

Russia's Social Media War in Ukraine

A Monograph

by

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Abstract

Russia's Social Media War in Ukraine, by Mr. Corey Sinclair, 39 pages.

This monograph argues that Moscow used pro-Russian individuals, bots, and trolls on social media as part of a larger strategy to take territory in Eastern Ukraine. Moscow used social media to spread pro-Russian narratives and spread disinformation to sew confusion and disunity among Ukrainian forces and the international community. This allowed pro-Russian forces the room to operate with impunity. Moscow's employment of social media in Ukraine also provides a proof of concept for the Gerasimov Doctrine, which calls for the use of Russian special forces in conjunction with information operations to overcome larger enemies. This monograph also contends that the United States has been ineffective at countering Russian narratives in the social media realm. This study outlines key strategic, operational, and tactical implications for America and its allies. It also outlines opportunities for the United States and the international community to counter Russian efforts.

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Acronyms

NATO – North Atlantic Treaty Organization

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Introduction

The President of the United States believes the Cold War is over; fine – it’s over. But Putin doesn’t believe it’s over.

—Sen. John McCain, *American Israel Public Affairs Committee Conference*

In March 2014, images of paramilitary forces taking over government facilities and unmarked military equipment making incursions into Ukraine began to appear on international television and the internet caught much of the international community off-guard. Despite their obvious attempts to mask their country of origin, it was not difficult to conclude that these men were Russian. For avid followers of international relations, these actions were an obvious continuation of Russian efforts to pressure their former Soviet bloc neighbors from turning towards the European Union and North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) partners. Russia intervened militarily in the country of Georgia in August 2008, after the government in Tbilisi publicly acknowledged its desire to join NATO and unify with South Ossetia.¹ Now Russia was doing the same in Ukraine. This time, however, Russia would use the internet and social media as part of an overall strategy to influence the narrative of the Ukraine crisis.

Despite the extensive evidence of overt diplomatic pressure, outright armed conflict with the Ukrainian military by paramilitary personnel, and subsequent annexation of Crimea, Moscow denied allegations of their involvement in Ukraine through official statements. More importantly for this monograph, Moscow used social media to create and control a pro-Russian narrative, as well as spread disinformation and conspiracy theories. *The Oxford Living Dictionaries* defines social media as websites and applications that allow online users to create and share content, or to participate in social networking.² Moscow’s overt social media efforts include using accounts that

¹ Ann Applebaum, “Russia invades Georgia while the West watches. How did it come to this?,” *Slate*, August 13, 2008, accessed March 9, 2018, <http://www.slate.com/human-interest/2018/03/some-childhood-misconceptions-make-more-sense-than-reality.html>.

² *Oxford Living Dictionaries*, s.v. “Social Media,” accessed January 18, 2018, https://en.oxforddictionaries.com/definition/social_media.

are either pro-Russian or openly affiliated with the Russian government. Meanwhile, Russia's covert efforts include the use of "bots" and "trolls," or the use of computer and human generated social media accounts respectively, that masks the true location and affiliation of the account.

This monograph argues that Russia's employment of social media in Ukraine provides a model for how Russia may effectively control or contest the narrative space by influencing the international community and outside actors. This will allow Russia to maintain a pro-Russian narrative, exert pressure on its neighbors, and keep the international community at bay. This allows Russia to conduct operations with impunity, as it masks Russian involvement and redirects the audience's attention away from Russian efforts.

This monograph also argues that the United States has been ineffective at countering Russian narratives in the social media realm, and has strategic, operational, and tactical implications for America and its allies. The use of soft power to spread misinformation and false narratives has always been a low-cost venture for great powers like Russia. The Information Revolution has further reduced the cost by creating the internet and other technologies that allow the spreading of information across the globe instantaneously, while shielding a government's involvement from the public.³

However, opportunities exist for the United States and the international community to counter Russian narratives in cyberspace. First, the United States could develop closer relationships with technology companies that own and operate social media platforms to greater enhance our ability to monitor social media activity and remove the accounts of suspected Russian bots or trolls. Second, the U.S. can leverage social media experts and develop nimble

³ *Oxford Living Dictionaries*, s.v. "Information Revolution: Definition of Information Revolution in US English," accessed January 18, 2018, https://en.oxforddictionaries.com/definition/us/information_revolution. The Information Revolution is defined as the proliferation of the availability of information and the accompanying changes in its storage and dissemination owing to the use of computers.

bureaucracies that can react in real-time to social media posts and allow them to develop messages to counter Russian propaganda. Third, and finally, the international community could learn about the effectiveness of social media in effecting public opinion. If the public knows that state actors are beginning to use social media and other cyber platforms to influence their thinking, they will be more likely to scrutinize their news sources and become less susceptible to online influencing attempts.

Methodology & Literature Review

To make the case that Russia's use of social media provides a future model for Russia and other bad actors to effectively control or contest the narrative space, this monograph examines two key events. First, the physical crossing of Russian troops into Ukraine depicts how Moscow used social media to spin multiple pro-Russian narratives and deny their involvement in Crimea. Second, the Malaysian Airlines Flight 17 plane crash that occurred over Ukraine shows how Moscow denies even further the extent of its involvement in the crisis and its backing of pro-Russian rebels in Crimea. Both events had a profound impact on Ukraine crisis and the international community when they occurred. In the following sections, this monograph outlines an event synopsis, a discussion of the reactions on social media, and how the Russians used social media to target individuals or groups. Finally, there is a discussion of the implications and opportunities associated with Russia's social media use, as well as a section devoted to the needs of further research.

This monograph does not argue that Russia's use of social media, or in other terms Russia's use of soft power, is somehow more important than Russia's wielding of military force in Ukraine. Also, it does not contend that the power of the sovereign state is somehow supplanted by the community of online users of social media. Instead, this monograph takes the same position as Joseph Nye when he states, "there is no contradiction between realism and soft power. Soft power is not a form of idealism or liberalism. It is simply a form of power, one way of

getting desired outcomes.”⁴ For Russia, the use of social media is just one version of soft power that can influence others to get what they desire.

This monograph relies on open-source reporting from a variety of English-language sources. These sources include traditional media outlets like the *New York Times*, the *Guardian*, and the *BBC*, political commentary websites like *Politico* and the *Diplomat*, and English-language Russian news websites *Russia Today* and *Sputnik News*. This research project also includes information from publicly available social media accounts that discuss Russian actions in Ukraine, to include official Russian government posts, Russian-controlled media outlets, Russian-backed groups, and private citizens. Unfortunately, many of the social media accounts and corresponding posts linked to Russian bots and trolls are now unavailable for evaluation. American companies like Twitter and Facebook have removed many of the accounts and posts in reaction to Russian meddling in the 2016 American presidential election.⁵ However, this monograph compensates for this fact by relying on the analysis and judgments outlined by various commentators and media outlets.

In Context: Russia’s Use of Social Media in Ukraine

The Russian government began to exert considerable diplomatic pressure on the Ukrainian government as early as November 2013 to drive a wedge between the former Soviet republic and the European Union.⁶ The Russian government threatened repercussions if the

⁴ Joseph S. Nye, *The Future of Power* (New York: PublicAffairs, 2011), 82.

⁵ Alexa Lardieri, “Facebook Removed Data Related to Russian Ads that Ran During 2016 Election,” *US News and World Report*, October 13, 2017, accessed November 30, 2017, <https://www.usnews.com/news/politics/articles/2017-10-13/facebook-removed-data-related-to-russian-ads-that-ran-during-2016-election>.

Josh Meyer, “Twitter deleted data potentially crucial to Russia probes,” *Politico*, October 13, 2017, accessed November 30, 2017, <https://www.politico.com/story/2017/10/13/twitter-russia-data-deleted-investigation-243730>.

⁶ Rikard Jozwiak, “After Kyiv Snub, Kwasniewski Says EU-Ukraine Deal Is Off,” *Radio Free Europe / Radio Liberty*, November 21, 2013, accessed October 30, 2017, <https://www.rferl.org/a/ukraine-tymoshenko-bill-rejected/25175222.html>.

Ukrainian government signed an important trade deal with the European bloc. This forced Ukraine government to reverse course on 21 November. According to a government decree signed by Prime Minister Mykola Azarov, Ukraine government halted negotiations “to fully analyze the impact of the planned agreement on industrial production and trade with Russia.”⁷ On the same day, Ukrainian lawmakers also failed to pass legislation that would allow jailed former Ukrainian Prime Minister Yulia Tymoshenko to receive medical treatment abroad – a key stipulation of the trade agreement. The United States and the European Union openly disapproved of Ukraine’s decisions and acknowledged the role that Russia was interfering in Ukraine. Swedish Foreign Minister Carl Bildt stated on social media that the “Ukraine government suddenly bows deeply to the Kremlin. Politics of brutal pressure evidently works.”⁸

In reaction to Ukraine’s decision to withdraw from the trade agreement, thousands of protestors assembled in Kiev on 1 December 2013 and demanded the removal of the Ukrainian president, prime minister, and the cabinet.⁹ Protesters successfully blockaded government buildings and facilities throughout Kiev, and clashed with riot police. Protests continued for three months until the Ukrainian President Viktor Yanukovich and opposition leaders reached a settlement agreement on 21 February.¹⁰ Ukraine would hold new presidential elections and return to the Constitution of 2004.

⁷ Jozwiak, “After Kyiv Snub.”

⁸ Carl Bildt, Twitter post, November 21, 2013 (5:53 a.m.), accessed October 31, 2017, <https://twitter.com/carlbildt/status/403521513342898176>.

⁹ BBC.com. “Ukraine unrest: Protesters blockade government sites,” *BBC*, December 2, 2013, accessed October 31, 2017, <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-25180502>.

¹⁰ Ian Traynor, “Ukraine protests: end nears for Viktor Yanukovich despite concessions,” *Guardian*, February 21, 2014, accessed October 31, 2017, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2014/feb/21/ukraine-protests-viktor-yanukovich-election>; Phil Black, Nick Paton Walsh and Michael Pearson, “Diplomatic talks in Ukraine last until dawn, a day after 100 may have died,” *CNN*, February 21, 2014, accessed October 31, 2017, <http://www.cnn.com/2014/02/20/world/europe/ukraine-protests/>.

Immediately following the agreement's signing, pro-Russian Ukrainian President Yanukovich fled to Eastern Ukraine to shore up support amid increasing tensions and calls for violence, forcing Ukraine parliament to remove Yanukovich.¹¹ Meanwhile in Sevastopol, the largest city in Crimea, local politicians and citizens began to signal that they would no longer follow the directions of Kiev.¹² On 25 February, the Sevastopol city council appointed a new, pro-Russian mayor. Two days later the Crimean Parliament Speaker announced that the parliamentarians were considering a referendum that would seek expanded autonomy for Crimea.¹³ Crimean demonstrators also began to protest for increased relations with Russian President Vladimir Putin and the Russian government.

On the morning of 28 February, several hundred, armed men wearing camouflage and carrying automatic rifles took control of the civilian airport at Simferopol and the military airport in Sevastopol.¹⁴ Both airports are key strategic sites located near Russia's Black Sea Fleet. Crimeans also reported seeing Russian helicopters, and military vehicles operating in the area.¹⁵

¹¹ Conal Urquhart, "Ukraine MPs appoint interim president as Yanukovich allies dismissed – 23 February as it happened," *Guardian*, February 23, 2014, accessed October 31, 2017, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2014/feb/23/ukraine-crisis-yanukovich-tymoshenko-live-updates>.

¹² Howard Amos, "Ukraine: Sevastopol installs pro-Russian mayor as separatism fears grow," *Guardian*, February 25, 2014, accessed October 31, 2017, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2014/feb/25/ukraine-sevastopol-installs-pro-russian-mayor>.

¹³ Christine Hauser and Jennifer Preston, "Updates on the Tensions in Ukraine," *New York Times*, February 27, 2014, accessed October 31, 2017, <https://thelede.blogs.nytimes.com/2014/02/27/live-coverage-tensions-in-ukraine/?action=click&contentCollection=Europe&module=RelatedCoverage®ion=Marginalia&pgtype=article>.

¹⁴ William Booth, "Armed men take control of Crimean airport," *Washington Post*, February 28, 2014, accessed November 8, 2017, https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/europe/pro-russia-separatists-flex-muscle-in-ukraines-crimean-peninsula/2014/02/27/dac10d54-9ff0-11e3-878c-65222df220eb_story.html?utm_term=.28cdde066d94; Sergei L. Loiko and Carol J. Williams, "Crimean airports closed after Russian transports reportedly land," *LA Times*, February 28, 2014, accessed November 8, 2017, www.latimes.com/world/worldnow/la-fg-wn-ukraine-russia-crimea-military-movements-20140228-story.html#ixzz2vs48sqt3.

¹⁵ BBC.com, "Protestors blockade;" Booth, "Armed men take control."

At the same time, additional Russian forces moved unopposed against other key strategic sites throughout Crimea.¹⁶ In response, Ukraine’s interior minister Arsen Avakov accused the Russians of sending the paramilitary forces and stated that, “what is happening can be called an armed invasion and occupation. In violation of all international treaties and norms. This is a direct provocation for armed bloodshed in the territory of a sovereign state.”¹⁷ Russia’s Ambassador to the UN countered the Ukrainian allegations by stating that, “any Russian military movements in Crimea were within Moscow’s long-standing agreement with Ukraine on the deployment of military assets.”¹⁸ Independent analysis of public statements by local citizens and photographs (See Image 1) prove that Russian soldiers were in fact taking over important military and civilian infrastructure to cease control of parts of Ukraine.

Figure 1. Russian paramilitary forces take over Crimea airport.



Source: Elizabeth Arrott, *Unidentified gunmen on patrol at Simferopol Airport in Ukraine’s Crimea peninsula*, February 28, 2014, photograph, Voice of America, accessed November 8, 2017, <https://www.voanews.com/a/us-britain-no-zero-sum-game-for-ukraine/1859367.html>.

¹⁶ Loiko and Williams, “Crimean airports closed.”

¹⁷ Booth, “Armed men take control.”

¹⁸ BBC.com, “Ukraine accuses Russia of deploying troops in Crimea,” *BBC*, February 28, 2014, accessed November 8, 2017, www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-26392958.

On 28 February, the Crimean parliament appointed Russian Unity Party leader Sergei Aksenov as Crimean Prime Minister.¹⁹ Aksenov immediately pledged allegiance to the ousted Ukrainian leader Yankovych and claimed that Yankovych was Ukraine's rightful leader. On 16 March, Crimea held a referendum on joining the Russian Federation.²⁰ 95.7% of Crimeans voted in favor of the proposal.

Event 1: Russia Moves Troops Over the Border and into Ukraine

Event Synopsis

In the Spring of 2014, Russian forces and pro-Russian separatists began to take over key Ukrainian military bases and cities in Eastern Ukraine amid the public outcry against Russian actions and attempts by the international community to end the crisis.²¹ In late March, the interim Ukraine government announced the withdrawal of its forces from Eastern Ukraine after weeks of Russian harassment.²² By using stun grenades and automatic weapons, Russian forces seized a naval base near the eastern Crimean port of Feodosia.²³ The Russian raid resulted in the wounding of two Ukrainian service members and as many as 80 detained. Just a couple of days earlier, Russian troops had also fired shots and used armored vehicles to breach the gates of the

¹⁹ Sputnik International, "Crimean Parliament Forms New Cabinet," *Sputnik International*, February 28, 2014, accessed November 8, 2017, <https://sputniknews.com/world/20140228187975982-Crimean-Parliament-Forms-New-Cabinet/>.

²⁰ Russia Today, "95.7% of Crimeans in referendum voted to join Russia – preliminary results," *Russia Today*, March 17, 2014, accessed November 8, 2017, <https://www.rt.com/news/crimea-vote-join-russia-210/>.

²¹ "The Ukraine Crisis Timeline," *Center for Strategic and International Studies*, last modified February 8, 2017, accessed November 8, 2017, <http://ukraine.csis.org/>.

²² Voice of America, "Ukraine Evacuates Service Members in Crimea," *Voice of America*, March 24, 2014, accessed January 23, 2018, <https://www.voanews.com/a/ukraine-evacuates-service-members-in-crimea/1877996.html>.

²³ Marie-Louise Gumuchian and Victoria Butenko, "Ukraine orders Crimea troop withdrawal as Russia seizes naval base," *CNN*, March 25, 2014, accessed March 31, 2018, <https://www.cnn.com/2014/03/24/world/europe/ukraine-crisis/index.html>.

Ukrainian air base at Belbek with no resistance.²⁴ Russians had also taken control of the Novofedorovka naval base.²⁵

In mid-April, Pro-Russian forces continued to take over additional security sites in Eastern Ukraine to include a police station in the city of Sloviansk that held automatic rifles, pistols, and ammunition.²⁶ Similar to the tactics and procedures of previous attacks that initiated Ukraine crisis, the attackers wore camouflage uniforms without insignia, they wore balaclavas to conceal their identities, and claimed that they were the people's militia.²⁷ The aggressive actions by pro-Russian forces would not go unnoticed in Kiev, as the Ukraine military would soon respond by reclaiming some of its territory.

On 15 April, the Ukrainian military signaled a new campaign to counter pro-Russian forces and their efforts to take more territory by securing an airfield in Kramatorsk that protestors threatened to overrun.²⁸ According to eyewitness accounts, the Ukrainian military also sent troops to the city of Slovyansk as part of "counterterrorism operations" against pro-Russian forces in the area.²⁹ Ukrainian Interior Minister Stanislav Rechinsky stated that the Ukrainian

²⁴ Simon Shuster, "The Standoff at Belbek: Inside the First Clash of the Second Crimean War," *Time*, March 5, 2014, accessed March 31, 2018, <http://time.com/12563/belbek-crimea-ukraine-russia/>.

²⁵ Carol Morello and Will Englund, "Russian forces storm one of the last Ukrainian military outposts in Crimea," *Washington Post*, March 23, 2014, accessed March 31, 2018, https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/monitors-set-to-deploy-to-ukraine-to-try-to-contain-crisis/2014/03/22/742e4898-b1a4-11e3-a49e-76adc9210f19_story.html?utm_term=.b63ed0eaa6ef.

²⁶ BBC.com, "Ukraine crisis: Another police building seized in east," *BBC*, April 13, 2014, accessed January 23, 2018, <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-27005783>.

²⁷ Michael Kelley, "These Masked, Pro-Russian Gunman Are 'Playing Out The Crimean Scenario' In Eastern Ukraine," *Business Insider*, April 7, 2014, accessed March 31, 2018, <http://www.businessinsider.com/armed-masked-protesters-appear-in-east-ukraine-2014-4>.

²⁸ Anthony Faiola, "Ukrainian troops secure airfield as operations against pro-Russian militants begin," *Washington Post*, April 15, 2014, accessed January 29, 2018, https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/ukraine-says-it-is-launching-counter-offensive-russias-pm-says-nation-on-brink-of-civil-war/2014/04/15/b8ac670e-c47b-11e3-b195-dd0c1174052c_story.html?utm_term=.e24d2d7fda37.

²⁹ *Ibid.*

military had stopped short of entering the city, because “the government remained leery of a full-on confrontation with pro-Russian forces, some of whom are heavily armed with weapons similar or identical to those used by the Russian military.”³⁰

Just a day later in the city of Kramatorsk, pro-Russian protestors seized Ukrainian military vehicles to include armored personnel carriers, as Ukrainian Army personnel refused to fire on what they perceived as their own people.³¹ Meanwhile, Ukraine’s Security Service published intercepted conversations between Russian forces and pro-Russian militants in eastern Ukraine that indicate Russians were ordered to “shoot to kill” any Ukrainian troops that do not surrender.³²

Within a matter of days, the United States’ Secretary of State, the Ukrainian foreign minister, the European Union’s foreign policy chief, and the Russian foreign minister met in Geneva, Switzerland and agreed on new measures to deescalate the situation.³³ The agreement required that all sides, to include the pro-Russian separatists and their backers, to stop all acts of violence in Ukraine. The agreement also stipulated the disarmament of all illegal groups, and the

³⁰ Faiola, “Ukrainian troops secure airfield.”

³¹ BBC.com, “Ukraine crisis: Military vehicles 'seized' in Kramatorsk,” *BBC*, April 16, 2014, accessed January 29, 2018, www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-27045534; Andrew Kramer, “Ukraine Push Against Rebels Grinds to Halt,” *New York Times*, April 16, 2014, accessed March 31, 2018, <https://www.nytimes.com/2014/04/17/world/europe/ukraine-crisis.html>.

³² Kramer, “Ukraine Push Against Rebels Grinds to Halt.”

³³ Karen DeYoung and Anne Gearan, “Diplomats reach deal on defusing Ukraine crisis,” *Washington Post*, April 17, 2014, accessed January 30, 2018, https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/europe/ukraine-prepared-to-offer-autonomy-to-eastern-regions-if-russia-pulls-back-troops/2014/04/17/53c64bc0-c5f7-11e3-bf7a-be01a9b69cf1_story.html?utm_term=.02106dba46b7.

Washington Post, “Joint Geneva Statement on Ukraine from April 17: The full text,” *Washington Post*, April 17, 2014, accessed January 30, 2018, https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/joint-geneva-statement-on-ukraine-from-april-17-the-full-text/2014/04/17/89bd0ac2-c654-11e3-9f37-7ce307c56815_story.html?utm_term=.2e549ea40385.

return of all illegally seized properties to their rightful owners. Finally, all protestors would receive amnesty, unless they committed capital crimes.

On 19 April, the Ukrainian government announced in conjunction with the agreement that they would conduct a cease fire during the Easter holiday, but would resume military operations if pro-Russian forces did not withdraw their forces.³⁴ Amid the agreement and threats of further retaliation, the pro-Russian separatists retained control of government offices in at least 10 cities in eastern Ukraine. The cease-fire would not last as the Ukrainian president would call for the resumption of counterterrorism operations in the east on 22 April when evidence surfaced that a local politician was tortured to death by pro-Russian forces.³⁵

Russia's Use of Social Media in Ukraine As Fighting Erupts

In March and April 2014, pro-Russian individuals, bots, and trolls took to Twitter and other social media platforms to counter the narrative that the Russians were responsible for the violence in Ukraine. It is difficult to expound upon every claim and narrative created during this period, because of the sheer number of pro-Russian individuals, bots and trolls that posted to social media. However, this monograph has identified multiple methods and narratives with varying degrees of effectiveness that the pro-Russian individuals, bots, and trolls used to influence public opinion.

³⁴ Sam Frizell, "Ukraine Calls 'Easter Truce' in East," *Time*, April 19, 2014. accessed January 30, 2018, <http://time.com/69078/ukraine-easter-truce-donetsk-kiev/>.

³⁵ Alastair Macdonald and Darya Korsunskaya, "Ukraine president calls for new anti-rebel offensive as crisis deal falters," *Reuters*, April 22, 2014, accessed January 30, 2018, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-ukraine-crisis/ukraine-president-calls-for-new-anti-rebel-offensive-as-crisis-deal-falters-idUSBREA3L11A20140422>; Leezel Tanglao, "Deadly Gunfight in Eastern Ukraine Shatters Easter Truce," *Vice News*, April 20, 2014, accessed March 31, 2018, <https://news.vice.com/article/deadly-gunfight-in-eastern-ukraine-shatters-easter-truce>.

One of the methods the Russians used during this period was to create posts using accounts that appeared like a normal person's social media account.³⁶ The accounts had a profile photo, provided limited personal details about the poster, and posts about Ukraine were often intermixed with posts about other topics. The user would then post inflammatory remarks and images that were then reposted by other Russian bots or trolls. From the Russian perspective, the best-case scenario would be for other unaffiliated or unsuspecting social media also repost it and make the post go viral. In some cases, these social media users left comments on the posts or actively engaged in dialogue with other users about the post.

An example of a pro-Russian individual or bot is the Twitter user DJ Rubiconski (@Rubiconski). DJ Rubiconski, whose last publicly available post was from 24 July 2014, claimed to be from California.³⁷ At the time of this monograph's publication, DJ Rubiconski posted 172,000 tweets, garnered over 80,000 likes, and has 4,483 followers. She regularly posts anti-American and pro-Russian statements – sometimes more than 20 in a day – and interacts with other users by retweeting and commenting on their posts. In addition to her pro-Russian statements, she also posts photos of adopted rescue animals and their stories, which make DJ Rubiconski appear to be a normal Twitter user.

A second method that the Russians used to spread pro-Russian narratives is the use of social media accounts that claim to be legitimate news sources.³⁸ These accounts have professional looking logos – often with an image of the world and their name. They fail to have

³⁶ Leo Benedictus, "Invasion of the troll armies: from Russian Trump supporters to Turkish state stooges," *Guardian*, November 6, 2016, accessed March 31, 2018, <https://www.theguardian.com/media/2016/nov/06/troll-armies-social-media-trump-russian>.

³⁷ DJ Rubiconski, Twitter profile, July 24, 2014 (4:29 a.m.), accessed February 28, 2018, <https://twitter.com/rubiconski?lang=en>.

³⁸ SCG News, Twitter profile, accessed March 31, 2018, <https://twitter.com/SCGnews?lang=en>; BlacklistedNews, Twitter profile, accessed February 28, 2018, <https://twitter.com/BlacklistedNews>.

the check mark next to their name that denotes that Twitter has verified the account. Of course, these social media accounts create posts that include links to their corresponding websites that hosts articles that contain pro-Russian narratives. In some cases, the websites merely copy and paste stories from Russia Today or Sputnik News (formerly known as the Voice of Russia) that are widely known to the international media as Russian government-controlled and purveyors of Russian propaganda.³⁹ In turn, pro-Russian individuals, bots, and trolls also retweet the posts from the illegitimate news accounts or directly link to their websites. Again, unsuspecting social media users may mistakenly believe that these links come from legitimate news sources and believe the pro-Russian narrative.

An example of this second method is the retweeting of articles by Blacklisted News (@BlacklistedNews) – a known conspiracy website. As with other illegitimate news websites on Twitter, Blacklisted News also utilizes a professionally created logo that includes a globe as well as routinely posts links of articles that redirect you to its website.⁴⁰ Blacklisted News is currently active and has tweeted over 61,000 times. It has over 58,000 followers, and has 1,245 likes at the time of this monograph’s publication. Showing indications that pro-Russian individuals or trolls promulgated similar stories, Blacklisted News tweeted a link to an article on 8 March 2014 that indicated Ukraine was mobilizing.⁴¹ This story was subsequently retweeted and mocked by the aforementioned DJ Rubiconski.

Pro-Russian individuals, bots, and trolls promulgated multiple, overarching narratives on social media to mislead the public about Russia’s involvement in Ukraine. First, the Russians

³⁹ David Morris, “Inside RT, Russia's Kremlin-Controlled Propaganda Network,” *Fortune*, September 17, 2017, accessed March 12, 2018, <http://fortune.com/2017/09/17/russia-network-rt-propaganda/>.

⁴⁰ BlacklistedNews, Twitter profile.

⁴¹ DJ Rubiconski, Twitter post, March 8, 2014 (2:06 p.m.), accessed February 28, 2018, <https://twitter.com/Rubiconski/status/442421061376675840>.

made the claim that it was not in their best interest to invade Ukraine or involve themselves in the conflict.⁴² By using social media, the Russians crafted a narrative that would likely appeal to conspiracy theorists by stating that Russian President Vladimir Putin’s viewer ratings would diminish if Moscow invaded Ukraine. As Twitter user RT Foreign Agent (@Adam1Baum) stated in one tweet, “Putin doesn’t want to invade #Ukraine neither does Popular Media want him too, they’re Viewer ratings would suffer.” The user also included a graphic that depicted President Obama alongside armed men with the slogan, “New World Order Is the Police State.” This particular tweet does not appear to have gained much traction. However, it did solicit a comment from one pro-Ukrainian user that stated, “He doesn’t? Oh you are right – he’s content stirring hatred and destabilizing #Ukraine. Yeah, much better... Putin’s World Order.”⁴³ It is also unclear as to how many of @Adam1Baum’s 1,984 followers viewed the original message.

Second, the Russians claimed that the Ukrainians themselves were revolting against a corrupt government in Kiev, and that Ukrainian soldiers were deserting in the process.⁴⁴ Moscow also used social media to promote a separate, but related narrative that the Ukrainian people would welcome the Russians if they intervened, because historically and ethnically they are all Russian. By promoting these narratives, the Russians targeted the international news media and their followers on social media to combat the claims that Moscow was unjustly provoking violence and instability in Crimea. As Twitter user Rauhansotilas (@rauhansotilas) tweeted, “#Kyiv is losing control of its army. Soldiers defect to #EastUkraine’s side to fight against #fascist #junta. #Ukraine #freedom #fascism.” Twitter user @ConsZyko went so far as to retweet

⁴² Adam1Baum, Twitter post, April 29, 2014 (4:54 p.m.), accessed February 28, 2018, <https://twitter.com/Adam1Baum/status/461292518047371264>.

⁴³ BohdanPechenyak, Twitter post, April 29, 2014 (5:19 p.m.), accessed February 28, 2018, <https://twitter.com/BohdanPechenyak/status/461298659360243712>.

⁴⁴ Rauhansotilas, Twitter post, April 16, 2014 (4:51 a.m.), accessed February 28, 2018, <https://twitter.com/rauhansotilas/status/456399398629412864>.

a post by CNN War Correspondent Christiane Amanpour that cited a poll that claimed 85% of Russian speaking Ukrainians say they feel no pressure or threat because of their language.⁴⁵ @ConsZyko then went to claim that all Ukrainians were Russian speaking and that Amanpour should ask the ethnically Russian Ukrainians if they felt threatened. It appears that both tweets did not garner much traction on Twitter. However, it is difficult to discern how many of Amanpour's 2.8 million followers viewed her original tweet and @ConsZyko's reply. Amanpour did not respond to @ConsZyko's claims publicly.

Third, the Russians claimed that the United States, the European Union, or NATO was responsible for supporting the overthrow of the Ukrainian government or somehow escalating the conflict. Like the first narrative, the Russian bots and trolls targeted those people who are likely to believe conspiracy theories and fake news websites. Twitter user and potential Russian troll DJ Rubiconski stated on 14 March 2014 that, "Bottom line is the US is supporting a coup of the democratically elected govt of #Ukraine. Forget Russia, OUR govt is completely lawless!"⁴⁶ Pro-Russian twitter user and potential Russian troll Mary Herman (@MaryHerman2) also retweeted an unofficial Ukraine news source and stated that the US, NATO, and the UN should stay out of Ukraine, called them "vultures" and that Ukraine was already Russian.⁴⁷ In this instance, however, the Russians not only used bots and trolls, but also used a fake news website. On 29 April 2014, the Blacklisted News Twitter account posted an article originally published by Russia Today titled, "Putin: Washington behind Ukraine events all along, though flying low."⁴⁸

⁴⁵ ConsZyko, Twitter post, April 16, 2014 (4:12 a.m.), accessed February 28, 2018, <https://twitter.com/ConsZyko/status/457114461808390144>.

⁴⁶ DJ Rubiconski, Twitter post, March 14, 2014 (4:58 p.m.), accessed February 28, 2018, <https://twitter.com/Rubiconski/status/444623638013042688>.

⁴⁷ Mary Herman, Twitter post, April 29, 2014 (10:52 a.m.), accessed February 28, 2018, <https://twitter.com/MaryHerman2/status/461201449234354176>.

⁴⁸ BlacklistedNews, Twitter post, April 29, 2014 (4:58 p.m.), accessed February 28, 2018, <https://twitter.com/BlacklistedNews/status/461293364105584640>.

Blacklisted News did not publish the article in its entirety, as it left out many key points like how sanctions would negatively impact US companies.⁴⁹

Fourth, and finally, the Russians bots and trolls spun the narrative that American corporations and Jewish banks are overthrowing Ukraine's government to take advantage of its economy.⁵⁰ This was likely an attempt to target American and European Jews by playing up historical fears, conspiracy theories, and antisemitism. In one instance, Twitter user and probable Russian troll DJ Rubiconski mocked the international community and reinforced Putin's image when she posted, "How dare Putin stand in the way of US corporations and the jew-wish Banking Cartel raping and pillaging of #Ukraine! He's anti-semetic!! :D".⁵¹ This narrative has not gained much traction online, while DJ Rubiconski's tweet received no likes and no retweets.

International Community Acknowledges Russian Role in Ukraine Crisis

By the fall of 2014, influential Russian citizens and independent activist groups began to acknowledge Russian military's role in Eastern Ukraine and the atrocities that both sides have committed in the fight over Crimea.⁵² Independent watchdog group Amnesty International accused the Russian government of interfering in Ukraine, as well as the Ukrainian militia and separatist forces of committing war crimes.⁵³ According to the Amnesty International report,

⁴⁹ Russia Today, "Putin: Washington behind Ukraine events all along, though flying low," *Russia Today*, April 29, 2014, accessed March 9, 2018, <https://www.rt.com/news/155732-putin-usa-behind-ukraine-crisis/>.

⁵⁰ DJ Rubiconski, Twitter post, March 13, 2014 (5:26 p.m.), accessed February 28, 2018, <https://twitter.com/Rubiconski/status/444268349602557952>.

⁵¹ Ibid.

⁵² Shaun Walker, "Ukrainian president: Russian troops have crossed border," *Guardian*, August 28, 2014, accessed January 22, 2018, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2014/aug/28/ukraine-accuses-russia-invading-south-east-help-rebels>.

⁵³ "Ukraine: Mounting evidence of war crimes and Russian involvement," *Amnesty International*, September 7, 2014, accessed January 30, 2018, <https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/news/2014/09/ukraine-mounting-evidence-war-crimes-and-russian-involvement/>.

Russia is fueling the conflict directly and indirectly by supporting Pro-Russian separatists in Eastern Ukraine that were implicated in “incidents of indiscriminate shelling, abductions, torture, and killings.”⁵⁴ Furthermore, Amnesty International argued that overhead satellite imagery depicting new artillery positions and military equipment, claims of captured Russian troops inside the Ukrainian border, and numerous eyewitness accounts of Russian troops crossing the border into the Ukraine with military equipment proves that there is now an open international conflict between the two countries.

Event 2: Malaysia Flight 17 Crash Over Ukraine

Event Synopsis

On 17 July 2014, the scheduled Malaysian Airlines Flight 17 from Amsterdam to Kuala Lumpur exploded in midair while flying over Ukraine, resulting in the deaths of all 298 passengers onboard.⁵⁵ Both sides blamed each other for the incident. According to the pro-Russian separatists guarding the crash site throughout the night, the plane crash came as a complete shock to them. Pro-Russian separatist and guard at the crash site Volodya Bogdanov accused the Ukrainians of shooting down the aircraft and targeting the civilians onboard.⁵⁶ On the other hand, Chief of Ukraine’s counterintelligence branch Vitaly Naida claimed to possess “compelling evidence” that separatists moved a Russian-made SA-11 Buk radar-guided missile

⁵⁴ Amnesty International, “Ukraine war crimes.”

⁵⁵ Somini Sengupta and Andrew Kramer, “Dutch Inquiry Links Russia to 298 Deaths in Explosion of Jetliner Over Ukraine,” *New York Times*, September 28, 2016, accessed January 18, 2018, <https://www.nytimes.com/2016/09/29/world/asia/malaysia-air-flight-mh17-russia-ukraine-missile.html>.

⁵⁶ John Wendle, “At Crash Scene of Malaysia Airlines Flight 17, Rebels Blame Ukraine,” *National Geographic*, July 22, 2014, accessed January 18, 2018, <https://news.nationalgeographic.com/news/2014/07/140721-ukraine-crash-malaysia-flight-rebels-russia-eyewitness/>.

launcher across the Russian border into Ukraine and shot down the aircraft.⁵⁷ The missile system was then subsequently returned to Russia.⁵⁸

Around the same time, former Russian intelligence officer and military commander of the pro-Russian rebels Igor Gorkin claimed responsibility for an attack against a Ukrainian military transport aircraft on his Russian social media page.⁵⁹ Gorkin immediately removed the post once the news that a civilian airliner had crashed became widespread, and gave rise to ideas of a coverup. For its part, the Russian Foreign Ministry refrained from publicly blaming Ukraine for the shootdown, but made calls for both sides to enable access to the crash site for an international investigation to take place.⁶⁰

Russia's Use of Social Media in Response to Malaysian Airlines Flight 17

In the days and weeks after the Malaysian Airlines Flight 17 crash, the Russians posted on social media using the same methods that they used during the initial invasion of Ukraine. These methods included using bots and trolls simulating average users to post and repost false statements or claims, as well as posting links of articles hosted on fake news websites. Moscow also used similar narratives as before to hide any involvement that the Russians may have had in the crash.

First, the Russians claimed that the Ukrainians were responsible for the crash, because they either diverted the plane's original flight plan or forced it to fly lower than normal operating procedures allowed. The Russians targeted the Ukrainians and the United States by blaming them

⁵⁷ Wendle, "At Crash Scene."

⁵⁸ Sengupta and Kramer, "Dutch Inquiry."

⁵⁹ Ibid.

⁶⁰ David Herszenhorn and Sabrina Tavernise, "Ukraine Says It Can Prove Russia Supplied Arms System That Felled Jet," *New York Times*, July 19, 2014, accessed January 18, 2018, <https://www.nytimes.com/2014/07/20/world/europe/malaysia-airlines-plane-ukraine.html>.

for the ultimate result. The Russian troll DJ Rubiconski tweeted a link to a YouTube video and stated, “Bombshell! Proof that Malaysia Flight #MH17 Was Diverted Over #Ukraine War Zone” just two days after the incident.⁶¹ The Novorossiia News Agency (@NovarossiiaNA), an unverified Twitter account claiming to be a news source, followed suit and posted a Reuters article and stated that, “#M17 was forced by Ukraine to fly at 33,000ft, below flight plan...US #falseflag.”⁶² Twitter users liked and retweeted the posts multiple times, while others used similar headlines separately to spread the same narratives.

Second, the Russians claimed that the Ukrainians were responsible for shooting down the Malaysian airliner and that Kiev was framing Moscow. In doing so, the Russians not only targeted the Ukrainians, but they also targeted *the Wall Street Journal*. The Twitter account GO! Malaysia (@GoMalaysiaNews), another unverified news outlet, posted a link to a now unavailable YouTube video and stated that “Ukraine [was] Caught Trying to ‘Frame Russia’ for Shooting Down Malaysia Flight MH17!”⁶³ Meanwhile, probable New York-based Russian troll Tatiana Pahlen (@tatianyc.oeuvre) posted a link to *the Wall Street Journal* and stated that, “Missile shrapnel destroyed Malaysian Airlines Flight 17, Ukraine says...M-17 was shot by W.Ukr plane! Stop speculations!”⁶⁴ Although these posts were not retweeted, other social media users posted similar narratives claiming that the Ukrainians were responsible.

⁶¹ DJ Rubiconski, Twitter post, July 19, 2014 (1:59 p.m.), accessed March 12, 2018, <https://twitter.com/Rubiconski/status/490601770356199424>.

⁶² NovorossiiaNA, Twitter post, July 19, 2014 (3:10 p.m.), accessed March 12, 2018, <https://twitter.com/NovorossiiaNA/status/490619819801444352>.

⁶³ Go! Malaysia, Twitter post, July 28, 2014 (3:50 a.m.), accessed March 12, 2018, <https://twitter.com/GOMalaysiaNews/status/493710168836669444>.

⁶⁴ Tatiana Pahlen, Twitter post, July 29, 2014 (4:51 p.m.), accessed March 12, 2018, <https://twitter.com/tatianycoevre/status/494268921650753536>.

Third, the Russians also posted a series of conspiracy theories that was meant to distract the general public. The Russian Embassy in India Twitter account (@RusEmbIndia) tweeted “With the shoot-down of Malaysia Airlines Flight 17 over Ukraine turning a local civil war into a U.S....”⁶⁵ Although it is unclear what the author of the post was meaning to convey, it appears that the Russians wanted to blame the US for interjecting into what they view is a localized, civil war. The tweet also included a link to the Consortium News website, a self-described investigative news magazine intended to prevent group think in the mainstream media, that included a memo from several former intelligence officers arguing that the Obama administration should release the intelligence and other evidence related to the crash.⁶⁶ The former intelligence officers also argued that the information should be released to prevent the Russians from being blamed for another airliner shutdown that was an honest mistake.

Finally, Russian troll Tatiana Pahlen also joined in the attempt to mislead the public with a conspiracy theory when she posted the tweet, “Neocon-NWO-WW3 MH17 Shot DOWN over UKRAINE is MISSING MALAYSIAN Flight 370...This is out of control.”⁶⁷ Here, Pahlen refers to neoconservatives, the new world order, and world war three, presumably to generate fear among the public. She also refers to Malaysian Flight 370, a separate flight that disappeared over the Indian Ocean on 8 March 2014.⁶⁸ Neither conspiracy theory gained traction on social media.

⁶⁵ Russia in India, Twitter post, July 30, 2014 (4:37 a.m.), accessed March 12, 2018, <https://twitter.com/RusEmbIndia/status/494446785025560577>.

⁶⁶ VIPS Steering Group, “Obama Should Release Ukraine Evidence,” *Consortium News*, July 29, 2014, accessed March 12, 2018, <https://consortiumnews.com/2014/07/29/obama-should-release-ukraine-evidence/>.

⁶⁷ Tatiana Pahlen, Twitter post, July 28, 2014 (1:54 p.m.), accessed March 12, 2018, <https://twitter.com/tatianycoeuvre/status/493862087831994369>.

⁶⁸ Faith Karimi, “MH370: Here's what's been found from jetliner 3 years after it disappeared,” *CNN*, March 9, 2017, accessed March 15, 2018, <https://www.cnn.com/2017/03/08/asia/mh370-debris-found/index.html>.

Dutch Report Outlines Cover-up, Falls Short of Implicating Russia

Despite Russia's attempts at spreading misinformation and sowing confusion within the international community to deflect attention away from its involvement in Ukraine, independent Dutch-led investigators released a report in September 2016 that outlined Russia's role in deploying the SA-11 missile system and their ongoing coverup.⁶⁹ The Dutch report argued that phone intercepts of pro-Russian separatists from the night before the airliner crashed prove that they had not only requested the Buk missile system, but that they would receive it that night.⁷⁰ Investigators also used intercepted phone calls, social media posts, and statements from eyewitnesses to piece together the route in which the vehicle transporting the SA-11 had travelled from Russia to Donetsk. Finally, the investigators located the exact spot in a farmer's field that the rebels launched the SA-11.⁷¹ The report falls short by not specifically naming the individuals responsible or stating that Russian soldiers were directly involved. However, the report does conclude that it is unlikely that pro-Russian separatists can deploy the missile system without the assistance of the Russian military or someone closely connected to the Russian military.

Even with the thorough investigation by the Dutch-led investigators, there is little that the international community can do to bring the culprits of the Malaysian Airlines Flight 17 crash to justice, because Russia continues to deny its involvement and the Russian Constitution prohibits the extradition of Russians abroad to stand trial.⁷² In a statement preempting the report, Putin's spokesperson Dmitri Peskov stated that a large amount of speculation surrounded the incident, and those investigating it had unprofessional and unqualified information. Instead, Peskov suggested that the radar images released by the Russian military prove that if there was a missile

⁶⁹ Sengupta and Kramer, "Dutch Inquiry."

⁷⁰ Ibid.

⁷¹ Ibid.

⁷² Ibid.

that shot down the airliner, then the missile was not fired within the territory held by the pro-Russian rebels or from Russia.⁷³ Even if the Russians allowed for one of their citizens to be tried in court, it is unclear as to which court would have authority. To date, there have been no arrests in relation to the Malaysian Airlines Flight 17 crash.

Synthesis and Analysis

Russia's employment of social media in Ukraine is a model for how Russia would like to use nonmilitary means, in conjunction with military action, to achieve its political objectives in the event of a conflict. Judging from the case studies and the publication of the Gerasimov Doctrine, Russia believes that social media is one tool that allows Russia to control or contest the narrative space. By controlling or contesting the narrative, Moscow can sow doubt and confusion among the local population and the international community. This also allows Russia to conduct military operations with impunity, because it can redirect the public's attention away from Russian efforts, prevents anti-Russian coalitions from forming, and allows Moscow the freedom to message one thing publicly and do another privately.

The Gerasimov Doctrine, named after the Russian Chief of the General Staff General Valery Gerasimov, highlights Russia's attempt to adapt to perceived changing rules of war that emphasizes the role of nonmilitary means in achieving political and strategic goals.⁷⁴ Gerasimov argues that "frontal engagements of large formations of forces at the strategic and operational level are gradually becoming a thing of the past. Long distance, contactless actions against the enemy are becoming the main means of achieving combat and operational goals."⁷⁵ Instead, the

⁷³ Sengupta and Kramer, "Dutch Inquiry."

⁷⁴ Valery Gerasimov, "The Value of science Is in the Foresight: New Challenges Demand Rethinking the Forms and Methods of Carrying Out Combat Operations," *Military Review* (January/February 2016): 23-29, Translated by Robert Coalson, accessed March 12, 2018, https://usacac.army.mil/CAC2/MilitaryReview/Archives/English/MilitaryReview_20160228_art008.pdf.

⁷⁵ *Ibid.*, 24.

use of asymmetrical forces, to include special operations forces and internal opposition, are becoming more widespread to nullify the enemy's advantages.⁷⁶ Gerasimov argues further that the "information space opens wide asymmetrical possibilities for reducing the fighting potential of the enemy" and can influence state structures and the population.⁷⁷

It appears that the Russians used at least some form of the Gerasimov Doctrine in the Ukraine conflict, as they used special operations forces, opposition groups, and spread disinformation via social media and other means simultaneously. As noted previously, the Russians spun multiple narratives to undermine the legitimacy of the Ukrainian government and the international community. Ambassador of NATO's Cybersecurity Center and Senior Fellow at the Atlantic Council, Kenneth Geers stated that, "Ukraine has been an evolutionary step forward, with examples of digital conflict seen across the spectrum, in every domain, from politics to diplomacy, in military operations, business, critical infrastructure, and social media."⁷⁸ Ukrainian citizens and soldiers on the frontlines also felt these attempts. Ukrainian journalist and army combat veteran Viktor Kovalenko stated that he saw "firsthand how Russians use fake news against the Ukrainian troops on the front line."⁷⁹ Kovalenko went on to say that the Russians wanted to defeat the Ukrainians' morale just as effectively as artillery and tanks would.

Furthermore, Russia was able to take advantage of the chaos and confusion in the Ukraine conflict to give their forces the time and space to consolidate their foothold in Crimea. This is most evident with the shutdown of the Malaysian Airlines Flight 17. In the days after the crash, there was some general confusion amongst those on the ground as to who was responsible

⁷⁶ Gerasimov, 25.

⁷⁷ Ibid., 27.

⁷⁸ Nolan Peterson, "In Ukraine, Russia Weaponizes Fake News to Fight a Real War," *Daily Signal*, March 30, 2017, accessed March 12, 2018, <http://dailysignal.com/2017/03/30/in-ukraine-russia-weaponizes-fake-news-to-fight-a-real-war/>.

⁷⁹ Ibid.

for the crash. Neither side would claim the attack. The pro-Russian separatists just removed the tweet claiming that they had just shot down a military aircraft. However, the *National Geographic* published an article titled, “At Crash Scene of Malaysia Airlines Flight 17, Rebels Blame Ukraine,” in which the author outlines how the rebels were surprised by the incident and felt genuine sorrow, leads the reader to believe that the rebels were innocent. The combination of legitimate news sources like the *National Geographic* and social media proposing multiple reasons for the downing of the airliner gave Moscow the room to blame Ukraine for the incident, while also spinning the narrative that they would be a willing partner to assist authorities in the investigation. As noted previously, Moscow continues to deny allegations of involvement, despite the findings of independent investigators.

To borrow the terms from author Peter Andreas, Russia’s front stage (public) actions have come to mirror the back stage (hidden) actions.⁸⁰ As noted previously, Russia used social media to promote false narratives that claimed the Ukraine conflict was part of a either a grassroots effort to replace an illegitimate government in Kiev, or a larger conspiracy of the United States, the European Union, or NATO. For his part, Putin seems to have taken these false narratives and use them to justify his actions in a March 2014 speech to the Kremlin.⁸¹ According to Putin, the post-revolution government in Ukraine had “resorted to terror, murder, and riots’ and the Crimeans turned to Russia for help.⁸² Using the propaganda evident in many of the social media posts, Putin also claimed that the coup was executed by “nationalists, neo-Nazis, Russophobes, and anti-Semites,: and that it would have been a betrayal not to act on behalf of those in distress.⁸³

⁸⁰ Peter Andreas, *Blue Helmets and Black Markets: The Business of Survival in the Siege of Sarajevo* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2008), 8-10.

⁸¹ Peterson, “In Ukraine, Russia Weaponizes Fake News.”

⁸² Ibid.

⁸³ Ibid.

Finally, it appears that Putin believes the Ukraine conflict was a victory for the Russian Federation and continues to use it as a unifying issue to garner public support. Putin chose to visit Crimea on the last day of campaigning in the 2018 Russian presidential election, which also correlates with the fourth anniversary of the referendum that allowed for the *de facto* annexation of Crimea.⁸⁴ Also in the leadup to the election, Putin stated in an interview with a Russian journalist that there will never be circumstances or conditions that can be met that would allow for Crimea to be returned to Ukraine. All of this is despite the fact that the referendum was deemed illegitimate by over 100 countries.⁸⁵

Implications and Opportunities

The United States and its allies have been unsuccessful at countering the narratives promulgated by Russia and other bad actors in cyberspace. Former US president Barack Obama stated in an interview in January 2017 that he “underestimated the degree to which, in this new information age, it is possible for misinformation, for cyberhacking... to have an impact on our open societies, our open systems, to insinuate themselves into our democratic practices in ways that [he thinks] are accelerating.”⁸⁶ President Obama went on to say that he ordered an investigation into allegations of Russian hacking into Democratic Party e-mails during the 2016 presidential elections “to make sure that we understand this is something that Putin has been doing for quite some time in Europe, initially in the former satellite states where there are a lot of

⁸⁴ Radio Free Europe / Radio Liberty, “Putin To Visit Crimea At End Of Election Campaign,” *Radio Free Europe / Radio Liberty*, March 13, 2018, accessed March 13, 2018, <https://www.rferl.org/a/putin-to-visit-crimea-election-campaign/29094123.html>.

⁸⁵ Ibid.

⁸⁶ David Nakamura, “Obama: I didn’t underestimate the threats from Vladimir Putin,” *Washington Post*, January 1, 2017, accessed October 30, 2017, https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/powerpost/wp/2017/01/08/obama-i-didnt-underestimate-the-threats-from-vladimir-putin/?utm_term=.dab33651c647.

Russian speakers, but increasingly in Western democracies.” Russia’s social media usage has far reaching and profound implications for the United States outside of the context of Ukraine.

Implications

Russia’s use of social media in conjunction with military power provides our potential adversaries with a low-cost model to achieve the strategic and operational goals of gaining territorial control, while maintaining at least some credibility or legitimacy with a portion of the international community. In international relations terms, Russia’s strategy involves the use of “smart power.” Joseph S. Nye defines smart power as the ability to combine the “hard power” of military force such as that in Ukraine with the “soft power” of messaging through a variety of tools to include social media.”⁸⁷ Although Russia’s use of smart power is difficult to measure in its effectiveness, at the time of this monograph Russia maintains *de facto* control over Crimea and at least ten states have chosen to not back a United Nations non-binding resolution that would have supported Ukraine’s territorial integrity.⁸⁸

As Nye points out, wielding soft power is not as simple or as straightforward as it may seem.⁸⁹ Success is dependent on how the target of the messaging reacts. In the social media realm, this means individual users liking, promoting, and sharing posts that promulgate the desired narrative, and having it spread widely. Soft power may also take a long time to show results. Social media allows for a condensed time horizon as users learn from what types of messaging work or do not work in real-time, and lets users adjust accordingly. Furthermore, state actors cannot control the culture and values of a given population, and the way in which the

⁸⁷ Nye, 22-23.

⁸⁸ Casey Michel, “Will Trump Recognize Russian Annexation of Crimea?,” *The Diplomat*, January 9, 2017, accessed December 5, 2017, <https://thediplomat.com/2017/01/will-trump-recognize-russian-annexation-of-crimea/>.

⁸⁹ Nye, 83.

influence their reception of a message. More importantly for this monograph, soft power depends on the credibility of the state actor trying to wield it. According to Nye, “when governments are perceived as manipulative and information is seen as propaganda, credibility is destroyed.”⁹⁰ As Russia has proven, governments can sidestep the issue of credibility in the cyber realm if states use bots or trolls to spread disinformation or propaganda, especially if users cannot make links between the state actor and the bots or trolls. This allows state actors to use social media to create narratives and spread disinformation to unsuspecting online users, while eschewing any criticism until social media researchers, private companies, or other governments publicly acknowledge their actions. Of course, the state actor retains the ability to remove the posts with little to no cost to themselves and can still deny involvement, despite these claims.

The use of social media to spread misinformation and false narratives by state governments is not only a low-cost proposition in terms of credibility, but it is also low cost in terms of financial resources. The Information Revolution has led to technological advances in communications, computers, and software, which in turn has led to “an enormous reduction in the cost of transmitting information. For all practical purposes, the actual transmission costs have become negligible, hence the amount of information that can be transmitted worldwide is virtually infinite.”⁹¹ Because of the broad dissemination of information is both quick and inexpensive, the collection and synthesis of that information is costly to those trying to track and potentially counter it. Furthermore, actors in the cyber domain have a distinct advantage as they can be diverse, anonymous, and geographically separated – leaving nefarious actors even more difficult to catch.⁹²

⁹⁰ Nye, 83.

⁹¹ *Ibid.*, 114-115.

⁹² *Ibid.*, 125.

In terms of tactical implications, the operational security of the United States and its allies may become threatened with the proliferation of cell phones and social media use by our adversaries and innocent civilians alike. As discussed earlier in this monograph, social media posts by normal civilians and members of the press during the Russian incursion into Ukraine depicted Russian paramilitary forces at various locations in Crimea in real-time. This is important for two reasons – the potential analysis of forces in the field and the potential for manufactured narratives to spread using these images. Our adversaries may use social media posts that include images of American and allied forces to determine the types, size and disposition of our forces, the types of weapons and heavy equipment employed, and the ultimate military goals of our forces in a conflict area. Furthermore, our adversaries may use the same posts depicting American or allied forces to create misleading or outright false narratives that sway public opinion and create resistance to our political and military objectives in a conflict area. Although unrelated to Ukraine and Crimea, the Russian Ministry of Defense attempted to do just that in November 2017 when it claimed in a series of social media posts that American special forces were supporting the Islamic State in Syria.⁹³ As it turns out, citizen bloggers noted that the Russians used altered images from popular video games and an official Iraqi video from 2006, forcing the Russian Ministry of Defense to remove the images an hour after their original posting.

Opportunities

Although the United States has been woefully unprepared to combat Russian social media efforts, there are three opportunities or actions that the United States and its allies can take to counter future threats: develop relationships with technology companies that are willing to disrupt Russia's efforts; leverage social media experts in existing institutions to promote pro-

⁹³ Oliver Carroll, "Russia claims US is helping Isis - using video games as evidence," *Independent*, November 14, 2017, accessed December 30, 2017, www.independent.co.uk/news/world/europe/russia-us-isis-video-game-footage-help-islamic-state-iraq-ministry-defence-ac-130-gunship-a8054066.html.

American messaging and combat Russian messaging in real-time; and educate the American public about the dangers of social media and Russia's efforts. First, the United States and its allies can further develop close relationships with the technology companies that are intimately involved in the development and upkeep of social media platforms – to include Facebook and Twitter. These well-placed companies can develop innovative technologies and processes to detect Russian users, bots, and trolls that post nefarious messages on social media, and potentially remove them from their service before their messages gain traction online. Both Facebook and Twitter have acted against Russian-linked accounts, and deleted accounts and social media posts. Facebook has removed numerous misleading ads purchased by Russian groups during the 2016 American presidential election that potentially reached over 10 million viewers online.⁹⁴ Twitter has also identified 201 accounts associated with the St. Petersburg-based troll farm Internet Research Agency that has been responsible for spreading false information and deleted their accounts.⁹⁵ Technology companies have greater insight into which emerging social media networks and technologies that the public adopts in the future and subsequently targeted by Russia's messaging efforts. By maintaining a close dialogue with these companies, the United States and its allies will have a better understanding of which new social media networks citizens adopt and what methods Russia and other bad actors may use for messaging.

Of course, having a close relationship with private companies and organizations is not without controversy. One of the potential pitfalls of having a close relationship is the potential of infringing upon the freedom of speech and the privacy of citizens. This crucial requirement to safeguard the freedom of speech and privacy for legitimate users of social media services must be balanced with the operational need of removing bots and trolls, and countering Russian

⁹⁴ Lardieri, "Facebook removed data."

⁹⁵ Meyer, "Twitter deleted data."

messaging. Of course, the legal and bureaucratic frameworks developed to deal with countering violent extremism may offer a solution to this problem.

Second, the United States needs to combat bureaucratic lag, the time it takes for a bureaucracy to react, by leveraging the expertise of public relations and social media experts to counter the messages of Russia and other potential bad actors in real-time. Nefarious actors from around the globe use social media at any time, day, and night to promulgate their messages. Because of our adversaries' capabilities, the United States requires a nimble system that allows for real-time counter messaging. Such a system requires an operations center devoted to counter messaging that is open twenty-four hours a day, seven days a week, and staffed by experts that retain the ability to post additional content and respond to the nefarious actors without prior approval from management. Of course, such social media posts should be in keeping with overarching strategic guidance.

Fortunately, the United States has started to create organizations that have or will soon have the capability to combat Russian narratives online. The United States' Departments of State and Defense have numerous social media accounts across multiple platforms that will have the ability to not only publish stories that are favorable to America and its allies, but can also create an open dialogue with the online community and combat detractors. In August 2017, the United States elevated Cyber Command to a unified combatant command and is committed to conducting cyber and information operations.⁹⁶ US Cyber Command's buildup is slated to be completed by the end of the 2018 fiscal year and will consist of six thousand two hundred personnel and one hundred and thirty-three teams dedicated to the mission.

⁹⁶ Jim Garamone and Lisa Ferdinando, 2017, "DoD Initiates Process to Elevate U.S. Cyber Command to Unified Combatant Command," *DoD News / Defense Media Activity*, August 18, 2017, accessed November 30, 2017, <https://www.defense.gov/News/Article/Article/1283326/dod-initiates-process-to-elevate-us-cyber-command-to-unified-combatant-command/>.

Third, and finally, the international community needs to learn about the effectiveness of social media in effecting public opinion and begin to educate the public about the results. At the time of this monograph's publication, the American Congress and the international community is still wrestling with the impact that Russian interference may have had in Ukraine, the 2016 American presidential election, and the French and German federal elections. Unfortunately, Facebook and Twitter removed much of the data from the public domain that can prove Russian interference when they removed the accounts and posts created by Russian bots and trolls.⁹⁷ This data is invaluable in evaluating how effective Russia was in driving public opinion. In the future, companies like Facebook and Twitter should retain such data for evaluation by social media analysts, while simultaneously removing the posts from the public sphere. Armed with independent analysis of Russia's social media, the American public and international community will be more informed about Russian aggression in cyberspace and make more informed decisions about current events.

Need for Further Research

This monograph's research has revealed that there needs to be more research on the overall effectiveness of the Russian effort to manipulate the public through social media. As noted previously, the conflict in Ukraine was not the only instance in which Russia attempted to use social media as a covert influence tool. Russia has used social media to influence elections in numerous countries, most notably in the United States' presidential election in 2016.

The Kremlin troll farm, Internet Research Agency, posted fake news stories and advertisements on social media websites to sow disunity and discord amongst Americans during the 2016 presidential election, which favored Republican candidate and now President, Donald J. Trump.⁹⁸ According to statements to Congress, Twitter discovered more than 2,700 Internet

⁹⁷ Lardieri, "Facebook removed data;" Meyer, "Twitter deleted data."

Research Agency-linked accounts that posted 131,000 tweets between September 2016 and November 2016.⁹⁹ Twitter also identified more than 36,000 automated accounts that posted 1.4 million election-related tweets that received 288 million views during the same period. Facebook also noted that 29 million people viewed 80,000 pieces of “divisive content” between January 2015 and August 2017 created by the Internet Research Agency. Tens of millions of people liked and shared these posts.

Many policy experts acknowledge that the Russian actions only highlighted some of Secretary of State Hillary Clinton’s challenges as a presidential candidate. According to the US Department of Justice, the Russians funded social media posts that discouraged minorities from voting or promoted voting for a third-party candidate.¹⁰⁰ In one case, the Russian-created Instagram account, “Woke Blacks” urged African Americans not to vote. In another instance, the Russians posted an ad on Instagram that encouraged users to vote for third-party candidate Jill Stein.

Despite the obvious result of Donald Trump winning the presidency, it remains unclear how much of a role the Russian meddling on social media played in influencing people to not vote or to vote in a particular way. The US Intelligence Community did not attempt to calculate whether the Russian efforts swung the 2016 presidential election.¹⁰¹ Researchers should develop methodologies to determine if fake news stories, advertisements, and social media posts are effective at reaching their target audiences. In addition, methodologies should help determine

⁹⁸ Jonathan Martin and Maggie Haberman, “Indictment Leaves No Doubt: Russia Backed Trump. But Was It the Difference?,” *New York Times*, February 18, 2018, accessed March 9, 2018, <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/02/18/us/politics/trump-election-russia.html>.

⁹⁹ Mike Isaac and Daisuke Wakabayashi, “Russian Influence Reached 126 Million Through Facebook Alone,” *New York Times*, October 30, 2017, accessed March 9, 2018, <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/10/30/technology/facebook-google-russia.html>.

¹⁰⁰ Martin and Haberman, “Indictment Leaves No Doubt.”

¹⁰¹ Ibid.

whether the social media posts solicit a reaction from the user. Such a reaction may be a change in the viewer's perception of an individual or issue area. Methodologies should also assist researchers in determining whether users who view the propaganda act upon it in a manner that is either compatible or incompatible with the creator's intended outcome. By determining their effectiveness, technology companies and politicians can create safeguards to mitigate the effects of propaganda on social media.

Conclusions

In sum, March 2014 marked the start of a concerted Russian effort to use social media in Ukraine. Moscow hoped that by spreading disinformation and false narratives on social media, they could sway international and internal Ukrainian public opinion. This in turn gave Russian forces enough time and space to conduct military operations and gain territory, while the international community and Ukrainian forces found themselves caught off guard. The strategy of using asymmetric forces in conjunction with information operations became known as the Gerasimov Doctrine. From the perspective of Moscow, the Gerasimov Doctrine provides a model for which Russia can combat more powerful nations by using the information space to reduce the fighting potential of the enemy through the influencing of state structures and the population.

With the acknowledgement that Moscow believes that the Gerasimov Doctrine provides a viable model for taking territory with minimal repercussions, the United States and its allies have numerous opportunities to combat Russian influence in cyberspace. The United States and its allies need to develop closer relationships with technology companies like Facebook and Twitter to combat Russian influence on social media. The United States can also combat bureaucratic lag, the time it takes for a bureaucracy to react, by leveraging the expertise of public relations and social media experts to counter the messages of Russia and other potential bad actors in real-time. An operations center devoted to counter messaging that is staffed by experts that retain the ability to post content and respond to the nefarious actors without prior approval from management

should be sufficient for this task. Finally, the international community would benefit from learning about the effectiveness of Russian influence operations. This monograph has identified this as a key point that requires further research. However, by increasing the public's understanding of influence operations, the public will be more able to spot such attempts and develop their own informed opinions about international events and politics.

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