

Anatomy of an Info-War: How Russia's Propaganda Machine Works, and How to Counter It

Russia's propaganda assault on the West is well-organized and well-funded. However, it is also predictable, and this is its weakness.



Executive Summary

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

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

However, while Russia's propaganda network is sophisticated, its messages are not. Its narrative is based upon the thesis that the United States is trying to rule the world, and only Russia is brave and strong enough to stop it. Its propaganda largely relies on four tactics: dismiss the critic, distort the facts, distract from the main issue and dismay the audience. Finally, it relies heavily on the Kremlin-controlled media, and paid or sympathetic commentators in the West, to pass its messages.

The West should respond by emphasizing its own narrative of the freedom of choice and democracy, values which are threatened by the Russian regime and seen by it as a threat. This is an area where the states of CEE can play a leading role. Further, the West should

publicly identify the key Russian tactics each time they are used, and expose the Kremlin's network of paid commentators and pseudo-journalists for what they are.

A Narrative of War

Russia's narrative has been set out by speakers including President [Putin](#), National Security Council secretary [Patrushev](#) and Foreign Minister [Lavrov](#). It has been articulated repeatedly over many months: Lavrov, for example, gave it a full exposé in an [interview](#) with ITAR-TASS on 11 September.

The full narrative can readily be deduced from these speeches: The U.S. has always used NATO and European countries as a tool for its own foreign-policy aims. When the Soviet Union collapsed, the U.S. acted like a victorious aggressor, trying to shape a world in which it would be the sole arbiter of power. As part of that goal, it supported separatists in the Caucasus in a bid to 'dismember' Russia, and absorbed the states of CEE into NATO in an attempt at 'encirclement', breaching a promise given to President Gorbachev.

When Putin came to power, he opposed the U.S. attempt at world domination, and thus became the main stumbling-block to American ambitions. The U.S. therefore tried to destroy him with personal attacks, and attempted to contain Russia by building missile defenses in CEE and forcing former-Soviet states such as Georgia and Ukraine to apply for NATO membership. In this process, the U.S. was backed by the European Union, which used its Eastern Partnership programme to lever CIS states away from Moscow's orbit. The EU, in turn, was driven by its new members from CEE, who are hysterical Russophobes.

NATO and the EU wanted to force Ukraine to turn West. They therefore gave it an 'either-or' choice of joining NATO and the EU's free-trade zone or staying in Russia's orbit. When President Yanukovich rejected their pressure, neo-Nazis in Kiev staged a violent coup and began an assault on Russian-speakers in eastern Ukraine. At the same time, NATO planned to move ships into Crimea. Russia therefore had no choice but to

intervene to protect its compatriots, and the Russian-speakers of the East rose up against the Kiev junta in defense of their lives and their language.

As a narrative, it is strikingly effective. It has a bad guy – the U.S. – and a good guy, Putin. It tells a simple linear story: the bad guy's attempt at world domination and the emergence of the good guy to challenge him. It leaves the reader wanting to know what happens next, and how the bad guy is to be defeated. It plays on strong emotions: anger at the West's selfishness, admiration of the heroic leader Putin, outrage at the Kiev junta's atrocities.

It is also flexible. Putin used it in March 2014 to **justify** the annexation of Crimea; Lavrov used it a year later to **attack** U.S. missile-defense plans, EU foreign policy and Ukrainian domestic politics. Patrushev has **interpreted** the fall in world oil prices according to this script; foreign ministry spokesman Lukashovich has used it to **dismiss** the downgrading of his country's credit rating by Western agencies.

So far, the West has failed to come up with an equally effective narrative. Its messaging has been cautious and complex rather than compelling. The most important word has been 'but': we condemn Russia's actions but we remain open to dialogue; we support Ukraine but we are not against Russia; we are reinforcing our troops in Europe but we are not in a military confrontation with Russia. Where Russia's narrative is simple and emotional, the West's is complex and intellectual. As such, it has nothing like the same appeal.

Tactics of Rebuttal: The 4D Approach

Russia's narrative can be viewed as an offensive weapon: Its effect is to discredit the West and shift the blame for the Ukraine crisis onto Western shoulders. When it comes to defending Russia, different tactics are used. They can be summed up in four words: dismiss, distort, distract, dismay.

Dismiss

The first Russian approach to negative reporting or comment is to dismiss it, either by denying the allegations on the ground, or denigrating the one who makes them.

The best-known example is Russia's consistent denial that it has forces in Ukraine. This began as early as 4 March 2014, in a [press conference](#) given by Putin:

“The tension in Crimea that was linked to the possibility of using our Armed Forces simply died down and there was no need to use them. The only thing we had to do, and we did it, was to enhance the defence of our military facilities.”

When asked outright whether the forces involved were Russians, he insisted “those were local self-defence units”.

Such denials ended at his marathon [call-in](#) on 17 April 2014, a full month after the annexation:

“We had to take the necessary measures in order to prevent the situation in Crimea unfolding the way it is now unfolding in southeastern Ukraine ... Of course, the Russian servicemen did back the Crimean self-defence forces.”

He changed his tone again in a [documentary](#) released a year after the annexation. The film showed him describing an all-night meeting on 22 February 2014, a week before the first armed men appeared in Crimea: “We finished about seven in the morning. When we were parting, I told all my colleagues, ‘We are forced to begin the work to bring Crimea back into Russia’.”

Russia was not involved. Russia backed up the Crimean rebels. Russia planned it all. Only one of these statements can be true; the fact that Putin made all three in the glare of the cameras reveals the extent to which deceit has become part of Russian communications.

The tactics of dismissal have also been aimed at commentators in a bid to undermine them. Targets for abuse include the [UN](#) and [OSCE](#), the [Baltic States](#), former NATO

Secretary General Anders Fogh Rasmussen, his deputy Alexander Vershbow and NATO Spokesperson Oana Lungescu. NATO's representative in Moscow, Robert Pszczel, has been told on national TV that he is "Polish and therefore Russophobe".

A particularly striking example concerns the deputy spokesman at NATO's military headquarters, Lieutenant-Colonel Jay Janzen. Janzen had emailed a comment to Reuters on the presence of Russian troops in Ukraine – email being widely used in the dissemination of press statements, including by Russian officials.

In a one-paragraph response, Russian Defence Ministry Spokesman Igor Konashenkov dismissed Janzen as a "clerk", claimed that his "allegation" was an attempt to "make a name for himself" during NATO staff rotations, and mocked the email format by saying that "we have to expect the next comment from the cleaning companies who clean up NATO headquarters, by SMS."

This comment contains all the elements of Russian dismissal. It disparages the commentator; it criticizes the form of his message; it dismisses the comment itself as an 'allegation'; and it mocks the entire NATO communications set-up. As such, it epitomizes the technique.

Distort

Russian officials and media have also developed a strong tendency to distort information to serve their overall narrative.

For example, in late March 2015, Russian media reported heavily on a "wave" of protests sweeping across the Czech Republic in response to the U.S. "Dragoon Ride", a parade of armoured vehicles passing through the country en route to Germany. The coverage completely obscured the much more substantial welcomes the U.S. troops received – misrepresenting the Czechs as NATO opponents in Central Europe.

Similarly, on 30 April 2015 Russia's Deputy Defence Minister Anatoliy Antonov told Komsomolskaya Pravda that "so-called rapid-reaction units with a planned strength of

30,000 men are being set up in Poland”.

His comment was loosely based on facts. As NATO Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg had [confirmed](#) days before, NATO is in the process of boosting its rapid-response force from a ceiling of 13,000 to 30,000 troops.

However, as NATO has [explained](#), the units which are allocated to the NRF remain based in their home country unless and until they are called on for NATO exercises or deployments. This has, moreover, been its practice from the inception of the NRF. Antonov's comment therefore reveals a startling lack of information in such a senior official, or a lie.

Further cases of media distortion include a Russian [actress](#) playing the role of five different women opposed to Kiev; a [hospital patient](#) interviewed by three different TV stations and presenting three totally different stories of how he ended up there; and a [witness](#) claiming that Ukrainian troops had crucified a child in a case quickly derided as a [fake](#) in Western media.

Distract

A further tool in Russia's information arsenal is distraction: turning attention away from the activities of Russia and its allies by launching accusations elsewhere.

Sometimes the distraction serves to create doubt and confusion, as in the case of the MH-17 disaster, which has become a source of burgeoning [conspiracy theories](#).

At various times since the disaster, Russian state-run media have claimed that the plane was shot down by a Ukrainian [aircraft](#) or a Ukrainian [missile](#). They have suggested that the Ukrainians did so to gain world sympathy or to [assassinate Putin](#). One particularly outré theory even [links](#) the downing of MH-17 with the disappearance of MH-370 over the Indian Ocean, saying that the two planes are in fact the same, and the entire crash was staged, possibly with the involvement of [Israel](#).

A particular specialty in this warfare by distraction is the Russian tendency to hold up a mirror to any accusation, saying that the accuser has already committed exactly the misdemeanor they are now blaming on Russia.

This has long been a characteristic of Putin's rhetoric. In 2007, he enlivened an otherwise anodyne summit with European Union leaders in Portugal by claiming that the missile-defense plans of then-U.S. President George W. Bush were "very similar" to the Soviet stationing of nuclear missiles on Cuba in 1962. The statement startled the journalists present at the time, including this author.

Putin's argument was that "For us, technologically, the situation is very similar. On our borders such threats to our country are being created." The comparison is, at the very least, questionable, since there is a difference between the secret deployment of nuclear-tipped offensive warheads and the publicly planned deployment of defensive systems which are not explosive at all, but the effect was to call out a rebuttal from the U.S. side, and thus, temporarily, put the rhetorical pressure on Washington.

Overall, the techniques of distraction create uncertainty, confusion, and ultimately a doubt whether any source can be trusted without detailed personal experience. It generates a moral quagmire in which everyone is wrong, and therefore wrong actions become normal.

Dismay

The final key tool in Russia's communications arsenal is to spread dismay, by warning that moves which Russia opposes will have disastrous consequences for those planning them.

This has long been characteristic of Russia's rhetoric concerning the states of CEE. In 2007 and 2008, Putin **warned repeatedly** that Russia would target missiles on Europe if then-U.S. President George Bush went ahead with plans to site missile-defense systems in the Czech Republic and Poland. The threats were **revived** when the Obama

administration launched its plans for the European Phased Adaptive Approach, with sites in Poland and Romania.

More recently, particular attention has been paid to NATO's reinforcement of the defence of members in CEE in its so-called "assurance measures" following the Ukrainian crisis. Despite the relatively low level of actual military activity, Russian officials have repeatedly **warned** that they are an "escalation" which will be met with a military response, whether it be the deployment of **Iskander** missiles, intensified air presence or simply an "**adequate response**", an oft-repeated phrase of vague menace.

However, the most striking example has been Russian officials' reference to Russia's stockpile of nuclear weapons. Such comments have been made in the context of Russia's **military doctrine**, U.S. **sanctions** over the annexation of Crimea, the prospect of the West arming Ukraine, and Denmark's **plans** to fit a frigate with radar for NATO's missile defense.

In the **words** of Financial Times commentator Gideon Rachman, "I have little doubt that one aim of all this nuclear posturing from Moscow is precisely to get western commentators talking about a Russian nuclear threat. Russia is desperate to stop the west supplying military aid to Ukraine. So, they want to get across the message that any such escalation would provoke a ferocious reaction from Moscow and – who knows – perhaps even the use of nuclear weapons."

In all these cases, the effect is to intimidate opponents, embolden the opposition and, ideally, force a change of course.

Trolls and Trojans: The Horsemen of the Apocrypha

Finally, it is worth considering how these messages of apocryphal doom are passed into the Western media and Western mainstream thinking.

Much attention has been paid to Russia's so-called "**troll factories**" – offices where paid **commentators** surf the social media and bring scorn and criticism to bear on those who

publicly criticize the Kremlin's stance. The propaganda role of Kremlin-funded media outlets such as [Russia Today](#) and [Sputnik](#) has also been widely discussed.

Less attention, however, has been paid to the way in which the Kremlin media use Western commentators to amplify and validate Moscow's messages. Understanding this technique is crucial to unpicking the web of propaganda which is being spun.

Western commentators quoted by the Kremlin media fall into three broad categories. Firstly, there are those who work, or worked, directly for the Kremlin, but who do not necessarily make their affiliation public. Secondly, there are those who are apparently independent, but support Russia's policies. Third come those commentators who may not support Russia's narrative, but whose words can be quoted in a way which appears to show that they do.

In each case, the tactic employed by the Kremlin's media is to take a comment which would otherwise garner little attention in the West, and push it out loudly to the designated audience, whether in Russian or another language.

A good example of the first group of speakers surfaced in the pages of the Guardian on 8 March. Responding to a [letter](#) from NATO spokesperson Oana Lungescu, a reader called Angus Roxburgh [wrote](#) accusing her of "distorting the truth" by quoting Gorbachev's denial of the NATO non-enlargement promise. Roxburgh's comment was swiftly reported by RIA Novosti – Sputnik's Russian-language arm – under the headline "Guardian says NATO guilty of 'shameful distortion'". The story was picked up by a number of Russian outlets including Argumenty I Fakty and vzhglyad.ru. (RIA Novosti later changed the headline to reflect the fact that it was a single reader's letter, but the [original](#) was run by other outlets.)

Not all was as it was presented in the Russian press. Roxburgh, a former [Guardian](#) and BBC journalist, worked as an advisor to Putin from 2006 to 2009 – a position which was not reported. Moreover, he is not a member of the Guardian's editorial board, but an independent commentator who writes occasionally for the paper's "Comment is free"

section. RIA Novosti's attribution of his sentiments to the entire Guardian therefore elevated the comment to a level which was not justified, and misleadingly claimed that the influential newspaper, rather than one contributor, was accusing NATO of lying.

An example of the second category is the public letter from 60 leading German figures calling for [dialogue](#) with Russia. By accident or design, the letter is a casebook study of the four Ds of Russian communications. It dismisses media coverage of the crisis as biased; it distorts reality by comparing the European reaction to the crisis with Hitler's 1941 invasion of the Soviet Union. It distracts attention away from Russia's illegal annexation of Crimea by linking it to Russia's "legitimate" security needs and the West's "expansion"; it seeds dismay by raising the specter of a European war.

The letter received wide play in the Russian media. Sputnik devoted [several reports](#) to the story; Russia Today headlined it as a call for the West to stop "[sabre rattling](#)" towards Russia; RIA Novosti [reported](#) the letter, [a statement](#) by one of its signatories, and the Russian [response](#).

The motivations of its authors lie outside the scope of this analysis. However, they include former chancellor Gerhard Schröder, who after leaving office became chairman of the company running the Nord Stream pipeline; the chairman of the German Economy's Eastern Committee, an industry body dedicated to promoting trade with Russia and other former-Communist states; and the honorary president of the German-Russian Chamber of Commerce in Moscow. These are people whose businesses depend on close ties between Russia and Germany; that point was not made in the Russian press.

An example of the third case came in a [speech](#) made by Kremlin human-rights emissary Konstantin Dolgov in Riga, criticizing Latvian citizenship policy. Dolgov accused Latvia of Russophobia, and [adduced](#) as evidence a comment by Nils Muižnieks, the Council of Europe's Commissioner for Human Rights, to the effect that extremism and xenophobia were on the rise across Europe. Muižnieks, a Latvian citizen, is a powerful advocate to enlist, especially in Riga; however, as the Latvian Foreign Ministry later [underlined](#), "In

his comments at the time, Mr Muižnieks was talking about expressions of radical nationalism aimed at the Roma and at Muslims, in Sweden, Germany, Greece, Hungary, Serbia, and Italy; at the time, the Council of Europe Commissioner for Human Rights did not even mention Latvia or the Baltic States.” Russophobia was not mentioned.

Yet again, the effect of these misquotes is to sow doubt, distrust and confusion. In the Russian media world, the reader could be forgiven for believing, the truth is too hard to find. The ultimate victory of Russia's propaganda has been to make all other news appear as propaganda too.

Conclusion: Beating the Machine

So Russia's propaganda machine is powerful, well-oiled and well-financed; but as appears from this analysis, it is both repetitive and predictable. Its tools are a black-and-white narrative; a reactive policy based on the four Ds of dismiss, distort, distract, dismay; and a carefully-groomed set of commentators amplified and publicized by the Kremlin's media.

Daunting though the task is, the predictability makes it possible for the West to respond. Some steps have already been taken, including the creation of a NATO centre for strategic communications in Latvia, and the incubation of an EU outreach program to Russian speakers. However, such initiatives provide a channel for communication; they do not in themselves define what those channels should say. The analysis above suggests that Western communications, and especially those in Central and Eastern Europe, should focus on developing four key themes in their communications approach:

1. A compelling narrative
2. Identification of the Russian tactics
3. Predicting attack
4. Exposing the Kremlin's support network

1. The narrative

First, the West needs a visceral, captivating storyline that appeals to the senses more than to common-sense. Such a narrative can be written, based on the West's long-held values of individual freedom, democracy and the rule of law, and the efforts of many people over the years to defend them – efforts of which the Maidan demonstrations are a part.

This is an area in which the states of Central and Eastern Europe should play a leading role. Because of their history, they have a unique perspective on the **clash** of values which underpins the Ukraine conflict: the desire of the Ukrainian people for European integration, and the determination of the Russian elite to prevent it. They can articulate the narrative of democracy and freedom as a true, immediate and personal story, and contrast it with their own experience of its antithesis. This is far more powerful than any nuanced political declaration.

2. The tactics

Secondly, rather than dealing piecemeal with each Russian accusation, the West should name them for what they are: tactics to dismiss, distort, distract and dismay. Every effort should be made to focus the debate on the facts on the ground, rather than pseudo-facts conjured up from thin air.

The most effective way to do this would be through further analysis and publication of Russia's communications techniques. There is little advantage to be gained by simply refuting each Russian claim as it is made, since the claims are so numerous that this would be an endless and thankless task.

This is an area in which the non-governmental sector can contribute more than the governmental. Across Europe, and in each country, there is an urgent need for public discussion and dissection of the methodology of Russian propaganda, to promote understanding of the techniques which underpin it. The more attention can be turned to

what is a limited and predictable set of techniques, the easier it should become to expose the Kremlin's wild claims for the distraction they are.

3. Predicting attack

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

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

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

4. The speakers

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

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

One important step would be to analyse and publish the financial or interest ties linking allegedly independent commentators to Russian business. These funding ties can be hard to pin down, but the effort would be repaid by making clear to Western audiences how dependent on Russian backing the allegedly "independent" commentators are.

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

In all this, the focus should be on educating and informing as broad an audience as possible, and then allowing them to decide for themselves what sources are credible and which reporting can be believed. Russia's great victory in the conflict has been to turn information into an invisible weapon. The best way to counter it will be to make that weapon visible.

By *Ben Nimmo*, [Central European Policy Institute](#)

Ben Nimmo is a UK-based analyst and writer on European security issues. He formerly worked as a journalist in the Baltic States and Brussels, and as a NATO press officer.