, emotional and effective. So far, Western governments and organisations have

not articulated a compelling counter-narrative, but the opportunity is there to be taken. CEE nations are ideally placed to do so, drawing on their personal experience of the fight for democracy and freedom.

To counter Western criticisms, Russian communicators use four main techniques: dismiss the critic, distort the facts, distract from the main issue and dismay the audience.

Thus, individuals who criticise Russian policies become the targets for personal abuse, while organisations which question Russian methods are dismissed as biased or incompetent.

Russian commentators also regularly use distorted reporting to undermine their opponents.

For example, in late March Russian media reported heavily on a "wave" of protests sweeping across the Czech Republic in response to the U.S. "Dragon Ride", a parade of armored vehicles passing through the country en route to Germany. The coverage completely obscured the much more substantial welcomes the U.S. troops received - misrepresenting the Czechs as NATO opponents in Central Europe.

If Russia is accused of a specific violation, Russian officials and commentators will come out with a host of counter-accusations whose effect is to distract the viewer from the key point.

For example, in 2007, Putin enlivened an otherwise anodyne summit with European Union leaders in Portugal by claiming that the missile-defense plans of then-U.S. President George W. Bush in Poland and the Czech Republic were "very similar" to the Soviet stationing of nuclear missiles on Cuba in 1962.

The analogy was misleading at best, but the effect was to put the rhetorical pressure on Washington, Warsaw and

Prague.

To forestall potentially dangerous actions by their opponents, Russian officials use more or less veiled warnings, including of nuclear response - provoking dismay and hampering decision-making.

The final link in the chain is Russia's use of the Kremlin-controlled media, and paid or sympathetic commentators in the West, to pass its messages. Officials, journalists and apparently independent pundits act as a team, amplifying and validating one another's statements in support of the overall narrative of war.

## Recommendations

Some steps to respond to this disinformation flow have already been taken, including the incubation of an EU outreach program to Russian speakers. However, such initiatives provide a channel for communication; they do not in themselves define what those channels should say. It is the message, more than the messenger, which will be crucial to success.

When it comes to what should be said, four key lines of effort are needed:

### 1. Tell the story

First, the West needs a visceral, captivating storyline that appeals to the senses more than to common-sense.

This is an area in which the states of CEE should play a leading role. Because of the history of their own fight for freedom, they have a unique perspective on the clash of values which underpins the Ukraine conflict: the desire of the Ukrainian people for European integration, and the determination of the Russian elite to prevent it.

They can articulate the narrative of democracy and freedom as an immediate and personal story. This is far more powerful than any nuanced political declaration.

### 2. Expose the tactics

Rather than dealing piecemeal with each Russian accusation, the West should name them for what they are: tactics to dismiss, distort, distract and dismay.

The most effective way to do this would be through public analysis and dissection of Russia's communications techniques. There is an urgent need for both governmental and non-governmental organisations to expose the methodology of Russian propaganda, to promote understanding of the techniques which underpin it.

### 3. Predict attack

In parallel, governments should pay more attention to the limited tactics used by Russian commentators and predict how they will be applied to their own communications.

Internal communications plans dealing with Russian issues should address the likely responses from the Russian side, based on Russia's 4D approach.

A spokesperson who knows, for example, that a particular accusation is likely to be answered with an inappropriate parallel from history will be better placed to debunk the answer with the minimum delay.

### 4. Name the speakers

Finally, the West should expose the Kremlin's media and supportive commentators for the propaganda mouthpieces they are.

This is an area in which both governmental and non-governmental actors in CEE can play a role.

One step would be to analyse and publish the ties linking allegedly independent commentators to Russia. Such ties can be hard to pin down, but the effort would be repaid by making clear to Western audiences how dependent on Russian backing the allegedly "independent" commentators are.

Another would be to compare the Kremlin media's coverage with the coverage of the same issues by genuinely independent and professional media. This would be a simple way to highlight their lack of editorial standards and defiance of balanced reporting.

In all this, the focus should be on educating and informing as broad an audience as possible, and then allowing them to decide for themselves what sources are credible and which reporting can be believed.

Russia's great victory in the conflict has been to turn information into an invisible weapon. The best way to counter it will be to make that weapon visible.

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This paper summarises the main points of a larger study entitled "Anatomy of an Info-War: How Russia's Propaganda Machine Works, and How to Counter It", out now on [www.cepolicy.org](http://www.cepolicy.org).