Russian Social Media Influence

Understanding Russian Propaganda in Eastern Europe

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Russian Social Media Influence: Understanding Russian Propaganda in Eastern Europe

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G ood morning, Chairman Burr, Vice Chairman Warner, and distinguished members of the committee. Thank you for the invitation to testify at this important hearing. Russia is engaged in an active, worldwide propaganda campaign. Information operations are a major part of Russia's foreign policy and social media are one important element of Russia's state-led activities. The RAND Corporation has been studying these activities; today, I will share some lessons learned from one particular study—*Russian Social Media Influence: Understanding Russian Propaganda in Eastern Europe*—that examined Russia's social media influence in Eastern Europe.[3] Understanding activities in this region, which Russia considers its "near abroad," will help advance the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) defense of the Baltics and also shed light on how to combat this issue around the globe. I will provide an overview of Russian propaganda activities, review our efforts to identify Russian propaganda on Twitter, and examine challenges confronting U.S. and European policymakers in the region. I will conclude with recommendations for countering the Russian propaganda threat.

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[2] The RAND Corporation is a research organization that develops solutions to public policy challenges to help make communities throughout the world safer and more secure, healthier and more prosperous. RAND is nonprofit, nonpartisan, and committed to the public interest.

[3] Todd C. Helmus, Elizabeth Bodine Baron, Andrew Radin, Madeline Magnuson, Joshua Mendelsohn, William Marcellino, Andriy Bega, and Zev Winkelman, *Russian Social Media Influence: Understanding Russian Propaganda in Eastern Europe*, Santa Monica, Calif.: RAND Corporation, RR-2237-OSD, 2018.

Overview of Russian Propaganda Activities

The Kremlin has made significant investments to influence the social media debate, developing an army of trolls, or fake social media accounts managed by Russian agents, as well as social media bots, or automated social media accounts.[4] These capabilities, initially designed to influence the Russian domestic audience, have likely been adapted and expanded to be used abroad.

This social media does not work in isolation but is part of a larger propaganda infrastructure. A state-funded Russian television network, *Russia Today* (*RT*), broadcasts abroad in English, Arabic, and Spanish. State-controlled news websites, such as *Sputnik*, disseminate news in about 30 languages. Russia also relies on civil society organizations, political parties, think tanks, and private citizens to echo and reinforce the Kremlin message.[5] Some of these elements may be directly supported by the Russian state; others disseminate pro-Russia content on their own free will and dime. Russia's social media campaigns are often synchronized tightly with these outlets.

The objectives for social media campaigns vary. In the former Soviet states, including the Baltic states and Ukraine, the Kremlin often aims to leverage shared elements of the post-Soviet experience to drive wedges between ethnic Russian and Russian-speaking populations and their host governments, NATO, and the West. Further abroad, the Kremlin often attempts to achieve policy paralysis by sowing confusion, stoking fears, and eroding trust in Western and democratic institutions. To achieve these and other objectives, Russian social media operations work on many fronts, including influencing conversation and debate on news comment sections; organizing protests against adversary governments, such as Ukraine; increasing web traffic for state-sponsored news stories; harassing individuals who criticize the Russian state; and disseminating fake news and other propaganda content.[6]

Although Russia seems to have a near-worldwide scope to its propaganda campaign, it is particularly interested in the lands on its western border—part of what Russia calls its "near abroad." This region stretches from the Baltic states to Ukraine and encompasses Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania, Belarus, and Moldova. This is an area of intense Russian focus, as evidenced by Russia's annexation of Crimea; the ongoing hybrid warfare in eastern Ukraine; and a campaign

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[4] Keir Giles, "Russia's 'New' Tools for Confronting the West: Continuity and Innovation in Moscow's Exercise of Power," Chatham House, Russia and Eurasia Programme, March 21, 2016.

5 See John Lough, Orysia Lutsevych, Peter Pomerantsev, Stanislav Secrieru, and Anton Shekhovtsov, "Russian Influence Abroad: Non-State Actors and Propaganda," Chatham House, Russia and Eurasia Programme Meeting Summary, October 24, 2014; Daunis Auers, *Comparative Politics and Government of the Baltic States: Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania in the 21st Century*, New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015; and Andrew Wilson, "Four Types of Russian Propaganda," *Aspen Review*, Issue 4, 2015.

6 A number of examples support these points. In January 2016, automated complaints posted by bots on social media caused Twitter to block pro-Ukraine user accounts. Russia also used themed groups on such social media platforms as the Russian-language VKontakte (similar to Facebook) to mobilize antigovernment protests against the Ukrainian government. It also used social media to spread fake rumors to undermine the morale of Ukrainian troops and discredit Ukrainian leadership and sent harassing SMS messages to Ukrainian soldiers on Ukraine's eastern front. Russia also used trolls and bots to artificially inflate web traffic and statistics for pro-Russia content. See Giles, 2016; Digital Forensic Research Lab, Atlantic Council, "Electronic Warfare by Drone and SMS: How Russia-Backed Separatists Use 'Pinpoint Propaganda' in the Donbas," *Medium.com*, May 18, 2017; and Landana Samokhvalova, "The Russian Organizers of a 'Third Maidan' in Ukraine," *Euromaidan Press*, February 14, 2016.

of fake news, hostile Twitter bots, and encouraging protests. Neighboring countries look at these actions and wonder where Russia will turn next.[7]

The Office of the Secretary of Defense's Rapid Reaction Technology Office asked the RAND Corporation to help it better understand the nature and effectiveness of pro-Russia outreach on social media and identify countermessaging opportunities in the areas surrounding Russia. The goals of our study of Russian social media influence were to (1) identify pro-Russia propagandists and anti-Russia activists on Twitter; (2) assess the degree to which Russian-speaking populations in a selection of former Soviet states have adopted pro-Russia propaganda themes in their Twitter language, and (3) consider challenges confronting U.S. and European policymakers in the region.

Identify Pro-Russia Propagandists and Anti-Russia Activists on Twitter

By analyzing Russian-language Twitter data emanating from the former Soviet states of Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania, and Ukraine, as well as from Moldova and Belarus, we were able to uncover two communities of interest—a population of pro-Russia activists and a community of Ukrainian activists.[9] These communities were not only large, with approximately 40,000 members each, but also highly influential. They produced a lot of content and were mentioned by a large number of accounts. When we examined this content, we discovered that these communities form two sides of a war of ideas.

The Russian activist community consisted of consumers and disseminators of pro-Russia propaganda. They disseminated content that was virulently anti-Ukraine and the West, and they supported breakaway Ukrainian confederations aligned with Russia. The Ukrainian activist group appeared to oppose Russian interference and exposed Russian propaganda. They supported Ukrainian independence and opposed corruption.

We also analyzed the key influencers of each community. For the pro-Russia community, the most influential users were ardently pro-Russia and anti-Ukraine and the West. Several disseminated what are described as "hate posts" about Ukraine and the United States, and one pontificated on Russian history. Several influencers appeared to operate from Russia or pro-Russia locations, and one was a journalist based out of the United Kingdom. Pro-Ukraine

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7 Russia has several reasons for training its propaganda machine on the former Communist countries. First, effectively influencing the political outcomes of these countries helps establish a cushion against what it considers malign Western influence. Second, some of these countries, including the Baltic states and Ukraine, have minority populations of Russian-speaking former Soviet citizens and their descendants. It is an established Russian policy—specifically, "the compatriot policy"—to protect the interests of this population and, more importantly, influence this population to support pro-Russia causes and effectively influence the politics of its neighbors. See Andrew Radin, *Hybrid Warfare in the Baltics: Threats and Potential Responses*, Santa Monica, Calif.: RAND Corporation, RR-1577-AF, 2017.

9 Using a method called Community Lexical Analysis, or CLA, we conducted social network analysis of our Twitter data set to distill 22,825,114 Russian-language tweets from 512,413 unique user accounts into ten of the most central or influential communities. We then used a analytics software called RAND Lex, which identifies statistically overpresent and underpresent words in comparison to a baseline text. For this study, our baseline text included all Russian-language tweets in our collected dataset. For more on RAND Lex, see Elizabeth Bodine-Baron, Todd Helmus, Madeline Magnuson, and Zev Winkelman, *Examining ISIS Support and Opposition Networks on Twitter*, Santa Monica, Calif.: RAND Corporation, RR-1328-RC, 2016.

influencers were, of course, anti-Russia and pro-Ukraine. Several used humor and sarcasm to convey their message, and others sought to expose Russian propagandists and fake news content. One was even supported by Radio Free Europe, in a type of capacity-building venture that is proposed in the recommendations of our recent research. Our study argues that analyses such as these can play a key role in campaigns designed to empower anti-Russia influencers.[10]

Are the accounts in the pro-Russia activist community working at the behest of the Russian state? We ran a randomly selected 2,000 accounts from each community to determine whether they were computer automated.[11] Accounts are more likely to exhibit bot-like behavior in the pro-Russia than in the pro-Ukraine activist community at a statistically significant rate, although the total numbers remain under 10 percent for both groups. Either the Russian activist community has fewer Russian bots than anticipated, or the Russians have improved their ability to surreptitiously field social media bots.[13] Alternatively, the accounts could be managed by Russian troll accounts, but such accounts can be difficult to distinguish from Russia's zealous, but otherwise authentic, base. Being able to differentiate Russian state-sponsored propaganda campaigns from genuine Twitter content is a key and challenging question for technologists.

The Degree to Which Regional Twitter Users Have Adopted the Language of Pro-Russia Propagandists

We tested whether we could discern the influence of the pro-Russia activist community over time and in different regions in eastern Europe. To do this, we developed a fingerprint of the word patterns from the content from the pro-Russia activist community. We then compared that word pattern fingerprint with that of eight longitudinal panels of Twitter users who were geo-inferenced to the region.[14]

The team found that an extremely high 15 to 20 percent of users in Crimea and Donetsk shared the same linguistic pattern as the rabid pro-Russia activist Twitter community. This rate drops the farther one goes away from the zone of Russian influence.[3] Only approximately 5

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[10] Identifying these influencers—as well as the number of followers and what each is focusing on—is useful for targeting and countermessaging. For example, if the U.S. government were to work with pro-Ukraine influencers and help improve their skills, it could more effectively counter the Russian propaganda machine. It goes without saying that the pro-Ukraine influencers have far more credibility than any U.S. government agency.

11 Such features include unusual frequency of tweets, profile characteristics, and retweet behavior; Botometer, home page, undated.

13 The field of computer bots is engaged in an arms race with bot developers increasingly trying to create bots that mimic complex human behavior on social media and can avoid detection by automated bot detector programs. See Jinque Zhang, Rui Zhang, Yanchao Zhang, and Guanhau Yan, "The Rise of Social Botnets: Attacks and Counter Measures," *IEEE Transactions on Dependable and Secure Computing*, March 8, 2016.

14 The data for the panels consisted of all tweets that met all of the following conditions: (1) They were written between August 2015 and May 2016, (2) they contained primarily Russian language (according to Gnip's language classification algorithm), (3) they belonged to one of the 2,200- to 2,600-person user samples in six specific areas in Ukraine (Crimea, Donetsk, Dnipro, Kharkov, Kiev, and Odessa) and two other areas in the region (Minsk and Riga). These samples yielded between 500,000 and 900,000 tweets each.

percent of users reporting from Kiev, Minsk, and Riga, show similarities to the Russian activist community.

We validated the ability of our method to accurately detect the pro-Russia activist accounts and argue that this method could be used to track the spread of Russian propaganda over time in various regions. This could be a critical component to an effort to detect malign Russian information-shaping campaigns in real time.

Challenges Confronting U.S. and European Policymakers in the Region

To understand threats and identify policy recommendations, we interviewed more than 40 U.S. and regional experts for our study, visited U.S. European Command in Stuttgart, and met with security and civil society experts in Estonia and Latvia.

We learned several lessons from these engagements. First, given the breadth of Russia's propaganda campaign, it should not be surprising that it is not solely a social media problem. Particularly for the Baltic states of Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania, the biggest propaganda threat comes from television. Moscow-controlled media, especially television, is the dominant source of information for many Russian speakers in the countries of the former Soviet Union.[15] Any effort to address Russian propaganda in the region must account for this monopoly that Russia holds over the Russian-language media market.

Second, the intensity of Russia's information campaign on social media appears higher in Ukraine than in the Baltic states. Some Baltic government security experts suggest that they are worried about an intensified Russian social media propaganda as a prelude to a kinetic campaign.

Third, there is a relatively high presence of Russian-speaking populations in the region. They are or descend from Soviet-era migrants, and their host countries have refused them citizenship—giving Russia a unique opportunity to communicate with a sympathetic audience. Further, some government policies prioritize national languages and limit government outreach in the Russian language, complicating state outreach to Russian speakers.

Finally, as discussed above, numerous social media activists, websites, news sources, and other content producers appear to actively disseminate their own pro-Russia propaganda without any obvious direct support from the Russian state. This makes identification of state-sponsored Russian-language bots, trolls, and other nonattributed content difficult.

Recommendations

Drawing on the above, our study made five recommendations that seek to limit Russian influence in the region.

Expand and Improve Access to Local and Original Content

To effectively compete with Russia propaganda, it is critical that Russian speakers in the region have alternatives to Russian-language television, Internet, and social media entertainment.

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15 Ukraine is the exception: It has censored Russian government broadcasting and VKontakte.

The key is not to so much counter the Russian narrative as to displace it with more entertaining and accurate content. There are several options for achieving this objective.

One approach is to empower influencers on social media. There are many social media activists in the region who speak Russian, hold pan-European outlooks, and have a large following on social media. The goal is to identify such actors and provide funding for content creation; offer training in monetization; and, overall, help them produce better content. Some efforts are ongoing in this respect, and additional efforts are needed.

Alternatively, some people we spoke with in the region suggested formal training efforts for Russian-speaking journalists in the region. Others suggest increasing access to Russian-language television programming. The Estonians, for example, have begun a publicly funded television station to help communicate to the 300,000 Russian-speaking residents of Estonia. The United States has created *Current Time*, a Russian-language television broadcast that seeks to give the U.S. perspective on news and current events. *Current Time* may also wisely increase their portfolio of entertainment programming.

Better Tell the U.S., NATO, and European Union Story

NATO, European Union, and host nations should offer a compelling argument for Russian-speaking populations to align with the West or with individual nation-states; populations, especially those sitting on the fence, should be easily able to grasp the goals and motivations of the West. Our study concludes that such a compelling argument or vision is currently missing.

NATO also should better communicate the purpose and intent of its Enhanced Forward Presence units—battalion-sized infantry units now stationed in the Baltic states. Russia is seeking to drive a wedge between Russian-speaking populations in the region and these units. Public affairs elements attached to these units should help frame their presence and mission and tell their story with compelling social media content. Civil affairs activities can also be used to their advantage. For example, after U.S. soldiers helped cut firewood for local Russian speaking residents, one resident was heard saying, "Russian soldiers would never do that."

Highlight and "Tag" Russian Propaganda

The current approach to highlighting Russian propaganda is to do so through websites or email alerts. Unfortunately, such efforts are extremely slow, and the messages fail to reach the populations most in need. It is critical to highlight Russian propaganda in speedy ways that target the audiences at risk. Our study highlights the potential use of Google Ads. This approach uses videos and other content embedded in Google search results to educate populations who search for Russian-created fake news on Google and other search engines. The report also notes the potential value of viewpoint bots. A viewpoint bot can, in theory, use advanced algorithms to identify Russian bots or trolls engaged in hashtag campaigns. Once it identifies a bot or troll, the viewpoint bot posts messages to the offending hashtags, informing audiences of Russian influence efforts.

Build the Resilience of At-Risk Populations

In the Baltic states, we frequently heard of the need for media literacy training, and there is a growing recognition of the need for such training in general. Facebook has begun broad-based media literacy training, and several countries, including Canada, Australia, and Sweden, now introduce media literacy training into their education system. While this is a long-term solution, such efforts would likely be warranted in the Baltic states and Ukraine. In the short term, there may be value in launching a public information campaign that can more immediately convey the concepts of media literacy and the risk of Russian propaganda to a mass audience.

Track Russian Media and Develop Analytic Methods

For the United States, allied governments, and technology firms to take any action against Russian social media operations, it will be critical to identify Russian bot and troll accounts and track their activity in real time. This is no small problem, as such accounts can be very difficult for the naked eye or even computer algorithms to spot. It will be critical to develop advanced computational analytics that can distinguish between authentic social media chatter and adversarial information campaigns. This will require a coordinated research program.