



# Russia and Disinformation: The Case of Ukraine

FULL REPORT

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# RUSSIA AND DISINFORMATION: THE CASE OF UKRAINE

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How does Russian state disinformation operate in the Caucasus region? This report considers three different cases of disinformation deployment in the Caucasus region to highlight the dynamics of Russian state influence, both domestically in the Russian Federation's North Caucasus region as well as in Georgia, just across the Russian border in the South Caucasus.

This report is part of a series on disinformation to come out of the Actors and Narratives programme. The other three reports in the *Russia and Disinformation* series: 'The Case of the Caucasus', 'Maskirovka', and 'Institutions and Actors' can be found at [www.crestresearch.ac.uk/tag/russia-disinformation/](http://www.crestresearch.ac.uk/tag/russia-disinformation/)

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# INTRODUCTION

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How does Russian state disinformation operate in Ukraine? As covered in the CREST report on disinformation and *maskirovka*, the term disinformation is often used to embrace concepts such as ‘strategic deception’, ‘active measures’, information operations, psychological operations, concealment, and deniability. The common factor is the use of various information tools to convey selective, incomplete and/or distorted messages in order to influence targeted audiences. Disinformation may accompany traditional diplomacy and be aimed at promoting ‘strategic narratives’ which seek to shape the views of target audiences; it may also be aimed at undermining credibility or undermining the confidence of perceived adversaries by disrupting their own narratives and sowing confusion and mistrust.

Ukraine has long been regarded by Russia simultaneously as a lesser sibling, a member of the broader ‘Russian world’, as well as an important strategic asset territorially – as a buffer between Russia and NATO. Over the last two decades, however, Moscow’s hold on Ukraine has weakened, as popular support in the country has pushed it towards the European Union and NATO. In 2014, the Ukrainian Revolution overthrew Moscow-backed president Viktor Yanukovich. Russian troops annexed the Crimean Peninsula and invaded Ukraine’s eastern Donbas region. Since then, Ukraine has been engaged in open conflict with Russia. At times, this conflict has involved offensive military operations – often channelled through local paramilitary groups, alongside a campaign to discredit, undermine and deploy information warfare against Ukraine. In this way, this report covers the more recent usage of multiple influence measures, and it thus also supplements and builds on the report on Russia and Disinformation in the North Caucasus. This report suggests that Russian disinformation does not operate according to a playbook, but is rather piecemeal and opportunist, involving a multitude of actors and methods in an only partially coordinated way.

This report considers Kremlin disinformation deployed in and surrounding Ukraine to highlight the dynamics of disinformation as used against a perceived enemy, in order to understand how Russia applies its operations abroad. In contrast to disinformation techniques used

within Russia, the goal of disinformation circulated internationally is less to consolidate support for Putin and his policies than it is to sow distrust and disbelief in an objective truth. For the purposes of analysis, the report will analyse two case studies in order to understand the dynamics of disinformation in and around Ukraine: (1) the annexation of Crimea; and (2) the downing of Malaysian Airlines flight MH17.

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## DISINFORMATION

Disinformation in the Russian context is often used as an umbrella term which includes other concepts such as strategic deception (*maskirovka*), information operations, and denial. As stated in the report on disinformation and *maskirovka*, the common factor is the use of various information tools – with some analysts referring to the ‘information weapon’ – to convey selected, incomplete and/or distorted messages in order to influence targeted audiences.

Active measures, reflexive control, propaganda, and disinformation are related concepts. In the Soviet era, active measures comprised media manipulation, reflexive control, and sometimes murder; disinformation plays a role in each of these (White, 2016). As observers have said elsewhere about Russian propaganda, disinformation is also used by Russia not so much to convince, but to contaminate the information environment and create doubt among perceived adversaries and their supporters. In the Soviet era, as today, Russian disinformation can be divided into two spheres: offensive disinformation, which seeks to influence decision makers abroad, and defensive disinformation which seeks to influence citizens (White, 2016). This report will look into offensive disinformation, which comprises Russia’s attempts to pollute and disrupt narratives in targeted contexts globally.

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# THE ANNEXATION OF CRIMEA

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The Crimean Peninsula in Ukraine was militarily annexed by Russia over February and March 2014. Since that time, the region has been administered by Moscow as a subject of the Russian Federation. The Crimea annexation is a part of the overall Russian military intervention that took place in the aftermath of the 2014 Ukrainian revolution which includes the conflict in southern and eastern Ukraine.

Russia's disinformation campaign surrounding the annexation of Crimea is an example of 'active measures' to weaken perceived foes. The Russian authorities deployed disinformation before, during, and after the annexation in three ways:

1. Putting out false information
2. Psyops
3. Misrepresenting event dynamics

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## FALSE INFORMATION

In terms of putting out false information, Putin denied existence of Russian troops in Crimea for one year. In March 2014, one month after the fall of Ukraine's then president and Moscow ally Viktor Yanukovich, reports from the peninsula of Crimea began emerging about masked 'little green men'. These were in fact Russian special forces – hundreds of members of the Russia's Main Intelligence Directorate (GRU)'s 45th Spetsnaz Regiment, wearing uniforms without insignia who had been quietly occupying Crimea, to create a 'popular uprising'. At the time, Putin denied they were Russian troops (e.g., Baczynska, 2015 and The Guardian, 2014), saying they were local militias formed to defend the rights of ethnic Russians in Crimea. While some of the troops involved were indeed comprised of local pro-Russian individuals and were hired for the operation, the majority were professional Russian military troops. Within days, Russia had illegally annexed Crimea. Putin only admitted to their presence a year later in a documentary aired in March 2015 (Shuster, 2015).

Russian journalists, who were forced to repeat Putin's line that there were no Russian troops in Crimea were put in an awkward position but continued to toe the Kremlin line. Newsman Dmitri Kiselev, who runs Kremlin media network Rossiya Segodnya and who hosts an analysis show on state TV, told TIME Magazine, "Vladimir Putin never changed his position... he never said that our troops aren't there, because we always had a base there," referring to the Russian base on the Black Sea in the Crimean city of Sevastopol (Shuster, 2015).

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## PSYOPS

A crucial aspect of the psyops campaign surrounding Crimea were actions taken by the Russian intelligence services, in particular the GRU, preceding the annexation. The GRU launched a covert influence operation in Crimea (Nakashima, 2017), the aim of which was to impact key decision-makers and the broader public, paving the way for the military action, which began on 27 February 2014 with the taking of the Crimean parliament building. Beginning with Yanukovich's ouster, military spies created numerous fake personas on Facebook, and the Russian analogue VKontakte (VK) (Nakashima, 2017). These fake profiles were created to represent ordinary Ukrainians from across the country who were disenchanted with Kyiv's opposition protests. For example, on 22 February 2014, a man calling himself Ivan Galitsin posted a comment to an article in a British newspaper saying, "There was a coup in Ukraine... I live in Kiev. I was on the Maidan, but peaceful protests ended two months ago, when we were displaced by armed nationalists. It's a nightmare. Fascists came to us again 70 years after the Second World War. I do not want this future for Ukraine" (Nakashima, 2017). The GRU had used paid ads to boost the online groups' popularity, getting nearly 200,000 views on one day - 27 February - just on Facebook. During the annexation, the Russian government spent more than \$19 million to support 600 people to constantly comment on articles, write blogs and remain active on social media, in both English and Russian (Holloway, 2017). These 'paid trolls' targeted comment sections on online articles, as well as on social media platforms of Twitter, VKontakte, and Facebook – all weakly regulated spaces.

A psyops campaign was also aimed at the Crimean population in advance of the Crimean status referendum

# THE ANNEXATION OF CRIMEA

## Russia and Disinformation

on 16 March 2014. For example, in Sevastopol, SMS messages and direct messages on social media networks were distributed with messages such as ‘support Russian policy in Crimea’, as well as references to the advantages of joining Russia disparaging remarks about Ukraine (Krymchanin, 2014). One rumour widely disseminated involved the crucifixion of a toddler in Slovyansk by Ukrainian soldiers, which was quickly debunked (Nemtsova, 2014). Other discourse engaged in fear mongering about the alleged fascist nature of the new Ukrainian government.

The fact that the psops in Ukraine appears to be GRU-led – hence separate from the Kremlin and the Russian Armed Forces – suggests that the GRU is proficient at the mixing of overt force and psyops, using technology.

to disrupt social cohesion. With the Internet and social media, the strategy becomes more rapidly and efficiently deployed, and the volume of disinformation grows exponentially.

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## MISREPRESENTING EVENT DYNAMICS

The main misrepresentation about Ukraine in Russia’s disinformation is it being fascist. Accusations of fascism targeting Ukraine have historical precedence. Since World War II, Moscow has characterised the Ukrainian independence movement practically as a Nazi one, efforts which have typically highlighted Nazi collaboration with some Ukrainian independence figures. In the contemporary era, the ‘fascist Ukraine’ discourse has been a fairly constant feature of Kremlin efforts to discredit the Ukrainian revolution. While some neo-Nazi type groups exist in Ukraine, its far-right parties have failed in elections and the appointment of Volodymyr Groysman, of Jewish background, as prime minister does not constrict the discourse.

The fundamental purpose Russian disinformation, is to undermine the official version of events — even the very idea that there is a true version of events — and foster a kind of policy paralysis. The disinformation launched during this campaign was not aimed to rally audiences to Russia’s point of view, but to exacerbate social tensions and plant doubt about the presence of any empirical truth. This practice is not new. For example, during the 1984 Olympics in Los Angeles, the KGB distributed fake Ku Klux Klan leaflets with threats and racist caricatures and sent them to African athletes competing at the Games (Rao, 2017). Whether it is anti-black racism in the US or the spectre of Fascism in Ukraine, the strategy is to exploit already salient issues and narratives in a society and use them

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# MH17

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Malaysia Airlines Flight 17 (MH17) was a regularly scheduled passenger flight heading to Kuala Lumpur from Amsterdam. While flying over eastern Ukraine on 17 July 2014, the plane was shot down, killing all 283 passengers and 15 crew. The downing occurred in the open conflict in Donbas in an area controlled by pro-Russian separatists.

Details of the downing of MH17 have been established by the Joint Investigative Team (JIT), comprised of the national investigative agencies of Australia, Belgium, Malaysia, the Netherlands, and Ukraine. In October 2015 the JIT concluded that the MH17 was shot down with a BUK missile system of the 53rd Anti-Aircraft Missile Brigade of the Russian Army. The missile system was found to have been moved from Russian to Ukrainian territory before the downing of the MH17, and afterwards, was taken back to Russia. Bellingcat, an independent organisation that uses open source and social media investigation to analyse various conflict events and subjects, has come to the same conclusion. The Russian authorities continue to deny the conclusions and have still not reported to the JIT that a BUK of the 53rd Brigade was deployed in Eastern Ukraine (Parket, 2018).

The Russian authorities deployed disinformation before, during, and after the annexation in three main ways:

1. Limiting coverage/reportage
2. Media blitz of disinformation
3. Settling on one (false) version of events

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## LIMITING COVERAGE/ REPORTAGE

Immediately after the downing of the MH17, the Russian government and its separatist allies in Ukraine's east obstructed access to the crash site for investigators. International observers from the Organisation for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE) were denied full access to the crash site by Russia-backed rebels 'for their own safety' and sent away after a rebel-

commander fired warning shots (Agence France Presse, 2014; Walker et al., 2014). The same OSCE observers reported that the rebels in charge of the site appeared to be drunk (Fisher, 2014). Russian-backed rebels continued to block access to international monitors for days, reportedly carrying away evidence, and taking bodies without informing the public (Reuters, 2014).

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## MEDIA BLITZ OF DISINFORMATION

The Russian disinformation deployed around the downing of Malaysian Airlines Flight MH17 consisted of a barrage of falsehoods. Russia's UN ambassador, glossing over how the MH17 was downed, said Russia 'fully blames Kyiv' for all the unrest in the region and foreign minister Sergei Lavrov, rejecting Ukrainian claims that Russia was responsible for the attack said he had 'hardly heard a single true statement come from Kyiv in the past few months' (Walker et al., 2014). The statements made by Russian officials in the days after the MH17 downing consist not of a single narrative but of a wide-ranging list of 'concerns': Russian grievances and misgivings about Western media and politicians' accusations as well as Kyiv's responsibility in the events.

Within days of the downing, the Russian military presented deputy head of the Russian military, Lieutenant-General A.V. Kartapolov, implicated Ukraine in the crash at a press conference. State-controlled RT (formerly Russia Today) featured continuous coverage of the press briefing on its English language channel (RT, 2014). At the press conference, Kartapolov claimed that flight MH17's course had been deliberately changed to direct it over Ukraine's eastern warzone and that a Ukrainian jet shot it down. The satellite images presented to support his case, however, were later shown by a team of arms control experts to have been altered (Lewis, 2016).

Bellingcat found numerous inconsistencies in the Russian authorities' accounts of the incident (Toler, 2018). For example, it was said at Kartapolov's press conference that a Ukrainian aircraft was detected near MH17 at the time of the crash. In 2016, however, the Russian Ministry of Defence held a press conference on allegedly newly uncovered radar data in which the Ukrainian aircraft was not shown.

Bellingcat has debunked much of the disinformation put out by the Kremlin and its associates regarding the MH17 downing, and it has identified a high-ranking Russian military commander likely tied to the missile operation (Bellingcat Investigation Team, 2017). The disinformation however continues to be disseminated. This disinformation is now in the public domain, forming fodder for a wide array of conspiracy theories. In December 2017, TV Zvezda, the official news agency of the Russian armed forces and state TV Rossiya-1 put out two lies, both debunked by Bellingcat and journalists of independent Russian news outlet The Insider. TV Zvezda featured an alleged Ukrainian officer who had defected to Russia, making claims about the actions of the Ukrainian government that were debunked by Bellingcat two years prior in July 2015 (Bellingcat Investigation team, 2015). These claims were repeated by Russian state-controlled agency 1st Channel (Perviy Kanal, 2017). The Insider highlighted that the satellite imagery featured by Rossiya-1's segment actually contradicts the testimony of a witness in the same segment. The witness claims to be a previously unknown eyewitness of Ukrainian troop movements in Donbas at the time of the MH17 downing.

Another example of the barrage of falsehoods was the narrative about an alleged Spanish air traffic controller, called Carlos, who claimed he was employed at Kyiv's Borispyl Airport at the time of the crash. His claims that two Ukrainian jets were in the area of MH17 just before the crash were used by RT and other pro-Kremlin news outlets after the downing of the MH17 to assign blame on Ukraine. RFE/RL and the RISE Project, a Romanian investigative journalist group in Bucharest, found "Carlos" in Spain, and uncovered the fact that the man was never an air traffic controller, but rather a convicted criminal whose real name was not Carlos. The man reported that he was paid \$48,000 by Russia for his statement. The RT material about Carlos was repeated by such Russian state-controlled outlets as TASS (TASS, 2014), RIA (RIA Novosti, 2014), as well as Putin himself (Schreck, 2018) in Oliver Stone's documentary about the Russian President. Moreover, the stories about Carlos have not been redacted even after his real identity has since been exposed. The deviation of the narratives over time suggests that Russian disinformation is reactive and shaped by the changing circumstances.

Within Russia, Russian state outlets, which present the Kremlin-friendly version of events report on the incident. Moreover, Russian state media control and online censorship make it extremely difficult for news stories that challenge the Russian state position to reach the Russian public. A poll conducted among Russians by Russian state-owned public opinion research centre VTsIOM revealed that only 1% of respondents believed that Russia was responsible for the downing of MH17 (RT, 2016).

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## SETTLING ON ONE (FALSE) VERSION OF EVENTS

Bellingcat found that between 2014 and 2016 the Russian government shifted between two main versions of events in their public communications: (1) that a Ukrainian fighter jet shot down flight MH17 and (2) that a Ukrainian BUK missile shot down the plane. Currently, however, the Kremlin's position has settled around one theory – that of the Ukrainian BUK missile system. Moreover, the Kremlin has moved towards this account without any clear redaction of previous media reports, fabricated radar evidence, witness reports and official statements that contradict it.

It should be pointed out that specific versions of events put forward by news agencies are often based on single anonymous individuals whose identities cannot be confirmed. In the past, Russian state TV has used actors to make claims laying blame for war crimes in Donbas on the Ukrainian side (Dakaev, 2014 and EU vs Disinfo, 2018).

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# CONCLUSION

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The evidence of both the annexation of Crimea and the downing of the MH17 provides several important lessons and implications for policy. The first is the understanding that Kremlin disinformation can contradict itself, and that the Russian authorities and media make little to no effort at redacting the trail of falsehoods they leave behind, even after convincing evidence of their fabrication emerges. The use of various Russian media repeating and disseminating the various narratives further serves to fill the information space with many, often contradictory versions.

Second, the lack of any single narrative in these cases of disinformation in fact fit Russia's overall goal in undermining "the credibility or confidence of perceived adversaries by disrupting their own narratives and sowing confusion and mistrust" as stated in the Study report on Disinformation and *Maskirovka*. While fact-checking Russian disinformation is important in understanding the lifecycles of Russian disinformation, these cases show fact-checks do not stop the disinformation from continuing to be circulated, even after the time of crisis has passed. This supports work being done elsewhere about the ineffectuality of countering Russian propaganda merely by disproving it. Moreover, the lack of a single narrative means that more labour is required to debunk each version of events, something that may well be a deliberate feature.

Third, the ad-hoc nature of the disinformation in these cases, for example the shifting narratives after the MH17 downing, suggests that Russian disinformation is reactive and constrained by the circumstances. Furthermore, the disinformation put out would not be possible without the media control that Moscow has monopolised over past few years. By shutting down independent press, it controls the story, effectively distributing the ad-hoc, shifting narratives through its dominance of Russian-language media and international outlet RT.

Fourth, and last, the presence of conflict in Ukraine, even if war is not openly declared, is confirmation of the idea that Russia uses disinformation as a major strategic aspect of war. While this idea began emerging after Russia's conflict with Georgia in 2008, of which

disinformation was a significant aspect, Ukraine's case firmly solidifies this view. The Ukraine-Russia conflict, however, is not a 'hybrid war', nor is it a centralised, coordinated execution of the so-called Gerasimov doctrine, as many commentators claim. Rather, it is part of Russian state influence, amplified by competing Russian domestic and foreign organisations playing a role: the GRU, the Russian media, the Russian political elite, the FSB, the Russian Armed Forces, and others.

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