

Peter Pomeranzev

Senior Fellow, Legatum Institute

House Committee on Foreign Affairs

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During the Russian invasion of Crimea last year, most of the world's journalists seemed confused. Most of the West's leaders were taken aback. But when it was over, the Supreme Allied Commander Europe (SACEUR), General Philip M. Breedlove, defined what had happened very precisely. The Kremlin had launched "the most amazing information warfare blitzkrieg we have ever seen in the history of information warfare". To put it differently, Russia has launched an information war against the West – and we are losing.

Crimea was the culmination of a long process, not the beginning. The Kremlin's military theorists have long been preparing to fight what they call 'information-psychological war', a mix of media, psychological, economic and cultural warfare. We saw an early example of these tactics in Estonia in 2007. When Estonian authorities decided to move a Soviet war memorial from the center of the city, Russian media went into a frenzy, accusing the Estonians of fascism. Russian vigilante groups started riots in the center of Tallinn. A massive cyber attack disabled Estonia's government and banking sectors. Moscow was sending a message: despite its membership of NATO and the EU, Estonia was still vulnerable, and the Kremlin could cripple it even before Estonia had a chance to invoke NATO's Article 5.

Ultimately the aim was not just to humiliate Tallinn, but show that Western, and specifically American, promises of security are empty. And once the NATO alliance has been undermined and American influence weakened, then the Kremlin will have a stronger hand to play – economically, politically, culturally - in Europe and around the world.

Since 2007 the Kremlin's information-psychological strategy has indeed expanded. The Kremlin is now bankrolling and lending political support to both far-right and far-left parties in Europe. Unlike their Soviet predecessors, this regime will work with anyone as long as its agenda helps create instability. Its aim is not to persuade anyone Russia is 'right'. Their aim is to disorganize and demoralize the West.

The Kremlin is also putting out its message in multiple media, 24/7. Russian media directly reaches some 30 million Russians outside the country, in Nato countries such as Estonia and Latvia as well as Ukraine. The Kremlin has also invested hundreds of millions of dollars into foreign language media, including the multilingual news channel RT, or Russia Today, which reaches millions of watchers in English, Spanish, German and Arabic, just for a start. In addition, the Kremlin funds Sputnik, a website news service and radio channel, in many languages. The Kremlin also funds "troll farms," regime-funded companies which hire people to spread messages on social media, using Facebook, Twitter, newspaper comment sections and many other spaces. Through these networks, Russia propagates conspiracy theories, disinformation and fake news. After the Malaysian flight MH17 was shot down over eastern Ukraine with Russian missiles last summer, Russian media spewed out scores of outlandish stories, alternately blaming Ukrainian fighter jets and NATO, and at one point claiming that the plane had deliberately taken off from Amsterdam carrying dead bodies. Their aim was not so much to persuade a potential viewer of any one version, but to trash the information space with so much disinformation so that a conversation based on actual facts would become impossible.

This is not merely an 'information war', in other words, but a 'war on information'. If the very possibility of rational argument is submerged in a fog of uncertainty, there are no grounds for debate. Sooner or later, public will give up trying to understand what happened, or even bothering to listen.

This strategy is working. Recent research by independent NGOs shows that

audiences exposed to both Russian and Ukrainian media end up not trusting anyone, the same trend in the Baltic states. In Germany 43 % do not trust anything that they read in Ukraine. Throughout Europe conspiracy theories are on the rise and in the US trust in the media has declined. The Kremlin may not always have initiated these phenomena, but it is fanning them.

In this effort, Russia is not acting alone. The Kremlin is now partnering up with other anti-Western regimes to create international networks of information-psychological operations. RT shares stories with Assad's Syrian TV, and is rebroadcasting with the Argentine state broadcaster. Other rising authoritarian states and non-state actors are developing their own versions of information-psychological war. ISIS' use of media has transformed the Middle East. China is also using a mix of media, legal and psychological warfare to stamp its authority in Asia. In the 21st century the question of whose story wins can be more important than the question of whose army wins.

Democracies are singularly ill equipped to deal with this type of warfare. For all of its military might, NATO cannot fight an information war. The openness of democracies, the very quality that is meant to make them more competitive than authoritarian models, becomes a vulnerability.

But we are not powerless, and we can fight back. If the United States and its allies finally agree to focus on this problem, to treat it with the seriousness it deserves, then there are many options. I hope in today's discussion to elaborate further, but here are some thoughts to begin with.

- 1. Defend our information space:** the Kremlin's strategy is not so much an information war as a 'war on information'. During the Ukraine we have seen the importance of NGOs such as Stop Fake in Ukraine, the Interpreter in the US and Bellingcat in the UK who expose Kremlin disinformation and launch open-source investigations into such events as the downing of flight MH17. These should be supported, and can

coordinate with each other to form international networks of critical inquiry.

- 2. Develop media literacy:** You can't stop disinformation but you can teach people to be more critically aware of how they are being manipulated. Media literacy should be prioritized in education, in the West and beyond.
- 3. Anti-corruption networks:** The Kremlin's information-psychological operations often rely on murky funding and corruption to co-opt foreign actors. Journalists and activists should be trained and funded to investigate this world. Currently there are brave groups working independently in various countries, but little coordination. Those investigating corruption need to be protected by a legal fund so they are not intimidated by threats of libel, and need to have the ability to launch their own political lobbying and legal campaigns against the perpetrators.
Research isn't enough: action needs to be enabled, a cross of investigative journalism, activism and legal work.
- 4. Support quality journalism in Central and Eastern Europe:** The West pulled out of media development in Eastern Europe too early. In countries such as Moldova or Ukraine there is no strong quality journalism: media is controlled and manipulated by politicians and oligarchs. In the absence of a beacon of quality journalism, the national conversation disintegrates and a foreign state like Russia can easily spread information chaos. We should support the building up of public broadcasting in the region, rigorously independent of both state and oligarchical influence.
- 5. Support independent Russian media through production companies that create new content the Kremlin avoids:** The Kremlin's media operations are impressive but have an Achilles heel. Russia news media virtually ignores 'local news': preferring to distract viewers with the war in Ukraine. This leaves a gap. For local news, and for shows akin to PBS' 'This American Life' or investigations like 'Serial', engaging the Russian language viewer by seeing the world through their eyes. This is a deeper way of projecting democratic values than superficial 're-branding' of the US or 'the West'. The Kremlin wants a PR war. What it is bad at is media that deals with reality.

6. Help Russians with an alternative vision for their country:

The Kremlin defines Russia as at war with the rest of the world. But many Russians have an alternative vision of their country integrated into the international community. Creating a world class Russian university abroad that could foster these values is a way to nurture this vision. One of the many weaknesses of the Kremlin is its failure to support Russian education- putting the lie to its 'great power' propaganda drive.

Most important, it is important for the USG to realize that the 21st century will be defined by new forms of information conflict. A comprehensive approach is urgently needed to deal with this- the West, including the US, is behind the curve.