

Hot Issue – Lies, Damned Lies and Russian Disinformation

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Executive Summary



The Russian Federation uses extensive propaganda, outright lies, and—most importantly—disinformation as part of the hybrid warfare it is waging against Ukraine and the West. Disinformation combines truth, what people want to be true, and cleverly disguised outright falsehoods. Moscow has been actively using such disinformation as part of a conscious broader policy on Ukraine, and it readily changes or rejects elements of the false narrative it has been spinning as political events on the ground shift. Russian disinformation has landed on fertile soil domestically because it plays on Russians’ deep rooted emotions and serves to turn people’s attention away from more immediate political and economic concerns. Abroad, Moscow’s message is given undue exposure and lack of questioning due to some Western journalists’ misunderstanding between balance and true objectivity, as well as the existence of a large constituency whose jobs rely on the West maintaining strong relations with Russia. In order to limit the spread and impact of disinformation, Western governments will need to recognize the difference between simple lies and actual disinformation, acquire expertise to identify disinformation and parse the truths and falsehoods within it, as well as develop methods to answer and counteract such disinformation both at home and abroad. The policy changes necessary to achieve this will require political will and some costs, but the costs of doing nothing may be even greater.

Introduction

Writing in *The Moscow Times* on July 30, Andrei Malgin pointed to just how differently the Russian authorities behaved after the shooting down of the Malaysian Airlines Flight 17 airliner compared to how the Soviet ones reacted when they shot down KAL Flight 007 in 1983. At that time, he writes, “Soviet media did not deny the incident but focused all its propaganda efforts on explaining the context of how it happened” ([The Moscow Times](#), July 30).

This time, however, “the Kremlin-controlled media has repeatedly [and variously] claimed that: the airplane was not shot down at all, but fell out of the sky by itself; a bomb exploded aboard the airplane; the airplane was hit by a Ukrainian missile fired from the ground; a Ukrainian air force fighter pursued and then attacked the plane; the [United States] shot down the plane in order to damage Russia’s reputation; no living people were aboard the plane as it flew on autopilot from Amsterdam, where it had been pre-loaded with ‘rotting corpses.’ ”

The Moscow commentator argued that under President Vladimir Putin, “it was not enough to simply twist the facts to their own purposes” because “when propaganda is based on nuances of interpretation, the chance always remains that someone with a fresh perspective or a critical mindset can cast doubt on those claims.” But, Malgin says, “when the authorities base their propaganda entirely on lies, they achieve their desired result faster and leave no room for doubt” ([The Moscow Times](#), July 30).

Malgin is clearly on to something with his suggestion that Putin is attempting to create “an alternative reality” with lies. But more is going on than that. Indeed, the scale of Moscow’s dishonesty about Ukraine over the last six months has been so unimaginably large that many have been driven to compile constantly updated lists of the 40, 60 or even 100 most outrageous things Vladimir Putin and his minions have said about Ukraine. [1] These observers are shocked that so many people in the Russian Federation appear to accept what Putin’s regime is saying as true. And at the same time they are outraged that so many in the West appear to have fallen victim to Moscow’s lies as well—either out of a confusion between balance and objectivity, a conviction that all governments lie and that no one should be surprised, or a commitment to maintaining good relations with the Russian government no matter what it does.

Such reactions are understandable if not particularly laudable. But they have combined to distract attention from the fact that what Putin has been doing, while it has its roots in past Russian state practice, represents a dramatic expansion. This upsurge includes not just a greater number of lies and damned lies, but also more thoroughness in Moscow’s carefully considered use of disinformation to advance Russia’s interests at home and abroad. No other government has ever employed this type of policy with such effectiveness; and few have ever had a greater need to counter it if they are to defend both their values and their interests.

What Putin is doing prompts three questions: What is disinformation as compared to simple lies and even damned lies? Why is it so effective? And how can it be identified and countered? Those are the subjects of this essay.

Disinformation Is Not the Same Thing as Lying

All governments at one time or another lie either by omission or commission in the prosecution of policies, covering up what they do not want people to know about or presenting information that is false or distorted to distract attention or to convince people that what the government wants is justified. But few governments use disinformation even though it too involves lying and even though it is intended to advance a political agenda.

As Nathalie Grant, the West's leading authority on disinformation, routinely put it, disinformation can be mostly, even 99 percent true. What makes it disinformation is the clever combination of what is true, what people want to be true, and what is demonstrably false but which many will not notice if it is cleverly presented. Consequently, what defines disinformation is not the percentage of truth or the percentage of lies it contains but the ways in which it is designed, carried out and ultimately accepted or rejected. [2]

Disinformation is always a conscious policy and part of a larger policy agenda. It is not simply dishonesty of this or that official in response to a particular event. It is implemented with a clear understanding that a combination of truth and falsehood is useful and effective. And it is pursued as long as it is effective, being sacrificed only when there are reasons to believe that either it is no longer necessary or it is no longer being accepted. All of those things have characterized Putin's approach to information about Ukraine, a pattern that makes what Moscow is doing all the more disturbing.

Unlike most other governments, the Russian government has a long history of engaging in disinformation campaigns. The tsarist regime did it, the Soviet regime did it, and Putin is doing it in spades. During the last six months, the Putin regime has put out a message about Ukraine that contains some true things (if there were no true things, there would be little basis to build on), some untrue things that people would like to believe because they allow them to feel good about themselves or to promote their own interests, and some completely false things that people do not reject out of hand because they see them as consistent or at least as not inconsistent with the other two components.

Putin's disinformation campaign about Crimea is particularly instructive in this regard. His message combined all three of these elements. Yes, it is true, as Moscow insists: Crimea has a longer history of ties to Russia than do other parts of Ukraine. No, it is not true that Crimea is "Russian" in the same sense that Moscow is. And it is demonstrably not true that ethnic Russians in Crimea were being persecuted and oppressed and needed to be defended by outside Russian forces. But these three themes worked together and even reinforced one another in the minds of many.

Putin Uses Disinformation Because It Works

Both Western observers and many Russian opponents of Putin's regime have been shocked that Moscow's duplicity regarding the situation in Ukraine has been so effective and has sent Putin's rating with Russians to unprecedented heights. They have blamed this on the facts that Russians overwhelmingly rely on Moscow television for their news, that Moscow television is controlled by the Kremlin, and that few Russians have access to, or at least take advantage of, alternative sources of information. And they have pointed to the increasing repression by the Putin government—to the return of the kind of fear Russians felt during most of Soviet times—in order to argue that many Russians may be willing to say they support Putin or agree with him even when they do not.

Both these factors are undoubtedly at work, but neither explains why the Kremlin's disinformation effort has been so successful among Russians. That has both deeper and more superficial causes. Among the deeper are a sense of grievance over the loss of superpower status and the impression that Russia now has the chance to recover that status by using force that others will not oppose. Russians also fear that Ukraine's turn to the West could further isolate them and lead to their decline. Finally, there is a profound sense among the Russian population that politics is the work of elite conspiracies rather than popular movements—hence, what is happening in Ukraine is necessarily the work of outside forces like the United States government or the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA).

At a more superficial level, Putin's disinformation campaign has worked because it has played to all of these factors precisely at a time when things have not been going well in Russia. The economy has been stagnant or declining, and the regime and many ordinary Russians would like to have their attention diverted to something else—the Sochi Olympics or “a good little war.” Putin faced a challenge to his rule in 2011–2012. Many Russians were frightened that the country might be returning to a period of uncertainty and instability. In turn, Putin's disinformation campaign about Ukraine provided reasons for Russians, his entourage and perhaps even himself to believe that the Kremlin leader could succeed in leading that country into a brighter future without the risks of instability that almost all the other courses proposed would likely entail.

But as effective as Putin's disinformation campaign has been inside Russia, it has been even more successful beyond that country's borders. This success is not due to all of Moscow's claims being accepted as true—this is certainly not the case. It is also not because of the presence of a network of Russian agents in Western countries—although such a network definitely exists, and thanks to Moscow's confidence that this network will not be challenged, much of it is now operating quite openly. Rather, Putin's disinformation campaign has worked because of a fundamental change in Western journalism and analysis; the existence of a large number of people in government, the business community and the academy whose careers are dependent on maintaining ties with the Russian Federation; and the desire of many Western governments not to infuriate Putin by calling him on his lies lest he behave even worse, cutting off gas supplies to Europe or invading yet another country.

None of these is pleasant to talk about, but each must be faced. First of all, many Western journalists confuse balance with objectivity. That means if anyone is in a position to put out a version of the story, however outrageous, journalists will often report it as one of the points of view out there, especially if the situation is confused or uncertain. And they may do so in ways that work particularly to Moscow's advantage. Thus, many Western outlets report what Moscow "says," while describing any Ukrainian government statement as "claims." Invariably, doing so is called objectivity but in fact it is anything but. Instead, it gives an opening to governments like Putin's, which are prepared to lie and to spread their lies widely, confident that what they say, however untrue or outrageous, will be reported.

Second, as is common knowledge, there are now so many people in government, the business community, and the academy whose positions, profits or careers are dependent on the maintenance of good relations with the Russian Federation that they not only are unwilling to challenge Russian disinformation. In fact, they are often prepared to promote Russian claims, again however untrue and outrageous. These people are not agents of Moscow, as some suggest, or even "the useful idiots" Vladimir Lenin talked about. Instead, they are a significant constituency, and few of them are prepared to sacrifice their next promotion in government, their next quarterly profits, or their standing as public intellectuals by calling Moscow on its dishonesty. And by not doing so or even more by repeating Moscow's line in whole or in part, such people ensure that the Kremlin's disinformation campaign works.

And third, as is tragically the case, many Western governments will not challenge what Moscow is doing because of fears that they will be subject to cutoffs in the supply of gas or be viewed as wanting to restore the Cold War. (The charge that the West is reviving the Cold War is an integral part of Moscow's disinformation campaign because it distracts attention from what Moscow is doing, justifies Russian actions, and most importantly constrains Western politicians who do not want to be thought people of the past.) Consequently, most but not all Western governments have refused to point out what Moscow is saying is a lie even as they have refused to take the kinds of actions that this situation would appear to demand.

What makes this pattern inside Russia and abroad so disturbing is that unless something fundamental is changed, it virtually guarantees that the Kremlin will have every incentive to engage in more, not less, disinformation and that other governments will conclude that such a strategy is something they could employ as well. As long as disinformation works, there will be more of it, and the world will be a place where trust will deteriorate and violence and the threat of violence become that much more common.

Identifying and Countering Disinformation Is Hard but Necessary Work

Because the use and even more the spread of disinformation carries with it such risks, it is critically important that Western countries respond in ways that will limit such possibilities. That is going to require three steps: first, it will require that these governments recognize they are dealing with disinformation rather than just lies; second,

it means that they will have to develop the kind of expertise to identify specific cases of disinformation and the truths and falsehoods within them; and third, it will necessitate the consideration of methods to deliver its response both with regard to foreign audiences and domestic ones. None of these will be easy to assure; some may prove impossibly difficult.

Recognizing disinformation as a strategy and tactic is the easiest, although few Western governments have been prepared to do so, at least in the case of Putin's Russia. The definition of disinformation offered above is one place to start. But what will make it hard for Western governments to take this step is that disinformation is part of information war, and information war is an ever more important aspect of war itself. [3] To say that a government is using disinformation as opposed to lying is something few national leaders and even fewer diplomats are prepared to take.

However, assuming that political challenge can be overcome—with the risks of not declaring something to be a disinformation campaign properly recognized as greater than the risks of doing so—Western governments need to develop the kind of expertise that will allow them to analyze specific cases of disinformation. That will require the development of linguistic and area expertise that has languished for too long. The United States needs people who understand not only the language but also the history and culture of major countries around the world and their potential adversaries. Given the decay in such expertise over the last generation, that will not be easy. At a minimum, it will require the restoration of the National Defense Education Act (NDEA) Title VI program and the development of career paths in all parts of the government that will allow individuals to have a full career without having to shift out of their area of expertise. And it will require the restoration of government translation programs like the Foreign Broadcast Information Service. There will be financial costs attached, but these will be relatively small.

The real challenge is the third one: countering disinformation campaigns. That is both a technical issue and a political one. Technically, it requires the development of channels to deliver alternative messages, including international broadcasting. Had the US had in place the capacity to broadcast in Russian to Russian speakers in Ukraine, Putin could not have achieved what he has. And if the US had a capacity to broadcast to the Russian people directly, Moscow would not have been able to shape Russian public opinion in the way that it has.

The era of shortwave broadcasting is over, and FM broadcasting requires that stations in most cases be on the territory of the country to which it is directed. That inevitably gives the host government the whip hand. The development of the Internet is important, but it is not the stand-alone technological solution many imagine. What is necessary is to invest in satellite direct-to-home television broadcasting so that the US and the West can deliver messages to peoples like the Russians who are now captives of their own

government's dis-informing media. Again, accomplishing this will not be free, but the costs of not doing it will be higher. And they will be higher still if Russia or China develops this capacity first.

But the hardest task will be countering disinformation being rebroadcast within Western countries by interested elites. Closing down openly declared institutions like Andranik Migranyan's operation in New York [4] is easy, but getting the government involved in countering disinformation within the US is going to be more difficult. That will require a willingness on the part of the government to speak out about themes, if not individuals, because again the costs of not doing so will be higher than those involved in taking such steps.

Notes:

1. See, for example, the continually updated list of exposed Russian propaganda lies at: "Russia's top 100 lies about Ukraine," *The Examiner*, August 11, 2014, <<http://www.examiner.com/list/russia-s-top-100-lies-about-ukraine>>, accessed August 2, 2014.
2. For a concise summary of her views, see: Nathalie Grant, "Disinformation," *National Review*, November 1960, <<http://www.unz.org/Pub/NationalRev-1960nov05-2g00041>>, accessed August 12, 2014.
3. On this point, see the various works of Paul W. Blackstock, especially: *The Strategy of Subversion* (Chicago, 1964).
4. Andranik Migranyan is director of the Institute for Democracy and Cooperation in New York, which is responsible for promoting Moscow's views in the United States. He gained notoriety earlier this year when he suggested that Adolf Hitler would have gone down in history as the greatest German leader of all time if he had stopped before invading Poland.