INSIDE THE KREMLIN HOUSE OF MIRRORS

The Hague Centre for Strategic Studies

HOW LIBERAL DEMOCRACIES CAN COUNTER RUSSIAN DISINFORMATION AND SOCIETAL INTERFERENCE

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How Liberal Democracies can Counter Russian Disinformation and Societal Interference

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How Liberal Democracies can Counter Russian Disinformation and Societal Interference

***The Hague* Centre for Strategic Studies**

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Table of Contents

LATVIA 35

UKRAINE 45

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR LIBERAL DEMOCRACIES 56

LIST OF ANNEXES 63

BIBLIOGRAPHY 66

List of Figures

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Russia's disinformation campaigns have targeted liberal democracies in Europe and North America with the goal to undermine societal coherence and distort the democratic process. The methods employed by the Kremlin include the dissemination of false, misleading and manipulative information and bear resemblance to the techniques, tactics and procedures used by the Soviet Union.

The past few years Western governments have been struggling with the question of how to appropriately respond to counter Russian subversive activities. Appropriate responses have been fiercely debated and are increasingly implemented. This study considers lessons for liberal democracies based on an analysis of the postures, strategies, organizational setups, programs, products, and capabilities that the following five actors have developed in recent years: the European Union, NATO, Finland, Latvia and Ukraine.

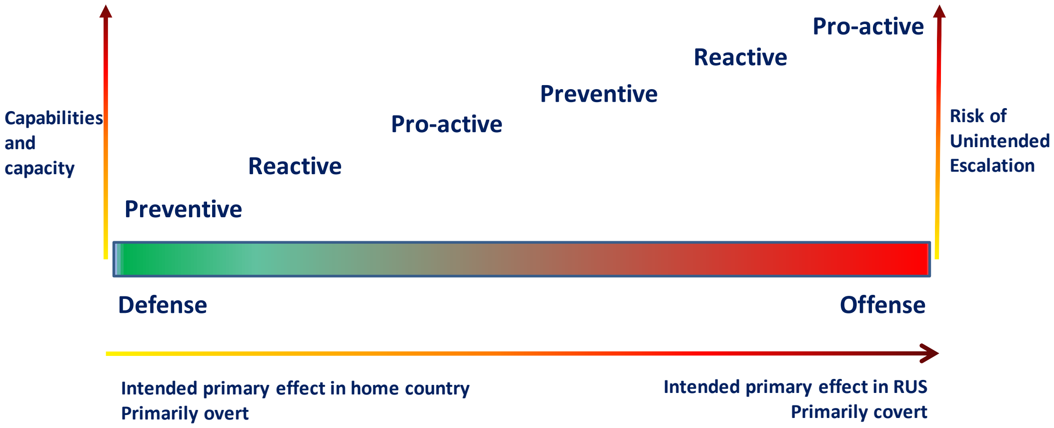
This study is based on extensive desk research and in-depth personal interviews with relevant high level representatives of these five actors. It offers recommendations for liberal democracies on how to deal with Russia's disinformation operations. The point of departure is the appropriate role and competence of government, as well as the constraints placed thereon in the context of a liberal democratic order. Of particular interest is how overall (top-down) visions, strategies and capabilities can help provide the best circumstances for societal resilience such as through (bottom-up) societal initiatives.

An analytical framework: strategic choices for government posture

Dealing with Russian meddling in societies through information operations goes beyond strategic communications. Disinformation activities are part of a broader hybrid campaign aimed at destabilizing societies and should be analyzed and countered as such. This requires a consolidated and comprehensive government wide effort that involves not only a serious strategic communication (StratCom) effort but also a range of other policies and measures.

This study has therefore proposed a framework for liberal democracies to consider their strategic posture and the development and implementation of new initiatives in dealing with disinformation (see Figure 1). The governmental posture can be defensive or offensive, and involve preventive, reactive or pro-active measures. Defensive activities are overt and designed to have an impact within a country's own information domain. Offensive measures, in contrast, are primarily covert and designed to have an impact in the Russian information domain. Both short term and long term solutions are possible and can be effective. This framework allows for the formulation of a whole-of-government approach, in which different departments have a role to play, synergies can be created, and progress be tracked.

Figure 1 The analytical framework: strategic choices for government posture


Capabilities and capacity
Preventive
Reactive
Pro-active
Preventive
Reactive
Pro-active
Risk of Unintended Escalation
Defense
Offense
Intended primary effect in home country
Primarily overt
Intended primary effect in RUS
Primarily covert

The role of government

The principal task of liberal democratic governments is to protect the safety, security and wellbeing of its citizens, at the same time as it is to uphold and protect the democratic constitutional order. This requires balancing the protection of society as a whole from external meddling in the fundamental rights of citizens. These latter include the right not to be monitored by the authorities without proper procedures being followed, the right not to be measured, analyzed or manipulated, and the right to the protection of privacy and personal data. Liberal democratic governments should seek to promote and protect such basic rights. At the same time, liberal democratic governments should not sit by idly while foreign actors purposively undermine the functioning of democratic processes. That would be similarly detrimental to the health of a liberal democracy. Yet, dealing with this democratic conundrum in a practical sense is not always an easy matter.

One recurring theme we encountered in our discussions with stakeholders concerned the dividing lines between legitimate expressions of freedom of speech and malign interference with potentially subversive effects; the distinction between ordinary people voicing their concerns and state-sponsored trolls; and how to formulate an effective response whilst remaining within the bounds of the rule of law, transparency and democratic oversight. These dividing lines are not always black and white. One important question in dealing with Russian information operations is the extent to which individuals, organizations and media should be allowed to spread disinformation and fake news under the guise of freedom of speech and press. A grey area exists between what is and what is not legitimate. When there are deliberate cases of fake news and disinformation, governments should not be afraid to take action. Three groups warrant special attention, namely pro-Kremlin politicians, civil society organizations and the media. With regard to pro-Kremlin politicians, instead of taking legal action, it is more appropriate for governments to engage in a debate and clearly state when false arguments are being used, in order to raise public awareness of disinformation activities. Strict rules on financial transparency should be in place for political parties and societal organizations alike. When dealing with the spread of misinformation, instead of censoring public discourse, independent regulatory agencies could take action against media entities that broadcast outright fake stories. Governments should reach out to journalists to raise awareness and share information on the scope of Russian information operations. At all times journalists should retain the capability to function as independent watchdogs.

Organizational setup of the government

The structure of government is an important factor in devising effective approaches. Not just in terms of ensuring timely responses but also in tackling the issues at stake preventively and proactively and implementing policies conceived to strengthen societal resilience. Various organizational setups are possible; there is no one-size-fits-all solution.

It takes a network to defeat a network

A networked approach is best suited for dealing with the multidimensional threat posed by Russian information operations and attempts to undermine societal cohesion. Such a networked, whole-of-government approach should comprise all relevant actors: not only the Ministry of Defense and Foreign Affairs but also other governmental agencies including the Ministry of the Interior, Economic Affairs and Education, as well as the Office of the Prime Minister or President. Such a networked approach would allow for quick decision-taking processes, as it would circumvent multiple layers that generally slow down policy-making.

Strategic communication should not be an afterthought

Activities aimed at combating Russian interference – including but not limited to strategic communications – should become an integral part of a government's operational thinking and security and foreign policy. Strategic communications should not be perceived as an afterthought, outsourced to PR, but rather as a tool that can and should support an overarching whole-of-government strategy.

Cooperate with coalitions

Governments must recognize the added value of international cooperation, rather than believing it is sufficient to respond unilaterally. Through the exchange of governmental responses, it will be possible to build an increasingly coherent response to Russia's strategic narratives. Sharing best practices, success stories and lessons learned both within NATO and the EU is essential.

Programs, products and technologies

In dealing with Russia's attempts to meddle in Western societies, governments can develop various programs and concrete products and make better use of existing technologies.

A strong narrative based on 'Western values' is an important asset

In a 'battle of narratives', the one who sets the frame is likely to win the argument. Western countries should strengthen their own narrative, reflecting what they stand for and what makes their societies strong and resilient. Individual national narratives would naturally differ from one country to another, reflecting unique national identities and historical experience.

The truth matters: do not fight propaganda with propaganda

Instead of fighting disinformation by creating more disinformation, effective counter propaganda needs to be rooted in a careful selection of facts. Governments should acknowledge what societal issues Russian information operations may (seek to) exploit and communicate with the general population the steps they intend to take, without becoming alarmist.

Be present and active in the information domain

With narratives being shaped online, governments should be more proactive and initiative in the information domain by putting out their own message too. Finland provides a good example to follow: every week, four key talking points are agreed upon and the ready-made material is then cross-posted by 300 officials on different social media sites.

Roll out media literacy programs to enhance societal resilience

Investing in media literacy in a bid to increase societal resilience against disinformation is crucial. Efforts should be undertaken to train and educate government officials, journalists and students in techniques to identify fake news and recognise the origins of news reports. Governments bear a special responsibility to instill media literacy courses in the secondary and tertiary school curriculum. More specific tailor made courses should be offered to government officials, and should form a key part of introductory training for newly hired staff at government departments and media firms.

Knowledge is power: rebuild the knowledge infrastructure, particularly the Slavic studies departments

After the collapse of the Soviet Union, the predominant thought in Western countries was that Russia and much of the former Soviet space would transform into consolidated democracies. The reality today is a far cry from this thought. Many Slavic studies centers have been closed or otherwise downscaled, the knowledge infrastructure has been dismantled, and much of the scale of existing expertise has been drastically reduced. In order to understand and interpret Russian policy better, universities should start training more Slavic studies experts again, and specific funding should be earmarked for this purpose.

Soft power matters: promote and spread your message at home…and abroad

Information war is waged on two fronts, which is why the governments need to counter it both at home and abroad. On the home front, for those countries with large Russian minorities, governments should engage with Russian speakers in their own language and invest more in the design of high-quality Russian language TV channels that not only broadcast current events and news talk shows, but also travel, culture and entertainment shows.

To engage with Russian speakers abroad, it is important to fund Russian language programming offered by outlets that are instruments of soft power, such as the BBC World Service or Radio Free Europe (RFE/RL), among others.

Make more effective use of technology and technological solutions

In order to identify, prevent and counter the spread of propaganda in the future, governments should make better use of existing technology and technological solutions, and/or – given legal constraints on the role of governments in liberal democracies – enable civil society actors to do so. Organizations such as the Atlantic Council’s Digital Forensics Lab and Bellingcat have set high standards for open source intelligence analysis and are already doing groundbreaking work in empirically analyzing how fake news and disinformation spreads. They use technological means to expose news trails and identify networks of bots.

Governments should take steps to detect fake traffic by promoting the use of algorithms by social media organizations to detect malicious behavior, for example. At the same time, governments should not resort to mass surveillance or mass retention of communications data as such activities would go beyond the bounds of democratic oversight and the rule of law.

It is furthermore necessary to develop a better understanding of how societies absorb fake news and disinformation. In particular, attention should be paid to the extent to which parts of the population are vulnerable to academic research based on disinformation in such domains as communications, sociology and psychology. Also, it is worthwhile to conduct vulnerability analyses of the target audiences of Russia's disinformation campaigns.

Leverage private sector expertise

Governments should also make better use of the expertise residing within the private sector. Marketing and communication experts working in the private sector have decades of experience crafting strategic messages and targeting specific groups within society. Their expertise would be of particular relevance with regard to the provision of target audience analysis in instances, where such analysis is currently missing.

The empowerment of civil society

Civil society often takes up a leading role in defending national narratives, exposing myths and propaganda, tackling the spread of disinformation online, and strengthening social cohesion – and it does so both complementary to and in the absence of governmental initiatives. Only an empowered and resilient civil society can achieve such goals effectively.

Provide sufficient funding to civil society initiatives

Governments should financially support civil society initiatives – such as investigative journalism projects – that are aimed at uncovering Russian information operations, as well as independent Russian-language media and other initiatives that seek to reduce the societal divide between Russian minorities and the majority populations. Funding should also be made available to organizations that work across borders.

Support the establishment of national myth-busting units

International expert units such as the EU's East StratCom Task Force and organizations such as StopFake do tremendous work in debunking fake stories and showing the dynamics of disinformation. Similar units should be established in European nations, which could then relay their findings back to those organizations that operate at the pan-European level.

Increase the reach of civil society communication products

Communication products produced by civil society initiatives can include disinformation briefs, relevant investigative journalism pieces and infographics explaining ways in which fake news could be avoided. Governments should not be afraid to take a stance on the matter of Russian subversive activities, and share communications products produced by civil society actors on their websites and social media accounts.

Cooperate with key influencers

In addition to civil society initiatives, governments should seek to support and empower influential individuals on the internet. Vloggers, YouTube and Instagram stars, and other individuals whose posts on Twitter and Facebook garner considerable interaction have impact on social media and possess an ability to drive news.

Provide civil society actors with adequate legal protection

Providing adequate legal protection for journalists and civil society actors involved in such activities constitutes a positive contribution to other efforts aimed at empowering civil society.

To conclude, in order to avoid 'throwing the baby out with the bathwater', an effective liberal democratic approach should respect the quintessential pillars of democracy and rule of law, while simultaneously protecting our liberal democratic order from foreign meddling. The combination of an empowered civil society, informed and active citizens, a vigilant government operating within a networked structure, and well tailored communication products is the best bulwark against attempts to undermine societal cohesion and the functioning of liberal democracy.

Introduction

Russia's meddling in the internal affairs of Western societies through the deployment of tactics such as digital hacking and the manipulation and dissemination of false information is proving to constitute a real threat. Russia's activities in the information space have been receiving increased public scrutiny, with reliable reports of Russian interference in the Baltic states, Sweden and Finland, France, Ukraine, the United States (US) as well as the Netherlands.[1]

Western governments wrestle with the question of how to appropriately respond to activities that undermine societal cohesion and the democratic process. In this context, new concepts, strategies and capabilities are developed both by governments and by societal actors to counter Russian strategic communication and information operations, and to strengthen the resilience of their societies.

This study looks at what can be learned from the postures, strategies, organizational setups, programs, products, and capabilities that other actors have developed in order to deal with Russia's subversive activities. The appropriate role and competences of governments, as well as the constraints thereon in the context of a liberal democratic order, is an explicit point of departure. Liberal democracy here represents the notion of government by the people for the people, characterised by the promotion of the security, safety, and well being of all citizens, and respect for the fundamental rights of every individual citizen and equality irrespective of race, gender and sexual orientation. Liberal democracies are characterised by free elections, the separation of powers, checks and balances on the executive, and freedom of speech and press. Liberal democracies respect and abide by international law in their dealings with other states.

Of particular interest is how overall (top-down) visions, strategies and capabilities can help provide the best circumstances for societal resilience such as through (bottom-up) societal initiatives. In the analysis, offered in this document, we consider three different frontline actors, including Ukraine, Latvia, and Finland, as well as the two foremost international actors: the European Union (EU) and NATO. The relationships with Russia of each of the five actors are quite different and so are their experiences with Russia's activities in the information domain and their responses. This study therefore does not necessarily assess which actor performs 'best', as some benchmark studies do. Instead, through these case studies, it identifies a range of distinct and valuable insights based on these actors' unique experiences.

In presenting the findings of the case studies, we introduce an analytical framework to think about actions in the information domain. Our framework distinguishes between defensive and offensive actions that can be preventive, reactive or pro-active in nature. Building on the findings from the case studies, we distill a select set of actionable guiding principles for liberal democratic governments on how to effectively deal with disinformation.

[1] Dana Priest and Michael Birnbaum, "Europe Has Been Working to Expose Russian Meddling for Years," Washington Post, June 25, 2017, sec. Europe, https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/europe/europe-has-been-working-to-expose-russian-meddling-for-years/2017/06/25/e42dcece-4a09-11e7-9669-250d0b15f83b_story.html; Jakub Janda et al., "How Do European Democracies React to Russian Aggression?," Kremlin Watch Report (European Values, April 22, 2017); Intelligence Community Assessment, "Background to 'Assessing Russian Activities and Intentions in Recent US Elections': The Analytic Process and Cyber Incident Attribution" (National Intelligence Council, 2017), https://www.dni.gov/files/documents/ICA_2017_01.pdf.

This study is structured as follows: Section 2 explains the method and structure of the comparative analysis. Sections 3 to 7 provide the five case studies starting with the EU and NATO followed by Finland, Latvia and Ukraine. Section 8 concludes and offers recommendations for liberal democratic governments.

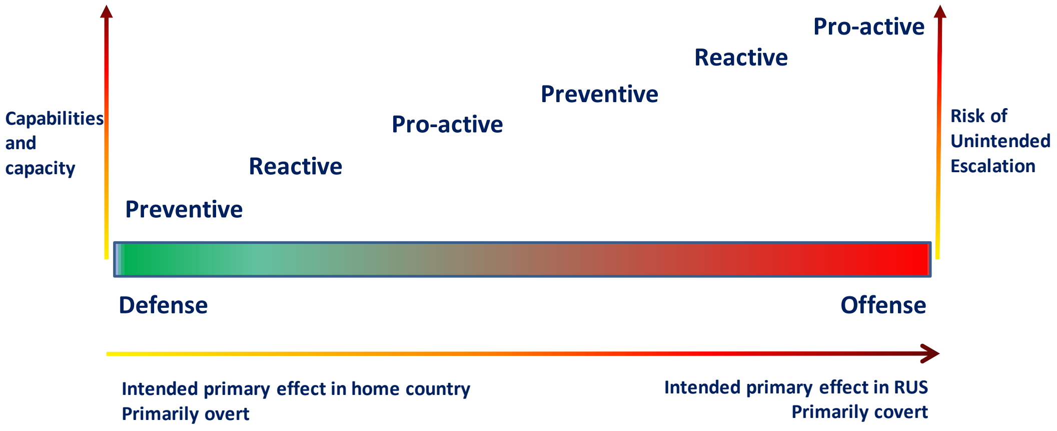
THE CASE STUDIES: A WORD ON THE METHOD AND STRUCTURE

Our approach consists of a mix between desk studies (official documents and secondary sources), complemented by 'field' interviews with relevant stakeholders and information gathered at the conference 'Answering Russia's Strategic Narratives', organized by The Hague Centre for Strategic Studies (HCSS) and its partners on 22 June 2017 in The Hague, the Netherlands. The main deliverables are five 'fact sheets', which provide a systematic analysis of how the five actors (countries and organizations) examined engage in countering Russian disinformation and societal interference. In drafting these fact sheets, attention is devoted to three themes in particular: governmental approaches and the involvement of societal actors; the freedom of the information space; and the types of dilemmas liberal democracies face in dealing with Russia's information activities.

Approach and posture: government and society

In our description of the five actors' approaches, we assess whether these actions are primarily directed top-down or emerge more bottom-up, and the ways in which societal actors engage in this realm. We also analyse in which domains these actions take place and whether these actions are defensive or offensive, as well as whether they are preventive, reactive or pro-active in nature (see Figure 2). In so doing, we identify a continuum for an actor's posture from defensive to offensive. The posture offers guidelines and thereby also sets limits on how these actors deal with disinformation activities.

Figure 2 Strategic posture along the defensive-offensive continuum: preventive, reactive and pro-active measures


Capabilities and capacity
Preventive
Reactive
Pro-active
Preventive
Reactive
Pro-active
Risk of Unintended Escalation
Defense
Offense
Intended primary effect in home country
Primarily overt
Intended primary effect in RUS
Primarily covert

Defensive is defined as primarily overt and designed to have an impact within own our information domain (although 'leakage' into the Russian information domain is possible). Offensive is primarily designed to have an impact in the Russian information domain and, as indicated on the right hand side of the scale, to be primarily covert. Preventive measures are designed to anticipate and avert the effective use of disinformation. Reactive measures are designed to effectively counteract detected cases of disinformation. Pro-active measures are designed to control the potential Russian disinformation target space to prevent disinformation from influencing its intended audiences.

Freedom of the information space

In our assessment of the level of press freedom in the three countries under consideration we seek to offer an understanding of the laws and regulations that influence media content, the degree of political influence exerted over news media, as well as the economic environment in which the media sector operates.[2]

Dilemmas for liberal democracies

In our analysis we also specifically identify the types of dilemmas that liberal democracies face when attempting to counter Russian disinformation and societal interference, for instance the balance for public actors between countering acts of disinformation whilst respecting the freedom of the media.

Structure of fact sheets

The fact sheets follow a distinct pattern. Each sheet starts with a brief description of the extent of Russian subversion, the nature and size of the problem encountered, whether there is a general strategy for combating said interference, and how this strategy is rooted within the responsible organizations. Following this, the fact sheets discuss the scope of the mandate bestowed on the unit(s) that deal with StratCom related activities. Subsequently, more detailed attention is given to an analysis of the various actors involved (both from the government and civil society), the method and style of the actor, the types of measures taken, and the products and information campaigns produced. The case study continues by addressing the capabilities and limitations of each actor and identifies both success stories and lessons learned. It then examines the freedom of the information space in each country under study, it describes the actor's strategic posture in the information domain, addresses the democratic dilemmas particular to each country and offers a few final concluding remarks.

[2] These three categories stem from Freedom House's annual report on the state of Press Freedom in the world. Freedom House, 'Press Freedom's Dark Horizon,' Freedom House, 2017, https://freedomhouse.org/report/freedom-press/freedom-press-2017.

EUROPEAN UNION

Background

Russia's strategic communications have been effective in shaping people's perceptions of the EU inside Russia, in the states belonging to the Eastern Partnership (EaP), as well as in the EU itself – particularly among native Russian speakers. In addition to countering Russian narratives in the Shared Neighborhood, the EU also sought to counter Russian attempts to use misinformation and propaganda to influence votes ahead of national elections in Germany, France and the UK ahead of Brexit.

Propaganda and disinformation directed at the EU take many forms. One of the most important strategies employed by the Kremlin is the incitement of uncertainty and fear in the EU citizens, as well as presenting hostile state and non-state actors as much stronger than they actually are.[3] To challenge democratic values and foster division in Europe, the Kremlin employs various instruments and tools, such as think tanks and special foundations (e.g. Russkiy Mir), pseudo news agencies and multimedia services (e.g. Sputnik), multilingual TV stations (e.g. RussiaToday), cross-border religious and social groups, internet and social media trolls.[4] According to the findings of the European Parliament and interviews conducted for the purpose of this report, some of the Member States remain unaware of such activities.[5]

General approach

In 2015, the EU set up the East StratCom Task Force as part of the European External Action Service (EEAS) for an initial period of two years. The team brings together 11 communication and Russian language experts from the EU institutions or seconded by Member States. The Task Force has no dedicated budget of its own but relies on Member State financial contributions and a share of the overall budget of the EEAS Strategic Communications Division.

In 2016, the European Commission and the High Representative adopted a Joint Framework on countering hybrid threats.[6] The Joint Framework proposed operational actions aimed at, inter alia, raising awareness by establishing dedicated mechanisms for the exchange of information between Member States, and by coordinating EU actions to deliver strategic communications.[7] Based on the Joint Framework's recommendations, an EU Hybrid Fusion Cell was established within the EU Intelligence and Situation Centre (EU INTCEN) of the EEAS.

[3] Anna Elżbieta Fotyga, 'Report on EU Strategic Communication to Counteract Propaganda against It by Third Parties' (Brussels: European Parliament, October 14, 2016).

[4] Ibid.

[5] Interview with expert; Ibid.

[6] 'Joint Communication to the European Parliament and the Council: Joint Framework on Countering Hybrid Threats: A European Response' (Brussels: European Commission, June 4, 2016), http://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/?uri=CELEX percent3A52016JC0018.

[7] European Commission, 'Security: EU Strengthens Response to Hybrid Threats' (Press release, Brussels, June 4, 2016), http://europa.eu/rapid/press-release_IP-16-1227_en.htm.

The Fusion Cell receives, analyses and shares classified and open source information from different stakeholders within the EEAS, the Commission and Member States, specifically relating to warning and indicators of hybrid threats, including disinformation operations.[8]

In direct response to the Joint Framework's proposals, the EU supported the establishment of the European Center for Countering Hybrid Threats by the Government of Finland, which is expected to start operating in September 2017. Even though the EU will not act as a signatory to the memorandum of understanding between the various participating Members States and Allies, it will support the steering board with experience and expertise gained through the Hybrid Fusion Cell.[9]

Mandate and scope

The Task Force's mandate stems from the EU's June 2015 Action Plan on Strategic Communications. Under objective 1 of the action plan, the Task Force focuses on fully fledged communications campaigns in the Eastern Partnership countries. Under objective 2, the Task Force offers expert support to various initiatives designed to promote a more pluralistic and independent media environment in the region. Under objective 3, the unit develops products that improve the EU's capacity to forecast, address and respond to disinformation activities by external actors. Most resources are focused on the first objective.

Actors involved

The Task Force works closely with EU Member States' national focal points, existing topical groups such as Friends of Ukraine, and other EU institutions active in the region.[10] Furthermore, the unit cooperates with the European Commission's OPEN Neighborhood Programme, the European Endowment for Democracy, and new initiatives supporting independent media in the region, including the Baltic Media Centre of Excellence and Russian Language News Exchange led by the Dutch Free Press Unlimited.[11] In parallel, the Task Force leads a myth-busting network that comprises over 400 experts, journalists, officials, non-governmental organizations (NGOs) and think tanks operating in more than 30 countries, who report instances of disinformation to the Task Force. In order to exchange information on StratCom trends in the EaP, the Task Force maintains regular contact with the NATO Headquarters StratCom team and the NATO StratCom Centre of Excellence (CoE) in Riga.

[8] European Commission, 'FAQ: Joint Framework on Countering Hybrid Threats' (Press release/Memo, Brussels, June 4, 2016), http://europa.eu/rapid/press-release_MEMO-16-1250_en.htm.

[9] EEAS, 'EU Welcomes Establishment of the Finnish Centre of Excellence for Countering Hybrid Threats' (Press Release, Brussels, November 4, 2017), https://eeas.europa.eu/headquarters/headquarters-homepage_en/24572/EU percent20welcomes percent20establishment percent20of percent20the percent20Finnish percent20Centre percent20of percent20Excellence percent20for percent20countering percent20hybrid percent20threats.

[10] European Union External Action, 'EU East StratCom Task Force,' 2015, http://www.tepsa.eu/wp-content/uploads/2015/12/Kimber.pdf.

[11] EEAS, 'EU East StratCom Task Force' (Tbilisi, April 4, 2016), http://infocenter.gov.ge/uploads/files/2017-03/1489766854_eeas-east-StratCom-kimbea-r.pdf.

Communication products and campaigns

The Task Force's flagship products are its two weekly newsletters – the Disinformation Review and the Disinformation Digest – that offer a systematic overview of cases of disinformation and highlight broader media trends.[12] The Task Force also manages the social media accounts @ EUvsDisinfo and EU vs Disinformation with 25,000 and 16,000 followers respectively. Upon request, the Task Force offers briefings to journalists and government officials, as was the case with the Dutch government inviting the Task Force to provide advice on disinformation campaigns to prevent outside meddling in the 2017 general elections.[13] In addition, the Task Force administers the EEAS Russian-language website[14], launched in 2016 with the aim to ensure high-quality information about EU activities, statements and press-releases with relevance to the Eastern Neighbourhood in particular.

The European Parliament has urged the EU institutions and bodies to step up their counter-propaganda efforts. The call was issued in Anna Fotyga's report on EU strategic communications to counteract propaganda against it by third parties in October 2016.[15] Fotyga's report identified a wide range of instruments and tools employed by the Kremlin, and highlighted the limited awareness amongst some of the EU member states that are arenas and audiences of disinformation and propaganda.[16] Among other proposals, the Parliament appealed for precise monitoring of the financial sources of anti-European propaganda, and called for the EU StratCom Task Force to be reinforced and turned into a fully-fledged unit within the EEAS. The report also underlined the necessity of strengthening the quality of journalism.

Method and style

The Task Force does not engage in counter-propaganda. Instead, the unit uses a more pro-active approach: it projects a positive EU narrative by focusing on the Union's activities in key policy areas in the Eastern partnership region, thereby identifying and correcting disinformation and, as such, increasing awareness of disruptive and hostile discourses in public communication. In response to Russia's diffusion of false messages in a repetitive manner, the Task Force focuses its efforts on active exposure and debunking of fake stories and the so-called myth busting.[17] Communication materials and products are available in local languages, especially Russian. EU communications, in general, have shifted from impersonal to personal stories and narratives: In Moldova, for example, 'Red card to corruption campaign', which involved football players and other personalities, was able to reach a broader audience domestically.[18] Another shift has been from official to social media sites.

[12] 'EU Strategic Communications with a View to Counteracting Propaganda' (Brussels: European Parliament, May 2016).

[13] Interview with expert.

[14] 'Информация ЕС На Русском Языке,' European External Action Service (EEAS), n.d., https://eeas.europa.eu/topics/eu-information-russian_ru.

[15] Fotyga, 'Report on EU Strategic Communication to Counteract Propaganda against It by Third Parties.'

[16] European Conservative and Reformist Group, 'European Parliament Adopts MEP Fotyga's Report on StratCom' (Press release, November 23, 2016), http://pr.euractiv.com/pr/european-parliament-adopts-mep-fotyga-s-report-StratCom-148290.

[17] Interview with expert.

[18] 'Policy Briefing 'The Challenges for the EU's Communication Strategy in Moldova'', EU-STRAT, December 14, 2016, http://eu-strat.eu/?p=355.

Capabilities and limitations

Communication activities carried out by the East StratCom Task Force are modest in scale in comparison to the multidimensional media propaganda produced by Russia. With no dedicated budget and an insufficient number of staff – consisting primarily of seconded national experts, rather than EEAS-funded specialists – the Task Force finds itself in a significantly weaker position. What is more, the Brussels-based unit has no presence in the countries concerned and relies on the cooperation with local organizations and the work of its support network, which is limited in the West.[19] Country-based specialists, embedded within the EEAS Delegations, could help reach the Task Force's objectives in a more effective and tailored way. In addition to ensuring sufficient financing and adequate staffing of the Task Force team, the EEAS is yet to develop criteria for measuring the efficiency of its work.[20] For the time being, it can only count the number of subscribers and followers its work generates. The Task Force also faces institutional constraints, which is why the European Parliament recommended it be turned into a fully-fledged unit.[21] There is also room for closer cooperation between the EEAS and the Parliament on strategic communication, through the use of Parliament's analytical capabilities and information offices in the Member States, for example.[22]

Although the situation has improved since the unit was established in 2015 and the number of supporting states has increased, the aforementioned limitations continue to hamper the Task Force's ability to fulfill its mandate. Support from top-level decision makers remains limited. Despite its mandate, the work of the Task Force continues to be perceived as controversial by many, and no regular briefings of high-level EEAS decision makers currently take place. Without sufficient backing in Brussels – from the EEAS and the EEAS mediation support team (MST) in particular – the situation is unlikely to change in the near future.[23]

Success stories and lessons learned

The weekly newsletters have successfully reached a diverse and high-level audience – including the former White House administration and the German Chancellery – resulting in greater and more widespread awareness of the problem.[24] The overall media environment in the Eastern Neighborhood and the EU Member States has been strengthened and a common platform for fighting Russian propaganda was established. Although its success has been limited, the work of the EEAS Task Force has helped steer the debate and step up efforts in individual Member States.

Strengthening media literacy, albeit important, is not sufficient to solve the problem alone. In some cases, authorities have considered it necessary to close down media outlets engaged in outright propaganda. A broad state-level discussion involving media specialists, education experts but also representatives from the secret services is called for. To increase the resilience of susceptible audiences, awareness should be raised by constantly highlighting the danger Russian disinformation poses to liberal democracy. In addition to conferences and reports, exposure of the threat in the

[19] Interview with expert.

[20] Fotyga, 'Report on EU Strategic Communication to Counteract Propaganda against It by Third Parties.'

[21] Ibid.

[22] Ibid.

[23] Interview with expert.

[24] Interview with expert.

mainstream media and public places would be beneficial. At the moment, the Task Force does not compile any lists of persons involved in disinformation activities.[25] Nevertheless, the unit considers it is sometimes required to name and shame in order to identify Russian meddling in a country's affairs.[26] Several Member States – Estonia and the Czech Republic, for example – openly expose operatives or websites involved in spreading Russian propaganda.[27]

Approach and posture: government and society

The approach adopted by the EU is top-down and involves multiple governments of the Member States.

Defensive-offensive continuum

The measures taken by the European Union are defensive in nature and were designed to have an impact within the EU and the EaP region in particular, rather than inside Russia. Despite this defensive posture, interviews conducted for the purpose of this study revealed the recognition of the added value of an offensive posture: EU officials consider that it may sometimes be necessary to close down media outlets as well as to openly expose operatives or websites involved in spreading disinformation.[28]

Preventive, reactive, pro-active measures

The EU approach encompasses preventive, reactive and pro-active measures (see Figure 3). A good example of preventive measures would be the promotion of a more pluralistic and independent media environment in the region. The EU, as a whole, promotes good governance in third countries and recognizes the role of independent media in achieving this goal. In order to reinforce inclusiveness and cohesion of the European society, the EU supports its Member States in the fight against social exclusion and discrimination.[29] In addition, the EU has introduced rules on the use of big data and data protection to protect citizens' privacy and prevent outside interference.[30] Reactive measures employed by the EU include the dissemination of the two weekly newsletters – Disinformation Review and Disinformation Digest – as well as the setting up of the accompanying social media accounts that collect and debunk pieces of disinformation. In addition, the Task Force leads a myth-busting network whose members report instances of disinformation to the Task Force, which also falls on the reactive defensive side of the continuum. The projection of a positive EU narrative in the EaP region could be classified as a pro-active defensive stance taken by the EU.

[25] 'Questions and Answers about the East StratCom Task Force,' European External Action Service (EEAS), January 14, 2017, https://eeas.europa.eu/headquarters/headquarters-homepage/2116/-questions-and-answers-about-the-east-.

[26] Interview with expert.

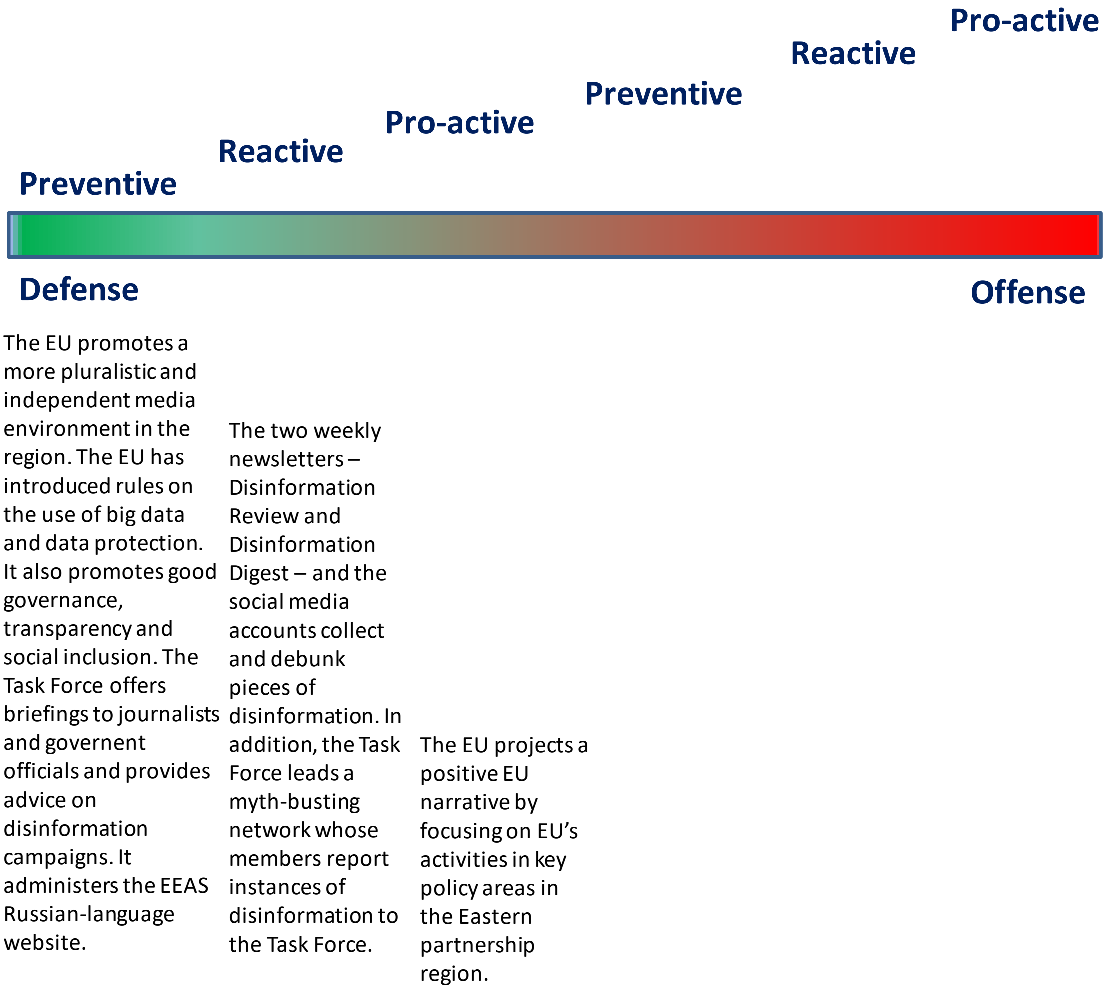
[27] In February 2015, Slovak activist Juraj Smetana published a list of 42 websites that intentionally and unintentionally spread Russian propaganda. The list continues to grow as more like-minded websites are being discovered. Estonia's domestic security service – also known as KAPO – names and shames enemy operatives in its annual report.

[28] Interview with expert.

[29] Susanne Kraatz, 'Fact Sheets on the European Union: The Fight against Poverty, Social Exclusion and Discrimination,' European Parliament, December 2016, http://www.europarl.europa.eu/atyourservice/en/displayFtu.html?ftuId=FTU_5.10.9.html.

[30] 'The EU Data Protection Reform and Big Data: Factsheet' (European Commission, March 2016), http://ec.europa.eu/justice/data-protection/files/data-protection-big-data_factsheet_web_en.pdf.

Figure 3 EU's posture along the defensive-offensive continuum: preventive, reactive and pro-active measures



The EU promotes a more pluralistic and independent media environment in the region. The EU has introduced rules on the use of big data and data protection. It also promotes good governance, transparency and social inclusion. The Task Force offers briefings to journalists and governent officials and provides advice on disinformation campaigns. It administers the EEAS Russian-language website.

The two weekly newsletters – Disinformation Review and Disinformation Digest – and the social media accounts collect and debunk pieces of disinformation. In addition, the Task Force leads a myth-busting network whose members report instances of disinformation to the Task Force.

The EU projects a positive EU narrative by focusing on EU's activities in key policy areas in the Eastern partnership region.

Domain of action

Through the work of the East StratCom Task Force, the EU focuses on reaching audiences online and its activities take place primarily in the social media sphere. The EU relies on its two weekly newsletters – the Disinformation Review and the Disinformation Digest – and the social media accounts @EUvsDisinfo and EU vs Disinformation. The EU's activities are targeted at journalists, experts, decision makers, and national institutions within the EU and the EaP countries. Due to limited budget and outreach, the primary target of EEAS activities are journalists, with media literacy taking priority over debunking of fake news.

Conclusion

The establishment of the the East StratCom Task Force should be seen as a major milestone in the fight against Russian disinformation and societal interference at the European level. Much can be learned from the manner in which it successfully taps into its myth-busting network and uncovers instances of disinformation in the process. Partnerships between institutions and civil society – akin to the one developed between the EU and members of its mythbusting network – could be replicated elsewhere. That said, the limitations posed by the lack of a dedicated budget and an insufficient number of staff severely hamper the Task Force's capacity for outreach. The impact its work has had despite these limitations should therefore be seen as commendable. For the future, it is imperative that more financial and political support is given to the East StratCom Task Force, both from within the EU institutions, as well as from member states in order for the unit to thrive in combating disinformation.

NATO

Background

The extent of Russia's information operations against Ukraine and its neighbors have made it increasingly challenging for NATO to compete effectively in today's communications environment, or to successfully implement pro-active information techniques. In an attempt to dissuade NATO countries from contributing troops, NATO and NATO Enhanced Forward Presence (EFP)[31] have been portrayed as a threat and warmongering by Russia, rather than a means to ensure security in Europe. Successful penetration of the Russian infosphere has proven very difficult.

General approach

Strategic communication has come to play a significant role in attaining NATO's political and military objectives. In light of the limitations experienced in Afghanistan, in 2007 the Alliance created a small StratCom cell at the Supreme Headquarters Allied Powers Europe (SHAPE) in Mons, Belgium.[32] In 2008, the Supreme Allied Commander Europe (SACEUR) produced the first directive on StratCom (ACO 95-2) and since 2009, NATO has been developing its Strategic Communications policy and doctrine. In 2011, Allied Command Operations (ACO) and Allied Command Transformation (ACT) were tasked to start a StratCom implementation process (StratCom Capability Implementation Plan).[33] NATO Headquarters (HQ) StratCom currently resides in NATO HQ Public Diplomacy Division (PDD).[34]

Table 1 Current NATO Strategic Communication understanding [35]

	Policy Doctrine	Definition	Under what authority
NATO HQ	Policy (PO (2009)0141)	The coordinated and appropriate use of NATO communications activities and capabilities (Public Diplomacy, Public Affairs (PA), Military Public Affairs, Information Operations and Psychological Operations) in support of Alliance policies, operations and activities, and in order to advance NATO's aims.	PDD
ACO/SHAPE	Directive 95-2 (AD 095-002)	In cooperation with NATO HQ, the coordinated and appropriate use of Military PA, Info Ops, and PSYOPS which, in concert with other military actions and following NATO political guidance, advances NATO's aims and operations.	Special staff

[31] At the 2016 Warsaw Summit, NATO decided to enhance its forward presence in the eastern part of the Alliance, with four multinational battalion-size groups in Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania and Poland. Source: 'Boosting NATO's Presence in the East and Southeast,' North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO), March 15, 2017, http://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/topics_136388.htm?selectedLocale=en.

[32] Mark Laity, 'Rising to the Challenge as Information Takes Central Stage,' The Three Swords Magazine, May 2015, 59.

[33] Lothar Buyny, 'Implementing StratCom,' The Three Swords Magazine, May 2015, 41.

[34] Rita LePage and Steve Tatham, 'NATO Strategic Communication: More to Be Done?' (National Defence Academy of Latvia: Center for Security and Strategic Research, March 2014).

[35] Ibid., 23.

Mandate and scope

NATO's civilian and military StratCom activities fall under the responsibility of the Public Diplomacy Division (PDD) and the overall direction of the North Atlantic Council (NAC) and the Secretary General (SG). NATO StratCom was designed as an inter-ministerial and intergovernmental concept, i.e., to facilitate collaboration between different information and communication capabilities of the Alliance (Public Diplomacy, Public Affairs, Military Public Affairs, Information Operations and Psychological Operations). According to the Military Concept for NATO Strategic Communications (2010), NATO StratCom aims to ensure that audiences receive 'truthful, accurate and timely communications that will allow them to understand and assess the Alliance's actions and intentions'.[36]

The mission of the NATO-accredited StratCom CoE is to contribute to the Alliance's communication capabilities by providing comprehensive analyses, timely advice and practical support. Rather than having an operational mandate, the Centre operates as a research/advisory hub that focuses on research and analysis, concept development, experimentation, training and education.

Actors involved

Cooperation has been established between EU and NATO staff with regard to strategic communications and is set to increase further. In order to exchange information on StratCom trends in the EaP, the NATO Headquarters StratCom team and the StratCom CoE in Riga maintain contact with the EEAS East StratCom Task Force. Cooperation between NATO StratCom CoE and the EEAS StratCom division (specifically the East and South StratCom Task Forces) is on the rise, including joint trainings and seminars.

For the purposes of research and analysis, NATO StratCom CoE cooperates with institutions such as the Latvian Political Scientist Association, the Latvian Institute of International Affairs, the Eastern Europe Studies Centre (Lithuania), the Royal United Services Institute for Defence and Security Studies (UK), the Conflict Studies Research Centre (UK), Royal Military College of Canada, Estonian Defence Forces, etc. The Centre further cooperates with NATO School at Oberammergau and the Baltic Defence College, as well as with other NATO Centres of Excellence (CoEs).[37]

Communication products and campaigns

A StratCom handbook, the Narrative Development Tool and a system to better assess the information environment in its relevant dimensions have been developed by the ACT to support StratCom coordination and advice processes.[38] A NATO Strategic Communications course was created at NATO School Oberammergau, providing senior officials with foundational knowledge of StratCom in the NATO environment.[39]

[36] Naja Bentzen, 'NATO Strategic Communications – An Evolving Battle of Narratives' (European Parliamentary Research Service (EPRS), July 2016), 2, http://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/BRIE/2016/586600/EPRS_BRI(2016)586600_EN.pdf.

[37] 'NATO Strategic Communications Centre of Excellence: Annual Report' (Riga, Latvia: NATO StratCom Centre of Excellence, January 1, 2016).

[38] Buyny, 'Implementing StratCom,' 39.

[39] 'N5-125: NATO Senior Official Strategic Communications Familiarisation Course,' NATO School Oberammergau, n.d., http://www.natoschool.nato.int/Academics/Resident-Courses/Course-Catalogue/Course-description?ID=123.

On NATO's official website, the PDD operates a myth-busting portal entitled 'NATO-Russia: Setting the Record Straight', which identifies, debunks and corrects false claims about NATO and its attitude towards Russia.[40] The portal is available in four languages: English, French, Russian and Ukrainian.

NATO StratCom CoE publishes analyses, occasional reports, and a bi-annual peer-reviewed academic journal *Defence Strategic Communications*. In addition, the Centre organizes eCourses, trainings, workshops, scenario exercises and conferences. A policy manual describing how NATO and its members can protect themselves from subversive leverage is under preparation. One of the most recent studies conducted by the Centre looked into the role of humor in Russian and Ukrainian strategic communications.[41] With humor being one of the preferred ways of communicating in Russia, the research explored the extent to which Moscow uses the country's well-known comedy shows for propaganda purposes. The findings suggest that comedy shows tend to portray Russia as an innocent victim vis-a-vis the Western world, and its president as the father of the state.[42] The speed with which Russia reacted to the study demonstrated that the Centre's work is closely followed and that humor is a field of political communication that the Kremlin wishes to keep under control.[43]

Method and style

NATO's overall approach has been pragmatic and pro-active and the focus has been on disseminating timely and culturally-attuned messages based on a positive, coherent, consistent and a forward-looking narrative (including spokesmanship).[44] In the context of information warfare, a strategic narrative should be thought of as a statement of identity, cause and intent, around which government, people and armed forces can unite.[45] It is a description of the raison d'etat of an organization, in this case NATO, or a 'why and how' of a specific strategy: why the actor is actively involved, which other entities the actor is up against, and how the actor seeks to resolve the conflict, or what the actor aspires to achieve.[46] In fact, over the past two decades, NATO faced challenges due to the inability to formulate a coherent strategic narrative across 28 nations. The narrative disseminated by NATO portrays the Alliance as a 'democratic, multinational alliance uniting across borders to guard, with courage and competence, against threats to [Allies'] homes'.[47] StratCom CoE itself is not mandated to confront Russian activities or engage in counter-propaganda. Instead, the Centre studies general patterns, how networks work, what the strong points and weaknesses in Russia's communication strategy are, and then feeds this information through its network and to the Enhanced Forward Presence (EFP).[48] The Centre operates in an open and visible way, and all its work is accessible

[40] 'NATO-Russia Relations: The Facts,' North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO), n.d., http://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/topics_111767.htm.

[41] 'StratCom Laughs: In Search of an Analytical Framework' (Riga: NATO Strategic Communications Centre of Excellence, March 15, 2017), http://www.StratComcoe.org/StratCom-laughs-search-analytical-framework.

[42] Ibid., 143.

[43] Interview with expert.

[44] Buyny, 'Implementing StratCom,' 41; ANTTI SILLANPÄÄ, 'Strategic Communications and the StratCom CoE,' n.d., http://www.tepsa.eu/wp-content/uploads/2015/12/Sillanpaa.pdf.

[45] LePage and Tatham, 'NATO Strategic Communication: More to Be Done?'

[46] Thomas Elkjer Nissen, 'Strategizing NATO's Narratives: Preparing for an Imperfect World,' in Strategy in NATO (Palgrave Macmillan US, 2014), 157–71.

[47] Dr. Antti Sillanpaa, Presentation: Strategic Communications and the StratCom COE, http://www.tepsa.eu/wp-content/uploads/2015/12/Sillanpaa.pdf

[48] Interview with expert.

online.[49] To strengthen the dissemination of consistent messages, NATO focuses on all available communication platforms. In order to provide practical support to the Alliance, NATO StratCom CoE uses modern technologies and virtual networks, which are aimed at spotting and countering virtual manipulation.

Capabilities and limitations

A number of limitations hamper the overall effectiveness of NATO's StratCom efforts. First, while there exists an approved definition of the term, NATO StratCom does not have any associated doctrine, nor has it been integrated into any NATO Capstone Doctrine (Allied Joint Publications (AJPs) 1, 3 or 5).[50] The absence of an overarching StratCom doctrine, along with the now dated definition, hamper the StratCom cause.[51] Writing and securing agreement for doctrine across the Alliance is generally a lengthy and complicated process. Moreover, since the definition was agreed upon in 2009, NATO has embarked on numerous operations, in which many lessons have been learned. The doctrine and the definition of the term deserve to be re-examined.

Secondly, a key element of a StratCom architecture – the target audience analysis (TAA) – is currently missing.[52] NATO's challenge lies in understanding different opinions, perceptions and patterns of communication within relevant groups in order to better design and tailor its own communications and operations.[53] NATO should attempt to grasp how audiences define themselves, as it is that self-definition that ultimately causes specific behaviors.[54] NATO could also engage with respected TAA providers, with a track record of providing TAA services to member nations.[55]

Thirdly, StratCom is still not embedded at the core of operational thinking and continues to reside within the information disciplines, where information specialists take the lead on development, experimentation and implementation.[56] The application of StratCom is often dependent on individual Commanders and their previous experience, or exposure to, StratCom. The positioning of StratCom within NATO's public affairs structure does not sufficiently grasp the importance and potential benefits of strategic communications. This could also constitute the reason why military commanders in most NATO nations remain unaware of the importance of strategic communications or of its power to affect the operational environment.[57]

Another issue of concern is the educational deficit of senior military commanders in information confrontation.[58] For years, frontline commanders have been trained in kinetic effects. The operating environment has, however, changed from that which defined their formative years and much more attention needs to be paid to the unconventional aspects of current and future warfare. Although the creation of a NATO Strategic Communications course at NATO School Oberammergau has proven successful, it is not frequented by General and Flag officers, two-stars and above.[59] All staff levels should be trained in strategic communications and their influence on audiences.

[49] Interview with expert.
[50] LePage and Tatham, 'NATO Strategic Communication: More to Be Done?,' 1.
[51] LePage and Tatham, 'NATO Strategic Communication: More to Be Done?'
[52] Bentzen, 'NATO Strategic Communications – An Evolving Battle of Narratives.'
[53] Buyny, 'Implementing StratCom,' 40.
[54] LePage and Tatham, 'NATO Strategic Communication: More to Be Done?'
[55] Ibid.
[56] Ibid.
[57] Ibid.
[58] Ibid.
[59] Ibid.

While the StratCom CoE is already addressing several of the alleged shortcomings, the broader impact of the centre remains to be seen, as the centre is relatively new and currently lacks an operational mandate.[60]

Success stories and lessons learned

In its reaction to the humor study conducted by NATO StratCom CoE Russia exposed the network it used to monitor the work of the Centre of Excellence. By reacting in such a prompt and a vocal manner, the Kremlin invited NATO's narrative into its own information space, unintentionally opening the discussion on humor and freedom of speech within Russia itself. Good research on the subject under investigation managed to penetrate the bubble of Russian communications and set the agenda. The Centre also learned that after the Foreign Ministry issues a statement, the main news agencies tend to follow suit. It was evident that the reaction, and the twisting of the narrative, had been pre-planned, thus enabling the promptness of the response. By the time NATO officially presented the findings of the humor study, Russian articles communicating the twisted narrative had already reached Latvian media. To avoid a similar situation in the future, the Centre learned that the forthcoming stories and publications should be surrounded by a level of secrecy.[61]

Approach and posture: government and society

The approach and posture adopted by NATO are top-down and government-wide. In fact, NATO StratCom was designed as an inter-ministerial and intergovernmental concept.

Defensive-offensive continuum

NATO's approach is largely defensive in nature. On one occasion, NATO unintentionally entered the offensive side of the continuum: the humor study helped expose the network Russia uses to monitor the work of NATO and opened the discussion on humor and freedom of speech within Russia.

Preventive, reactive, pro-active measures

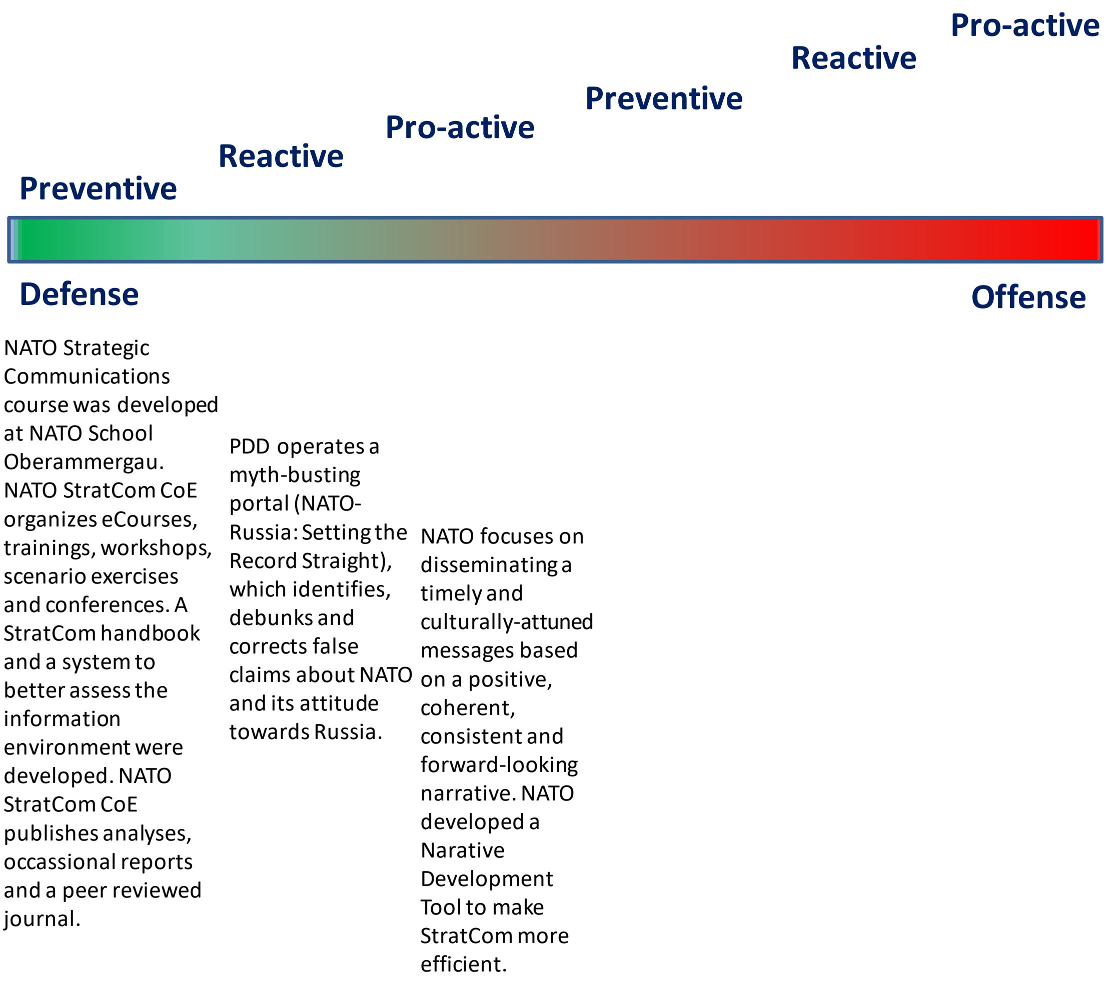
NATO's approach consists of preventive, reactive and pro-active measures (see Figure 4). Training and education programs – namely the NATO Strategic Communications course at NATO School Oberammergau, and eCourses, trainings, workshops and exercises organized by the NATO StratCom CoE – constitute preventive defensive measures, designed to improve StratCom capabilities and, as such, to help anticipate and avert the effective use of disinformation. Reactive measures include the myth-busting portal, which identifies, debunks and corrects false claims about NATO and its attitude towards Russia. Dissemination of timely and culturally-attuned messages based on a positive, coherent and forward-looking narrative can be classified as a pro-active defensive measure.

[60] Bentzen, 'NATO Strategic Communications – An Evolving Battle of Narratives.'
[61] Interview with expert.

Domain of action

NATO operates in the information domain, targeting the wider public, as well as within its own ranks, strengthening the Alliance's own communications capabilities. First, NATO operates in the information domain by means of a myth-busting portal entitled 'NATO-Russia: Setting the Record Straight', which targets the wider public. Second, the StratCom CoE publishes analyses and reports, which are disseminated online and which are targeted at both the general public and the members of the Alliance. The majority of NATO's actions focus on strengthening the Alliance's own communication environment and target NATO's own ranks. The eCourses, trainings, workshops, scenario exercises and conferences target primarily NATO member and partner states, as well as interested third parties, while the NATO StratCom course at NATO School Oberammergau targets senior officials.

Figure 4 NATO's posture along the defensive-offensive continuum: preventive, reactive and pro-active measures



NATO Strategic Communications course was developed at NATO School Oberammergau. NATO StratCom CoE organizes eCourses, trainings, workshops, scenario exercises and conferences. A StratCom handbook and a system to better assess the information environment were developed. NATO StratCom CoE publishes analyses, occassional reports and a peer reviewed journal.

PDD operates a myth-busting portal (NATO-Russia: Setting the Record Straight), which identifies, debunks and corrects false claims about NATO and its attitude towards Russia.

NATO focuses on disseminating a timely and culturally-attuned messages based on a positive, coherent, consistent and forward-looking narrative. NATO developed a Narative Development Tool to make StratCom more efficient.

Conclusion

The establishment of the StratCom CoE is a good example of the extent to which StratCom related activities have gained in importance for NATO. The Centre performs a valuable function through its analyses of Russian information operations and the kinds of tactics and methods used. That said, more work should be done on the streamlining of StratCom efforts in the core of the Alliance's operational thinking. The absence of an overarching StratCom doctrine continues to functionally hamper operations. Furthermore, in support of ongoing activities, more effort can be put into conducting a proper target audience analysis and the training of senior staff to increase their strategic communication literacy.

FINLAND

Background

Finland was never a Soviet state and has different historical ties with present day Russia than the Baltic states and Ukraine. Already before Russia's annexation of Crimea, the relationship with Russia featured prominently on the security agenda of the Finnish government. Unlike many other European countries, Finland has continued to make investments in a robust defense posture since the end of the Cold War. It has also made significant advances in dealing with Russian operations in the information domain.

Finland plays a prominent role in Russian concerns about NATO's eastward expansion and attempts have been made to divide public opinion on NATO membership. The Kremlin has also executed numerous fake news campaigns targeting the Russian minority in Finland as well as its own population about the alleged maltreatment of Russians in Finland. State-sponsored media attacks intensified particularly ahead of the country's celebrations marking 100 years of independence from Russia in 2017.[62] Although attempts have been made to make citizens suspicious about the EU, Finland is not Russia's main target when it comes to undermining European unity. At present, the level of Russia's information activities targeted at Finland is considered 'low', primarily due to Russia's current focus on the Middle East and its belief that too much pressure on Finland could lead to a counterproductive Finnish pushback.[63]

Finland's posture against Russian disinformation and propaganda is underpinned by the government's confidence in its high education standards which have nurtured a critical and active civil society, its free and diverse media landscape, the high willingness amongst its citizens to defend the country (74 percent of the population compared to only 15 percent in the Netherlands)[64], its capable defense forces with large reserves, and its longstanding whole-of-government approach in dealing with security and safety issues (including both vision and mission formulation, organization, culture and execution).

Russians constitute the second largest ethnic minority in Finland and there is ample Russian-language media content available in Finland. Although most of the content originates in Russia, there are also Russian-language media productions made in Finland, intended for the Russian-speaking minority. In addition to the Russian-language services of public broadcasting company Yle, a significant share of Russian-language production is so-called 'citizen media', i.e. videos or blogs made by ordinary people or other products made possible by social media.[65]

[62] Adam Withnall, 'Finland: Russian Propaganda Questioning Our Validity Risks Destabilising Country,' Independent, October 20, 2016, http://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/europe/russia-finland-putin-propaganda-destabilising-effect-a7371126.html.

[63] Based on explanations provided by the stakeholders interviewed in Finland.

[64] 'WIN/Gallup International's Global Survey Shows Three in Five Willing to Fight for Their Country,' Gallup International, 2015, http://gallup-international.bg/en/Publications/2015/220-WIN-Gallup-International's-global-survey-shows-three-in-five-willing-to-fight-for-their-country.

[65] Government Communications Department, 'Russian Speakers in Finland as Media Users - Media Travel with Immigrants' (Press Release, Helsinki, October 28, 2016), http://vnk.fi/en/article/-/asset_publisher/suomen-venajankieliset-mediankayttajina-media-matkustaa-maahanmuuttajan-mukana.

General approach

Comprehensive security lies at the heart of the Finnish approach. Comprehensive security not only refers to a wide range of security and safety dimensions, but also denotes a whole-of-government approach – both horizontally and vertically – as well as the participation of corporations, civil organizations and citizens. It is overseen by the Security Committee, in which the principals of key governmental ministries meet regularly.[66]

Strategic communications are overseen by the Government Communications Department, which falls under the Prime Minister's Office. The Government Communications Department receives input from all ministries on a weekly basis and deals with broad-based issues, including, but not limited to, Russian information operations.[67]

In 2015, a specific Committee for influencing through information and a concomitant Network were set up to deal with Russia's information operations. The Committee is centrally coordinated by the Prime Minister's Office and consists of 5-6 high ranking officials and experts from key government departments who meet every two weeks.[68] The Network for influencing through information (IIN) consists of experts drawn from different government departments, including all ministries, the Police, the Defence Forces, Border Guard, Customs and the Office of the President of the Republic. Its task is to identify, analyse and respond to the influencing targeted at Finland.[69]

On Finland's initiative, a European Center for Countering Hybrid Threats was established in Helsinki. The Finnish Center – which started operating in 2017 – will host around 10 staff members[70] and will focus on designing strategies to tackle hybrid threats, primarily cyber attacks, disinformation and propaganda.[71] The Centre will focus on research and will not have any operational responsibilities. In addition, Finland has become a contributing nation to both the NATO StratCom CoE and the NATO Cyber Defense CoE to enhance Helsinki's strategic communication and cyber strategies.

Mandate and scope

The status of the Information Influencing Committee and Network is not formally institutionalized by law but has received approval and support both from the Prime Minister and the President. The term 'influencing' is chosen deliberately in order to prevent framing it in a 'warfare' context. The IIN does not have an official strategy, which, multiple officials emphasize, is one of its strengths, because it reinforces the spirit of 'learning by doing' and allows Finland enough flexibility to deal with Russian attempts to interfere in the information domain.

[66] 'Comprehensive National Defence,' Ministry of Defence in Finland, n.d., https://www.defmin.fi/en/tasks_and_activities/comprehensive_national_defence.

[67] 'Strategic Communications,' Prime Minister's Office in Finland, n.d., http://vnk.fi/en/strategic-communications.

[68] Interview with expert.

[69] Interview with expert.

[70] 'NATO and EU Members Join Finland's New Center for Countering Hybrid Threats,' The Atlantic Council, November 4, 2017, http://www.atlanticcouncil.org/blogs/natosource/nato-and-eu-members-join-finland-s-new-center-for-countering-hybrid-threats.

[71] The Finnish centre will focus on research in tackling cyber attacks, propaganda and disinformation. Source: 'EU, NATO Countries Kick off Center to Counter 'Hybrid' Threats,' Reuters, April 11, 2017, http://www.reuters.com/article/us-eu-defence-hybrid-idUSKBN17D1S6.

Actors involved

In reaction to Russia's annexation of Crimea and in the context of its comprehensive security approach, the Finnish government established the Information Influencing Network in 2015. The network is overseen by a small steering committee, in which the key security and foreign ministries are represented at the level of Director General of communications or slightly below that. The Prime Minister's Office steers the working group. Members of the committee have had prior professional experience working as chief editors of large news organizations before enrolling in the civil service. The committee meets every two weeks and the network meets at least every four weeks to exchange information and discuss responses to Russian attempts to interfere. In addition to ensuring information sharing amongst its participants, the IIN also plays an important role in outreach and awareness raising activities, including among national and local policy officials and civil society organizations (i.e., media organizations). It is also the central node where responses are discussed and devised.

Another important actor is the state majority-owned Finnish Broadcasting Company (Yle), which offers internet and broadcasting services in all the minority languages, including Russian. Yle is deeply rooted in Finnish society: All of Finland's inhabitants use at least one of Yle's services a year, while in 2014 it recorded a daily reach to over 70 percent of the population.[72] Journalists working for Yle's social media division, Yle Kioski, have been involved in investigating Russian disinformation, notably the so-called 'troll factories'.

The establishment of the Centre for Hybrid Threats is expected to increase cooperation with the EU, NATO and other regional organizations.

Communication products and campaigns

The Finnish government has developed a broad range of initiatives to respond to Russia's information operations and bolster the resilience of Finnish society. It actively approaches Russian actors spreading potentially harmful disinformation and provides them with the Finnish story.

As part of the implementation of the government's 2015 plan for analysis, assessment and research, a research effort looked into media consumption by Russian speakers in Finland and the means by which the Russian speakers and Russian-language media content produced in Finland is targeted by the mainstream Russian media.[73] This effort forms part of a larger pilot project of the Finnish government in which – together with private partners – it is developing a media landscape analytical dashboard. This will allow it to gauge different media sentiments, identify the dissemination of fake news, and tailor responses accordingly.

[72] Ruurd Bierman et al., 'Peer-to-Peer Review on PSM Values' (Geneva: European Broadcasting Union (EBU), February 2015).

[73] The study has shown that the majority of Russian speakers in Finland follow both Russian and Finnish media and identify significant differences between the two language productions. Although most of the interviewees expressed scepticism about the truthfulness of mainstream Russian media, Finnish media were not considered neutral actors either. Instead, Russian speakers generally perceive the Finnish media as part of the anti-Russian western media environment that portray Russia too negatively. Based on the findings, a number of measures were proposed to improve the current situation. Source: 'Russian speakers in Finland as media users - media travel with immigrants', Ibid.

In 2016, the Finnish Defence Forces hosted a training workshop on the topic of public information management and the countering of propaganda.[74] The workshop, offered by experts from leading American universities, involved 100 officials across several levels of the Finnish government (from the central to the municipal level), NGOs, media and the private sector.[75] Its purpose was to increase awareness amongst policy officials and provide them with basic expertise and information operations skills. One of the key takeaways was that in order to counter propaganda, policymakers should avoid repeating statements that are considered to be false.[76] Instead, they should focus on spreading the (positive) message of the government. The government has since offered awareness workshops on countering propaganda at several occasions to a range of actors, including border guards, child protection agencies and educators.

To raise their awareness, the Finnish government has also been reaching out to media organizations. To date, over 20 visits have been carried out during which the government shared its view on Russia's activities in the information domain. Another workshop for approximately 100 journalists is planned for January 2018. Owing to the discussion on Russia's dissemination of fake news, journalists have begun to contact the government to ask for confirmation or rejection of the news. Discussions with the media helped increase awareness on the part of the editors in chief of being fed disinformation by Russian sources.

The government has also stepped up its efforts to boost its own messaging capabilities. The Foreign Ministry has developed a platform which broadcasts Finland's message under the title 'This is what Finland has to say'. Every week, a steering group consisting of Foreign Ministry officials outlines four key talking points and a tweet for every Finnish diplomat to use. In addition, a platform called SMARP[77], which offers the capability to cross-post simultaneously on different social media, is used by 300 officials to post ready-made or redacted material.

The government also offers a National Defense Course, an executive Master Program to which senior representatives from all ministries as well as the private sector and NGOs are invited. The goal is to give participants a total overview of Finland's foreign, security and defense policy. Four national and 1-3 special courses are organized annually for target groups defined by the Advisory Board for National Defence Education.[78] Since 1961, 220 courses have been held, and 9000 participants trained – of which 88 percent were civilians.[79] The program intends to build and reinforce societal resilience partially also through networking of people working in different fields of comprehensive security.[80]

Journalists working for Yle's social media division, Yle Kioski, have also played an important role in investigating Russian disinformation, especially its 'troll factories'. In 2015, Yle Kioski's Jessikka Aro reached out to the members of her audience, asking them to share their experience of encounters with Russia's 'troll army' online, after which she visited St. Petersburg to investigate further

[74] 'US Experts Gird Finnish Officials for Information War,' Yle Uutiset, January 22, 2016, http://yle.fi/uutiset/osasto/news/us_experts_gird_finnish_officials_for_information_war/8616336.

[75] Interview with expert.

[76] 'US Experts Gird Finnish Officials for Information War.'

[77] Smarp is a Helsinki-based employee advocacy platform provider, trying to help companies communicate better with employees and stakeholders. Its employee advocacy app (a mobile intranet) enables employees to share company news and information in social circles. Source: Dom Nicastro, 'Smarp Positions Its Employee Advocacy App as a 'Mobile Intranet,' CMS WiRE, May 10, 2016, http://www.cmswire.com/digital-workplace/smarp-positions-its-employee-advocacy-app-as-a-mobile-intranet/.

[78] 'National Defence Courses,' Maanpuolustuskorkeakoulu [The National Defence College], n.d., http://maanpuolustuskorkeakoulu.fi/en/national-defence-courses.

[79] Interview with expert.

[80] 'National Defence Courses.'

into the work of a Russian 'troll factory'.[81] Ms. Aro's investigation resulted in a series of articles published on Yle Kioski's website in Finnish, English and Russian, earning her the Finnish Grand Prize for Journalism in March 2016.[82] Her efforts to expose Russian disinformation also led to a vicious retaliatory campaign of insults and harassment against her and her work by the same online agitators her work exposed.[83]

Method and style

The government focuses on fact-checking and selecting messages with a potentially high impact for reaction, which it says should ideally be countered within four hours of transmission.[84] Furthermore, as Finland celebrates its centenary of independence, the country pays attention to communicating a positive Finnish narrative and on emphasizing Finnish national identity. Finland's approach is therefore to provide an 'alternative narrative' rooted in core national values in the countering of misinformation. Many other Western governments do not possess a similar kind of narrative that is shared by a very large segment of their populations.[85] Discussion-based media outreach – where various perspectives are presented and taken into account – has been judged to be more effective than aggressive attacks against propaganda.[86]

Capabilities and limitations

The Finnish government is open, transparent, and inclusive and the citizens perceive it as a force for 'good'. The information literacy and educational levels amongst StratCom officials are very high. The loose network structure of the IIN facilitates the spreading of information and the sharing of best practices. Because of its non-bureaucratic setup and shared responsibility, IIN promotes whole-of-government and public-private cooperation, deflecting also the pitfalls associated with departmental 'silo' thinking.

At the same time, the Finnish approach appears to have a number of limitations. First, reaction to potentially harmful disinformation should ideally take place within 4 hours. Because Finland lacks a 24/7 capacity, this timeline cannot always be met. Monitoring, analysis and reactive capacity should therefore grow. In addition, there does not seem to be a dedicated hybrid analysis capability – at least not overtly.

Second, the Finnish population is aging. The younger generation does not have any Soviet experience what increases the chances that Russia can find and make use of 'useful fools'.

[81] Andrew Higgins, 'Effort to Expose Russia's 'Troll Army' Draws Vicious Retaliation,' The New York Times, May 30, 2016, sec. Europe, https://www.nytimes.com/2016/05/31/world/europe/russia-finland-nato-trolls.html.

[82] 'Jessikka Aro's Prize-Winning Stories on Russian Propaganda,' Yle Kioski, June 17, 2016, http://kioski.yle.fi/omat/jessikka-aros-prize-winning-stories-on-russian-propaganda?_ga=2.212891028.1831742762.1494692813-1709271858.1468064970.

[83] Higgins, 'Effort to Expose Russia's 'Troll Army' Draws Vicious Retaliation.'

[84] 'US Experts Gird Finnish Officials for Information War.'

[85] Reid Standish, 'Why Is Finland Able to Fend Off Putin's Information War?,' Foreign Policy, March 1, 2017, https://foreignpolicy.com/2017/03/01/why-is-finland-able-to-fend-off-putins-information-war/.

[86] Government Communications Department, 'Russian Speakers in Finland as Media Users - Media Travel with Immigrants.'

Third, although the Russian minority is small in size, and maintains a positive view of Finnish society, there is a need for publications in Finland that talk about the lives, problems and achievements of the Russian speakers in a way that they can feel part of society. Russian-language content, including talk shows with Finnish subtitles, should be increased. More Russian-language news and documentaries produced in Finland are needed.[87] In addition to fostering a better integration of Russian speakers into Finnish society, the government should invest more in quick and credible official communications and publicly disclose confirmed attempts to influence decision-making within the country.[88]

In 2015, the president of Finland, Sauli Niinistö, commented that countering disinformation is the duty of every citizen in the furtherance of national defense.[89] However, outsourcing information defence to the public runs the risk of creating new victims of Russian info-ops. Given that it is the duty of the government to protect its citizens also in the information domain, a proper information defence mechanism that protects people and societies from disinformation and troll attacks is needed.[90]

Success stories and lessons learned

Finland is often cited as an example to follow. The country's strong educational system[91], diverse and relatively robust media landscape, and increased social media literacy have served as key sources of societal resilience against Russian interference, making Finns less susceptible to propaganda attempts.[92] The cross-authority approach has proven successful in dealing with the issues at stake. The government recognizes the dangers of framing information operations in military terms only, and recognizes that different ministries and agencies – not only military – need to take part in StratCom activities. Because society as a whole is being targeted and society as a whole needs to defend itself, the government acknowledges the need to involve as many stakeholders as possible in its approach. In turn, network effects and bonds have led, as has been pointed out repeatedly, to increased societal coherence. While the efforts are led and controlled by a government agency, media literacy serves as a core element of civil competence.[93] Instead of shutting down websites and radio broadcasts, Finnish authorities focus on raising awareness among policy makers, media outlets, civil society, opinion leaders and the broader general public, believing that sufficient knowledge would lead to enlightenment. Thanks to the contact between the government and media organizations, including occasional visits and trainings, Finnish media outlets have become much more aware and critical of Russian behavior. The fact that the Russian news agency Sputnik ceased to operate in Finland – after it failed to attract enough readers – may be seen as an example of the success of the Finnish approach.[94]

[87] Ibid.

[88] 'Report: Russia Now a Greater Threat to Finland,' The Independent Barents Observer, August 31, 2016, https://thebarentsobserver.com/en/life-and-public/2016/08/report-russia-now-greater-threat-finland.

[89] Teemu Hallamaa, 'Presidentti Niinistö infosodasta: Me kaikki olemme maanpuolustajia [President Sauli Niinistö on info war: We are all national defenders],' Yle Uutiset, October 17, 2015, https://yle.fi/uutiset/3-8388624.

[90] Jessica Aro, 'The Cyberspace War: Propaganda and Trolling as Warfare Tools,' European View 15, no. 1 (June 2016): 121–132, doi:10.1007/s12290-016-0395-5.

[91] Oscar Williams-Grut, 'The 11 Best School Systems in the World,' Business Insider, November 18, 2016, http://uk.businessinsider.com/wef-ranking-of-best-school-systems-in-the-world-2016-2016-11?international=true&r=UK&IR=T.

[92] Standish, 'Why Is Finland Able to Fend Off Putin's Information War?'

[93] Geysha Gonzalez, 'The Obvious Mistake We Make in Fighting Russian Disinformation,' Atlantic Council, accessed May 26, 2017, http://www.atlanticcouncil.org/blogs/ukrainealert/the-obvious-mistake-we-make-in-fighting-russian-disinformation.

[94] Standish, 'Why Is Finland Able to Fend Off Putin's Information War?'

Freedom of the information space

From 2010 until 2016, Finland ranked first in the Annual World Press Freedom Index compiled and published by Reporters without Borders (RSF).[95] This year, however, Finland has fallen to third place, after Norway and Sweden. At the same time, Finland ranks fourth in the world for newspaper readers per capita, with a total of 200 newspapers, including 33 dailies.[96]

Legal environment

Freedom of expression in Finland is protected by Article 12 of the constitution and the 2003 Act on the Exercise of Freedom of Expression in Mass Media. Freedom of access to information is also embedded in the constitution. The 1999 Act on the Openness of Government Activities established mechanisms for the granting of access to information in the public domain, with restrictions on information relating to foreign affairs, criminal investigations, and national security.[97] Although journalists and media outlets are allowed to operate freely, defamation is considered a crime. Defamation cases against journalists are, however, fairly rare. In 2014, the penal code was revised so that only aggravated defamation – offenses causing considerable or long-lasting suffering – would result in a prison sentence. Following criticism from the European Court of Human Rights (ECHR), the Finnish courts, which traditionally treated defamation cases as a dispute between the journalists and the subject – without sufficient consideration of the public's right to receive information on matters of public importance – have begun to adjust their practice.[98]

Political environment

Finnish media outlets are generally perceived as independent and free from political pressure or censorship. Journalists enjoy freedom of movement and physical access to news events. Cases of physical harassment or of threats against journalists are very uncommon.[99] In 2016, however, an incident involving Finnish Prime Minister Juha Sipilä – the so-called Sipilägate – cost Finland its long-held leadership position in the world press freedom rankings. Prime Minister Sipilä reportedly pressured the national broadcaster Yle to alter its coverage of a possible conflict of interest involving himself.[100] Following a number of 'angrily-worded emails' from Mr. Sipilä, further reporting on the issue was suppressed.[101] Two Yle journalists subsequently resigned, citing political pressure and interference in editorial decisions. The Prime Minister's intervention was seen as a violation of freedom of information by observers both in Finland and abroad.[102]

[95] Y. L. E. News, 'Norway and Sweden Surpass Finland in 2017 Press Freedom Rankings,' Eye on the Arctic, April 26, 2017, http://www.rcinet.ca/eye-on-the-arctic/2017/04/26/norway-and-sweden-surpass-finland-in-2017-press-freedom-rankings/.

[96] 'Finland,' Reporters Without Borders, n.d., https://rsf.org/en/finland.

[97] 'Finland|Freedom of the Press 2016,' Freedom House, n.d., https://freedomhouse.org/report/freedom-press/2016/finland.

[98] Ibid.

[99] Ibid.

[100] '2017 World Press Freedom Index,' Reporters Without Borders, July 6, 2017, https://rsf.org/en/ranking#.

[101] 'Reporters Without Borders (RSF) Remains Concerned about Actions Taken by National Broadcaster Yle,' Reporters Without Borders, December 16, 2016, https://rsf.org/en/news/reporters-without-borders-rsf-remains-concerned-about-actions-taken-national-broadcaster-yle.

[102] News, 'Norway and Sweden Surpass Finland in 2017 Press Freedom Rankings.'

Economic environment

Finland has a variety of editorially independent print, broadcast and online news outlets. With regard to print media, Finland maintains a high newspaper readership. Most newspapers are privately owned and controlled by Sanoma and Alma Media. The largest daily newspaper, Helsingin Sanomat, and the tabloid Ilta-Sanomat, as well as a number of television channels and periodicals, form part of Sanoma's portfolio. Alma Media owns the major daily newspaper Aamulehti and the tabloid Iltalehti.[103]

The television landscape has expanded since the digital switch-over of television broadcasting was finalized in 2007. In addition to four public channels operated by the government-owned national public service broadcasting company Yle, there are more than 50 commercial channels currently available in Finland. Yle is funded by a special tax and provides broadcasting and internet services in all the minority languages, including Russian. In addition to six public radio channels with a national reach and 28 regional stations operated by Yle, there are dozens of commercial radio stations with a local, regional, or national reach.[104]

The internet is open and unrestricted, and 92,4 percent of the population had internet access in 2016.[105] In 2008, the government initiated the Broadband for All 2015 project, with the goal of expanding internet access in Finland, particularly to people living in remote areas. Financial difficulties made reaching the coverage target of 99 percent by the end of 2015 impossible. In addition to government support in extending internet coverage, in 2014 the government announced a three-year funding program to help media outlets adapt their services and practices to the digital age.[106]

Approach and posture: government and civil society

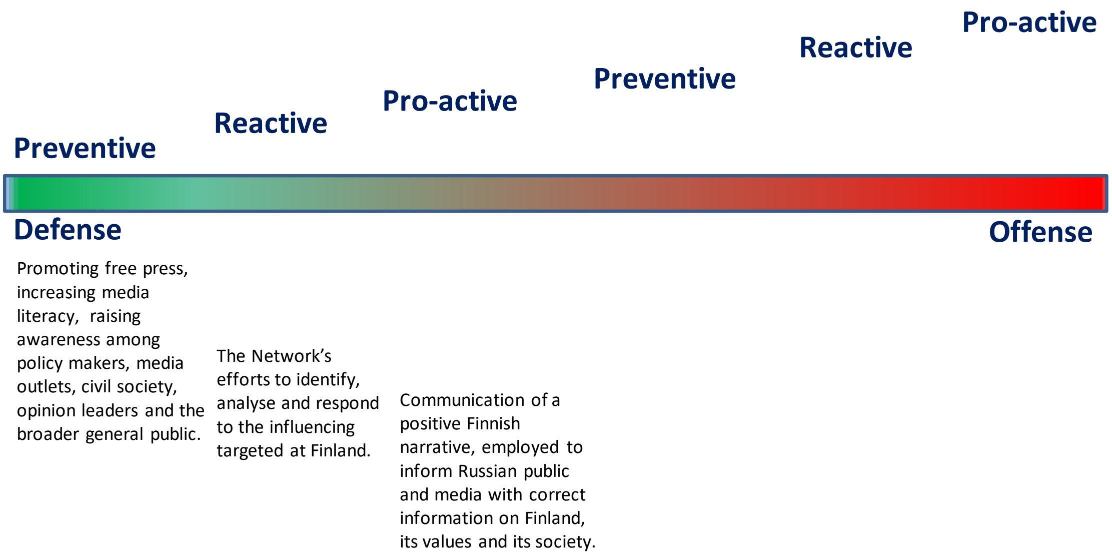
Finland utilizes a networked approach that is coordinated from the Centre (the Prime Minister's Office) and can be characterized as truly 'whole-of-government'. All government ministries and other relevant governmental actors such as the Police, Defence Forces and Border Guard are included in the Information Influencing Network. Societal resilience against disinformation and hybrid war is a key part of the Finnish Comprehensive Security concept.[107]

Defensive-offensive continuum

The Finnish approach falls squarely on the defensive side. The government focuses on its own information space by coordinating the key talking points for the government on a weekly basis, increasing media literacy and collaborating with journalists and other societal initiatives.[108] The country has refrained from offensive language and operations, which it considers escalatory, invasive, and in some ways legally and morally inappropriate.[109] The authorities have also refrained from banning media outlets. Such measures are considered insufficient to address the issues at stake.

[103] 'Finland|Freedom of the Press 2016.'
[104] Ibid.
[105] Ibid.
[106] Ibid.
[107] Interview with expert.
[108] Interview with expert.
[109] Interview with expert.

Figure 5 Finnish posture along the defensive-offensive continuum: preventive, reactive and pro-active measures


Preventive
Reactive
Pro-active
Preventive
Reactive
Pro-active
Defense
Offense
Promoting free press, increasing media literacy, raising awareness among policy makers, media outlets, civil society, opinion leaders and the broader general public.
The Network's efforts to identify, analyse and respond to the influencing targeted at Finland.
Communication of a positive Finnish narrative, employed to inform Russian public and media with correct information on Finland, its values and its society.

Preventive, reactive, pro-active measures

The Finnish approach encompasses preventive, reactive and pro-active measures (see Figure 5). Preventive measures include the promotion of free press, increasing media literacy, and awareness raising among policy makers, media outlets, civil society, opinion leaders and the broader general public. The network's effort to identify, analyse and respond to the influencing targeted at Finland could be classified as a reactive defensive measure. The Finnish government leans toward a pro-active defensive stance. Communication of a positive Finnish narrative constitutes a pro-active measure, employed to pro-actively inform Russian public and media with correct information on Finland, its values and its society.

Domain of action

The Finnish government is active in different domains of the information space. Through the state-majority owned national broadcasting company (Yle), which offers internet and broadcasting services in all minority languages, including Russian, the government can reach a wide segment of the population (over 70 percent of the population in 2014). In addition to the media sphere, actions take place within both the government and society: outreach and awareness activities carried out by the IIN target national and local policy officials as well as civil society organizations. Trainings are offered to a wide range of actors, including government officials (from the central to the municipal level), NGOs, journalists, private sector, child protection agencies, and educators. Because the society as a whole is being targeted, actions are targeted at Finnish society at large.

Dilemmas for liberal democracies

All Finnish officials emphasized the importance of a diverse and free media landscape and a constitutional duty of the government to respect the right of representatives from all sides of the political spectrum to make their viewpoints heard. At the same time, the government has not shied away from actively contacting civil society including key media outlets to share its own perspective on Russia's information activities, both in a more general fashion but also in specific cases. This, officials emphasized, is within the rights of a government operating in the boundaries of a liberal democratic order.

In 2016, the Helsinki Police Department demanded the closure of the anti-immigrant websites MV-lehti and Uber Uutiset on suspicions of hate incitement, disinformation and aggravated defamation.[110] Although the Helsinki District court refused to shut down the websites, it nevertheless issued an arrest warrant in absentia for the site's founder Ilja Janitskin.[111] Controversy surrounds radio station Love FM too, which has been broadcasting since July 2016. In addition to harmless pop music, which forms 95 percent of its broadcasting, the radio station diffused short 'News from Russia', which carried Moscow's propaganda.The fact that the government granted a license to a propaganda radio station attracted much criticism from the local media establishment.[112] Due to opposition from the Finnish authorities, Love FM stopped broadcasting the news. Last year, in a unique case, the Finnish government took another step when it denied pro Kremlin activist Johan Backman the right to acquire 95 percent of the Love FM ownership, threatening it would revoke the radio licence should the ownership structure change.[113] It was the first time the authorities warned that a change in radio ownership structure may endanger national security if the radio continues operating.[114]

In contrast to Lithuania and Latvia, where legislation prohibiting the broadcasting of propaganda is in place, Finland's regulatory authorities have no authority to intervene in the programming content of radio stations, unless terms and conditions of the license are violated.[115] If the radio content is considered unlawful, it becomes a case for the courts to decide.

Conclusion

Although Finland has traditionally been less critical of Russia and followed a pragmatic Russia policy, the country underwent a significant policy shift – or 'awakening'[116] – after Russian aggression against Ukraine and its subsequent annexation of Crimea. Finland takes the Russian threat seriously and has made significant advances in dealing with Russian operations in the information domain. Russia is aware that too much pressure on Finland may result in a counterproductive Finnish pushback. Finland can and will defend itself and exert a high price for aggression against its territory. Much can be learned and emulated from Finland's whole-of-government approach.

110. 'Police Demand Closure of MV-Lehti,' Finland Times, July 29, 2016, http://www.finlandtimes.fi/national/2016/07/29/28869/Police-demand-closure-of-MV-lehti.

111. 'European Arrest Warrant for MV-Lehti Founder to Be Sought,' Finland Times, September 29, 2016, http://www.finlandtimes.fi/national/2016/09/29/30492/European-arrest-warrant-for-MV-lehti-founder-to-be-sought.

112. Kerkko Paananen, 'From Russia With Love,' StopFake.org, January 8, 2016, http://www.stopfake.org/en/from-russia-with-love/.

113. 'Love FM:n Lupa Peruutetaan, Jos Omistajaksi Tulee Johan Bäckman,' Aamulehti, February 2, 2017, https://www.aamulehti.fi/kotimaa/love-fmn-lupa-peruutetaan-jos-omistajaksi-tulee-johan-backman-24250777/.

114. Ibid.

115. Paananen, 'From Russia With Love'; Nina Leinonen, 'Propagandaradio Aloitti Toimintansa Suomessa - Levittää Venäjän Viestiä [The Propaganda Radio Started Its Activity in Finland - to Spread Russia's Message],' Iltalehti, July 27, 2016, http://www.iltalehti.fi/uutiset/2016072721967458_uu.shtml.

116. Jakub Janda et al., 'How Do European Democracies React to Russian Aggression?'

LATVIA

Background

Latvia is one of the countries targeted by Russia's information operations. The country has a sizable minority of ethnic Russians and Belarusians. Integration of these minorities into political, economic and cultural life following independence from the Soviet Union in 1991 has been a slow process and historical grievances continue to influence ethnic relations. For example, 12 percent of Latvia's population are classified as 'non-citizens' as these ethnic Russians were not granted Latvian citizenship in 1991.[117] In total, 38 percent of Latvians claim Russian as their mother tongue.[118] Like in the other Baltic States, the Russian minority in Latvia has developed a sense of community separate from Russia itself, but most Russian speakers still prefer to obtain their news in Russian.[119] Therefore, Russian media, and local Latvian Russian language media outlets are able to reach a large audience.[120] Latvia based Russian propaganda outlets such as Baltnews, Vesti, and Segodnya spread Kremlin-controlled content from sites hosted in Russia. For example, they frequently quote rubaltic.ru, a Kaliningrad-based news site known to spread disinformation.[121] These pieces often paint a negative picture of the Latvian government and its treatment of the Russian minority.[122]

Furthermore, the Russian government seeks to influence the Russian minority in Latvia by means of the so-called 'compatriots policy'.[123] This initiative supports NGOs dedicated to the preservation of Russian culture and language, and rights and education of Russian speakers abroad, with distinct anti-EU, anti-NATO and anti-Western undertones.[124] Latvian society has become vulnerable to Russian-funded NGOs aiming to influence local policies.[125] In fact, there are more than 40 such organizations in the Baltic states that have received at least 1.5 million euros in Russian financial support since 2012.[126] Under these conditions, the Latvian government is in the process of formulating a centralized strategic communications approach.

[117] Benas Gerdziunas, 'Latvia's Russian 'Non-Citizens,'' Deutsche Welle, March 7, 2017, http://www.dw.com/en/latvias-russian-non-citizens/g-37820075.

[118] Carol J. Williams, 'Latvia, with a Large Minority of Russians, Worries about Putin's Goals,' Los Angeles Times, May 2, 2015, http://www.latimes.com/world/europe/la-fg-latvia-russia-next-20150502-story.html.

[119] Agnia Grigas, 'The New Generation of Baltic Russian Speakers,' EURACTIV.com, November 28, 2014, https://www.euractiv.com/section/europe-s-east/opinion/the-new-generation-of-baltic-russian-speakers/.

[120] 'Role of Russian Media in the Baltics and Moldova' (Broadcasting Board of Governors, 2016), https://www.bbg.gov/wp-content/media/2016/02/BBG-Gallup-Russian-Media-pg2-02-04-164.pdf.

[121] Inga Spriņģe, 'Small Time Propagandists,' Re:baltica, April 17, 2017, https://en.rebaltica.lv/2017/04/small-time-propagandists/.

[122] Ibid.

[123] Interview with expert.

[124] Alexandra Jolkina and Markian Ostaptschuk, 'Activists or Kremlin Agents - Who Protects Russian-Speakers in the Baltics?,' Deutsche Welle, December 9, 2015, http://www.dw.com/en/activists-or-kremlin-agents-who-protects-russian-speakers-in-the-baltics/a-18903695.; Interview with expert.

[125] Sanita Jemberga, Mikk Salu, and Šarūnas Černiauskas, 'Kremlin's Millions,' Re:baltica, August 27, 2015, https://en.rebaltica.lv/2015/08/kremlins-millions/.

[126] Investigation led by re:baltica: Ibid.

General approach

Currently, Latvia has no overarching, whole-of-government, strategic communications strategy in place. There are strategic communications efforts being pursued across various government bodies and at different levels, mostly on an ad hoc basis.[127]

Mandate and scope

There is no dedicated strategic communications unit within the Latvian government. The legal mandate to regulate media outlets lies with the independent National Electronic Mass Media Council (NEPLP).[128]

Actors involved

Within the Latvian government there are several actors involved in the countering of Russian information operations. For example, the Latvian Ministry of Defence (MoD) has alerted the public about fake news.[129] Through their news portal Sargs.lv, they inform Latvian citizens of Russia's military actions at home and abroad.[130] Public broadcasting organization Latvijas Sabiedriskais Medijs (LSM) has created a Latvian news radio station in the Russian language, Latvijas Radio 4 (LR4). Its online news portal LSM.lv and TV news channel Latvijas Televīzija 7 (LTV7) provide accurate and balanced information in both Latvian and Russian on current politics and news issues.[131] The Latvian Security Police identifies foreign backed news sources and NGOs that seek to undermine Latvian society.[132] The Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MFA) cooperates with and supports NGOs, mainly with the goal of increasing media literacy and improving investigative journalism. They also disseminate information through e.g., press releases about salient issues, such as the annexation of Crimea. Furthermore, they put Russian disinformation and strategic communications on the agenda of the EU, NATO and other international organizations.[133]

Various civil society initiatives are also active within the Latvian information space. The 'Elf Team', a volunteer initiative created by Ingmars Bisenieks (a former Latvian MFA employee) in April 2017, seeks to fight fake news and spread awareness about Russian propaganda.[134] The 'elves' are anonymous people who identify 'trolls' that leave behind false statements on online news platforms and counter them with facts.[135] The Baltic Centre for Media Excellence aims to raise media literacy, knowledge, and ensure accountable journalism. The Centre was founded by several leading Baltic media organizations and academic institutions, including investigative journalism platform

[127] Interview with expert.

[128] 'Competence of the Council in the Field of Electronic Mass Media,' NEPLPADOME, August 31, 2012, http://neplpadome.lv/en/home/about-us/competence-of-the-council-in-the-field-of-electronic-mass-media.html.

[129] 'Fake News about Summer Shield XIV Exercise,' Ministry of Defence of the Republic of Latvia, accessed May 30, 2017, http://www.mod.gov.lv/en/Aktualitates/Preses_pazinojumi/2017/04/26-01.aspx.

[130] 'Sargs.lv,' accessed July 21, 2017, http://www.sargs.lv/.

[131] Anda Rozukalne, ''All the Necessary Information Is Provided by Russia's Channels'. Russian-Language Radio and TV in Latvia: Audiences and Content,' Baltic Screen Media Review 4 (2016): 106–24.

[132] Interview with expert.

[133] Interview with expert.

[134] The International Massmedia Agency, 'Latvian Elves against the Trolls of the Kremlin,' The International Massmedia Agency, April 6, 2017, https://intmassmedia.com/2017/04/06/latvian-elves-against-the-trolls-of-the-kremlin/.

[135] Ibid.

RE:Baltica, Latvian and Estonian public broadcasters and several universities, and receives funding from the Latvian MFA.[136] The commercial TV channel TV3 started a weekly show debunking fake news, named Lie Theory.[137]

Realizing Latvia cannot deal with the problem of Russian disinformation alone, the government has been a driving force behind international cooperation on this issue. As a member of both the EU and NATO, Latvia has a working partnership with the EU's East StratCom Task Force and the NATO StratCom CoE, headquartered in Riga, receiving expert advice and analysis on Russian disinformation campaigns.[138] In 2016, as coordinator of the Nordic-Baltic Eight cooperation, Latvia focused on and established cooperation between the eight nations in the strategic communications domain, as well as on other regional foreign and security policy issues.[139]

Communication products and campaigns

The Latvian government has taken various actions to counter Russian disinformation.[140] The Latvian Ministry of Defense occasionally engages in the debunking of fake news stories, in particular on topics related to NATO involvement in Latvia and the Latvian army.[141] Public broadcaster LSM also deconstructs fake news on its website LSM.lv, in both Latvian and Russian.[142] On the initiative of the regulatory agency NEPLP, the Russian state television Rossiya RTR was temporarily banned on two occasions, first in 2014 and again in 2016.[143] In March 2016, the government branch that regulates the .lv domain cancelled the registration of the Latvian domain of Russian propaganda outlet SputnikNews.[144]

Civil society actors have also developed some communication products and campaigns. The 'Elf Army' counteracts false online statements by providing facts.[145] Some independent bloggers identify fake news in the Latvian information space.[146] TV3's Lie Theory is another communication product aimed at the debunking of fake news.[147] The Baltic Centre for Media Excellence has created media literacy trainings for journalists, in order to strengthen Latvian media's resilience to fake news.[148]

[136] Baltic Centre for Media Excellence, 'About,' Baltic Centre for Media Excellence, accessed May 30, 2017, https://baltic.media/about.

[137] 'Melu Teorija,' Skaties, accessed May 30, 2017, http://skaties.lv/tema/melu-teorija/.

[138] 'Latvia Backs More 'StratCom',' LSM, October 21, 2016, http://eng.lsm.lv/article/politics/politics/latvia-backs-more-StratCom.a206498/.

[139] Republic of Estonia Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 'Nordic-Baltic Cooperation (NB 8),' July 4, 2016, http://www.vm.ee/en/nordic-baltic-cooperation-nb-8.

[140] Una Bergmane, 'Latvia's Debate About Russian Propaganda,' Foreign Policy Research Institute Baltic Bulletin, July 6, 2016, http://www.fpri.org/article/2016/07/latvias-debate-russian-propaganda/.

[141] For example, see 'Fake News about Summer Shield XIV Exercise.'

[142] 'Melu Detektors,' LSM, accessed May 30, 2017, http://www.lsm.lv/temas/melu-detektors/.

[143] Freedom House, 'Latvia Country Report 2015,' Freedom of the Press (Freedom House, April 2015), https://freedomhouse.org/report/freedom-press/2015/latvia; Bergmane, 'Latvia's Debate About Russian Propaganda.'

[144] Bergmane, 'Latvia's Debate About Russian Propaganda.'

[145] The International Massmedia Agency, 'Latvian Elves against the Trolls of the Kremlin.'

[146] 'Blogger Unmasks More Fake News Sites,' LSM, December 12, 2016, http://eng.lsm.lv/article/features/features/blogger-unmasks-more-fake-news-sites.a214227/.

[147] 'Melu Teorija.'

[148] Baltic Centre for Media Excellence, 'About.'

Method and style

As seen in the previous section, one of the main methods used by Latvian actors in the information space is to provide alternative media for Russian-language speakers in Latvia. Examples are the creation of LR4 and LTV7. A second method is to improve the information space by debunking fake news stories and the organization of media literacy courses, mostly through grassroots initiatives. Thirdly, the government looks to restrict access to the information space for outlets that articulate Russian propaganda, for example by suspending the Rossiya RTR channel. In a preventive move, the Saeima (Latvian Parliament) updated the country's criminal code in response to Russia's information warfare, criminalizing (foreign-backed) disinformation in the process.[149]

Capabilities and limitations

At the moment, Latvian government bodies tackle the Russian propaganda machine on an individual basis. Several ministries and civil society actors are active in countering Russian disinformation, but actions are taken on an ad hoc basis. There is no whole-of-government approach in place. With no dedicated budget or staff mandate, measures are taken one step at a time in a process that is more incremental than reflective of a long term solution.

Other limitations are that journalists are underpaid and media often poorly funded, especially after the media sector was hit hard by the 2009 economic crisis. Because of sudden budget cuts and layoffs, the quality of Latvian journalism declined in this period.[150] Considering the current challenging media environment in which fake news and real news are not always easily distinguishable, greater media literacy education for journalists may be needed to get journalistic standards up to par and help stop the spread of disinformation. Moreover, Russian media have a far greater budget at their disposal than do Latvian Russian-language media and are able to provide a more attractive package of programs.[151]

Success stories and lessons learned

By offering local news to Russian speakers about events in Latvia, politics and Latvian culture, radio channel LR4, LSM.lv and TV news channel LTV7 have shown themselves as useful tools of integration. Viewer rates of Russian news TV in Latvia have declined by a third according to a recent poll by the Latvian Foreign Ministry.[152] However, this also shows the need for a public broadcasting TV channel operating fully in the Russian-language. Attempts to create such a channel have hitherto been unsuccessful, in part because nationalist Latvian politicians do not want to legitimize the Russian language.[153]

[149] Saeima Press Service, 'Saeima Adopts New Regulations on Criminal Liability for Crimes against the State,' Saeima, April 21, 2016, http://www.saeima.lv/en/news/saeima-news/24680-saeima-adopts-new-regulations-on-criminal-liability-for-crimes-against-the-state; Konstantin Benyumov, 'Riga's Fight against Russian Propaganda: Legislation to Counter Moscow's 'hybrid War' Stalls in the Latvian Parliament,' Meduza, April 14, 2016, https://meduza.io/en/feature/2016/04/14/riga-s-fight-against-russian-propaganda.

[150] 'Latvia - Media Landscape | European Journalism Centre (EJC),' European Journalism Centre (EJC), accessed July 21, 2017, http://ejc.net/media_landscapes/latvia.

[151] Interview with expert.

[152] 'Audience of News on Russian TV Channels down by 1/3 in Lithuania,' DELFI, February 1, 2017, http://en.delfi.lt/lithuania/society/audience-of-news-on-russian-tv-channels-down-by-13-in-lithuania.d?id=73618442.

[153] Rozukalne, ''All the Necessary Information Is Provided by Russia's Channels'. Russian-Language Radio and TV in Latvia,' 123.

Freedom of the information space

Legal environment

Press freedom and freedom of speech are protected by Latvia's constitution. The media environment is qualified as 'free' by the NGO Freedom House.[154] However, there are certain legal restrictions to press freedom. For example, libel and defamation remain criminal offenses.[155] Over the past decade, several whistleblowers and investigative journalists researching corruption or misconduct by politicians have been charged with libel or defamation.[156]

A second legislative challenge to the freedom of the press is the Law on Electronic Mass Media. The law includes provisions which allow the National Electronic Mass Media Council (NEPLP) to regulate (broadcast) media content. In 2014, the NEPLP suspended the Russian TV broadcaster Rossiya RTR for three months, on the accusation of spreading 'war propaganda' and information that threatened Latvia's national security.[157] In 2016, it banned the same channel for six months, while the Latvian domain of Russian news site Sputnik News was suspended.[158]

In April 2016, the Saeima passed amendments to the Criminal Code in response to Russia's information warfare, criminalizing individuals who speak out against 'Latvian independence, sovereignty, and territorial integrity'.[159] The initial proposal received strong opposition from various civil society actors, who saw it as an attack on civil liberties. Several changes were made before the law was passed. Changes included a revision of the language used and the (at least temporary) removal of the section criminalizing illegally accessing classified information; one of the provisions heavily criticized for its potential negative effect on whistleblowers and investigative journalists.[160]

Political environment

In general, the Latvian national media environment can be characterized as relatively competitive, diverse and independent.[161] During election campaigns, the different political parties are all proportionally represented in the media and without bias towards the governing coalition.[162] However, at times, political parties have exerted influence over the media.[163] An estimated 60 percent of Latvian national and regional newspapers are owned by entities affiliated with a particular political party.[164] On a local level, media are often dependent on advertising or subsidies from the local government, leading to close affiliations between local politicians and these small

[154] Freedom House, 'Latvia Country Report 2017,' Freedom of the Press (Freedom House), accessed May 30, 2017, https://freedomhouse.org/report/freedom-press/2017/latvia.

[155] International Press Institute, 'Latvia | Defamation Laws,' Media Laws Database, accessed May 30, 2017, http://legaldb.freemedia.at/legal-database/latvia/.

[156] Freedom House, 'Latvia Country Report 2015'; 'Latvia : Two-Speed Freedom,' Reporters Without Borders, accessed May 30, 2017, https://rsf.org/en/latvia.

[157] Freedom House, 'Latvia Country Report 2015.'

[158] Bergmane, 'Latvia's Debate About Russian Propaganda'; 'Latvia Shuts down Sputnik Propaganda Website,' LSM, March 29, 2016, http://eng.lsm.lv/article/society/society/latvia-shuts-down-sputnik-propaganda-website.a175627/.

[159] 'Saeima Passes Controversial Amendments to Criminal Law in Final Reading,' LETA, April 21, 2016, http://leta.lv/eng/home/important/1339FA51-D181-0A2B-05AD-7618856E2B4E/.

[160] Saeima Press Service, 'Saeima Adopts New Regulations on Criminal Liability for Crimes against the State'; Benyumov, 'Riga's Fight against Russian Propaganda.'

[161] 'Latvia'; Freedom House, 'Latvia Country Report 2015.'

[162] Anda Rožukalne and Sergejs Kruks, 'Latvia,' Media Pluralism Monitor, January 20, 2016, http://monitor.cmpf.eui.eu/mpm2015/results/latvia/.

[163] Freedom House, 'Latvia Country Report 2015.'

[164] Rožukalne and Kruks, 'Latvia.'

media outlets.[165] A potential area of concern for political influence is the funding of the public broadcasting corporation, LSM. As funding is set annually by the government without a public discussion, there is a possibility for political manipulation through ad hoc budget cuts.[166] The NEPLP is the entity responsible for funding LSM. Since 2012, NEPLP appointments are made by parliament after consultation with the NGO sector, in a bid to increase its status as independent regulator. However, many members still have close connections to the government. In 2012, when guests on Latvijas Radio voiced critical opinions about the ruling party, a member of the NEPLP threatened to ban these guests from the program.[167] In September 2015, in a move widely regarded as political, a majority in the Saeima fired the head of the NEPLP for inefficient spending and increasing Russian-language programming.[168] He was later reinstated as an NEPLP member by the Constitutional Court.[169]

Another issue concerns the position of Russian media outlets in the Latvian information space. As the Russian-speaking minority in Latvia numbers around 30 percent of the population, there is a high demand for Russian-language media. The public broadcaster provides some Russian-language TV programs on its channel LTV, reaching approximately half of the Russian-speaking minority in 2015.[170] Attempts to create a fully Russian language public TV channel have not materialized due to political reasons. The public Russian-language LR4 radio channel also has a substantial audience, but is perceived as a tool of state communications and formal in tone.[171] In lieu of (entertaining) public media in their language, many Russian speakers turn to private outlets. The main Russian-language TV channel, Pirmais Baltijas Kanāls (PBK), tends to parrot the Russian government position. In 2015, it was fined 10.000 euros by the NEPLP for their pro-Kremlin bias while reporting on the Ukraine conflict.[172] The main newspapers, Vesti Segodnya and MK-Latvia, also run mostly pro-Kremlin articles.[173] An additional problem is that in rural Eastern Latvia, access to Latvian channels is often unavailable due to the weakness of cable infrastructure. Viewers there primarily watch Russian channels received through satellite dishes or terrestrial antennae.[174]

Economic environment

The Latvian media market consists of both public and private media. LSM operates two TV channels (LTV1 and LTV7) as well as several radio channels and an online news portal. Over the past decade, ownership of Latvia's private media has become increasingly concentrated in the hands of a small number of foreign firms. This development may in part have been due to decreasing advertising revenues. The Estonian company Eesti Meedia now owns two often-visited online news portals, Apollo.lv and Tvnet.lv.[175] In 2017, the Swedish Modern Times Group (MTG) sold the two major

[165] Ibid.

[166] Ibid.

[167] Freedom House, 'Latvia Country Report 2015.'

[168] 'Saeima Dismisses Head of Broadcast Regulator,' LSM, July 8, 2015, http://eng.lsm.lv/article/society/society/saeima-dismisses-head-of-broadcast-regulator.a136808/.

[169] Ivo Leit⍰ns, 'Acting Chair Takes Seat at Helm of Broadcast Regulator / LSM.LV,' LSM, January 4, 2016, http://eng.lsm.lv/article/politics/acting-chair-takes-seat-at-helm-of-broadcast-regulator.a162477/.

[170] Rozukalne, ''All the Necessary Information Is Provided by Russia's Channels'. Russian-Language Radio and TV in Latvia,' 116.

[171] Ibid., 122–23.

[172] 'Media Watchdog Fines PBK Television for pro-Kremlin Bias,' LSM, October 23, 2015, http://eng.lsm.lv/article/society/society/media-watchdog-fines-pbk-television-for-pro-kremlin-bias.a151572/.

[173] Rozukalne, ''All the Necessary Information Is Provided by Russia's Channels'. Russian-Language Radio and TV in Latvia,' 106–24.

[174] Freedom House, 'Latvia Country Report 2015.'

[175] Ibid.

Latvian commercial TV channels, TV3 and LNT, to an American private equity firm.[176] Up to a third of Latvia's 15 most popular TV channels, including Russian-language channel PBK, now belong to the Baltic Media Group.[177] This consolidation of media assets spurs concerns about the future of pluralism in the Latvian media landscape.[178]

A further concern about the economic environment of Latvian media is the lax enforcement of the Law on the Press and Other Mass Media, requiring disclosure of media ownership structures. The government does not facilitate or enforce ownership transparency. For a number of Latvian media, the ultimate owners or beneficiaries are still unknown.[179] This is particularly problematic for Russian-language media. After several ownership changes and takeovers, the three major daily Russian newspapers Vesti Segodnya, Chas, and Telegraf were consolidated in a single holding in 2012.[180] Officially, ownership was transferred to a 23-year old Ukrainian university graduate in 2016, in a move to avoid paying 200.000 euros in back taxes to the Latvian government. The ultimate owner is believed to be former Russian Duma MP Eduard Yanakov, a millionaire who made his fortune in the mining business. Since the takeover, journalists with dissenting opinions have been fired and the papers have become a mouthpiece for the Russian embassy in Latvia.[181]

Approach and posture: government and society

There is no coordinated, government-wide approach to strategic communications and the countering of Russian information operations. There are some top-down measures employed, such as the widening of the Criminal Code and the suspension of Russian TV channels by the NEPLP. Other initiatives, such as the anti-trolling volunteer 'Elves', the investigative journalist NGOs Meduza.io and RE:Baltica, and the Baltic Centre for Media Excellence are bottom-up. The Ministries of Defence and Foreign Affairs financially support some of these civil society initiatives. The Latvian government is also a driving force behind supranational initiatives in countering Russian disinformation. They were a strong proponent of the creation of the NATO StratCom CoE, the EEAS StratCom Task Force and cooperation on strategic communications within the Nordic-Baltic Eight framework.

Defensive-offensive continuum

The measures taken by the Latvian government are largely defensive in nature. For example, amending the Criminal Code, to debunk fake news, create Russian-language TV and radio broadcasats, and promote positive narratives about Latvia are all actions taken to prevent or counteract Russian disinformation in the Latvian information space. A measure that could be characterized as offensive is the suspension of Russian TV channel Rossiya RTR.

[176] 'Programme: New TV3 and LNT Owner Will Likely Sell Channels to Someone Else,' Baltic News Network, March 27, 2017, http://bnn-news.com/programme-new-tv3-and-lnt-owner-will-likely-sell-channels-to-someone-else-162843.

[177] 'Latvia: Little Trust in the Press,' Eurotopics, May 2017, http://www.eurotopics.net/en/149413.

[178] Freedom House, 'Latvia Country Report 2015.'

[179] Rožukalne and Kruks, 'Latvia'; Freedom House, 'Latvia Country Report 2015.'

[180] Freedom House, 'Latvia Country Report 2015.'

[181] Inga Spriņģe, 'How Russian Propaganda Becomes Even Nastier in Baltic News | Re:Baltica,' Re:baltica, March 29, 2017, https://en.rebaltica.lv/2017/03/how-russian-propaganda-becomes-even-nastier-in-baltic-news/.

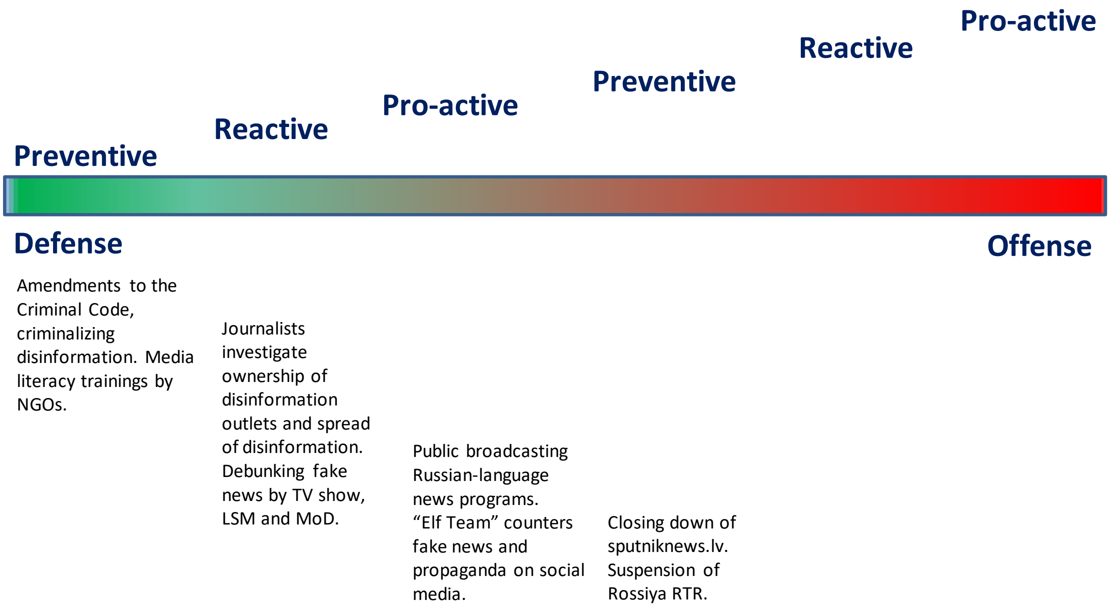
Preventive, reactive, pro-active measures

The Latvian approach has so far consisted of preventive and reactive measures (see Figure 6). One defensive preventive measure is the change in the Criminal Code, which offers new tools to restrict and prosecute NGOs or media that are aimed at stirring up unrest or anti-Latvian sentiments. Civil society initiatives aimed at increasing media literacy (such as the Baltic Centre of Media Excellence) for both journalists and schools are also preventive. Offensive preventive measures are the closing down of the Latvian web domain of SputnikNews and the suspension of Rossiya RTR.

Investigative journalism initiatives such as RE:Baltica study the ownership structure of media outlets spreading Russian disinformation as well as the ways in which pieces spread through the Russian-language media domain. This constitutes a defensive, reactive action, aimed at limiting the impact of Russian disinformation in the Latvian information space. The debunking of fake news in a TV show, on the website of LSM and by the MoD are also defensive measures.

The creation of Russian-language public broadcasting programs on LR4 and LTV7 is a defensive, pro-active measure, aimed at reaching the Russian-speaking minority that was previously only exposed to media from Russia. Another pro-active initiative is the 'elf team' NGO, which debunks Russian fake news and propaganda on social media and counters it with facts.

Figure 6 Latvian posture along the defensive-offensive continuum: preventive, reactive and pro-active measures



Amendments to the Criminal Code, criminalizing disinformation. Media literacy trainings by NGOs.

Journalists investigate ownership of disinformation outlets and spread of disinformation. Debunking fake news by TV show, LSM and MoD.

Public broadcasting Russian-language news programs. "Elf Team" counters fake news and propaganda on social media.

Closing down of sputniknews.lv. Suspension of Rossiya RTR.

Domain of action

Latvian government ministries and agencies are active in several domains of the information sphere. First, the NEPLP seeks to restrict the access of outlets that disseminate information aimed at destabilizing Latvia and its government. The suspension of Russian TV channel Rossiya RTR and levying fines on media that are deemed overly pro-Russian are examples thereof. The update of the Criminal Code provides more effective legal tools to take such measures. Second, the NEPLP attempts to improve access for Russian speakers through Russian-language radio channel LR4, news programs on LTV7 and content on the public broadcaster's website. Third, the government (in particular the Latvian MFA) wants to raise societal resilience and increase the quality of Latvian journalism by supporting investigative journalism initiatives and media literacy courses for journalists and schools. Fourth, individual ministries generally review their public messages, press releases and the strategic message they send out, and check whether these are in line with their ministry's higher-level policy documents.[182] These actions, while not constituting a coordinated government-wide strategy, have a strategic communications component and take place in the actual information domain.

Dilemmas for liberal democracies

Latvia has experienced several tensions between upholding liberal democratic principles and actions it considers necessary to counter Russian information operations. For example, the amendments to the Criminal Code criminalize any type of activities against the fundamental interests of the state of Latvia, including the dissemination of information against the independence, sovereignty, territorial integrity and the Latvian government.[183] The clause is important as a basis to prosecute pro-Russian outlets and pundits involved in disinformation. However, its broad phrasing means the amendment could in theory be used to prosecute journalists and citizens arguing for changes in the constitution and, as such, may limit the freedoms of speech and press.

A second tension arises around the question of how to deal with Russian-speaking minorities. On the one hand, the government wants to strengthen Latvian national identity and stimulate the use of the Latvian language. Therefore many politicians do not wish to invest in Russian-language government communication and radio and TV outlets. On the other hand, it is crucial to engage with the Russian-speaking minority in the face of its vulnerability to Russian media outlets disseminating fake news and propaganda.

Finding new ways to maintain Latvia's open information space without limiting it has proven challenging. Choices in media preferences are made at the individual level, which is why it is important for the state to provide education in media literacy in the national school curriculum and state media in how to identify false news.

Conclusion

In conclusion, Latvia has significantly stepped up its defense against Russian influence in the information domain. Civil society actors have developed substantial capabilities in fields such as media literacy education, investigative journalism and the debunking of fake news. A point of concern, however, is that on the government side Latvia still lacks an overall strategy on how to deal with the issue of Russian disinformation. This hampers the overall effectiveness of operations since a whole-of-government approach is currently missing.

[182] Interview with expert

[183] Saeima preliminarily supports amendments to the criminal law aimed at addressing threats of hybrid warfare. Source: 'Latvijas Republikas Saeima,' Saeima.lv, March 3, 2016, http://www.saeima.lv/en/news/saeima-news/24508-saeima-preliminarily-supports-amendments-to-the-criminal-law-aimed-at-addressing-threats-of-hybrid-w.

Notwithstanding the absence of such a strategy, the government has been able to take several positive concrete actions. For example, the public broadcaster has produced Russian-language programs to better engage with the Russian minority. Furthermore, the government has amended legislation to more effectively counteract Russian societal interference and it seeks international cooperation in fighting disinformation. However, the fact that Russian(-backed) media outlets remain popular among the Russian-speaking minority will remain a challenge for the future. The Latvian government is likely to continue to walk a tightrope in this respect.

UKRAINE

Background

After the Ukrainian revolution in February 2014 ousted the then Ukrainian President Viktor Yanukovych, Russia annexed the Crimean peninsula and supported separatist rebels in the Donbas region. As part of this hybrid war, Russia has conducted information operations aimed at discrediting the current Ukrainian government, driving an internal wedge between Russian-speaking Ukrainians and the rest of the population, and discouraging Western governments and populations from involving themselves in the conflict. Russia employs a variety of methods to distort the information space, ranging from the fabrication of fake news stories and online trolling to frequency-jamming in order to restrict access to Ukrainian media in Crimea and the Donbas.

General approach

The key governmental StratCom unit is the Ministry of Information Policy (MIP). The ministry was created in 2014, and its tasks are circumscribed by the new Doctrine of Information Security set out by the National Security and Defense Council, which was enacted by Presidential Decree in February 2017. According to the Doctrine, the MIP is responsible for coordinating and facilitating governmental communications.[184]

After the revolution, there was no governmental strategic communications strategy. In response, several private sector communications experts founded the NGO Ukraine Crisis Media Center (UCMC), seeking to create a communications strategy for the government to counter Russian information operations. The UCMC was instrumental in creating spokespersons with various ministries. Under the UCMC's guidance, spokespersons were installed for the various ministries. Under the so-called 'one voice policy', these spokespersons coordinate the Ukrainian response to developing stories amongst each other and with civil society. They hold regular press briefings, for example about the situation in Eastern Ukraine, in order to get out a clear, unified message.[185]

Mandate and scope

The broad informational strategy is set out by the Doctrine of Information Security, as set by the National Security and Defense Council. The three objectives of the MIP, as outlined by this document, are the development of strategies for the information policy of Ukraine and the concept of information security; the coordination of government agencies in matters of communication and information dissemination; and the countering of Russian informational aggression.[186]

[184] 'President Approved Information Security Doctrine of Ukraine,' Official Website of the President of Ukraine, February 25, 2017, http://www.president.gov.ua/en/news/glava-derzhavi-zatverdiv-doktrinu-informacijnoyi-bezpeki-ukr-40190.

[185] Interview with expert.

[186] 'General Information,' Ministry of Information Policy of Ukraine, May 4, 2017, http://mip.gov.ua/en/content/pro-ministerstvo.html.

Actors involved

In the wake of 'Euromaidan', a large number of civil society initiatives were set up. The most important include the UCMC, StopFake.org, StratComUA, InformNapalm, Hromadske TV, Information Resistance and Open Source Intelligence (OSINT) Academy. Many NGOs receive funding from Western governments and organizations such as the Renaissance Foundation (Ukrainian part of Open Society Foundations) and the European Endowment for Democracy.

On the side of the government, the MIP acts as the central agency, but the Office of the President, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs (responsible for communications with foreign media) and the Ministry of Defense also have important roles to play. The NATO Information and Documentation Centre (NIDC) in Kyiv advises and assists the government in strategic communications.[187]

Communication products and campaigns

The MIP has created various communication campaigns such as 'Crimea is Ukraine'. They host http://i-army.org/, an online platform aimed at the creation of a Ukrainian 'information army' of volunteers who can post identified fake news on the website. Another major initiative is the embedded journalism program, which attaches foreign journalists to military units operating in the anti-terrorist operation (ATO) zone in Eastern Ukraine.

The various NGOs have created a range of communication products and campaigns. The UCMC hosts a press center, which functions as a hub for events, daily news briefings about the ATO and international media. They also work with government institutions, for example Parliament and the Office of the President, in order to improve and streamline communications under the one voice policy.[188] StopFake hosts a website where they debunk fake news, aimed at the general public. They are also active on social media, produce TV and radio shows, and recently started a newspaper, in order to reach a larger audience. Furthermore, they hold media literacy courses.[189] StratComUA supports the Ukrainian government with their internal and external communication strategy.[190] InformNapalm covers stories about Russian military aggression on their website, including on the presence of the Russian military in the ATO zone.[191] Information Resistance seeks to counteract Russian threats in the Ukrainian information domain, mainly by publishing stories online.[192] Hromadske TV is an independent NGO TV channel dedicated to objective investigative journalism. It was founded during Euromaidan as counterweight to Ukraine's traditional media, which are often owned by oligarchs. However, viewership is declining and the channel is faced with criticism from the government, which deems it pacifist and unsupportive of the country during a war.[193] The OSINT Academy trains journalists, bloggers, activists and others in conducting open

[187] NATO, 'NATO Information and Documentation Centre (NIDC) in Kyiv, Ukraine,' NATO, March 1, 2017, http://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/topics_64610.htm.

[188] Ukraine Crisis Media Center, 'Annual Report UCMC 2016,' (Government & Nonprofit, April 24, 2017), https://www.slideshare.net/UkraineCrisisMediaCenter/annual-report-ucmc-2016.

[189] StopFake, 'About Us,' StopFake.org, October 21, 2016, http://www.stopfake.org/en/about-us/.; Interview with expert.

[190] 'Strategic Communications of Ukraine (StratComUA): Overview | LinkedIn,' accessed July 21, 2017, https://www.linkedin.com/company-beta/10250602/?pathWildcard=10250602.

[191] 'About Us,' InformNapalm, March 11, 2014, https://informnapalm.org/en/about/.

[192] 'About Us,' Information Resistance, May 4, 2014, http://sprotyv.info/en/about-us.

[193] Matthew Luxmoore, 'The Brief Life and Slow Death of Ukrainian Journalism,' Foreign Policy, November 1, 2016, https://foreignpolicy.com/2016/11/01/how-ukraine-turned-on-its-freest-media-hromadske-russia/.

source intelligence investigations.[194] During the Ukraine referendum campaign in the Netherlands, 50 students from the Ukrainian Academy of Leadership (set up by Western NIS Enterprise Fund) visited the Netherlands to campaign for a yes vote.[195]

Method and style

The NGOs take different approaches to the problem of Russian disinformation. StopFake has debunked over 1000 fake news stories. The group has an audience of over 180.000 total followers on social media and they are active in 10 different languages. They have now moved beyond debunking, for example by analyzing their data to identify the principles, mechanisms and instruments of Russian disinformation.[196] The UCMC mainly functions as a hub for strategic communications. When a new issue develops, the UCMC coordinates the response. They use internal and external validation groups of experts to discuss which message would be most effective in reaching the target audiences both in Ukraine and abroad. They discuss this with the various spokespersons.[197] InformNapalm, Information Resistance and Information Army (founded by MIP) engage in providing evidence of Russia's direct military involvement in Ukraine.

The government uses various methods to fight Russian disinformation. The National Council on Television and Radio Broadcasting banned several (pro-)Russian TV channels, including TV Dozhd, a channel often seen as liberal and critical of the Kremlin.[198] The MIP wants to improve the information domain in Ukraine, for example by funding a state broadcasting channel. Furthermore, they are active in creating communication campaigns such as 'Crimea is Ukraine'. Another priority is the reintegration of Eastern Ukraine and Crimea into the Ukrainian information space.[199] Compared to the early days just after the revolution, government communications have much improved. Before, the government only put out occasional statements. Now, with the help of the UCMC, various ministries hold regular press briefings, are active on social media, including Russian-language platforms such as VKontakte (VK), and are welcoming towards journalists.[200] However, on 16 May 2017, President Poroshenko signed a bill announcing further sanctions against Russia, which included the blocking of popular Russian social media sites VK and Odnoklassniki, as well as email service mail.ru and search engine Yandex. His own accounts on the networks were also closed down.[201]

[194] 'OSINT.Academy | Институт Постинформационого Общества,' Osint Academy, accessed May 30, 2017, http://osint.academy/.

[195] David Bremmer, 'Reizigers Verrast Door Jonge Oekraïense Voorstanders Referendum,' Algemeen Dagblad, March 30, 2016, http://www.ad.nl/home/reizigers-verrast-door-jonge-oekraiense-voorstanders-referendum~a6694d41/; 'Economic Leadership,' WNISEF, accessed July 21, 2017, http://wnisef.org/economic-leadership/.

[196] StopFake, 'About Us.'; Interview with expert.

[197] Interview with expert; Ukraine Crisis Media Center, 'Annual Report UCMC 2016.'

[198] Alessandra Prentice, 'Ukraine Bans Russian TV Channels for Airing War 'Propaganda,'' Reuters, August 19, 2014, http://www.reuters.com/article/us-ukraine-crisis-television-idUSKBN0GJ1QM20140819.

[199] 'The Best Counter-Propaganda Is Truth! MIP Progress Analysis of Activity for the First Quarter of 2017' (Ministry of Information Policy of Ukraine, April 2017), http://mip.gov.ua/files/pdf/mip_report_first_quater_2017_ENG.pdf.

[200] Ukraine Crisis Media Center, 'Annual Report UCMC 2016.'; Interview with expert.

[201] Yuriy Zoria, 'Ukraine Extends Sanctions, Blocks Popular Russian Web Services and Software Companies -,' Euromaidan Press, May 16, 2017, http://euromaidanpress.com/2017/05/16/ukraine-blocks-popular-russian-services-extends-personal-sanctions/.

Capabilities and limitations

As mentioned above, the MIP has developed capabilities in several areas, most notably the coordination of government communication, to develop communication strategies and campaigns, and to improve the Ukrainian information space. However, the MIP is a controversial actor. At the start of the MIP, it was branded as a 'Ministry of Truth', established to control the media and function as a propaganda machine.[202] The government's perceived credibility in the eyes of the Ukrainian public is low in general. Furthermore, the MIP is seen as ineffective, underfunded, understaffed and unprofessional. According to several experts, it has become clear that the MIP has no influence and few take its employees seriously.[203] A possible factor could be the low wages in the Ukrainian government sector.

The NGO sector has also developed several capabilities. An actor such as StopFake successfully debunks Russian fake news before a substantial audience. The UCMC has become a hub for foreign media, events and press conferences related to the conflict in the Donbas, and plays an important role in improving media literacy and training government officials. However, what limits their reach is the lack of a broad strategy or structural effort through which NGOs and the government operate on a daily basis. Messages, campaigns and strategies are created as they go along, but no follow-up takes place.[204]

Success stories and lessons learned

Public-private cooperation has been successful, most notably with the UCMC. Under the UCMC's guidance, a systematic approach to government communications has been instituted, leading to a much clearer Ukrainian message under the one voice policy. By explaining their position and giving regular updates, it becomes harder for Russian disinformation to describe the Ukrainian government as weak and ineffective. Subsequently the public trust in the government increases.

Another success has been the UCMC's practice of using focus groups of experts, both internally and externally, to receive feedback on potential strategies for particular news issues. The feedback allows them to better explain the Ukrainian position to their population and the outside world.[205] Thus, a recommendation would be to study the effectiveness of different messages with the target audience(s) before sending the message out into the public sphere, for example by utilizing focus groups.

StopFake has been successful in debunking Russian information operations, as the general public also became interested in 'fake news'. They have over 180.000 followers on social media. Fabricated Russian stories are caught early on, before they can make their way to major Ukrainian media channels. It also proved that Russia engages in systematic propaganda and fake news, as the

[202] Jo Simmons, 'Is Ukraine Tomorrow the New Russia Today?,' StopFake.org, September 8, 2015, http://www.stopfake.org/en/is-ukraine-tomorrow-the-new-russia-today/; Maksim Vikhrov, 'Ukraine Forms 'Ministry of Truth' to Regulate the Media,' The Guardian, December 19, 2014, sec. World news, https://www.theguardian.com/world/2014/dec/19/-sp-ukraine-new-ministry-truth-undermines-battle-for-democracy.

[203] Interviews with numerous experts from Ukraine. Also see Reporters without Borders, 'Facing Reality After the Euromaidan: The Situation of Journalists and Media in Ukraine,' June 2016, 39, https://rsf.org/sites/default/files/journalists_and_media_in_ukraine_-_rsf_2016.pdf.

[204] Interview with experts.

[205] Interview with expert.

dissemination of the stories often follows a similar pattern. The lesson learned from StopFake is that it is important to look into the way fake news spread through Russian media, and to catch the lies before they are, sometimes inadvertently, picked up by major news outlets.[206]

Governments should not be afraid to speak out against acts of Russian disinformation. However, it is important that they do so in a unified manner, in order to leave no room for the Russians to exploit inconsistencies. The one voice policy is an example of coordination between government agencies. The lesson learned is that the West, both governments and civil society, should stop tolerating those who are actively supporting Russian propaganda and disinformation under the pretext of free speech.[207]

Notwithstanding the abovementioned successes, the government is slow in restoring access to pro-government media in separatist-held areas, among others due to jamming and a lack of political will. The population there lives in a closed information space controlled by Russia. Even in other parts of the country, older people and people outside the large cities are still dependent on Russian information.

There is no broad policy strategy in place upon which the communications strategy can be based; NGOs and government agencies mainly work on an ad hoc basis, dealing with problems as they arise. For example, the UCMC set up a taskforce for the Dutch referendum on the association agreement, but there was no follow-up in other countries.[208]

A particular failure is the persistent threat to journalistic freedom. In May 2016, the NGO Myrotvorets placed online the names and addresses of 4500 reporters who covered the conflict in the Donbas, labeling them separatists in the process. Officially, the Ukrainian government has spoken out against the move, but many high-level officials, including the Interior Minister, are supportive and have in fact shared parts of the database.[209] It is important to prevent witch-hunts against journalists.

A highly controversial measure is the blocking of the popular Russian social media sites VK and Odnoklassniki. The law was hailed by StopFake founder Yevgen Fedchenko: 'If it will be possible to do this, this will be the greatest contribution to the protection of information sovereignty of Ukraine ever.'[210] However, serious doubts exist about whether the blockade can - both legally and technically - be implemented effectively, and how much it will cost in the end.[211] Somewhat ironic, Russian state television aired segments explaining how to subvert the ban using a Virtual Private Network (VPN), while similar blockades are in place in Russia itself.[212] There are also concerns about freedom of speech and Ukraine's international reputation.[213] Many Western organizations,

[206] Interview with expert.

[207] Interview with expert.

[208] Interview with expert.

[209] Luxmoore, 'The Brief Life and Slow Death of Ukrainian Journalism'; 'Myrotvorets,' Myrotvorets, accessed May 30, 2017, https://myrotvorets.center/about/.

[210] Zoria, 'Ukraine Extends Sanctions, Blocks Popular Russian Web Services and Software Companies -.'

[211] Roman Goncharenko, 'Ukraine Imposes New Sanctions on Russian Social Media and Web Services,' Deutsche Welle, May 16, 2017, http://www.dw.com/en/ukraine-imposes-new-sanctions-on-russian-social-media-and-web-services/a-38865935; Kostiantyn Yanchenko, 'Self-Defense or a Blow to Democracy? Pro et Contra Arguments to Ukraine's Ban of Russian Internet Companies -,' Euromaidan Press, May 19, 2017, http://euromaidanpress.com/2017/05/19/self-defense-or-a-blow-to-democracy-pro-et-contra-arguments-to-ukraines-ban-of-russian-internet-companies/.

[212] Yanchenko, 'Self-Defense or a Blow to Democracy?'; Kevin Rothrock, 'The Russian State Media: Champion of Internet Freedom?,' Global Voices Advocacy, May 17, 2017, https://advox.globalvoices.org/2017/05/17/the-russian-state-media-champion-of-internet-freedom/.

[213] 'Ukraine Blocks Access to Russian Social networks 'VKontakte' and 'Odnoklassniki' - Poroshenko Decree,' UAcrisis, May 16, 2017, http://uacrisis.org/56242-ukraine-blocks-russian-sm.

such as the Council of Europe and Human Rights Watch, have condemned the move by Poroshenko as an infringement on freedom of expression.[214] Western governments have not (yet) responded to the ban with an official statement. The EU has asked Ukraine to provide additional information before taking an official stance.[215] Some commentators even regard the ban as an admission of Ukraine's failure in the information war; Russian social media are the most important place where the Ukrainian government can engage with Russians and Russian-speakers, and hit back against Russian information operations. Limiting access and closing accounts in effect allows the Russians to fully control these platforms.[216]

Freedom of the information space

Legal environment

After the 2014 Maidan revolution, various laws have been introduced to improve the Ukrainian information space. Legislation has been enacted to increase penalties for crimes targeting journalists and grant financial assistance to journalists that fall victim to crimes during, and because of, their work. Nevertheless, abuse against journalists remains a problem, as evidenced by the car bomb murder of journalist Pavel Sheremet in July 2016.[217]

Legislation has been adopted to reform the various state media into a public broadcaster. However, this transformation has proven to be challenging; in 2015, the newly created public joint stock company only received half of the 31 million euro in funding stipulated by the new law.[218] Additional problems include low staff wages, fierce competition from private broadcasters and outdated equipment.[219] The Minister of Information Policy Yuriy Stets has guaranteed that it will receive 'adequate funding' in 2017.[220]

A law introduced in October 2015 obliges broadcasters to disclose detailed information about their ownership structure before 1 April 2016, but few companies had complied with the regulation by that date.[221] The Media Ownership Monitor, an initiative by the NGOs Institute of Mass Information and Reporters Without Borders, keeps track of the declared and suspected ownership structures of Ukrainian media.[222]

[214] 'Ukraine Bans Its Top Social Networks Because They Are Russian,' The Economist, May 19, 2017, http://www.economist.com/news/europe/21722360-blocking-websites-may-be-pointless-it-could-help-president-poroshenkos-popularity-ukraine; 'Ukraine: Revoke Ban on Dozens of Russian Web Companies,' Human Rights Watch, May 16, 2017, https://www.hrw.org/news/2017/05/16/ukraine-revoke-ban-dozens-russian-web-companies.

[215] Tobias Wals, 'Noodweer of Dictatuur? Oekraïne Blokkeert Russische Websites En Bedrijven,' Raam Op Rusland, May 22, 2017, https://www.raamoprusland.nl/dossiers/oekraine/584-noodweer-of-dictatuur-oekraine-blokkeert-russische-websites-en-bedrijven.

[216] Sergey Sukhankin, 'Ukraine Blocks Russian Social Networks: Anti-Democratic Move or Antidote to Disinformation?,' Jamestown Eurasia Daily Monitor, June 7, 2017, https://jamestown.org/program/ukraine-blocks-russian-social-networks-anti-democratic-move-antidote-disinformation/; 'Серьезно? Это И Есть Противостояние В Информационной Войне? | InfoResist,' InfoResist, accessed May 30, 2017, https://inforesist.org/serezno-eto-i-est-protivostoyanie-v-informatsionnoy-voyne/.

[217] Freedom House, 'Ukraine Country Report 2017,' Freedom of the Press (Freedom House), accessed May 30, 2017, https://freedomhouse.org/report/freedom-press/2017/ukraine.

[218] Reporters without Borders, 'Facing Reality After the Euromaidan: The Situation of Journalists and Media in Ukraine,' 17.

[219] Ibid., 19–20.

[220] 'Yurii Stets: 'I Guarantee That This Year the Public Broadcasting Will Get Adequate Funding,'' Ministry of Information Policy of Ukraine, January 24, 2017, http://mip.gov.ua/en/news/1637.html.

[221] Reporters without Borders, 'Facing Reality After the Euromaidan: The Situation of Journalists and Media in Ukraine,' 11.

[222] 'Media,' Media Ownership Monitor, accessed May 30, 2017, http://ukraine.mom-rsf.org/en/ukraine/media/.

On 29 May 2017, a new bill was passed stipulating that national TV channels must broadcast in the Ukrainian language at least 75 percent of the time.[223] Parliamentarians are also working on a draft law on the state language, which would further restrict the use of Russian in public life.[224]

Political environment

The ongoing conflict in Eastern Ukraine and Russia's attitude towards the country affect the Ukrainian government's stance toward the media. For example, president Poroshenko asked journalists not to report negative stories about Ukraine. Further controversy emerged when the Minister of Interior praised the vigilante website Myrotvorets after it published the personal details of some 5000 journalists that had visited occupied areas and branded them separatists, thus endangering their lives. [225]

The National Television and Radio Broadcasting Council has banned various Russian TV channels from operating in Ukraine for actively or passively acknowledging the Russian occupation of Crimea.[226] A decree signed by President Poroshenko on 16 May 2017 stipulates new sanctions against Russia, including blocking access to popular social media sites VK and Odnoklassniki, as well as internet provider mail.ru and search engine Yandex.[227]

Economic environment

The most important media firms in Ukraine are controlled by a small number of oligarchs who equally play a large role in Ukrainian political and economic life. It is problematic that the advertising market has shrunk considerably since 2014, as this makes it difficult for independent media corporations to sustain themselves. For the oligarchs, there is no need to run a profitable media business per se; they often use their media corporations to promote their political agenda and further their other business interests.[228] The 5 Kanal TV station, for example, is still in the hands of president Poroshenko, despite criticism that this constitutes a conflict of interest. Another problem is the blurring of news and advertisements. Due to the economic crisis, people have less to spend on media consumption. Out of financial considerations, many outlets thus resort to mixing advertisements in with their news, without explicitly stating they are doing so.[229]

The new legislation bans 'individuals or entities from offshore economic zones or 'aggressor or occupier states' from establishing or owning broadcasting or program service provider companies in Ukraine.'[230] However, some large media corporations are believed to be owned by close associates of pro-Russian former president Yanukovych, such as Rinat Akhmetov (Media Group Ukraine) and Sergey Kurchenko (UMH Group).[231]

[223] Thomas De Waal, 'New Fighting in Ukraine's Language War,' Carnegie Europe, May 29, 2017, http://carnegieeurope.eu/strategiceurope/?fa=70098&utm_source=rssemail&utm_ medium=email&mkt_tok=eyJpIjoiTXpjNE9ERTJOVE poTXpOaSIsInQiOiJTb2lObkNMRGR4WWhDdXdzNjNVZlNSVjFDK29VWHV1WWRzTXZGSFJXQ TFCSXJjUE9tYVkyMkJSTVF3WUVlRWdEWlFsY0pScXp3ZDlpM2tWWGkyT3lHWE10MCtJRGd2bEhVUlBidFIzd1Fl Y2hjQjdYUG92dXhZZUVDMFRtck94aiJ9.

[224] Thomas De Waal, 'New Fighting in Ukraine's Language War,' Carnegie Europe, May 29, 2017, http://carnegieeurope.eu/strategiceurope/?fa=70098&utm_source=rssemail&utm_ medium=email&mkt_tok=eyJpIjoiTXpjNE9ERTJOVE poTXpOaSIsInQiOiJTb2lObkNMRGR4WWhDdXdzNjNVZlNSVjFDK29VWHV1WWRzTXZGSFJXQ TFCSXJjUE9tYVkyMkJSTVF3WUVlRWdEWlFsY0pScXp3ZDlpM2tWWGkyT3lHWE10MCtJRGd2bEhVUlBidFIzd1Fl Y2hjQjdYUG92dXhZZUVDMFRtck94aiJ9.

[225] Freedom House, 'Ukraine Country Report 2017.'

[226] Ibid.

[227] 'Ukraine Blocks Access to Russian Social networks 'VKontakte' and 'Odnoklassniki' - Poroshenko Decree.'

[228] 'Media'; Reporters without Borders, 'Facing Reality After the Euromaidan: The Situation of Journalists and Media in Ukraine,' 12.

[229] Reporters without Borders, 'Facing Reality After the Euromaidan: The Situation of Journalists and Media in Ukraine,' 11.

[230] 'Ukraine | Country Report | Freedom of the Press | 2016,' accessed July 21, 2017, https://freedomhouse.org/report/freedom-press/2016/ukraine.

[231] 'Rinat Akhmetov,' accessed May 30, 2017, http://ukraine.mom-rsf.org/en/ukraine/owners/individual-owners/detail/

Approach and posture: government and society

At the start of the conflict, the government approach to the problem of Russian information warfare would best be described as bottom-up, rather than top-down. The Ukrainian government mainly relied on civil society actors, such as the UCMC and StopFake, to counter Russian disinformation. Most of the governmental strategy originated from the UCMC. They trained and instructed various governmental institutions on strategic communications and communication coordination. Over the past three years, the Ministry of Information Policy has developed some top-down capabilities, such as the creation of communication campaigns, but the government still relies heavily on civil society initiatives in addition to its own activities. Blocking Russian (social) media is another top-down measure employed by the Ukrainian government. The one voice policy, set up by the UCMC, is a government-wide approach to strategic communications. The various spokespersons of the ministries coordinate the government's message, for example on issues regarding security and defense.

Defensive-offensive continuum

The Ukrainian approach is both offensive and defensive in nature. Examples of defensive measures are the streamlining of government communications, StopFake's debunking of fake news, the creation of communication campaigns aimed at the Ukrainian population and spreading positive narratives about Ukraine in foreign information spaces, for example during the Dutch Ukraine referendum campaign.

Examples of offensive measures are the banning of several (pro-)Russian TV channels from Ukrainian cable networks, the blocking of social media sites VK and Odnoklassniki, and the data collection and analysis StopFake carries out on the mechanisms of Russian disinformation.

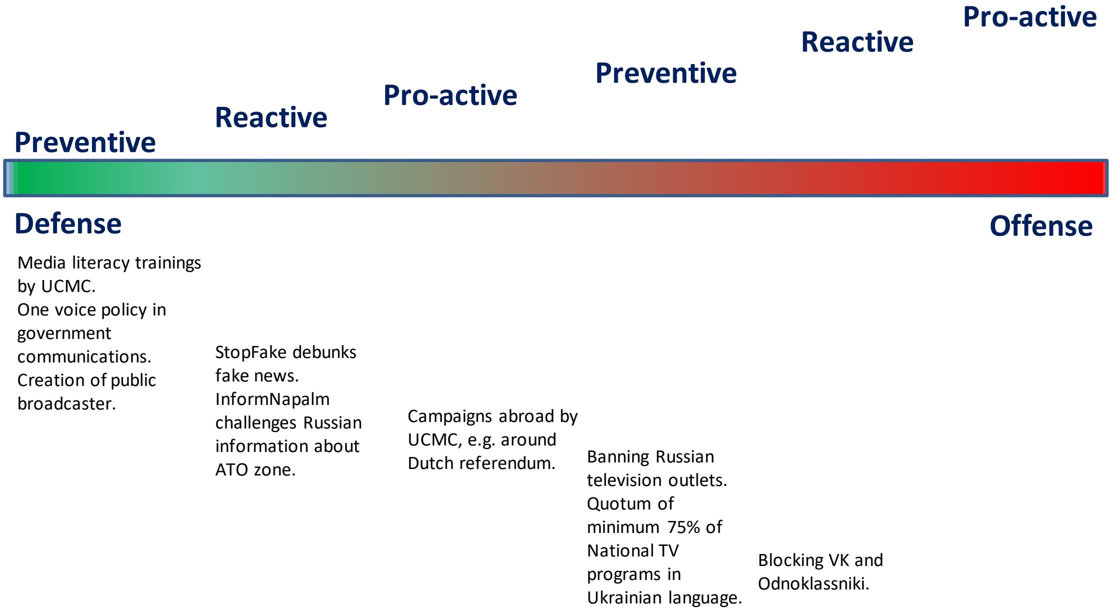
Preventive, reactive, pro-active measures

The Ukrainian approach has preventive, reactive and pro-active components (see Figure 7). There are several preventive measures taken. One defensive preventive measure is the setup of media literacy trainings by the UCMC. Another is the installation of the one voice policy, which significantly improved government communications. The MIP attempt to create an effective public broadcaster is also preventive, aimed at improving the Ukrainian information space. Ukraine has also taken offensive preventive measures, such as banning Russian television and radio outlets and the implementation of laws that stipulate at least 75 percent of programming on Ukrainian national television must be in Ukrainian.

There have also been a number of defensive reactive measures. In response to the spread of Russian disinformation, StopFake was founded with the goal of limiting the influence of Russian fake news. Other NGOs, such as InformNapalm, also debunk fake news, especially regarding the ATO zone. Blocking social media platforms VK and Odnoklassniki constituted an offensive reactive move. It was instituted in response to Russian intelligence services making use of data gathered through the networks to plan operations in the ATO zone.

owner/owner/show/rinat-akhmetov/; 'Sergiy Kurchenko,' accessed May 30, 2017, http://ukraine.mom-rsf.org/en/ukraine/owners/individual-owners/detail/owner/owner/show/sergiy-kurchenko/.

Figure 7 Ukrainian posture along the defensive-offensive continuum: preventive, reactive and pro-active measures


Preventive
Reactive
Pro-active
Preventive
Reactive
Pro-active
Defense
Offense
Media literacy trainings by UCMC.
One voice policy in government communications.
Creation of public broadcaster.
StopFake debunks fake news.
InformNapalm challenges Russian information about ATO zone.
Campaigns abroad by UCMC, e.g. around Dutch referendum.
Banning Russian television outlets.
Quotum of minimum 75% of National TV programs in Ukrainian language.
Blocking VK and Odnoklassniki.

Some of the actions undertaken by Ukrainian actors can be classified as (defensive) pro-active. For example, the UCMC and other NGOs disseminated positive information about Ukraine in the Netherlands in the runup to the Dutch Ukraine referendum.

Domain of action

The Ukrainian government is active in different domains of the information space. First, the MIP is working on restoring Ukrainian media penetration in Crimea and Eastern Ukraine by rebuilding infrastructure such as transmission towers. Second, the government is active in banning (pro-)Russian TV and radio channels as well as social media, restricting the presence of Russian information in the Ukrainian information space. TV and radio are still the most important types of media consumed, especially by the rurally located and older segments of the population. Third, the government is active in getting its message out through the one voice policy. They do this through communication campaigns, regular press conferences and events. Increasingly, both the government and the NGOs make use of social media platforms. Furthermore, the MIP is working on the creation of a public broadcasting channel.[232]

Dilemmas for liberal democracies

Ukraine has encountered several dilemmas between the core values of liberal democracy and the effective countering of Russian disinformation. The most important tension is the one between freedom of speech, expression, and press and censorship of media, including the banning of Russian outlets. The Russians exploit this tension to discredit the Ukrainian government. When outlets

[232] 'Legal Entity of the Public Broadcaster Registered on 19.01.2017 – What Are the next Steps?,' Council of Europe Office in Ukraine, January 26, 2017, http://www.coe.int/en/web/kyiv/news-event/news/-/asset_publisher/9W803G4ii38m/content/legal-entity-of-the-public-broadcaster-registered-on-19-01-2017-what-are-the-next-steps-.

are banned or blocked, they claim freedom of press is under threat from a fascist government, disregarding the fact that the Kremlin employs the same tools. When TV Dozhd was banned by the Ukrainian government for failing to recognize Ukraine's territorial integrity over Crimea, the Russian government accused Ukraine of attacking press freedom, even though TV Dozhd has been excluded from all major cable operators in Russia since January 2014 for political reasons.[233] While it may be necessary for the internal information space to ban these outlets, there is always a backlash from the West and organizations such as Human Rights Watch, who see it as an infringement on press freedom.[234] Similarly, blocking Russian social media VK and Odnoklassniki, some of the most popular websites in Ukraine, infringes heavily on internet freedom and freedom of expression. Philosopher Mikhail Minakov stated 'we are turning into Russia, except we have no oil'.[235] In other words, by using heavy-handed tools, liberal democracies may risk turning into what they fear most: autocratic or hybrid regimes like Putin's Russia.

Another issue is how to walk the fine line between countering Russian propaganda with Ukrainian propaganda, or with the Ukrainian version of the truth. On the one hand, simply spreading facts may be ineffective when Russia is playing on people's emotions.[236] However, the backlash to the creation of the Ministry of Information Policy, often branded as a 'Ministry of Truth', in 2014 showed that the public in liberal democracies is very sensitive to the potential use of counter-propaganda.

As noted in one of the interviews, it is impossible to create a true one voice policy in a liberal democracy.[237] Different government agencies and civil society actors will have different opinions on what the Ukrainian message should be. How can the Ukrainian message then best be crafted and unified, if a true one voice policy is only possible in a dictatorship? And how should those who dissent be dealt with?

Another dilemma facing the Ukrainian government is whether to try and engage with those who are susceptible toward Russian propaganda[238], for example by engaging on Russian-language social media and re-establishing Ukrainian access to the information market in Crimea and the Donbas, or to focus on the protection of those who already support the government. Examples of the latter include the banning of Russian social media, television and journalists from Ukraine. Critics argue that the new law restricting Russian-language TV broadcasts and the draft law on state language would both further alienate Russian-speakers, not all of whom are pro-Russian, and also represent a fundamental infringement of an essential human right. The laws could restart a 'language war', likely to further polarize Ukrainian society. Integration of the Donbas and Crimea, which have high percentages of Russian-speakers could thus become more difficult.[239]

[233] 'Why Ukraine Has Banned Russia's Most Liberal TV Channel, Dozhd,' UAwire, January 14, 2017, http://www.uawire.org/news/ukraine-has-banned-russian-tv-channel-dozhd-what-are-the-violation-of-the-most-liberal-tv-channel-of-the-russian-federation#.

[234] 'Ukraine: TV Channel Ordered Banned,' Human Rights Watch, January 18, 2017, https://www.hrw.org/news/2017/01/18/ukraine-tv-channel-ordered-banned.

[235] 'Ukraine Blocks Access to Russian Social networks 'VKontakte' and 'Odnoklassniki' - Poroshenko Decree.'

[236] Interview with expert.

[237] Interview with expert.

[238] Interview with expert

[239] De Waal, 'New Fighting in Ukraine's Language War.'

Conclusion

Ukraine has significantly improved its ability to counter Russian information operations since the start of the Maidan revolution. A large part of these capabilities have initially been developed by societal actors, due to a lack of expertise from the government side. Most notable are the UCMC's role in strategic communications coordination and StopFake's fake news debunking efforts. The government has become more active over time, with the creation of the Ministry of Information Policy. Furthermore, several new laws have been passed in order to limit Russian influence in the information domain, including the blocking of Russian social media, banning Russian TV channels and requiring national TV channels to broadcast 75 percent of their content in Ukrainian. In its efforts to protect its society and the territorial integrity of Ukraine as a nation-state from Russia, Ukraine is facing difficult choices: will it continue down the path of taking hard-handed actions such as banning Russian (social) media platforms and restricting the use of the Russian language, thus risking further alienation of Russian-speaking Ukrainians as well as criticism from the West? Or will it be able to find other means to counter Russian disinformation, that are effective yet do not seriously undermine the freedom of Ukraine's information space?

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR LIBERAL DEMOCRACIES

Dealing with Russian societal meddling through information operations goes beyond strategic communications. Disinformation activities are part of a broader hybrid campaign aimed at destabilising societies and should be analyzed and countered as such. This requires a consolidated and comprehensive government-wide effort that involves not only a serious StratCom effort but also a range of other policies and measures.

We have proposed a framework for liberal democracies to consider their strategic posture and the development and implementation of measures to deal with disinformation. These can be defensive or offensive, and involve preventive, reactive or pro-active measures. Defensive measures are overt and designed to have an impact within a country's own information domain. Offensive measures, in contrast, are primarily covert and designed to have an impact in the Russian information domain.

This study has identified an assortment of activities that can implemented. These measures however go beyond the field of strategic communications and encompass both short term and long term solutions. It requires the involvement of different government departments and civil society actors. It is likely that on the defensive side, government capacity will be lower than on the offensive side of the scale, as covert work is more labor intensive to be effective and non-attributable, and, in a liberal-democratic setting, under proper oversight, the exclusive domain of governments. Offensive operations can be justified, but when detected or perceived, they can increase the risk of unintended escalation. At the same time, offensive operations can also act as a deterrent or take away the opponent's means, thereby having a de-escalatory effect (again, intended or unintended). Less controversial long term solutions, such as investment in education and media literacy programs, that are squarely on the defensive side, are aimed at strengthening the resilience of our societies and yield lasting results.

The appropriate role and competences of governments, as well as the constraints thereon in the context of a liberal democratic order, were used as an explicit point of departure in our analysis of cases. Strategic communications – which often evoke negative connotations such as propaganda, infringement on press freedom and freedom of speech, and the suppression of opposition – do not come natural to liberal democratic governments.

Providing a systematic breakdown of what works and what does not was intentionally omitted: each actor has been affected differently because of differences in their political cultures and socio-demographic composition, different relationship with Russia (both historic and present), and because disinformation operations came to play a central role in politics at different stages in each country. In Ukraine, StratCom started to be deployed after the Russian aggression as part of a hybrid war campaign that began in the wake of the Maidan revolution, and which is still being fought in the Donbas today. In Latvia, Russian attempts to pit the Russian-speaking minority against the rest of the population, as well as attempts to delegitimize the Latvian state by spreading disinformation, led to the government and civil society engaging in information operations. Finland's strategic communication strategy started to take shape after a rise in fake news and disinformation from Russia, mostly aimed at Finland's Russian minority, in the period around the annexation of Crimea.

Finland, as a non-NATO member state, is also often the target of information campaigns that aim to discredit the alliance and discourage Finland from seeking closer ties with NATO. Therefore, instead of assessing which actor performs 'best', or pointing out what works and what does not within the offensive-defensive framework offered in this study, we highlight important lessons learned from the inventory of measures and actions taken by liberal democracies in dealing with (Russian) information operations, based on our research. Below, we outline our thoughts and recommendations grouped into four categories:

- The role of government;
- The organizational setup of the government;
- Programs, products and technologies; and
- The empowerment of civil society.

The role of government

What should be the role of government in a liberal democratic order? The principal task of liberal democratic governments is to protect the safety, security and well being of its citizens as well as uphold and protect the democratic constitutional order. This requires balancing the protection of society as a whole from external meddling in the essential rights of citizens. These include the right not to be monitored by the authorities without proper procedures being followed, the right not to be measured, analyzed or manipulated, and the right to the protection of privacy and personal data. Liberal democratic governments should seek to promote and protect such basic rights. At the same time, liberal democratic governments should not sit idly by while foreign actors purposively undermine the functioning of liberal democratic processes. That would be similarly detrimental to the health of liberal democracy. How to deal with this democratic conundrum in practice, is not always an easy matter, however.

One recurring theme we encountered in our discussions with stakeholders concerned the dividing lines between legitimate expressions of freedom of speech and malign interference with potentially subversive effects; the distinction between ordinary people voicing their concerns and state-sponsored trolls; and responding effectively whilst remaining within the bounds of the rule of law, transparency and democratic oversight. The dividing lines between these forms are not always black and white. Often, 'there is no smoking gun, only lots of smoke'.[240] From the country cases analyzed in this report, it becomes clear that Russian interference comes in many shapes and sizes. A grey area exists between what is and what is not legitimate. When there are deliberate cases of fake news and disinformation, governments should not be afraid to take action.

Three groups warrant special attention when it comes to dealing with the aforementioned dilemmas, namely pro-Kremlin politicians, civil society organizations and the media. The following recommendations outline what we consider to constitute appropriate policies fitting with the competences of liberal democratic governments to deal with this problem.

When politicians in a liberal democracy espouse pro-Kremlin sentiment, they cannot and should not be silenced through threat of legal action, for it is their free and democratic right to express their political attitudes and preferences. Instead of taking legal action, it is more appropriate for

[240] Sijbren de Jong quoted in 'Fake news, fake Ukrainians: how a group of Russians tilted a Dutch vote', Andrew Higgins, 'Fake News, Fake Ukrainians: How a Group of Russians Tilted a Dutch Vote,' The New York Times, February 16, 2017, https://www.nytimes.com/2017/02/16/world/europe/russia-ukraine-fake-news-dutch-vote.html.

governments to engage in a debate and clearly state when false arguments are being used, in order to raise public awareness of disinformation activities. Governments have other options at their disposal too – concerning party financing, for instance. Strict and clear rules concerning transparency of party funding should be in place so that there is full disclosure about financial donations. This helps identify instances where pro-Russian sentiments are directly, or indirectly, linked to Russian funding.

The same rules should be applied to civil society organizations. Strict rules on financial transparency should be in place for societal organizations. If the origins of funding can be tied to foreign intelligence or security organizations, the governments should be in a position to close down the recipient organizations.

Another issue is how to deal with the spread of blatantly wrong information. Hate speech and incitation to violence are already legally circumscribed in many countries. Similar limitations do not necessarily exist on spreading propaganda and fake news although media regulators such as Ofcom in the UK and NEPLP in Latvia have sanctioned, fined and/or suspended Russian news media for spreading misleading or biased stories, inciting to violence, or otherwise breaching the broadcasting code.[241] Governments should not be censors of the public discourse. At the same time, regulatory agencies, provided that they are independent, can assume that role, and take action against media entities that broadcast outright fake stories. Such independent regulatory agencies can and need to establish collaboration with social media corporations to develop protocols on how to deal with disseminators of fake news.

Governments themselves are allowed to reach out to journalists, to raise awareness and share information on the scope of Russian information operations. It goes, or at least it should go, without saying that in a liberal democracy, the press decides what it writes. Ukrainian President Poroshenko set a bad example in this regard when he requested that the press refrain from writing negative stories about the Ukrainian government. At all times, journalists should retain the capability to function as independent watchdogs.

Organizational set up of the government

The structure of government is an important factor in devising effective approaches, not just in terms of ensuring timely responses but also in tackling the issues at stake preventively and proactively and implementing policies conceived to strengthen the resilience of our societies. Various organizational setups are possible, there is no one-size-fits-all solution. At the same time, various insights regarding the organizational set up of the government stand out which are elaborated below.

It takes a network to defeat a network

A networked approach is best suited for dealing with the multidimensional threat posed by Russian information operations aimed at undermining democratic discourse and societal cohesion. Such a networked, whole-of-government approach should comprise all the relevant actors: not only the Ministries of Defense and Foreign Affairs but also other governmental agencies including the

[241] Jasper Jackson, 'RT Sanctioned by Ofcom over Series of Misleading and Biased Articles,' The Guardian, September 21, 2015, sec. Media, https://www.theguardian.com/media/2015/sep/21/rt-sanctioned-over-series-of-misleading-articles-by-media-watchdog; 'NEPLP Restricts Rebroadcasting and Distribution of Rossiya RTR in Latvia for Six Months,' accessed July 21, 2017, http://neplpadome.lv/en/home/news/news/neplp-restricts-rebroadcasting-and-distribution-of-rossiya-rtr-in-latvia-for-six-months.html.

Ministry of the Interior, Economic Affairs and Education as well as the Office of the Prime Minister (or President). Such a networked approach would allow for quick decision-taking processes, as it would circumvent multiple layers that generally slow down policy-making.

Strategic communication should not be an afterthought

Activities aimed at combating Russian interference – including but not limited to strategic communications – should become an integral part of a state or organization's operational thinking and security and foreign policy. Strategic communications should not be perceived as an afterthought, that is outsourced to a PR department, but rather be seen as a central element in an overarching whole-of-government strategy. As such, strategic communications should be included in the strategic decision making process upfront.

Cooperate within coalitions

Governments must recognize the added value of international cooperation in dealing with the threat posed by Russian information operations, rather than believing it is sufficient to respond unilaterally. Through the coordination of governmental responses, it will be possible to build an increasingly coherent and effective response to Russia's strategic narratives. Sharing best practices, success stories and lessons learned both within NATO and the EU is essential. Units such as the EU East StratCom Task Force and the NATO StratCom CoE can provide support to governments, especially in countries that lack the expertise or the necessary resources to respond to subversive activities.

Programs, products and technologies

In dealing with Russia's attempts to meddle in Western societies, governments can develop various programs and concrete products and make better use of existing technologies.

A strong narrative based on 'Western values' is an important asset

In a 'battle of narratives', the one who sets the frame is likely to win the argument. Western countries should formulate their own narrative, reflecting what they stand for and what makes their societies strong and resilient. This kind of narrative can be based on democratic values such as freedom of speech, a strong adherence to the rule of law, competitive politics and an entrepreneurial spirit. Individual national narratives would naturally differ from one country to another, reflecting unique national identities and historical experience.

The truth matters: do not fight propaganda with propaganda

Instead of fighting disinformation by creating more disinformation, an effective counter propaganda needs to be rooted in a careful selection of facts. The governments should debunk and dispel falsehoods while staying close to the truth. In fact, fighting propaganda with propaganda only serves to reduce a government's credibility. The governments should acknowledge what societal issues Russian information operations may (seek to) exploit, and communicate with populations the steps they intend to take, without becoming alarmist. In doing so, intelligence services face a dilemma in how far they should go in informing the population about Russia's actions in the information and cyber domain. On the one hand, revealing information runs the risk of exposing one's own information gathering tactics and techniques to the adversary. On the other hand, stopping short of specifics is unlikely to convince the general population of the seriousness of the threat, who may subsequently regard it as an empty warning.

Be present and active in the information domain

With narratives being shaped online, governments should be more proactive and initiative in the information domain by putting out their own message too. Finland provides a good example to follow: every week, four key talking points are agreed upon and the ready made material is then cross-posted by 300 officials on different social media sites. Inconsistencies in external messages by the government can easily be exploited and used by outside powers to sow division. Speaking with one voice and communicating a unified message is key.

Roll out media literacy programs to enhance societal resilience

Investing in media literacy in a bid to increase societal resilience against disinformation is crucial. Efforts should be undertaken to train and educate government officials, journalists and students in techniques to identify fake news and recognise the origins of news reports. Governments bear a special responsibility to instill media literacy courses in the secondary and tertiary school curriculum. More specific tailor made courses should be offered to government officials, and should form a key-part of introductory training for newly hired staff at government departments and media firms. Such trainings could best be facilitated by communication experts from civil society, akin to how this is done in Ukraine by the UCMC.

Knowledge is power: rebuild the knowledge infrastructure, particularly the Slavic studies departments

After the collapse of the Soviet Union, the predominant thought in western countries was that Russia and much of the former Soviet space would transform into consolidated democracies. The reality today is a far cry from this thought. Many Slavic studies centers have been closed down or otherwise downscaled, the knowledge infrastructure has been dismantled, and much of the scale of existing expertise has been drastically reduced. In order to understand and interpret Russian policy better, universities should start training more Slavic studies experts again, and specific funding should be earmarked for this purpose.

Soft power matters: promote and spread your message at home...and abroad

Information war is waged on two fronts, which is why the governments need to counter it both at home and abroad. On the home front, for those countries with large Russian minorities, one of the problems governments face when countering Russian disinformation is that Russian minorities appear to live in a closed information space, which may be difficult to penetrate. As such, countries with large Russian minorities face a dilemma of having to make a choice between restricting the use of Russian – by means of banning Russian-language media outlets or restricting the use of Russian as a native language at schools, for instance – and engaging with Russian speakers in their own language. Here it is recommended that governments invest more in the design of high-quality Russian language TV channels that not only broadcast current events and news talk shows, but also travel, culture and entertainment shows.

To engage with Russian speakers abroad, it is important to fund Russian language programming offered by outlets that are instruments of soft power such as the BBC World Service or Radio Free Europe (RFE/RL), among others.

Make more effective use of technology and technological solutions

In order to identify, prevent and counter the spread of propaganda in the future, governments should make better use of existing technology and technological solutions, and/or, given legal constraints on the role of governments in liberal democracies, enable civil society actors to do so. Organizations such as the Atlantic Council’s Digital Forensics Lab and Bellingcat have set high standards for open source intelligence analysis and are already doing groundbreaking work in empirically analyzing how fake news and disinformation spreads. They use technological means to expose news trails and identify networks of bots.

Governments should take steps to detect fake traffic by promoting the use of algorithms by social media organizations to detect malicious behavior, for example. At the same time, governments should not resort to mass surveillance or mass retention of communications data as such activities would go beyond the bounds of democratic oversight and the rule of law. It is furthermore necessary to develop a better understanding of how societies absorb fake news and disinformation. In particular, attention should be paid to the extent to which parts of the population are vulnerable to academic research based on disinformation in such domains as communications, sociology and psychology. Also, it is worthwhile to conduct vulnerability analyses of the target audiences of Russia's disinformation campaigns.

Leverage private sector expertise

Governments should also make better use of the expertise residing within the private sector. Marketing and communication experts working in the private sector have decades of experience crafting strategic messages and targeting specific groups within society. Their expertise would be of particular relevance with regard to the provision of target audience analysis in instances, where such analysis is currently missing. Private-public cooperation has been highly successful in the case of Ukraine, where the UCMC plays an important role in strategic communications coordination and the debunking of fake news.

Empowerment of civil society

Civil society often takes up a leading role in defending national narratives, exposing myths and propaganda, tackling the spread of disinformation online, and strengthening social cohesion – and it does so both complementary to and in the absence of governmental initiatives. Only an empowered and resilient civil society can achieve such goals effectively. Decision makers can empower civil society actors by taking the following steps:

Provide sufficient funding to civil society initiatives

Governments should financially support civil society initiatives – such as investigative journalism projects, for example – that are aimed at uncovering Russian information operations, as well as independent Russian-language media and other initiatives that seek to reduce the societal divide between Russian minorities and the majority populations. Russian language programming offered by the BBC World Service or Radio Free Europe (RFE/RL) are a good case in point. Funding should also be made available to organizations which work across borders, such as Ukraine's fact-checking site StopFake.

Support the establishment of national myth-busting units

Governments should support the establishment of organizations that work across borders. International expert units such as the EU's East StratCom Task Force and organizations such as StopFake do tremendous work in debunking fake stories and showing the dynamics of disinformation. Similar units should be established at a national level, which would then relay their findings back to those organizations that operate at the pan-European level.

Increase the reach of civil society communication products

Communication products produced by civil society initiatives can include disinformation briefs, relevant investigative journalism pieces and infographics explaining ways in which fake news could be avoided. Governments should not be afraid to take a stance on Russian subversive activities and share communications products produced by civil society actors on their websites and social media accounts.

Cooperate with key influencers

In addition to civil society initiatives, governments should seek to support and empower influential individuals on the internet. Vloggers, YouTube and Instagram stars, and other individuals whose posts on Twitter and Facebook garner considerable interaction have impact on social media and possess an ability to drive news.

Provide civil society actors with adequate legal protection

Providing adequate legal protection for journalists and civil society actors involved in such activities constitutes a positive contribution to other efforts aimed at empowering civil society.

To conclude, in order to avoid 'throwing the baby out with the bathwater', an effective liberal democratic approach respects the quintessential pillars of democracy and remains within the bounds of the rule of law while at the same protecting our liberal democratic order from foreign meddling. An empowered civil society, an informed and active citizenry, a vigilant government operating within a networked structure, and well tailored communication products and campaigns together constitute the best counterweight to outside transgressions aimed at undermining societal cohesion and the functioning of liberal democracy.

LIST OF ANNEXES

ANNEX I: Comparative table

	EU	NATO	Finland	Latvia	Ukraine
StratCom Unit	x	x	x		x
Government strategy	x				x
Dedicated budget	Member states responsible	Member states responsible	Unknown	No	252 mln UAH (€8.6 mln) in 2017 [242]
Top-down or bottom-up	Top-down	Top-down	Whole-of-government, centrally led but all inclusive	Both top-down and bottom-up	Largely bottom-up
Role of civil society	Primary focus on governments; EU acts in partnership with civil society	Focus on governments	Civil society participates in the whole-of government approach	Both government and civil society have developed capabilities	Civil society as trailblazer for the government
Offensive-defensive continuum	Defensive	Defensive	Defensive	Defensive	Both defensive and offensive
Preventive measures	x	x	x	x	x
Reactive measures	x	x	x	x	x
Pro-active measures	x	x	x	x	x
Domains of action[243]	B, C, E, F	B, C, E	B, C, D, F	B, D, F	A, B, C, D, E[244], F
Legal measures			No	Yes	Yes
Banning of media			No	Yes	Yes
Media ownership concerns			No concerns	Some concerns[245]	Large concerns[246]
Political interference in media landscape			One occasion of interference	Little interference	Significant interference

[242] Budget for the Ministry of Information Policy, see "Ukraine's State Budget 2017: The Key Figures," 112.ua, December 21, 2016, http://112.international/article/ukraines-state-budget-2017-the-key-figures-12315.html.

[243] For Domains of Action, we use the following categories. This list is not exhaustive, yet provides a good categorization of the types of activities undertaken:
A. Physical information space (e.g. infrastructure, newspaper distribution, access to internet)
B. Fake News debunking and Factchecking
C. Government Communications (e.g. coordinated narrative)
D. TV/Radio (e.g. creation of public broadcasting channels in Russian)
E. Social Media (e.g. using VK/Odnoklassniki to engage with Russian speakers)
F. Media literacy education

[244] The Ukrainian government was active on Russian social media, but these networks were banned in May 2017 and their accounts were closed down.

[245] There is a concentration of outlets in a handful of firms. Furthermore, Russian-language media ownership remains unclear – most likely owned by pro-Kremlin Russians.

[246] The major Ukrainian media holdings are owned by politically and economically powerful oligarchs, including some who are close to ex-President Yanukovych and the Kremlin.

ANNEX II: Interview Guidelines

We work for a think tank called the Hague Centre for Strategic Studies. We conduct analysis and provide strategic advice to high level decision makers of European governments, NATO and the EU.

Our research examines what can be learned from the visions, concepts, strategies and capabilities that other actors have developed, develop and consider developing, to deal with Russia's activities specifically in the information domain. In our comparative analysis we consider Ukraine, Latvia, and Finland, as well as the European Union and NATO.

Two central issues are of particular interest:

- What is the appropriate role and competences of governments within a liberal democratic order to deal with such attempts at societal interference?
- How can overall (top-down visions, strategies and capabilities) help to provide best circumstances for societal resilience such as through (bottom-up) societal initiatives?

We will be more than happy to share the results of our study with you. The information you provide us with during these interviews will be used in our report without direct personal attribution. With your permission we would like to record the interview to ensure that we preserve everything of value that will be said during this conversation, and we can get back to it later on. If you would like to share something 'off the record', please indicate so, and we will not use the information.

In this interview, given the limited time available, we would like to ask you five general questions: these relate to the 1) the nature of the problem 2) the way in which your government and society deals with this problem 3) and the constraints you face in doing so; we then like to move on to 4) what in your view are some of the most important lessons learned over these past few years and 5) what are some of the principal recommendations you would like to offer in your particular country case going forward.

Answers should reflect a view from the strategic level with further exploration of the operational level of the specific organization addressed in the interview. Detailed questions on Strategic, Institutional and Operational level and on successes and failures are found below the 5 general questions.

ANNEX III: Table list of all recommendations

The following table offers an aggregated list of recommendations gleaned from interviews with relevant stakeholders conducted for the purpose of this study.

Recommendations
Invest in (social) media literacy education for the general public.
Invest in media literacy trainings for specific groups important in the information space: civil servants, military, journalists, bloggers.
Do not be afraid to close down Russian TV channels when there is a good reason to do so, such as the spreading of fake news and propaganda which are dangers to society.
Use your own, clear, positive narrative towards your own population. Do not repeat the Russian narrative or go against it with psychological, confrontational language.
When faced with clear acts of propaganda and disinformation, make clear what is fake and what is not.
Do not wage war with counter-propaganda, the government should stay close to the truth.
Be more creative in the messages the government sends out to reach young people. Make use of humor, artistic means, infotainment etc.
Be willing to highlight examples of disinformation – and risk exposing how you got hold of this information – if you wish to raise awareness of the issue. Secret services should open up in this regard.
Do not allow Russia to exploit structural problems in Western societies. Governments should address and communicate about these problems.
Study and learn from the methods, structures and mechanisms Russia uses in spreading fake news and propaganda. Increase the number of experts active in NATO StratCom COE and EU East StratCom Task Force.
Identify those politicians, NGOs and others in our own societies who speak for Russia, by increasing transparency laws.
Spend money on big data analysis to identify which groups in our societies are vulnerable to Russian disinformation and how they can best be targeted.
Think how to reach out to civil society in Russia. Try to change the Russian population's perceptions of EU, NATO and countries such as the Baltic states.
Make life more difficult for Russian spies, and tackle Russian money laundering and corruption.
Engage with Russian-speaking minorities through a well-funded Russian-language TV channel and Russian social media such as VK and Odnoklassniki.
Create a comprehensive, whole-of-government approach to strategic communications, including all key (governmental) actors in the fields of defense, foreign affairs and domestic affairs.
Provide citizens and civil society actors such as journalists with the right level of information. Make them become aware of the problem without sounding too alarmist. Leave journalists leeway on what to do with the information they receive - press freedom must be maintained.
International cooperation is necessary
Understand Russia and the West are currently in a political, non-kinetic war. Our current lifestyle cannot be taken for granted.
Media should receive adequate funding and journalists should be paid decent salaries, as to make media more resilient to inadvertently spreading fake news.

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