

Russia's disinformation on Ukraine and the EU's response

SUMMARY

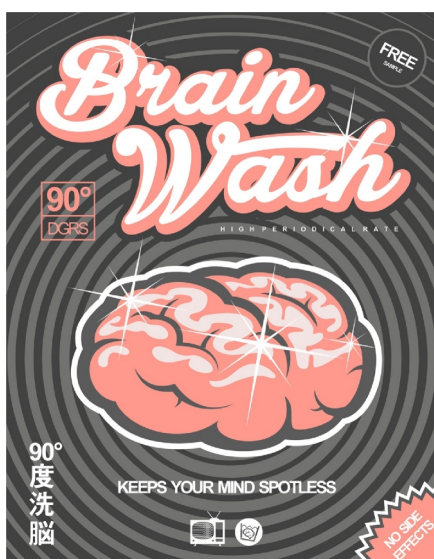
Manipulation of information is central to the Ukraine crisis, with some observers even referring to an 'information war'. Coverage in Russia's largely state-controlled domestic media bears the hallmarks of a sophisticated disinformation campaign. Internationally, multilingual news channel RT is Russia's main media tool, projecting the Kremlin's narrative to a global audience.

In Russia itself, the vast majority of people subscribe uncritically to the version of events presented in the country's media. The Russian media are also highly effective in neighbouring countries with large ethnic Russian populations such as the Baltic States. However, the global impact is more mitigated; while RT has garnered a huge international audience, Russia's image has deteriorated substantially in many countries since the start of the Ukraine crisis.

Proposals to counter Russian disinformation include increased funding for existing Western media broadcasting in Russian, such as the BBC World Service, and the creation of new ones, such as a jointly operated Russian-language TV channel offering not only news but also entertainment in order to compete with pro-Kremlin media.

For its part, the EU has set up a strategic communication task force to develop a response; one of the first initiatives of the new team is a weekly review exposing Russian disinformation.

This briefing updates an [earlier edition](#) of May 2015.



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Information is key to the Ukraine crisis

Information has become central to the Ukraine crisis. The Kremlin is using Russian media to shore up domestic support. Outside the country, the RT television channel aims to divide international public opinion and undermine hitherto largely united opposition to Russian involvement in eastern Ukraine.

The centrality of the media has been highlighted by [images](#) of pro-Russian soldiers capturing TV towers in eastern Ukraine, cutting off Ukrainian broadcasts and replacing them with Russian TV channels. It has also been confirmed by Defence Minister, Sergei Shoigu, [describing](#) the media as 'weapons', and Dmitry Kiselev – head of Rossiya Segodnya news agency and the Kremlin's '[chief propagandist](#)' – asserting that information wars have become '[the main type of warfare](#)'.

A sophisticated domestic media campaign

According to English-language daily the *Moscow Times*, the Russian presidential administration holds regular [political briefings](#) for media bosses, who also have 'yellow telephones' with direct hotlines to the Kremlin. Certainly coverage of the Ukraine crisis in Russian domestic media bears the hallmarks of a coordinated propaganda campaign. Reporting is relentlessly one-sided, always highlighting the death and destruction inflicted by Ukrainian attacks, never the other way round. Worse, there is strong evidence that many of the stories featured on Russian media are fabricated – not only the infamous story of the [crucified three-year-old](#) (the newsreader who presented the story subsequently [defended](#) it, arguing that while the facts had not been proven, it was an accurate reflection of 'hellish' conditions in Slavyansk) – but also of numerous other [children](#) killed by Ukrainian shelling. One actress is [alleged](#) to have posed for Russian TV in a variety of roles, including those of a Ukrainian housewife denouncing the 'fascist' government of her country, and of a soldier's mother. Many similar stories have been documented by Ukrainian site, [StopFake](#). This lack of concern for the facts is unsurprising given Dmitry Kiselev's [announcement](#) that the era of objective journalism is over.

Thus, in Russian media, Euromaidan protestors are '[neo-Nazi Banderites](#)' cold-bloodedly massacring unarmed opponents in the '[Odessa Katyn](#)'; their government is an anti-semitic '[junta](#)', perpetrating [pogroms](#) on Russians and Jews. The emotive language charged with historical allusions – to Ukrainian nationalist Stepan Bandera, who fought alongside the Nazis, and to the Katyn massacre – has been particularly resonant around the 70th anniversary of Soviet victory in World War II.

These characteristics were already typical in Soviet propaganda, but the new Russian media have gone a step further by [sugar-coating](#) the political message with Western-style entertainment. Some foreign news stories may be fabricated, but the media are careful to avoid losing credibility by contradicting viewers' everyday experiences – there has been little attempt to [downplay](#) the economic recession, for example. The presence of notionally independent media outlets such as [Moscow Echo](#) radio station or [lenta.ru](#) news portal – though in fact often owned by state-controlled companies such as Gazprom Media or pro-Putin oligarchs – creates an illusion of pluralism, not unlike the role of the opposition parties in Russia's [managed democracy](#). Even some criticism is allowed – provided it does not challenge Vladimir Putin's role as the country's saviour and [problem-solver](#).

Russia has proved equally adept at mastering the new media – trolls [allegedly](#) linked to pro-Putin youth group *Nashi* or from the Kremlin's '[troll factory](#)' disrupt political discussions on online fora and social media, reiterating the official narrative on the Ukraine crisis and [attacking critics](#).

Russia's instruments of international soft power

RT

The 24-hour news channel RT is Russia's main international media weapon. In order to draw in a broader audience and avoid being perceived as an instrument of Kremlin propaganda, the channel has shifted from its former emphasis on Russia-related stories to international news (and accordingly [renamed](#) itself in 2009; previously it had been *Russia Today*). RT brands itself as a platform for provocative and original perspectives (its slogan: 'Question More'), raising sometimes legitimate concerns – for example over [fracking](#), [austerity policies](#), the EU's [democratic deficit](#), [NSA surveillance](#) – that resonate with a heterogeneous mix of environmentalists, civil liberties campaigners, eurosceptics, far-right parties, and various disaffected groups. Its reports feature the [Occupy Wall Street](#) movement, Wikileaks founder [Julian Assange](#), and [Scottish Nationalists](#) – precisely the kind of dissenting voices whose counterparts within Russia are ignored by the Russian domestic media.

While RT focuses on attacking the US and EU rather than defending Russia, the methods it uses are very similar to Russian domestic media. Like her domestic counterparts, RT chief editor Magarita Simonyan [admits](#) to having a hotline to the Kremlin, and she [echoes](#) Dmitry Kiselev's disregard for 'objective reality'. Conspiracy theories are a staple both on RT and domestic media – one Spanish-language RT [article](#) (since withdrawn) speculated that the US may have been to blame for spreading the Ebola virus.

With the Kremlin struggling to balance the federal budget, RT's 2015 budget was [cut by 10%](#) (earlier it had been promised a 30% increase); nevertheless, it added [German and French](#) channels to its existing range of English, Spanish, Arabic and Russian, expanding its potential audience (previously [estimated](#) at 600 million) still further.

Other pro-Kremlin international media and organisations

Alongside RT, [Sputnik](#) and Russia Beyond The Headlines ([RBTH](#)) publish multilingual news stories; both are state controlled, whereas [Russia Insider](#) news portal claims to be a volunteer initiative launched by expatriates living in Russia and funded by readers. British daily [The Telegraph](#) publishes stories by [RBTH](#), while [Foreign Policy](#) magazine includes sponsored content from RBTH's sister site [Russia Direct](#), enabling these two Russian platforms to pass off their own pro-Kremlin content under the names of the host publications. Meanwhile, Russian trolls are as [active](#) on Western online media as they are back home.

Pro-Russian NGOs such as the [Institute of Slavic Strategic Studies](#) (Czech Republic) and the [Eurasian Institute](#) (Georgia), some with [alleged](#) links to the Kremlin, also advocate sympathy for the Russian perspective.

How effective is Russian information policy?

In Russia – widespread acceptance of the official narrative on Ukraine

In Russia itself, the most influential media are owned or controlled by the state and its agencies, or by pro-Putin businessmen. News broadcasts on state-controlled TV Channel One reach [82%](#) of the population, and for [43%](#) television is their only source of information on current affairs. Media offering dissenting views such as Dozhd TV,

Novaya Gazeta newspaper and Moscow Echo radio station have a much smaller audience, and in any case are increasingly being reined in. Meanwhile, vaguely worded [anti-extremism laws](#) are among a range of legislative tools used with growing frequency to clamp down on online opposition.

Given the extent of state control and high levels of trust in the media ([70%](#) believe that national TV coverage of events in Ukraine is mostly or fully objective), it is hardly surprising that most Russians subscribe to the version of events presented by state media – according to a [survey](#) by independent pollsters Levada Centre, 83% blame Ukraine and Western countries for the Ukraine crisis, while only 20% believe that Russian soldiers have been sent to fight there (however, there is a certain ambivalence – in reply to another question in the same survey on Russia's support for Donbass militia, 38% agreed that 'even if there are Russian soldiers and weapons in Ukraine, it is right for Russia to deny their presence in the current international situation' – recalling the Orwellian concept of doublethink, the ability to believe simultaneously in two contradictory notions). Increasingly, Russians [associate](#) Ukrainians with negative qualities such as hypocrisy, secretiveness, envy, avarice, arrogance and violence, reflecting negative media coverage.

In other ex-Soviet countries – Russian media are highly influential

Russian media are also highly effective outside the country. In the Baltics, Russian TV – either broadcast directly from Russia or re-broadcast by Latvian-based [PBK](#), which reaches some 4 million viewers – targets Russian speakers and ethnic Russians in particular (in Estonia and Latvia, around [two thirds](#) and one quarter respectively of the total population). PBK is the [second most widely watched](#) channel in Latvia, and its influence is reflected in consistently stronger backing for the Kremlin among ethnic Russians than in the general population – in a 2014 [survey](#), over twice as many ethnic-minority Latvians expressed support for Russia as for Ukraine, with similar results from a 2008 Estonian [survey](#) on Russian intervention in Georgia. [Lithuania](#), Moldova and [Ukraine](#) itself have blocked Russian TV channels, to prevent them from exerting similar influence on their minorities.

In the rest of the world – public opinions on Russia remain divided

Beyond Russian-speaking minorities, RT in particular has garnered a huge global audience – it is estimated to have [2.5 million viewers](#) in the UK (year-on-year, a rise of 60%) and [3 million](#) in US urban areas, while in South Africa it is by far the largest European news channel. RT's [YouTube channel](#) has 1.6 million subscribers, far ahead of rivals CNN (1 000 000), Al Jazeera English (800 000) and BBC News (600 000).

It is true that RT has failed to prevent a general deterioration in Russia's image abroad. According to a spring 2015 [poll](#) by US-based Pew Research Center in 8 NATO countries, approval rates of the country and its president were at or close to record low levels – ranging (for Putin) from just 6% in Spain to 9% in Poland, 21% in the US and 23% in Germany. On the other hand, public opinion is more favourable to Russia in countries to which it has historical and cultural ties, such as [Serbia](#), and, within the EU, [Greece](#) and [Bulgaria](#).

Countering Russian disinformation

The Kremlin's disinformation is nothing new – for example, Russian media carried [stories](#) on alleged genocide in South Ossetia during the 2008 conflict with Georgia.

However, concern about disinformation on Ukraine and beyond – including by Russian state media – has prompted numerous calls for an effective response.

Investing in Russian language quality media

Russian-language media broadcast from Western countries do not enjoy the same popularity in Russia as RT does in the West; for example, only [5%](#) of Russians watch the news on Euronews; fewer than 2% tune into Western radio stations such as Radio Liberty, Deutsche Welle and BBC World Service. The latter's Russian service [stopped](#) broadcasting in 2011 and since then has only been available online; its former director Peter Horrocks has [warned](#) of it being 'financially outgunned by Russia and the Chinese', calling for extra World Service funding to counter the wave of pro-Kremlin information. However, in September 2015, BBC Director-General, Tony Hall [acknowledged](#) that the BBC Russian Service should not have been cut, and [presented](#) proposals for the coming decade, including a satellite TV service for Russian speakers as well as increased digital presence on YouTube and Rutube (the Russian equivalent) to address 'democratic deficits'.

Clamping down on disinformation

Meanwhile, several countries have acted on alleged abuse of Western media freedom by Russian broadcasters. Citing disinformation and incitation of hatred, Lithuania has blocked Russian-language channels such as PBK and [NTV Mir](#). In September 2015, the UK media regulator, Ofcom, [ruled](#) that RT had breached broadcasting rules on impartiality four times in three programmes. For example, one episode in RT's 'Truthseeker' series (taken off air in July 2014) accused the BBC of faking pictures of a chemical attack in Syria; another episode [claimed](#) that Ukrainian leaders had repeated 'Hitler's genocidal oath' and that the Ukrainian army had 'systematically massacred' civilians. A separate documentary, [Ukraine's Refugees](#), also accused Kyiv of involvement in killing civilians. RT was 'shocked and disappointed in Ofcom's decision', RT's editor-in-chief, Margarita Simonyan said in a [statement](#) following the ruling, adding that 'we are being criticized because the show used statements made by Ukrainian politicians – i.e. their own words – because those statements make them look bad'.

Stepping up social media activity

Western media and governments have been intensifying efforts to counter Russia on social media – not always successfully. DARPA, the US military research agency, invested [US\\$50 million](#) in a [Social Media in Strategic Communication programme](#), looking at disinformation among other areas; however, the State Department's [UnitedForUkraine](#) campaign launched in March 2014 never really got off the ground (it currently has just 142 followers) and at one point was [hijacked](#) by Russia's Ministry of Foreign Affairs. US-funded Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty has been more successful – its Russian-language [Facebook](#) and [Twitter](#) pages have attracted 360 000 and 147 000 followers respectively. Meanwhile, the British army has joined the information war with a [450-strong brigade](#) of '[Facebook warriors](#)', with tasks including psychological warfare and engagement through social media.

However, western social media remain at a [disadvantage](#) compared to their Russian counterparts, due to numerous constraints such as US [rules](#) prohibiting government agencies from 'covert action ... intended to influence United States political processes, public opinion, policies, or media'.

The EU's response to Russian disinformation

The March 2015 [conclusions](#) of the European Council 'stressed the need to challenge Russia's ongoing disinformation campaigns', and called for an action plan on strategic communication. Accordingly, a communications team, the East StratCom Task Force, was established in April 2015 within the European External Action Service (EEAS), to draw up and implement the plan in cooperation with the Member States and EU institutions.

The Action Plan, [published](#) on 22 June 2015, aims at 'effective communication and promotion of EU policies and values towards the Eastern neighbourhood' as well as 'increased public awareness of disinformation activities by external actors, and improved EU capacity to anticipate and respond to such activities'. According to the Action Plan, the EU should, where necessary, be prepared to 'anticipate and respond to disinformation relating to the EU'.

EU 'mythbusters' thwart Russian 'disinformation attacks'

The East StratCom Task Force comprises nine Russian-speaking officials and media professionals, funded not from the EU budget but by Member States directly. These self-styled '[EU mythbusters](#)' monitor and analyse Russian-language media, including from the Eastern Partnership countries (Ukraine, Belarus, Moldova, Georgia, Azerbaijan and Armenia).

On 4 November 2015, the team launched a new weekly EU '[Disinformation Review](#)', collecting as many examples of Russian 'disinformation attacks' as possible with the help of a large network of journalists, NGOs, think-tanks, and experts. The objective of the Disinformation Review is to show 'the European public the high amount of such disinformation attacks that target European audience[s] every single day, to expose the number of countries targeted, and, thus, to explain to the European audience the breadth of this problem.'

The first [Disinformation Reviews](#) debunk a long list of fabricated stories, including media allegations that nationalists from Ukraine are planning to fight Russia in Syria, reported by Ukrainian fact-checking website [stopfake.org](#). Other examples of disinformation exposed by the East StratCom team include: a claim by Russian state-owned TV channel [Russia-24](#) that ISIL/Da'esh bombed the Russian Metrojet Airbus in Sinai on 31 October in agreement with the US; a US admission of defeat in Ukraine; an acknowledgement by Ukraine's secret service that ISIL/Da'esh fighters use Ukraine as a temporary base and health resort; and an accusation that Doctors Without Borders sell human organs from Donbas residents.

Russia fights back against EU 'information warfare'

Not surprisingly, Russian media have responded to EU initiatives to counter Russian disinformation, including the East Stratcom Task Force, by picking up reports on an [alleged](#) split in the EU over the East StratCom Team – including concerns that VP/HR Mogherini would not be 'fully behind the project' – and spun their own version of the story under the headline '[The EU's Anti-Russian Propaganda Effort is Falling Apart](#)'.

According to [RT](#), Russia's Foreign Ministry has criticised 'EU drafted information warfare initiatives to target so-called Russian propaganda', which it feels are 'clearly aimed at pushing out Russia's presence in the international media field.'

EP resolutions:

[on the situation in Ukraine](#) (15 January 2015): the EP accuses Russia of 'waging an undeclared hybrid war against Ukraine, including information war', 'calls on the Commission and the Commissioner for European Neighbourhood Policy and Enlargement Negotiations to prepare and present to Parliament within two months a communication strategy to counter the Russian propaganda campaign directed towards the EU, its eastern neighbours and Russia itself, and to develop instruments that would allow the EU and its Member States to address the propaganda campaign at European and national level'.

[on Ukraine](#) (17 July 2014): the EP emphasises 'the importance of ... avoiding propaganda, hate speech and rhetoric including from Russia which may further aggravate the conflict';

[on the murder of the Russian opposition leader Boris Nemtsov and the state of democracy in Russia](#) (12 March 2015): 'is alarmed by the atmosphere of hatred directed against ... neighbouring nations, which has been growing in Russia in recent years, instigated by state propaganda and official media'; 'calls on the authorities of the Russian Federation to stop the shameful propaganda and information war against its neighbours, the Western world and its own people'.

on [EU-Russia relations](#) (10 June 2015): renews its calls for strengthened capabilities to monitor and analyse 'Russian propaganda' and calls on the Commission to earmark 'adequate funding for concrete projects aimed at countering Russian propaganda and misinformation within the EU and abroad'.

on the [review of the European Neighbourhood Policy](#) (9 July 2015): urges the EU to increase its presence in the partner countries using more interactive audiovisual means and social media in the respective local languages.

Further reading

'[Understanding disinformation and propaganda](#)', Bentzen, Naja, EPRS, 2015.

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