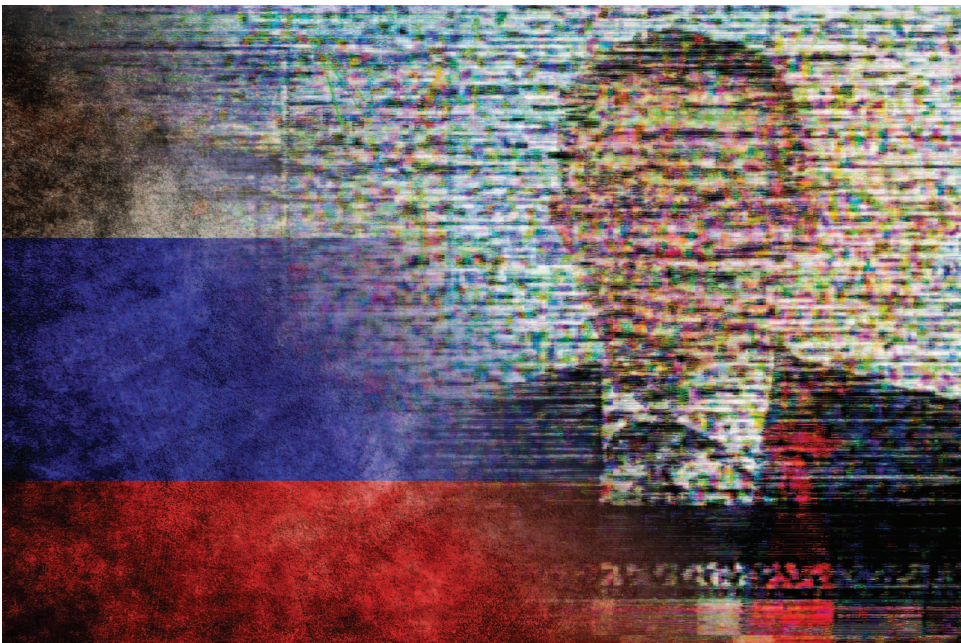




Research Report

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Understanding and Defending Against Russia's Malign and Subversive Information Efforts in Europe



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Preface

The increasing frequency and intensity of information aggression targeting the United States and its European allies demands more thorough consideration of concepts and practices for protecting against, resisting, and mitigating the effects of psychological manipulation and influence. In this report, RAND Corporation researchers describe apparent Russian efforts at using information to shape Russia's operating environment, focusing on the European context; review and apply existing research on influence and manipulation to Russia's efforts; and draw from existing practice to describe possible defensive approaches that United States European Command (USEUCOM) and its various inter- and intraorganizational partners, as well as international partners (governmental and nongovernmental), can use when defending against these actions.

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Summary

The increasing frequency and intensity of information aggression targeting the United States and its European allies demands more thorough consideration of concepts and practices for protecting against, resisting, and mitigating the effects of psychological manipulation and influence. Russia, in particular, often appears to use messaging and intimidation as part of its efforts to influence multiple actors and countries,¹ including the United States and its European allies; and a recent RAND Corporation report showed that central characteristics of contemporary Russian efforts, which we refer to as malign or subversive information efforts, have a foundation in the psychological literature on persuasion.² Unfortunately, however, concepts and practices for understanding and resisting the potential effects of efforts conducted by Russia and its agents are few. To address this, United States European Command (USEUCOM) asked the RAND Corporation to identify strategies through which USEUCOM and its various inter- and intraorganizational partners, as well as international partners (governmental and nongovernmental), can defend against the effects of Russia's efforts to manipulate and inappropriately influence troops, government decisionmaking, and civilians. In this report, RAND researchers describe apparent efforts conducted by Russia and its actors involving the use of information to shape Russia's operating environment, focusing on the European context; review and apply existing research on influence and manipulation to Russia's efforts; and draw from existing practice to describe possible defensive approaches that USEUCOM and its various partners can use when defending against these actions.

¹ Heather A. Conley, James Mina, Ruslan Stefanov, and Martin Vladimirov, *The Kremlin Playbook: Understanding Russian Influence in Central and Eastern Europe*, Washington, D.C.: Center for Strategic and International Studies, 2016; Alina Polyakova, Markos Kounalakis, Antonis Klapsis, Luigi Sergio Germani, Jacopo Iacoboni, Francisco de Borja Lasheras, and Nicolás de Pedro, *The Kremlin's Trojan Horses: Russian Influence in Greece, Italy, and Spain*, 2nd ed., Washington, D.C.: Atlantic Council Eurasia Center, November 2017; Alina Polyakova, Marlene Laruelle, Stefan Meister, and Neil Barnett, *The Kremlin's Trojan Horses: Russian Influence in France, Germany, and the United Kingdom*, 3rd ed., Washington, D.C.: Atlantic Council Eurasia Center, November 2016.

² Christopher Paul and Miriam Matthews, *The Russian 'Firehose of Falsehood' Propaganda Model: Why It Might Work and Options to Counter It*, Santa Monica, Calif.: RAND Corporation, PE-198-OSD, 2016.

Framework for Conceptualizing Russia's Malign or Subversive Information Efforts

Many recent efforts have attempted to describe or conceptualize Russia's use of the information environment as part of its broader influence efforts. Many of these works focus on what aims Russia is seeking to achieve, offering examples or generalizations of how it goes about achieving those aims. Others focus on the many techniques and tools Russia and its agents use to spread their themes and messages. The structure we present aims to cover both aspects of Russian information efforts—offering a way to conceptualize the objectives that motivate these efforts as well as the means used to pursue those objectives.

Our framework is a stylized scheme—and one among any possible number—that may be used to conceptualize Russian malign or subversive information efforts. It is a means of organizing and understanding how Russia operates in and through the information environment based on observable behavior and an evidence-based understanding of Russia's aims.³ Importantly, it should not be presumed that Russia and its agents conceive of their own efforts in these terms or categories. Further, the structure should not be taken as an implication that Russian information efforts are planned in a top-down manner in accordance with the objectives identified.

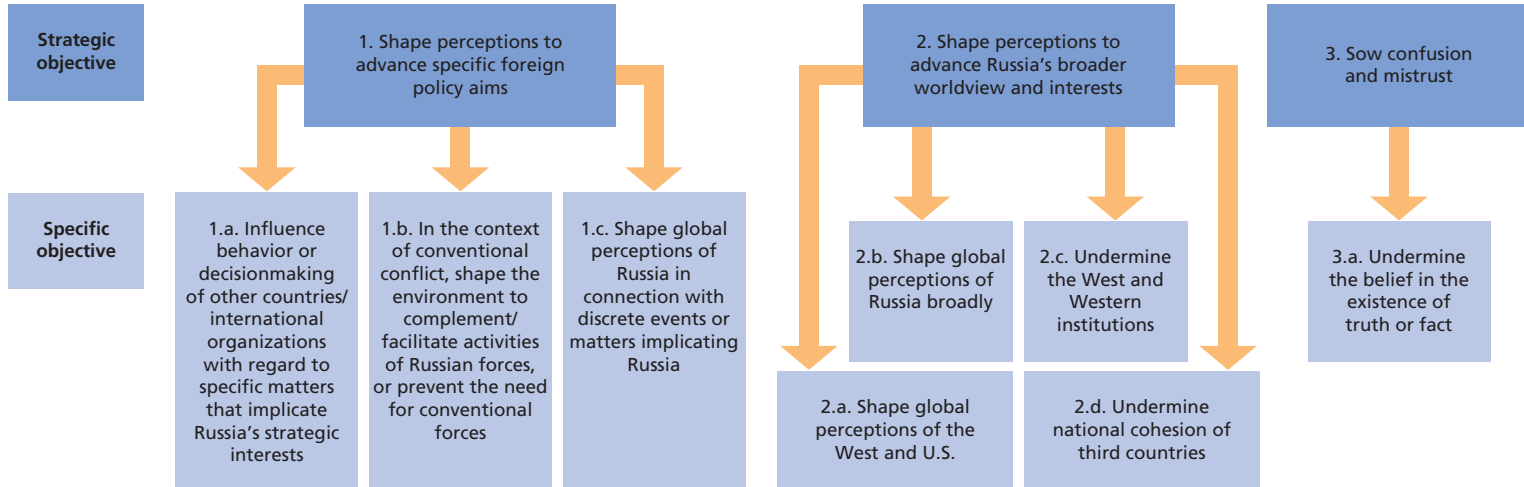
Objectives Associated with Russia's Malign or Subversive Information Efforts

The objectives motivating contemporary Russian information activities distinguish these efforts most markedly from Soviet-era disinformation and propaganda. No longer appearing to seek to convert the world to a particular ideology, Russia's contemporary malign or subversive information efforts appear to be deployed in service of diverse political objectives. We identify the main sets of objectives that seem to be motivating Russian information efforts as the highest "layer" of our framework. In particular, we identify *strategic objectives* at the highest level and *specific objectives*, which articulate more narrowly the aims pursued within each broader strategic objective category (see Figure S.1). At both levels, the objectives are not mutually exclusive, and a given information campaign or set of messages can (and often does) advance more than one strategic or specific objective; similarly, the objectives are not wholly discrete, and progress on one objective may support progress on another objective.

The objectives pursued by Russia and its agents through its information efforts are not in themselves directly observable. Instead, we infer these objectives based on both Russia and its agents' actions and the content of Russian information efforts, as well as from what we know about Russia's understanding of its foreign policy goals

³ Christopher Paul, Colin P. Clarke, Michael Schwillie, Jakub P. Hlavka, Michael A. Brown, Steven Davenport, Isaac R. Porche III, and Joel Harding, *Lessons from Others for Future U.S. Army Operations in and Through the Information Environment*, Santa Monica, Calif.: RAND Corporation, RR-1925/1-A, 2018.

Figure S.1
Framework of Apparent Strategic and Specific Objectives Motivating Russian Information Efforts



and concerns. We focus on objectives most centrally implicated in Russia's information efforts in the European information environment.

Tactics, Techniques, and Procedures in Russia's Malign or Subversive Information Efforts

Figure S.1 specifies objectives that can be used to help organize and conceptualize malign or subversive information efforts that appear to be implemented by Russia and its agents in Europe. Better understanding and countering Russian information efforts requires answering a further question: How do Russia and its agents pursue the objectives identified above? To answer this question, we identify and describe key dimensions that define the tactics, techniques, and procedures (TTPs) employed by Russia and its agents in Europe, which span the production, dissemination, and consumption of information: content, information manipulation techniques, dissemination techniques, and audiences. Specifically, *content* employing *information manipulation techniques* is distributed via *dissemination techniques* to various *audiences*.

What Content Is Produced and Disseminated by Russia and Its Agents?

The first dimension of TTPs is the content, or the substance, theme, or message conveyed by the information effort. The content produced by Russia and its agents is highly diverse and difficult, if not impossible, to capture completely and in full detail. However, existing research and analysis suggests a set of content categories that appear to be most prominent and commonly employed, summarized in Table S.1.

How Do Russia and Its Agents Manipulate Information?

The second dimension of TTPs consists of various techniques through which Russia and its agents may manipulate the information communicated to target audiences. These techniques range from outright lies to subtle manipulation of facts in ways that mislead or deceive. We present a categorization of these techniques in Table S.2. These techniques are not mutually exclusive and are often used in tandem in any given information effort or campaign.

How Do Russia and Its Agents Disseminate Information?

The third dimension of TTPs concerns the ways in which Russia communicates the content/information to its target audiences, or what we call "dissemination techniques." Dissemination techniques are defined by the conjunction of *actors* and *modes of communication*. Actors are individuals or entities that direct, plan, and/or execute malign/subversive information efforts using modes of communication or conduits to transmit messages to their target audiences. Table S.3 depicts the resulting array of dissemination techniques. Note that the infamous Russian troll farm, the Internet Research Agency (IRA), would fall into the category of nonmedia organizations with opaque ties to the Russian state.

Table S.1
Types of Content Disseminated by Russia and Its Agents

| Content Category | Description | Example |
|---|--|--|
| Malign or attack other countries' government and nongovernment actors | Maligning (slandering or falsely accusing) and otherwise attacking other countries' government institutions, politicians, officials, and/or other actors | Emmanuel Macron is gay, "agent of the big American banking system" ^a |
| Malign or attack Western actions, policies, institutions, culture | Maligning the West broadly (Europe and the U.S.) through attacks on its alleged flaws, culture, actions, or policies | West foments color revolutions to "destroy statehood and sovereignty under the pretext of democratization" ^b |
| Promote other countries' government and nongovernment actors | Promoting other countries' actors, typically those who are seen as friendly to Russia's interests and/or those who favor actions friendly to Russian interests | More favorable coverage of François Fillon and Marine Le Pen than opponent Emmanuel Macron ^c |
| Promote Russian actions, policies, institutions, culture, successes | Promoting and bolstering Russian image abroad by amplifying Russian successes and promoting Russia's image as a counterpoint to the West | Messaging by Sputnik France highlighting Russia's successes in hosting the 2018 World Cup and critiquing Russophobic skeptics ^d |
| Appeal to common heritage, culture, history, interests, etc. | Promoting cultural, linguistic, religious, or ethnic ties between target audiences and Russia and/or Russian people | "Unwavering Brotherhood and Friendship" between Russia and Serbia ^e |
| Defend or deflect from accusations of wrongdoing | Responding to accusations of wrongdoing or criticism by denying Russia's role, offering competing narratives, or attacking their accusers | Multiple, conflicting explanations for the downing of Malaysia Airlines Flight 17 and the poisoning of Sergei Skripal |
| Fan divisive sentiments | Stoking existing divisions within and between countries, whether based on historical grievances or currently contentious issues | Messaging exploiting antimigrant and anti-Islamic sentiments; associating ills of migrant influx with Western states and institutions ^f |

^a "Ex-French Economy Minister Macron Could Be 'US Agent' Lobbying Banks' Interests," *Sputnik*, February 4, 2017.

^b "Western 'Attempts to Carry Out Color Revolutions in Russia Futile,'" *Sputnik*, May 18, 2017.

^c Prior to the first round of voting, "evidence shows Russian state media used dubious opinion poll data in the run up to the French election to promote François Fillon, at a time when mainstream polls showed him trailing in third place." "Russia Attempted to Influence French and Dutch Elections with Suspect Polls," *Bellingcat*, June 6, 2017. After the first round, analysis suggests *Sputnik France's* reporting was more favorable to Le Pen than to Macron. Digital Forensic Research Lab, "Frankly Unfair: Fact Checking Sputnik France's Claim That It Is Reporting the French Election Fairly," *Atlantic Council*, February 11, 2017.

^d "Coupe du Monde 2018 en Russie: Une réussite totale?" *Sputnik France*, July 9, 2018.

^e For an example of content focusing on the countries' political, economic, and cultural ties, see "Russia and Serbia: Unwavering Brotherhood and Friendship," *Sputnik*, March 27, 2017.

^f For example, *Sputnik Česká Republika* (Czech Republic) published an article falsely claiming that the EU's Euro-Mediterranean Free Trade Area (MEDA) program of the European Union (EU) allows for the immigration of 56 million Muslims to the EU, though the program is exclusively focused on issues related to free trade. EU vs. Disinfo, "Because of the EU's MEDA Programme, the EU Requires the Admission of 56 Million Muslims to Its Structures," webpage, undated. Also see EU vs. Disinfo, "Disinformation Playing on Fears," *Disinformation Review*, December 7, 2017. It is important to reiterate that the connections between some of the cited outlets sowing anti-Islamist and antimigrant messaging and Russia are murky.

Table S.2
Information Manipulation Techniques Used by Russia and Its Agents

| Information Manipulation Technique | Description | Example |
|------------------------------------|--|---|
| Fabrication | Information that is purposefully entirely false and misleading | Publication of forgeries (e.g., falsified government documents and email exchanges, audio of fictional conversations, and manufactured video and still images) |
| Misappropriation | Misleading content that uses existing events, people, or documentary evidence to misrepresent facts | Translations of interviews that directly contradict what the interviewee said |
| Deceptive identities | Imitation or impersonation of a genuine and credible source of information ^a | Impersonating categories of individuals with authority by using terms such as "specialist," "expert," or "witness" when referring to individuals or organizations used to authenticate narratives |
| Obfuscation | Clouding public discourse, often by offering multiple, contradictory accounts for the same event/phenomenon | Multiple contradictory accounts offered for the same event (such as who was responsible for poisoning former KGB agent Sergei Skripal) |
| Conspiracy theories | Proposed covert plots by powerful individuals, organizations, or alliances to accomplish a goal, which is often nefarious in nature ^b | Stories regarding secretive actions taken by the West, U.S., Central Intelligence Agency (CIA), Brussels (EU), and homosexuals and the "gay lobby" |
| Selective use of facts | Use of factual information in manipulative ways | Sputnik's selective presentation of facts as evidence |
| Rhetorical fallacies | Messages that contain deliberately flawed reasoning "which [is] logically invalid but cognitively effective" ^c | "Whataboutism," countering strawman arguments, appealing to a slippery slope, and propagating red herrings |
| Appeals to emotion/ authority | Themes or messages that elicit emotional responses, often at the expense of logic or evidence | Emotionally charged framing regarding a (false) story of how refugees treated a young girl |

^a Swedish Civil Contingencies Agency, *Countering Information Influence Activities: A Handbook for Communicators*, Karlstad, Sweden: Swedish Civil Contingencies Agency, July 2018, p. 21.

^b Karen M. Douglas and Robbie M. Sutton, "The Hidden Impact of Conspiracy Theories: Perceived and Actual Influence of Theories Surrounding the Death of Princess Diana," *The Journal of Social Psychology*, Vol. 148, No. 2, 2008; Michael J. Wood, Karen M. Douglas, and Robbie M. Sutton, "Dead and Alive: Beliefs in Contradictory Conspiracy Theories," *Social Psychological and Personality Science*, Vol. 3, No. 6, 2012.

^c Antonio Lieto and Fabiana Vernerio, "Unveiling the Link Between Logical Fallacies and Web Persuasion," *5th ACM Web Science Conference, Conference Proceedings*, Paris: ACM, 2013, p. 2; Cory S. Clements, "Perception and Persuasion in Legal Argumentation: Using Informal Fallacies and Cognitive Biases to Win the War of the Worlds," *BYU Law Review*, Rev. 319, 2013, p. 333.

**Table S.3
Russian Dissemination Techniques**

| Relationship with Russia | Type of Actor | Modes of Communication/Dissemination Mechanisms | | | |
|--|--|---|--|---|---|
| | | Traditional Media (TV, Radio, Print) | Online Media | Social Media | In Real-Life Events/Other |
| Actors directly controlled by or openly affiliated with Russian state | Russian state actors | State officials' appearances on/ in traditional media programming/ publications ^a | Official websites of Russian Foreign Ministry, Russian Ministry of Defense ^b | Official government social media accounts ^c | State officials' remarks, press conferences, other events (in-person attendees, and only when propagating messaging related to information efforts) |
| | Russian domestic state-controlled media | TV broadcasts and publications of state-owned newspapers in former Soviet states ^d | Websites of Russian domestic state-controlled media | Social media accounts of state-controlled domestic media organizations | |
| | Russian foreign-facing overtly state-controlled media | TV programming, radio, and print media in foreign languages ^e | Websites of outlets such as RT, Sputnik, and Ruptly and associated streaming video channels ^f | Social media accounts associated with outlets like RT, Sputnik, and Ruptly, etc. ^g | |
| Actors with opaque ties to Russian state | Pro-Russian media with opaque ties to Russian state | Other country traditional media outlets broadcasting content produced by Russian state-controlled media | Websites with opaque ties to the Russian state ^h | Social media accounts of pro-Russian media outlets with opaque ties to Russian state ⁱ | |
| | Nonmedia proxies with opaque ties to Russian state | | Websites with suspected links to Russian state that disseminate Russian messages or act as facilitators for Russian information; troll posts in comments sections of articles, images, or videos | Social media accounts with opaque ties to Russian state conducting activities like posting, liking, purchasing ads, friend invites, rally organization on social media accounts, use of bots, etc. ^j | Proxy actors organizing rallies, and discussion forums, for causes in line with Russian interests ^k |

Table S.3—Continued

| Relationship with Russia | Type of Actor | Modes of Communication/Dissemination Mechanisms | | | |
|---|--|--|--|--|---|
| | | Traditional Media (TV, Radio, Print) | Online Media | Social Media | In Real-Life Events/Other |
| Actors without known affiliation with Russian state | Pro-Russian nonmedia actors without affiliation to Russian state | | Use of “unaffiliated” third parties to leak information ^l | Social media accounts of actors with no affiliation used to propagate pro-Russian messaging ^m | Pro-Russian actors that disseminate pro-Russian messaging to audiences in-person ⁿ |
| | Other country pro-Russian media without known affiliation to Russian state | Journalists and pundits that propagate pro-Russian (or anti-Western) messages on local TV and radio and in newspapers ^o | Media outlets’ websites that propagate pro-Russian (or anti-Western) messages and/or directly appropriate content from Russian state-controlled media outlets ^p | Social media pages and posts operated by actors unaffiliated with the Russian state that propagate pro-Russian messages and/or directly appropriate content from Russian state-controlled media outlets ^q | |

NOTE: Gray boxes denote categories for which we did not identify reliably documented examples; however, this should not be taken to mean that such do not exist.

^a Maria Zakharova’s comments about the Skripal case on a state-owned television channel is an example of an official Russian state actor using a traditional media outlet to conduct information efforts. Ruptly, “Russia: Zakharova Responds to UK’s Accusations on Skripal Poisoning Case,” Pervyj Kanal [Channel One], March 14, 2018.

^b For instance, the Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs established a webpage on its official website devoted to debunking what it claims is fake news about Russia. For the site in English, see The Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation, “Published Materials That Contain Information about Russia,” undated. Likewise, the Russian Ministry of Defense runs Zvezda, an outlet that publishes written and video content on its website, and produces television and radio programming. While some of the state-run outlet’s information is factual, it has also contributed to information efforts by propagating false narratives. See “Dependent Media—Russia’s Military TV Zvezda,” *StopFake*, July 20, 2017.

^c For an example of a Russian state actor, in this case the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, using its official social media account (Twitter) to propagate false narratives, see Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation (MFARussia), “Sergei Skripal & His Daughter Yulia Were Poisoned with an Incapacitating Toxin Known as 3-Quinuclidinyl Benzilate or BZ, Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov Said, Citing the Results of the Examination Conducted by a Swiss Chemical Lab,” Twitter, April 14, 2018b, 9:14 a.m.

^d For example, Russian state-controlled traditional media programming was available in Ukraine before it was banned by the Ukrainian interior ministry for “broadcasting propaganda.” Reuters, “Ukraine Bans Russian TV Channels for Airing War ‘Propaganda,’” August 19, 2014b; 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, pp. 66–67.

Table S.3—Continued

^e Russian newspaper *Argumenty i Fakty*, for instance, began publishing a Serbian-language edition in 2018. The newspaper was acquired by the Moscow city government in 2014. Filip Rudic, “Right-Wingers Launch Russian Newspaper in Serbia,” *Balkan Insight*, April 12, 2018; Martin Russell, “Russian Media—Under State Control,” European Parliamentary Research Service, European Parliament, May 2015.

^f For instance, Russia Today (RT) operates video streaming channels in various languages on YouTube. Jack Nicas, “Russia State News Outlet RT Thrives on YouTube, Facebook,” *Wall Street Journal*, October 23, 2017.

^g Outlets openly affiliated with the Russian state such as RT, Ruptly, and Sputnik, all operate accounts on social media platforms where content from the websites is often republished.

^h For instance, evidence uncovered by reporting indicates that the site Baltnews, a news portal in the Baltic states, is connected to the Russian state. For an analysis of the site’s content, see “Sputnik’s Unknown Brother,” *StopFake*, April 7, 2017.

ⁱ Baltnews, referenced above, also operates social media accounts. For the organization’s main Twitter account, see Baltnews (@Balt_news), 2018.

^j The IRA, a “troll factory” with suspected ties to the Russian state, operates social media accounts that conduct information efforts while masquerading as legitimate users. Tom Parfitt, “My Life as a Pro-Putin Propagandist in Russia’s Secret ‘Troll Factory,’” *The Telegraph*, June 24, 2015. Likewise, the Patriots of Ukraine group is an example of nonmedia proxies with opaque ties to the state. Helmus et al. note, “[I]n the beginning of 2016, Ukrainian journalists exposed a network of dozens of social media groups, including Patriots of Ukraine, across multiple social media platforms, coordinated from Moscow. These groups used pro-Ukraine symbolic and nationalistic rhetoric to undermine trust in the Ukrainian government and mobilize people for a ‘Third Maidan’” (Helmus et al., 2018, p. 16).

^k According to the Estonian Security Service, “propaganda clubs” such as Impressum in Estonia and Format A-3 (founded in Moldova and Crimea), which began holding meetings in Latvia and Lithuania, convene meetings featuring well-known Russian speakers. These presentations propagate messaging that is both pro-Russian and against the state where the meetings are held. While many of those involved in the clubs may have some connections to the Russian state, it is unclear whether the clubs themselves are funded by the state. Estonian Internal Security Service, *Annual Review 2013, 2013*, pp. 8–9.

^l While reporting by the U.S. intelligence community indicates that the GRU likely used the sites WikiLeaks and DCLeaks to leak information related to the 2016 presidential election, it is unclear what the relationship between these entities is. Likewise, it is unclear whether this applies to Russian information efforts in Europe. Office of the Director of National Intelligence, *Assessing Russian Activities and Intentions in Recent US Elections*, Intelligence Community Assessment, January 6, 2017, pp. 2–3.

^m For a discussion of pro-Russian nonmedia actors (sometimes referred to as “useful idiots”) without a known affiliation to the Russian state who propagate Russian messaging verbatim or messaging in line with Russian narratives and messages using social media platforms see Helmus et al., 2018, pp. 67–68.

ⁿ For example, some clergy in the Orthodox church are believed to use religious services and events as a means of propagating anti-Western and pro-Russian narratives and messages. It is possible that some may have connections to the Russian state, whereas others may not. See Andrew Higgins, “In Expanding Russian Influence, Faith Combines with Firepower,” *New York Times*, September 13, 2016.

Table S.3—Continued

^o For examples of Bulgarian pro-Russian media without a known affiliation to the Russian state that propagate Russian messaging verbatim or messaging in line with Russian narratives and messages using traditional media platforms, see Dimitar Bechev, *Russia's Influence in Bulgaria: Defense, Foreign Policy and Security*, Brussels, Belgium: New Direction: The Foundation for European Reform, 2015, pp. 22–23.

^p As is discussed in the section of the chapter on the Balkans, some media outlets without any known affiliation to the Russian state either propagate messages or narratives that mirror those propagated by the Kremlin or republish content produced by outlets affiliated with the state verbatim. See Dusica Tomovic, “Pro-Russian Montenegrins Publish New Anti-Western Media,” *Balkan Insight*, October 18, 2017.

^q For a discussion of other country pro-Russian media without a known affiliation to the Russian state that propagate Russian messaging verbatim or messaging in line with Russian narratives and messages using social media platforms, see Helmus, 2018, pp. 67–68.

What Audiences Do Russian Malign or Subversive Information Efforts Target?

The final dimension of the TTPs used in Russian information efforts is the targeted audience. The question of who Russian information efforts are seeking to reach does not always have a straightforward answer. Notably, when particular messages or campaigns fail to resonate with an intended audience, the message itself may go largely unnoticed by analysts. Moreover, the audience with which any given message or campaign does resonate may or may not be the intended one. Indeed, there may not be a specific intended audience as such. Nonetheless, we can identify *likely* audiences Russia and its agents seek to reach and influence on the basis of the content as well as the ultimate reach or resonance of a given information effort.

As Keir Giles argues, Russia's information efforts either seek to influence foreign decisionmaking by manipulating the information that reaches the decisionmakers themselves or seek to "create a permissive public opinion environment where Russian narratives are presented as factual," and "to win public support in adversary nations, and thereby attenuate resistance to actions planned by Russia."⁴ Thus, at a high level of generality, audiences targeted by Russia's malign information efforts in European countries consist of *general publics*, *decisionmakers*, and *influencers* (i.e., actors who may not be decisionmakers themselves but have the ability to influence decisions and public opinion). While some malign information efforts are aimed at the general public of European countries, others appear to target publics that are more narrowly defined, notably, publics on the *extreme political right and extreme left*, especially those identified with anti-Western, antiestablishment, anti-immigrant, and nationalist viewpoints;⁵ *Russian-speaking communities* within former Soviet republics as well as other European states; and *publics with cultural, historical, religious, or political affinities to Russia*, such as Slavs, the Christian Orthodox, and historical allies or partners long supported by Russia, as well as the socially conservative and otherwise pro-Russian constituencies.

Application of Research on Influence and Manipulation to Russia's Malign or Subversive Information Efforts

Identifying the causal impact of Russia's information efforts is challenging, if not impossible, due to multiple factors, including difficulties in clearly determining whether an effort is connected to Russia or its agents, ascertaining exactly which indi-

⁴ Keir Giles, *Handbook of Russian Information Warfare*, Research Division, NATO Defense College, November 2016a, p. 22.

⁵ As numerous sources note, key actors of Russia's information efforts like *RT* tend to appeal to both fringes of the political spectrum, typically unified by "their disillusionment with their governments and skepticism toward Western media." Linda Robinson, Todd C. Helmus, Raphael S. Cohen, Alireza Nader, Andrew Radin, Madeline Magnuson, and Katya Migacheva, *Modern Political Warfare: Current Practices and Possible Responses*, Santa Monica, Calif.: RAND Corporation, RR-1772-A, 2018, p. 66.

viduals were exposed to an effort, examining how/whether those exposed to a messaging effort engaged with or processed the content, and analyzing which efforts might have had effects among individuals who were exposed to multiple messages. However, categorizing the key dimensions of Russia's malign or subversive information efforts, as outlined previously, facilitates consideration of whether, when, and why characteristics of these efforts might be effective in persuading various audiences, such that the research that has been conducted on or is related to these dimensions may address their persuasive efficacy.

Messages Produced by Russia and Its Agents

In addition to generally attacking countries or actors that do not support Russian interests and broadly promoting those entities that do align with its interests, much of the content within Russia's information efforts appears to focus on the supposed threats to tradition and conservative social norms allegedly presented by those opposing Russian interests and actions. This emphasis on traditional social norms and standards can be seen within the messages used to malign or attack Western culture, to promote Russian institutions and culture, to appeal to Russia's common culture and history with selected audiences, and to fan divisive sentiments. Across each of these content types, the messages disseminated by Russia and its agents emphasize the depravity of those who are not supportive of Russian interests while promoting Russia and its supporters as moral bulwarks. Research in psychology and related fields provides some insights into the possible effects on audience engagement, opinions, and behaviors stimulated by this emphasis on threats to traditional cultural values, conservative social norms, and conventional morality.

Use of Threatening Messages to Influence Attitudes and Behaviors

Specifically, research suggests that threat-based messages have at least some potential to influence attitudes and behaviors. These threatening communications include, and are often associated with, fear appeals. Fear appeals are persuasive messages that present threatening information in order to arouse fear and motivate audiences to respond in self-protective ways. Although they have the potential to exert some influence, fear appeals are not universally effective, and assumptions that all or most fear appeals will strongly influence mass audiences are not supported by research and appear to be inappropriate.

Given the seemingly limited overall impact of fear appeals, the continued use of threat-based messages as part of persuasive tactics might seem questionable. However, threatening messages can have influential effects beyond the focus of the message. For example, research suggests that individuals increase identification with—or show greater solidarity to—social groups in response to personal and collective threats.

In addition, threat-based messages could have stronger effects on selected groups or individuals than others and can contribute to political polarization. Focusing on threat-based political messages specifically, research has shown that those who are less

educated are less critical of advertisements that promote notions of cultural threats than their more educated peers.⁶ Additional research in political psychology suggests that those holding differing political views respond differently to negative stimuli, such that those with more conservative views tend to demonstrate stronger physiological responses and devote greater cognitive resources to addressing negative stimuli, including threats, compared with their more liberal counterparts.⁷ Further, studies have also shown that uncertainty, perceptions of threats to the social system, and resistance to change are each associated with greater conservatism (vs. liberalism).⁸ Europeans who are more supportive of tradition and conservative social norms might be more likely to respond to threat-based messages than their more liberal counterparts. In addition, messages suggesting threats to tradition and conservative norms might be particularly impactful among more conservative social groups and can also contribute to increases in support for conservative values and parties among different groups.

Manipulating Threat Appeals and Party Support

Moving beyond the association between conservatism or authoritarianism and responses to threat, research has also begun to consider messages to and from various political parties and groups. For example, one study considered the association between perceived group threats and support for populist parties in the Netherlands and Germany. Results of this research suggested that believing the interests of one's group are threatened promoted preferences for radical right-wing populist parties.⁹

Additional research has also considered the different types of threats that might be most influential in increasing support of and intentions to vote for right-wing populist parties in Europe. Different studies on this topic have focused on two broad categories of threat: economic (or realistic) threats and symbolic threats. Economic threat appeals address dangers to financial security and competition for various economic resources, including jobs, housing, and social services. By contrast, symbolic threat appeals focus on challenges to shared cultural practices, including tradition, conventional social norms, religious values, and language.

The malign or subversive information efforts that appear to be disseminated by Russia and its agents might address both categories of threats, but seem to heavily

⁶ Jorg Matthes and Franziska Marquart, "Advertising on a Low Level?—Effects of Negatively Emotionalizing Political Advertising on Attitudes Towards Foreigners," *Publizistik*, Vol. 58, 2013.

⁷ John R. Hibbing, Kevin B. Smith, and John R. Alford, "Differences in Negativity Bias Underlie Variations in Political Ideology," *Behavioral and Brain Sciences*, Vol. 37, No. 3, 2014.

⁸ John T. Jost, Jaime L. Napier, Hulda Thorisdottir, Samuel D. Gosling, Tibor P. Palfai, and Brian Ostafin, "Are Needs to Manage Uncertainty and Threat Associated with Political Conservatism or Ideological Extremity?" *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin*, Vol. 33, No. 7, 2007.

⁹ Carl C. Berning and Elmar Schlueter, "The Dynamics of Radical Right-Wing Party Preferences and Perceived Group Threat: A Comparative Panel Analysis of Three Competing Hypotheses in the Netherlands and Germany," *Social Science Research*, Vol. 55, 2016.

emphasize symbolic threats in particular. Drawing from the European Social Survey to examine workers' support for right-wing populist parties in Western Europe, research found that cultural protectionism, or concerns regarding possible negative influences on a country's cultural identity, was more influential of support for right-wing populist parties than economic grievances, and this was particularly pronounced among production and service workers.¹⁰

Information Manipulation by Russia and Its Agents

As discussed previously, when disseminating content that covers various topical categories, Russia and its agents may manipulate or completely falsify information as part of efforts to disseminate messages that align with Russian interests. In terms of the information manipulation techniques that Russia and its agents appear to use, most of these practices involve various kinds of falsehoods, ranging from completely manufacturing content to the misuse or misapplication of factual information. Research examining the spread of true and false information online has suggested that fabricated information reaches a larger number of people faster than does true information. Specifically, this research has shown that false information is disseminated faster, farther, and more broadly on social media than true information.¹¹ Further, after initial publication, false information tends to be recirculated multiple times (i.e., rumor resurgence), whereas true information is not.

Research also provides additional insights into who might be most likely to fall for the fabricated or manipulated information that Russia and its agents disseminate. Broadly, individuals with a lower propensity to think analytically (vs. intuitively) have greater difficulty differentiating real and fake information.¹² In addition to people showing individual differences in the extent to which they tend to engage in analytic reasoning and are, thus, more susceptible to believing fabrications, other factors contribute to whether a person more deliberately processes a communication. These include factors affecting the ability to process information, such as presence of distractions (decreases deliberate processing, increases susceptibility), repetition of information (decreases deliberate processing, increases susceptibility), and prior knowledge on a topic or issue (increases deliberate processing, decreases susceptibility).¹³

¹⁰ Daniel Oesch, "Explaining Workers' Support for Right-Wing Populist Parties in Western Europe: Evidence from Austria, Belgium, France, Norway, and Switzerland," *International Political Science Review*, Vol. 29, No. 3, 2008.

¹¹ Soroush Vosoughi, Deb Roy, and Sinan Aral, "The Spread of True and False News Online," *Science*, Vol. 359, No. 6380, 2018.

¹² Gordon Pennycook and David G. Rand, "Who Falls for Fake News? The Roles of Analytic Thinking, Motivated Reasoning, Political Ideology, and Bullshit Receptivity," *Social Science Research Network*, 2018b.

¹³ Richard E. Petty and John T. Cacioppo, "The Elaboration Likelihood Model of Persuasion," *Advances in Experimental Social Psychology*, Vol. 19, 1986.

Distribution Techniques

The distribution techniques that appear to be used by Russia and its agents can also play a role in influencing audiences. Various actors who appear to be differentially connected to the Russian state make use of different modes when communicating information. Social media encompasses one of the newest and most frequently used communication distribution techniques used by Russia and its agents.¹⁴ Research suggests that the use of social media sites might increase the amount of inaccurate and falsified information to which individuals are exposed—one study found that visitors to fake news websites are likely to navigate to these sites from social media sites.¹⁵ In part, the ability for outside groups, including Russia and its agents, to use deceptive identities when sharing malign or subversive information appears to increase the number of people exposed to, and the possible effects of, these messages.¹⁶

Social media is far from the only distribution method Russia and its agents use to distribute malign or subversive information. Use of other communication modes, including television, newspapers, radio broadcasts, live events, and online media other than social media, might promote the likelihood that audiences are exposed to certain messages at all, and exposure to or awareness of a message can increase its potential influence. In addition, distribution of a message or argument by multiple sources increases the extent to which the communication influences audience attitudes and behaviors, and the use of diverse communication modes to distribute messages can also increase audience's repeated exposure to the messages.¹⁷ Moderate repeated exposure to a message can also increase its persuasive efficacy, such that audiences are more likely to accept information to which they have been previously exposed.¹⁸

Defending Against Malign or Subversive Information Efforts

Thus far, we have reviewed, categorized, and analyzed apparent malign or subversive information efforts implemented by Russia and its agents in Europe and the possible psychological effects of those efforts. Now, to understand how best to defend against

¹⁴ Elizabeth Bodine-Baron, Todd C. Helmus, Andrew Radin, and Elina Treyger, *Countering Russian Social Media Influence*, Santa Monica, Calif.: RAND Corporation, RR-2740-RC, 2018; Helmus et al., 2018.

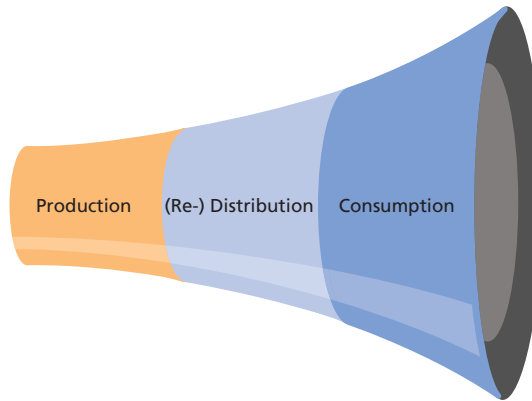
¹⁵ Jacon L. Nelson and Harsh Taneja, "The Small, Disloyal Fake News Audience: The Role of Audience Availability in Fake News Consumption," *New Media & Society*, Vol. 20, No. 1, 2018.

¹⁶ Youg Mie Kim, Jordan Hsu, David Neiman, Colin Kou, Levi Bankston, Soo Yun Kim, Richard Heinrich, Robyn Baragwanath, and Garvesh Raskutti, "The Stealth Media? Groups and Targets Behind Divisive Issue Campaigns on Facebook," *Political Communication*, Vol. 35, No. 4, 2018.

¹⁷ Stephen G. Harkins and Richard E. Petty, "The Multiple Source Effect in Persuasion: The Effects of Distraction," *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin*, Vol. 7, No. 4, 1981.

¹⁸ John T. Cacioppo and Richard E. Petty, "Effects of Message Repetition on Argument Processing, Recall, and Persuasion," *Basic and Applied Social Psychology*, Vol. 10, No. 1, 1989.

Figure S.2
Model of the Pathology of Russian Malign/Subversive Information Efforts



Russia's malign and subversive information efforts and organize specific practices that might be considered, we delimit the apparent pathology that Russia uses to create and distribute content to others. To do so, we view Russia's current information efforts as a firehose having three distinct parts, each displayed in Figure S.2.

The first part of this model is the **production of content**, which is akin to a spigot that controls the flow of content into this proverbial hose. The production of content focuses on the content that Russia and its agents generate as well as their information manipulation techniques. The second part of the model is the **distribution (and redistribution) of content** produced by Russia and the country's agents, wittingly or unwittingly. The distribution part of this model is akin to the firehose that carries malign or subversive information to the people who may consume the information. The last part of the model is the **consumption of content** by individuals. These consumers are the people whom Russia and its agents are targeting with content from their information efforts. Put simply, consumers are those who are being sprayed with this proverbial firehose.

Purposes of Defensive Practices

Based on our model of the pathology of malign/subversive information efforts, we categorize defensive practices by whether they intend to affect the production, distribution, or consumption stage of information efforts. Because malign/subversive information must transit all three stages to be successful, protecting citizens and societies against such efforts can result from defensive efforts aimed at any or all of the stages.

Table S.4 organizes these purposes by each part of the pathology of malign/subversive information efforts. Specific defensive practices should be tailored to the type of content, information manipulation techniques, dissemination techniques, and target audiences of Russia's information efforts. These purposes may not always be

Table S.4
General Purposes of Defensive Practices

| Production | (Re-) Distribution | Consumption |
|--|--|---|
| Reduce the volume of new malign or subversive content from Russia and its agents | Decrease the spread of existing malign or subversive content | Promote awareness of the information space by consumers |

NOTE: When engaging in any specific practice to achieve a general purpose, we recommend the practice have a SMART objective: specific, measurable, achievable, relevant and results-oriented, and time-bound.

mutually exclusive, in part, because the lines between production, distribution, and consumption of content are not always clearly delineated, especially for social media.

Purpose 1: Reduce the Volume of Content

Table S.5 summarizes four types of defensive practices that may reduce the volume of false or misleading content from Russia and its agents. Each practice varies in how intrusive it is within the information space.

Purpose 2: Decrease the Spread of Existing Content

Table S.6 displays four defensive practices that have the capacity to discourage the spread of existing malign or subversive information. Bottom-up approaches are executed by volunteers and are the least intrusive for the information environment. Moving down the table, flooding is one of the most intrusive for the information environment.

Table S.5
Summary of Defensive Practices That Target Production of Content

| Defensive Practice | Examples | Benefits | Limitations |
|--|--|---|---|
| Digital identity verification | IP addresses; cell phone verification; blockchain | Reduces fraudulent accounts | Hinders user growth on social media platforms |
| Government-enforced data protection laws | GDPR; Swiss Federal Data Protection Act; UK Data Protection Act of 2018 | Prevents micro-targeting by bad actors | Prevents microtargeting by legitimate actors |
| Government regulation of content | UK Ofcom; Ukraine's National Radio and TV Counsel | Ensures a balanced information space | Censorship may appear undemocratic to the public |
| Cyber operations | NATO Cooperative Cyber Defense Centre of Excellence; Bundeswehr's Department of Information and Community Network Operations; France's Cyber Command | Immediately disrupt Russian information efforts | Public exposure of cyber operations may appear undemocratic to the public |

NOTE: GDPR = General Data Protection Regulation; Ofcom = Office of Communications; NATO = North Atlantic Treaty Organization

Table S.6
Summary of Defensive Practices That Target Distribution of Content

| Defensive Practice | Examples | Benefits | Limitations |
|------------------------|--|--|---|
| Bottom-up approaches | Wikipedia's Bot Approval Group and Arbitration Committee; Reddit's moderators and bots | Increases community engagement in monitoring the information space | Longer time frame to develop community self-monitoring; coordination costs |
| Flagging false content | StopFake.org, Facebook's "disputed" flags | Immediate notification of consumers | Streisand effect; further entrench people's beliefs |
| Friction | Facebook news feed prioritizing truthful content, deprioritizing false content | Prevents user exposure to false content | Appearance of government- or corporate-backed censorship; false content may get prioritized |
| Flooding | Information efforts by Russia and China; Facebook's Related Articles feature | Increases users' exposure to alternative content | Appearance of government censorship; harmful to social media platforms |

Purpose 3: Promote Consumer Awareness

The last purpose of defensive efforts is to promote consumer awareness of the information space. It is addressed to the audiences who consume content. Media literacy programs are some of the most frequently discussed options for promoting consumer awareness.

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Abbreviations

| | |
|---------|---|
| AI | artificial intelligence |
| BiH | Bosnia and Herzegovina |
| CIA | Central Intelligence Agency |
| DARPA | Defense Advanced Research Projects Agency |
| EU | European Union |
| GDPR | General Data Protection Regulation |
| IRA | Internet Research Agency |
| IREX | International Research and Exchanges |
| LGBT | lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender |
| MH-17 | Malaysia Airlines Flight 17 |
| NATO | North Atlantic Treaty Organization |
| Ofcom | Office of Communication |
| RT | Russia Today |
| SME | subject matter expert |
| TTP | tactics, techniques, and procedures |
| UK | United Kingdom |
| USEUCOM | United States European Command |

Introduction

The increasing frequency and intensity of information aggression targeting the United States and its European allies demands more thorough consideration of concepts and practices for protecting against, resisting, and mitigating the effects of psychological manipulation and influence. Russia, in particular, often appears to use messaging and intimidation as part of its efforts to influence multiple actors and countries,¹ including the United States and its European allies; and a recent RAND Corporation report showed that central characteristics of contemporary Russian efforts, which we refer to as malign or subversive information efforts, have a foundation in the psychological literature on persuasion.² Unfortunately, however, concepts and practices for understanding and resisting the potential effects of efforts conducted by Russia and its agents are few. To address this, United States European Command (USEUCOM) asked the RAND Corporation to identify strategies through which USEUCOM and its various inter- and intraorganizational partners, as well as international partners (governmental and nongovernmental), can defend against the effects of Russia's efforts to manipulate and inappropriately influence troops, government decisionmaking, and civilians. This report describes apparent efforts conducted by Russia and its actors involving the use of information to shape Russia's operating environment, focusing on the European context; reviews and applies existing research on influence and manipulation to Russia's efforts; and draws from existing practice to describe possible defensive approaches that USEUCOM and its various partners can use when defending against these actions.

Study Tasks and Methodology

This effort encompassed several tasks, including examination and enumeration of Russia's malign or subversive information efforts, review of existing research on influence and manipulation, and review of possible defensive approaches against influence and

¹ Conley et al., 2016; Polyakova, Kounalakis, et al., 2017; Polyakova, Laruelle, et al., 2016.

² Paul and Matthews, 2016.

manipulation.³ To address these tasks, we collected information from multiple sources and conducted several reviews and analyses, described below.

Examination and Enumeration of Russia's Malign or Subversive Information Efforts

To examine and enumerate Russian malign/subversive information efforts, we reviewed the relevant literature that comprises primary sources (i.e., content issued by actors believed to be acting in Russia's interest, in a variety of European languages), English-language secondary sources such as policy and scholarly analyses, and government documents and reports. Our review of the literature did not aim at an exhaustive or strictly representative overview of the universe of Russia's efforts. Instead, our attention was guided by efforts or campaigns that received particular attention from (non-Russian) researchers, fact-checkers, and/or the media, and for which evidence of participation by Russia's agents was more than trivial. We also conducted nine semistructured expert interviews with individuals selected through purposive sampling, based on their geographically diverse expertise and backgrounds.

Review of Existing Research on Influence and Manipulation

In considering the potential application of research on influence and manipulation to Russia's malign or subversive information efforts, we conducted a review of the literature, limiting this review to articles, reports, and chapters written in, or available in, English. We conducted searches in Google Scholar that were focused on literature published between 1998 and 2019. Search terms that we used included, but were not limited to, the following: (disinformation OR misinformation OR falsehood*) AND (persuas* OR influenc* OR "attitude change" OR "opinion change") with language and publication year limits. We also reviewed the reference lists of relevant articles and chapters obtained through these searches to find additional literature not captured within the searches.

Practices for Defending Against Russia's Malign or Subversive Information Efforts

To address practices for defending against Russia's malign/subversive information efforts, we designed a systematic approach that focused on examining and synthesizing existing lines of research that describe *what* the Russians appear to be doing, *how* others defend against these kinds of information efforts, and *why* these efforts are effective under certain conditions. Following review of research on the characteristics of current Russian information efforts, we reviewed research that describes the current practices that state and nonstate actors are using to defend against Russian information efforts. Most of this research is from think tanks, government ministries, and intergovernmental alliances (e.g., North Atlantic Treaty Organization [NATO]).

³ In a separate report, we also characterized Russian aggression and vulnerable pathways on a social media platform.

Finally, we focused on academic literature that may explain why some defensive practices are more effective than others. We looked at research from communications, economics, political science, psychology, and sociology, among other disciplines. Unsurprisingly, much of this research uses different labels to explain similar concepts that relate to current Russian information efforts. Thus, our analysis attempts to find relevant linkages between these intersecting lines of research to explain which relevant practices are likely to be most effective for USEUCOM and its partners. In some cases, we found research that directly evaluates the effectiveness of defensive practices. In other cases, however, we found little to no direct research and had to draw on various lines of related studies to make informed speculation about the degree of effectiveness for each practice.

Key Terminology

Throughout this report, we reference several terms and concepts that have been variably defined across multiple sources. To promote a common understanding of how we use the terms and concepts across the chapters in this report, we briefly list and describe several core concepts in Table 1.1. In addition, throughout this report, we reference and describe each of these concepts in more depth. We include additional terms that are less distinctive or central to this report in Appendix A.

Organization of the Report

The remainder of this report describes apparent Russian information efforts and practices for defending against these efforts. Chapter Two describes a framework for conceptualizing these efforts, focusing on possible objectives and observable features of Russian efforts. Chapter Three describes TTPs that appear to be associated with Russia's efforts. Chapter Four reviews potential effects of these efforts by examining available literature and research. Chapter Five describes current practices that might be considered when developing defensive approaches to Russia's efforts. Appendixes provide additional information regarding terminology used in this report (Appendix A) and scoping of our review of Russia's efforts (Appendix B). In addition, Appendix C provides a discussion of Russia's apparent information warfare efforts in the Balkans, specifically.

Table 1.1
Key Terms and Brief Definitions

| Term | Definition |
|--|---|
| Content | The substance, theme, or message conveyed by the information effort, which may involve one or more <i>information manipulation techniques</i> |
| Information environment | The aggregate of individuals, organizations, and systems that collect, process, disseminate, or act on information ^a |
| Information manipulation techniques | Various, often interrelated, methods by which facts and information communicated to target audiences may be manipulated |
| Malign/subversive information efforts | Activities in and through the information environment that (1) are sustained and multidimensional, (2) involve distribution of false information or information that is manipulated in other clearly identifiable ways, and (3) appear to be conducted with political intention to shape perceptions or affect behavior |
| Russia and its agents | Individuals or entities believed to be acting on behalf of or in the interests of the Russian state, whether intentionally or unintentionally |
| Tactics, techniques, and procedures (TTPs) | Methods, patterns of activity, and processes implemented to perform particular functions |
| Target audience | An individual or group selected for influence. ^b These are the intended consumers of content |
| Target of interest | The entity that is the subject or focus of <i>malign/subversive information efforts</i> |

^a Joint Publication 3-13, *Information Operations*, Washington, D.C.: Joint Chiefs of Staff, November 27, 2012, incorporating change 1, November 20, 2014.

^b Joint Publication 3-13, 2012.

Framework for Conceptualizing Russia’s Malign or Subversive Information Efforts

This chapter introduces a framework for conceptualizing Russia’s malign or subversive activities in and through the information environment as related to European audiences. The framework is intended to serve as an analytical aid to understand and identify major strands of Russia’s information efforts in terms of their objectives and observable features. Chapter Three further presents a conceptualization of the TTPs Russia uses to enable these efforts. Appendix B provides additional information on how we scoped this framework, and Appendix C provides an application of the framework to the Balkans.

Many recent efforts have attempted to describe or conceptualize Russia’s use of the information environment as part of its broader influence efforts. Often, these works focus on what aims Russia is seeking to achieve, offering only examples or generalizations of how it goes about achieving those aims. Conversely, other discussions focus on the many techniques and tools Russia and its agents employ to spread its messages without much attention to describing objectives and goals. The structure we present aims to cover both aspects of Russian information efforts—offering a way to conceptualize the objectives that motivate these efforts as well as the means used to pursue those objectives.

Our framework is a stylized scheme—and one among any possible number—that can be used to conceptualize Russian malign or subversive information efforts. It is a means of organizing and understanding how Russia operates in and through the information environment based on observable behavior and an evidence-based understanding of Russia’s aims.¹ Importantly, it should not be presumed that Russia and its agents conceive of their own efforts in these terms or categories. Further, the structure should not be taken as an implication that Russian information efforts are planned and coordinated in a top-down manner in accordance with the objectives identified. The ways in which Russia organizes to conduct these activities is beyond the scope of this report.

¹ Paul, Clark, et al., 2018.

Objectives Associated with Russia's Malign or Subversive Information Efforts

The objectives motivating contemporary Russian information activities distinguish these efforts most markedly from Soviet-era disinformation and propaganda. No longer appearing to seek to convert the world to a particular ideology, Russia's contemporary malign or subversive information efforts appear to be deployed in service of diverse political objectives. We identify the main sets of objectives that seem to be motivating Russian information efforts as the highest "layer" of our framework. In particular, we identify *strategic objectives* at the highest level and *specific objectives*, which articulate more narrowly the aims pursued within each broader strategic objective category (see Figure 2.1). At both levels, the objectives are not mutually exclusive, and a given set of themes and messages can (and often does) advance more than one strategic or specific objective; similarly, the objectives are not wholly discrete, and progress on one objective may support progress on another objective.

The objectives pursued by Russia and its agents through its information efforts are not in themselves directly observable. Instead, we infer these objectives based on both Russia and its agents' actions and the content of Russian information efforts, as well as from what we know about Russia's understanding of its foreign policy goals and concerns. We focus on objectives most centrally implicated in Russia's information efforts in the European information environment. Thus, the framework does not address the primary objective of Russia's general approach to information efforts—that of regime preservation within Russia—because that is predominantly germane to domestic Russian audiences. We summarize the strategic and specific objectives that appear to motivate Russia's information efforts in Europe in Figure 2.1.

We posit three main objectives:

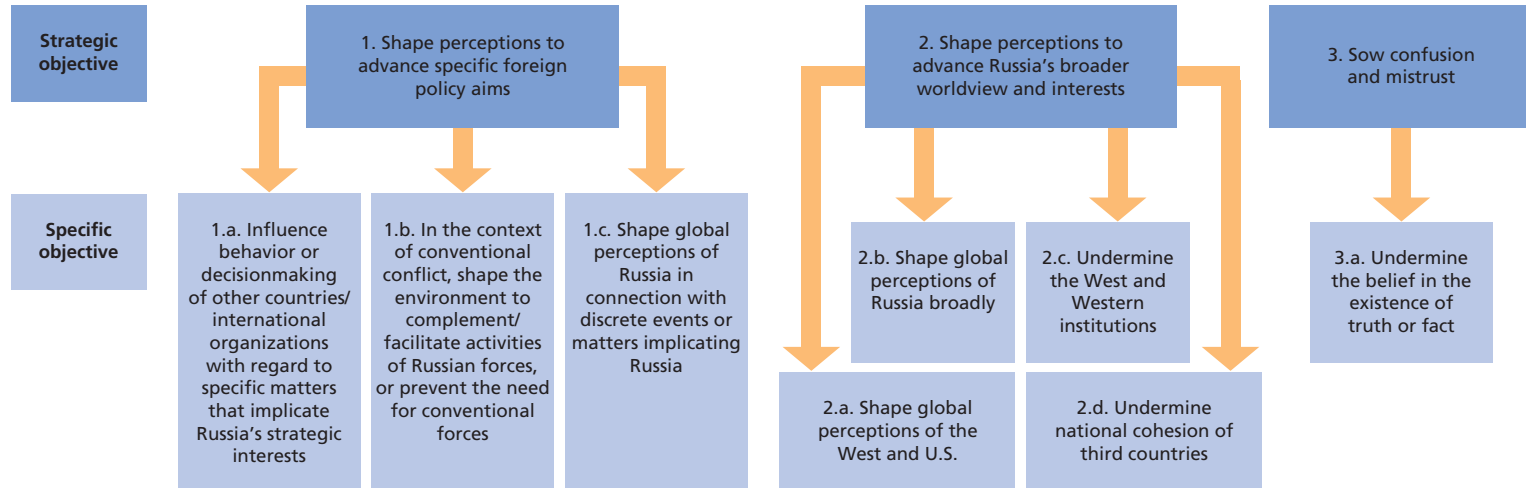
1. Shape perceptions to advance specific foreign policy aims
2. Shape perceptions to advance Russia's broader worldview and interests
3. Sow confusion and mistrust.

Specific supporting objectives related to each are described in what follows.

Strategic Objective 1. Shape Perceptions to Advance Specific Foreign Policy Aims

One objective behind Russia's malign or subversive information efforts is to advance its foreign policy aims in connection with *specific near-term developments or outcomes*. Whether the foreign policy aim at stake is broadly defined, such as enhancing Russia's status and power, or narrowly defined, such as stemming the expansion of NATO or advancing a favorable resolution of an armed conflict, Russia's interests are affected by a range of developments and outcomes within other countries and the international

Figure 2.1
Framework of Apparent Strategic and Specific Objectives Motivating Russian Information Efforts



arena.² Thus, some of Russia's information efforts seek to shape perceptions of target audiences so as to influence specific outcomes in the near term, such as decisions and actions pursued by actors outside Russia. This objective may be understood as encompassing several distinct and more specific objectives, described below.

1.a. Influence Behavior or Decisionmaking of Other Countries and/or International Organizations with Regard to Specific Matters That Implicate Russia's Interests

The decisions made by other states, international organizations, and publics can directly and indirectly affect Russian foreign policy interests. For instance, Russia would favor the election of policymakers who support policies in line with specific Russian interests, such as the lifting of sanctions imposed in the wake of Russia's role in the Ukrainian conflict or construction of pipelines lobbied for by Russia. Thus, Russia and its agents have deployed subversive information efforts in support of candidates in elections who favor the lifting of sanctions, as was the case with the campaign against Emmanuel Macron in favor of Marine Le Pen in the 2017 French presidential election.³

1.b. In the Context of Conventional Conflict, Shape the Environment to Complement/Facilitate Activities of Russian Forces, or Prevent the Need for Conventional Forces

While many recently observed Russian information efforts have taken place during peacetime, Russia also uses information efforts as part of its military operations. Russia's use of information efforts during its annexation of Crimea and invasion into Eastern Ukraine served a dual goal. First, Russia and its agents used intensive information efforts to set their own narrative about the causes and nature of the conflict as well as Russia's involvement. For instance, Russian officials and media sought to shape the narrative of reporting on their state's annexation of Crimea by denying the presence of Russian troops on the peninsula, among other things.⁴ Once Moscow acknowledged its involvement, its information efforts propagated the narrative that it was necessary to protect Russians and Russian-speakers from Kyiv-aligned Fascists.⁵ Second, the infor-

² For useful discussions of some aspects of Russia's foreign policy aims, see generally Andrew Radin and Clint Reach, *Russian Views of the International Order*, Santa Monica, Calif.: RAND Corporation, RR-1826-OSD, 2017; Olga Oliker, Christopher S. Chivvis, Keith Crane, Olesya Tkacheva, and Scott Boston, *Russian Foreign Policy in Historical and Current Context: A Reassessment*, Santa Monica, Calif.: RAND Corporation, PE-144-A, 2015.

³ "France's Marine Le Pen Urges End to Russia Sanctions," *BBC News*, March 24, 2017; Jean-Baptiste Jeangène Vilmer, Alexandre Escorcica, Marine Guillaume, and Janaina Herrera, *Information Manipulation: A Challenge for Our Democracy*, Paris: Policy Planning Staff (CAPS) of the Ministry for Europe and Foreign Affairs and the Institute for Strategic Research (IRSEM) of the Ministry for the Armed Forces, August 2018, pp. 106–116

⁴ Jill Dougherty, *Everyone Lies: The Ukraine Conflict and Russia's Media Transformation*, Discussion Paper Series, Shorenstein Center on Media, Politics and Public Policy, Harvard Kennedy School, #D-88, July 2014, p. 3; Keir Giles, *Russia's 'New' Tools for Confronting the West: Continuity and Innovation in Moscow's Exercise of Power*, London: Chatham House, March 2016b, pp. 31–32.

⁵ Dougherty, 2014, p. 4.

mation efforts also facilitated the military operation itself, by creating a “smokescreen” intended to “deceive, delay, and disrupt.”⁶

1.c. Shape Global Perceptions of Russia in Connection with Discrete Events or Matters Implicating Russia

Russia and its agents undertake information efforts to deflect criticism or defend the country in instances where the Russian state is accused of wrongdoing or is implicated in events that reflect poorly on Moscow. For instance, Russia and its agents launched information efforts in response to accusations by the United Kingdom (UK) and the West that the 2018 poisoning of former KGB agent Sergei Skripal was directed by the Kremlin in retaliation for the international attribution of responsibility to Russia for the downing of Malaysia Airlines Flight 17 (MH-17).⁷ This objective is usefully seen as distinct from Russian efforts to shape global perceptions of itself more broadly, which is addressed below.

Strategic Objective 2. Shape Perceptions to Advance Russia's Broader Worldview and Interests

Russian information efforts also appear to be aimed at advancing Russia's broader worldview and interests in the longer term, which are not tied to any particular developments or outcomes in the near term. Although Russia appears to have abandoned Soviet-era efforts to spread an ideology, it is still quite interested in popularizing its worldview and raising its esteem in the eyes of international audiences. Russia's information efforts are based on Russia's standoff with the Western world; thus, the worldviews and interests that Russia and its agents seek to advance are defined by opposition to certain aspects of the Western worldview and interests.⁸ Keir Giles, an expert on Russian information operations, aptly describes a similar subset of information efforts in terms of a “broad-based, long-term weakening and undermining of adversary societies overall, without necessarily any specific short-term goal other than increasing Russia's relative strength in a classic zero-sum approach.”⁹ This objective encompasses more specific objectives.

2.a. Shape Global Perceptions of the West and United States

Conveying and reinforcing a negative image of the West and the United States is one specific objective that falls within the larger, strategic objective of shaping perceptions. In particular, Russia's interest appears to be to diminish perceptions of the normative

⁶ Mark Laity, Chief Strategic Communications at SHAPE, quoted in Giles, 2016a, p. 46.

⁷ For example, “British Officials Probe 2,800 Russian Bots That ‘Spread Confusion’ After Salisbury Nerve Agent Attack on Former Spy,” *Daily Mail*, March 24, 2018; Ben Nimmo, “How MH17 Gave Birth to the Modern Russian Spin Machine,” *Foreign Policy*, September 29, 2018.

⁸ See Radin and Reach, 2017.

⁹ Giles, 2016a, p. 24.

authority of the West, emphasizing the West's decline, corruption, and moral bankruptcy. For instance, expert Constanze Stelzenmüller notes that content produced by Russian state media targeting Germany's Russian-German audience has "for years . . . been waging a relentless campaign against a 'Gayropa' of extreme liberal values and overrun by swarthy Muslim migrants, and other tropes of a decadent West."¹⁰ Similarly, Russia seeks to paint the West as an aggressive force that violates sovereignty and imposes its will through the intrusion into states' domestic affairs.¹¹ For example, Russia and its agents have consistently spread the message that the United States and the West instigated the Arab Spring to overthrow regimes displeasing to the West.¹²

2.b. Shape Global Perceptions of Russia Broadly

A corollary objective appears to involve the portrayal of Russia as a positive counterforce to the West. Russia positions itself as a defender of conservative values and as a moral force that resists Western decay as a result of its liberal values.¹³ Vladimir Putin and Kremlin ideologues publicly announced Russia to be the leader of traditional values in 2013, a message Russia's agents have perpetuated since.¹⁴ At the same time, Russia portrays itself as a force for stability in the world and a defender of international legal norms that it claims are under attack by the United States and the West, such as sovereignty and noninterference in other states' domestic political affairs.¹⁵ For instance, Russian sources seek to advance a perception that Russia is the only international player interested in bringing peace to Syria, while the United States is only emboldening or helping ISIS (Islamic State of Iraq and Syria).¹⁶

¹⁰ Constanze Stelzenmüller, "The Impact of Russian Interference on Germany's 2017 Elections," testimony before the U.S. Senate Select Committee on Intelligence, June 28, 2017.

¹¹ For example, Stelzenmüller observes that Russian efforts seek to undermine "the legitimacy of the West as a normative force upholding a global order based on universal rules rather than might alone" (Stelzenmüller, 2017).

¹² For example, see "US Triggered Arab Spring, Destabilized Mid East - Egyptian Presidential Hopeful," *Sputnik International*, March 25, 2018.

¹³ Radin and Reach, 2017, p. 29; Melik Kaylan, "Kremlin Values: Putin's Strategic Conservatism," *World Affairs*, Vol. 177, No. 1, May/June 2014.

¹⁴ As Krekó and coauthors observe, "Part of the agenda to alter Russia's image abroad is to stress the country's role in saving 'traditional European values,' elevating Putin as a 'conservative icon' and the 'vanguard of a new 'Conservative International.'" Péter Krekó Lóránt Györi, Jekatyerina Dunajeva, Jakub Janda, Ondřej Kundra, Grigorij Mesežnikov, Juraj Mesík, Maciej Szylar, and Anton Shekhovtsov., *The Weaponization of Culture: Kremlin's Traditional Agenda and the Export of Values to Central Europe*, Budapest: Political Capital, 2016, p. 16; see also Brian Whitmore, "Vladimir Putin, Conservative Icon," *The Atlantic*, December 20, 2013.

¹⁵ Radin and Reach, 2017, pp. 19–21.

¹⁶ For example, RT published an interview with an alleged "former British diplomat" asserting that "Russia is still trying to achieve stability and peace," while the United States is "pretending that they are against ISIS when they in fact they are arming ISIS." "US Warning to Russia 'Unprofessional, Threatening, Tactless & Undiplomatic' - fmr. British Diplomat," *RT*, September 20, 2016. On the true identity of the "former British diplomat," see David Alandette, "RT, Sputnik and the New Russian War," *El Pais*, January 2, 2018.

2.c. Undermine the Unity of the West and Western Institutions

In Russia's worldview, the expansion of the reach of Western institutions comes at the expense of Russia's own influence. Thus, Russia and its agents appear to use information efforts to undermine such institutional expansion and to emphasize fissures within the Western world.¹⁷ As Anders Fogh Rasmussen, a former head of NATO and prime minister of Denmark, summarized it, Russia's objective is to "undermine the political cohesion in Western institutions."¹⁸ For example, as some evidence suggests, Russia and its agents conducted malign information efforts in support of the UK referendum to leave the European Union (EU; Brexit).¹⁹ Similarly, Russian information efforts sought to create a perception that the Dutch population would likewise prefer to leave the EU, using manipulated polling.²⁰ Western institutions also include core democratic institutions, and Russian information efforts have apparently sought to foster a lack of trust in basic democratic institutions.²¹ According to some high-level assessments of Russian goals, some of Russia's information campaigns surrounding elections were motivated by the aims of "delegitimizing the democratic process," rather than, or in addition to, supporting or hindering some candidate or political force.²²

2.d. Undermine National Cohesion of Other Countries

Similarly, the internal unity and cohesion of individual members of the West make for a more effective and cohesive alliance. Thus, Russia and its agents also appear to use information efforts to magnify economic, social, political, and cultural divisions and

¹⁷ Vilmer et al., 2018, p. 53; Stelzenmüller, 2017.

¹⁸ Joe Parkinson and Georgi Kantchev, "Document: Russia Uses Rigged Polls, Fake News to Sway Foreign Elections," *Wall Street Journal*, March 23, 2017.

¹⁹ Analyses conducted on new data released by Twitter suggest that Russian-linked actors conducted a troll campaign on the social media platform targeting the Brexit vote: the Internet Research Agency appears to have conducted a coordinated trolling campaign using the hashtag #ReasonsToLeaveEU and #Brexit, with "some of the posts [coming] from accounts masquerading as news organizations or journalists," and others from "internet personalities crafted over years by Russian hackers." Matthew Field and Mike Wright, "Russian Trolls Sent Thousands of Pro-Leave Messages on the Day of Brexit Referendum, Twitter Data Reveals," *The Telegraph*, October 17, 2018.

²⁰ Before the Dutch general elections of 2017, RT claimed that the majority of the Dutch populace would prefer "Nexit," or leaving the EU, based on misleading reporting on poll results ("Russia Attempted to Influence French and Dutch Elections with Suspect Polls," 2017).

²¹ For example, Giles identifies as a "key element of subversion campaigns," the "spreading disinformation among the population about the work of state bodies, undermining their authority, and discrediting administrative structures" (Giles, 2016a, p. 24).

²² Esther King, "Russian Hackers Targeting Germany: Intelligence Chief," *Politico*, November 29, 2016; see also Stelzenmüller, who characterizes the purpose of Russian information efforts in Germany as "shatter[ing] Germans' confidence in the stability and integrity of their country and its institutions, as well as to sow confusion, doubt, and distrust" (Stelzenmüller, 2017).

sources of internal instability within Western countries.²³ For example, Russia and its agents appear to seize on secessionist movements, as in the case of Catalonia's push for independence: Russia has little strategic interest in Catalonia as such, but appears to have actively sought to inflame the division over the issue of Catalan independence through social media–focused information efforts.²⁴ Such efforts extend to both “core” members, or countries that Russia views as more or less firmly integrated into the West, and more recent joiners of Western institutions, whose loyalties and alignment Russia views as more or less susceptible to influence.

Strategic Objective 3. Sow Confusion and Mistrust

Sowing confusion and mistrust seems to be both an objective animating Russian information efforts and a tactic employed in service of other objectives. Numerous experts and government officials conclude that an attempt to establish confusion, chaos, uncertainty, and mistrust in the possibility of truth is a Russian objective in its own right.²⁵ In the words of Peter Pomerantsev, a Soviet-born journalist and author, “it’s not so much an information war, but a war on information.”²⁶ Thus, we treat this as a distinct objective while recognizing that it will sometimes be used as a means in service of other objectives.²⁷

3.a. Undermine Belief in the Existence of Truth or Facts

A key way in which the strategic objective manifests itself is through an apparent Russian purpose to foster a sense that truth or facts are unascertainable through available means or simply do not exist. In other words, Russian information efforts attempt to establish doubt in the existence of truth, and instead reinforce the idea that only various agenda-driven versions of events exist.²⁸ As Russia expert Mark Galeotti puts it,

²³ See Alina Polyakova and Spencer Boyer, *The Future of Political Warfare: Russia, the West, and the Coming Age of Global Digital Competition*, Washington, D.C.: The Brookings Institution, 2018, p. 3.

²⁴ As Vilmer and coauthors point out, “Catalonia is not and has never been a concern for Moscow. The vote [i.e., the Catalan referendum on independence] was an opportunity for the Kremlin to divide—and thereby weaken—European States” (Vilmer et al., 2018, p. 94).

²⁵ Peter Pomerantsev and Michael Weiss, *The Menace of Unreality: How the Kremlin Weaponizes Information, Culture and Money*, New York: Institute of Modern Russia, The Interpreter, 2014, p. 6; Vilmer et al., 2018, p. 50, quoting the 2017 Swedish National Security Strategy.

²⁶ Stephen Castle, “A Russian TV Insider Describes a Modern Propaganda Machine,” *New York Times*, February 13, 2015.

²⁷ It is worth noting that the “erosion of trust and reliance on objective facts in political debate and civil discourse” is a broader trend, which has been observed in the United States and beyond. For a detailed discussion, see Jennifer Kavanagh and Michael D. Rich, *Truth Decay: An Initial Exploration of the Diminishing Role of Facts and Analysis in American Public Life*, Santa Monica, Calif.: RAND Corporation, RR-2314-RC, 2018, p. 2.

²⁸ For example, the prominent political technologist and longtime Kremlin insider Gleb Pavlovsky explains that “[t]he main difference between propaganda in the USSR and the new Russia . . . is that in Soviet times the concept of truth was important. Even if they were lying they took care to prove what they were doing was ‘the truth.’”

“The next best thing to being able to convince people of your argument, after all, is to make them disbelieve all arguments.”²⁹ This aim is pursued through the undermining of trust toward established media and information sources, and through a creation of an “information fog” that undermines the ability of societies to establish a factual reality,” in the words of Janis Sarts, director of NATO Strategic Communications Centre of Excellence.³⁰ The fact that Russia and its agents often produce and disseminate contradictory narratives for the same event—as it has done with the downing of MH-17, the Skripal poisoning, and the chemical attacks in Douma—is often cited as evidence for this objective.³¹

Variety of Information Efforts

Although the objectives apparently motivating Russia's information efforts are not mutually exclusive and a single information effort can serve multiple objectives simultaneously, it is possible and useful to connect the objectives to observable features of the efforts. This allows U.S. and allied observers to form expectations about what kind of information efforts to expect and when to expect them, and to recognize and better understand campaigns while they are in progress.

Some objectives are pursued through campaigns focused around a discrete, ascertainable event or development. These consist of a seemingly coordinated set of TTPs aimed at the same end. Other objectives, by contrast, are pursued on an ongoing, continuous manner and are not tied to such time-delimited contingencies. These consist of TTPs that sometimes lack the appearance of a coordinated effort. We distinguish three types of information efforts conducted by Russia and its agents: *proactive*, *reactive*, and *steady-state*, where the first two are pursued through focused campaigns, and the latter through ongoing, continuous efforts.

Campaigns that are focused in time and oriented toward influencing particular events or outcomes may be proactive or reactive. *Proactive* campaigns are waged to prospectively influence future outcomes of events or perceptions in other countries with regard to issues of current concern, in which Russian participation is usually not invited. In such campaigns, Russia and its agents seek to influence the outcome

Now no one even tries proving the ‘truth.’ You can just say anything. Create realities.” Peter Pomerantsev and Michael Weiss, “The Menace of Uncertainty: How the Kremlin Weaponizes Information, Culture, and Money,” *The Interpreter*, 2014. See also Robinson et al., 2018, p. 65; Vilmer et al., 2018, p.75.

²⁹ Mark Galeotti, *Controlling Chaos: How Russia Manages Its Political War in Europe*, London: European Council of Foreign Relations, 2017a, p. 6.

³⁰ Janis Sarts, Director of NATO Strategic Communications Centre of Excellence on Russian Interference in European Elections, United States Senate Select Committee on Intelligence, prepared statement, June 28, 2017, p. 31.

³¹ See, for example, Vilmer et al., 2018, p. 75.

of future events. *Reactive* campaigns are waged largely in response to past events or ongoing developments, rather than anticipation of future events. In such campaigns, Russia and its agents seek to exert influence over various audiences' perceptions of the events. *Steady-state* efforts, by contrast, are conducted without focused campaigns and are aimed at shaping perceptions more generally, not necessarily connected to any particular outcomes or issue.

Each of the strategic and specific objectives we identify is pursued through one or more types of information efforts, as summarized in Figure 2.2.

Information Efforts of Strategic Objective 1

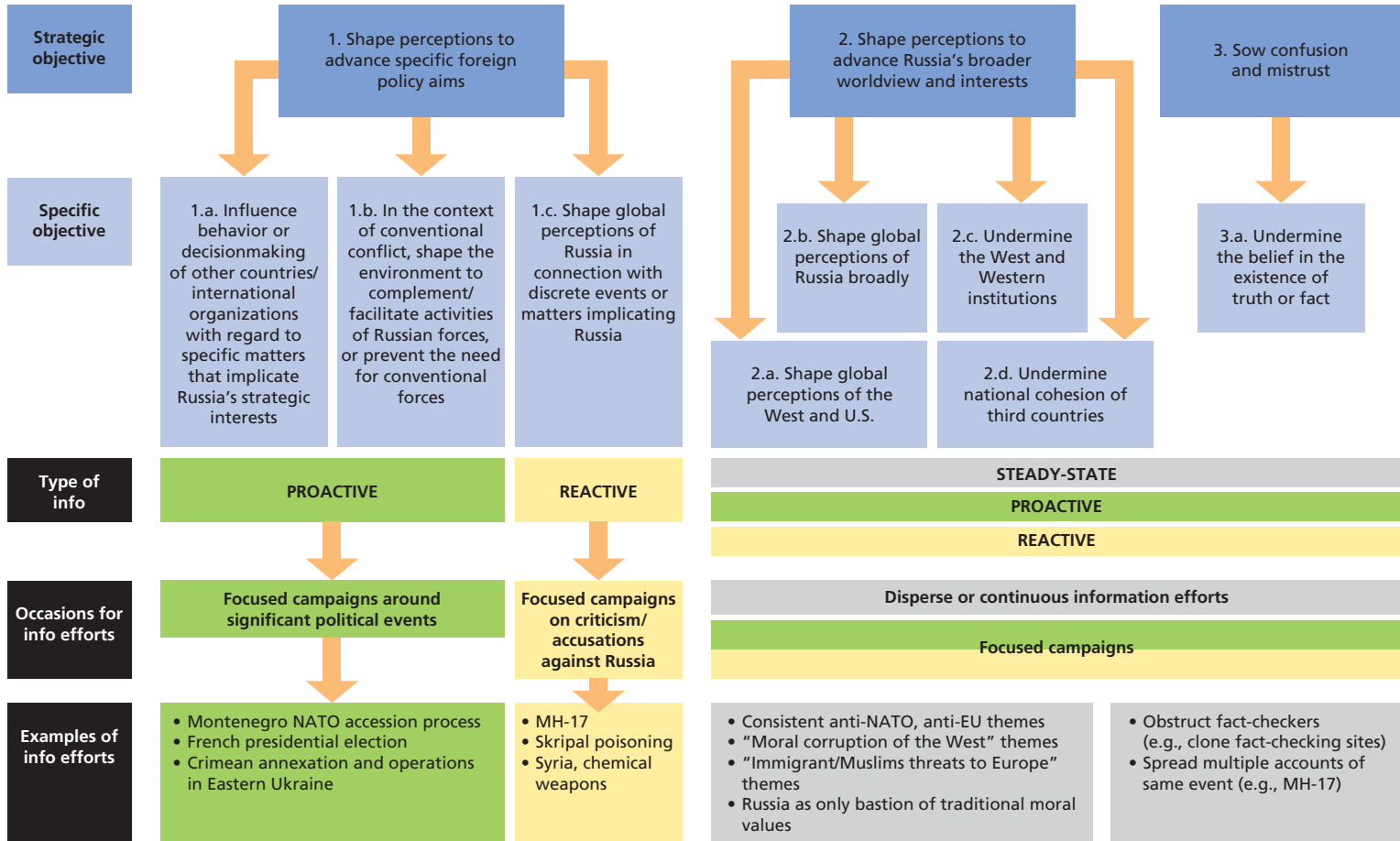
The first strategic objective—shaping perceptions to advance specific foreign policy aims—is often pursued through focused campaigns. Proactive campaigns appear to be typical when the specific objectives are to influence the behavior or decisionmaking of other actors with regard to matters that implicate Russia's interests (1a) or to shape the environment in the context of conventional conflict (1b). In service of the former (1a), proactive campaigns usually appear to be launched in anticipation of a specific significant event, such as an election or a significant political decision. The numerous instances of Russian attempts to influence the course of elections, referenda, and major state decisions by European countries are all examples of such focused campaigns in service of this objective.³² For instance, information efforts targeting the 2017 French presidential election, specifically candidate Emmanuel Macron, is an example of a proactive campaign—it is believed by experts (though unconfirmed by French authorities) that information efforts were launched by Russia and its agents in advance of the election to influence the outcome of the election.³³ Proactive campaigns are launched in connection with particular goals or developments in the conflict, that is, shaping the environment in the context of conventional conflict (1b). For example, information efforts were used as part of the Russian military's seizure of Crimea to both frame the strategic narratives surrounding the conflicts and facilitate the operational and tactical activities of Russian forces.³⁴

³² For a catalog of elections and referenda in which Russia and its agents have been suspected to use information efforts (as well as other means of influence), see Lucan Ahmad Way and Adam Casey, "Is Russia a Threat to Western Democracy? Russian Intervention in Foreign Elections, 1991–2017," Memo for Global Populisms as a Threat to Democracy? Freeman Spogli Institute for International Studies, Stanford University, Stanford, Calif., November 3, 2017.

³³ For a more detailed discussion of the 2017 efforts targeting the French election, see Vilmer et al., 2018, pp. 106–116.

³⁴ See Michael Kofman, Katya Migacheva, Brian Nichiporuk, Andrew Radin, Olesya Tkacheva, and Jenny Oberholtzer, *Lessons from Russia's Operations in Crimea and Eastern Ukraine*, Santa Monica, Calif.: RAND Corporation, RR-1498-A, 2017, pp. 23–24. For further discussion of Russia's use of information efforts in the prelude to its annexation of Crimea, see Kofman et al., 2017, pp. 12–16, 28–29, 50–54.

Figure 2.2
Framework of the Variety of Russian Information Efforts



The last specific objective within the first strategic objective—influencing outcomes or perceptions with regard to matters in which Russia is directly implicated (1c)—is typically pursued through reactive efforts. These usually appear to be prompted by criticisms of or accusations of wrongdoing leveled against Russia. Salient recent examples include Russia's military action in Eastern Ukraine, the downing of MH-17, the poisoning of Skripal, and the interference in elections. In each of these cases, official denials of wrongdoing are supported by multifaceted information campaigns using a variety of TTPs to reach a variety of audiences.

Information Efforts of Strategic Objectives 2 and 3

The second and third strategic objectives—shaping perceptions to advance Russia's broader worldview and interests (2) and sowing confusion and mistrust (3)—may be pursued through both proactive and reactive focused efforts, but are also a prominent part of the background, steady-state information flow from Russia and its agents toward the external world. On the one hand, the specific objectives within these broad aims are often pursued in conjunction with the objectives of advancing specific foreign policy aims in the near term. For example, efforts to influence a forthcoming decision of a country with respect to NATO or EU membership (1a) will also necessarily aim at undermining the unity of Western institutions (2c). Likewise, efforts to shape perceptions in connection with events implicating Russia (1c) will usually also involve efforts aimed at shaping the perceptions of Russia more broadly (2b). On the other hand, the distinctive characteristic of efforts in service of the latter two strategic objectives is that they produce a continuous, steady-state stream of messages by means of the entire range of TTPs at the disposal of Russia and its agents. For example, one can easily locate content portraying the moral decline of the West and the traditional moral values protected by Russia at any given point, across a variety of media controlled by Russia and its agents. The same is true when it comes to narratives and stories that seek to undermine the credibility of Western political institutions or erode faith in notions of objective and truthful reporting.

In sum, U.S. and allied observers should be alert to the possibility of focused campaigns in the lead-up to events whose outcomes are implicated in Russia's foreign policy interests, and in the wake of allegations of wrongdoing by Russia or its partners. While vigilance to such is warranted, it is important to note that Russian information efforts have not in fact been detected in *every* recent European election, and should probably not be expected in every instance.³⁵ At the same time, observers should recognize more disperse, ongoing efforts connected to Strategic Objectives 2 and 3.

³⁵ For example, no notable malign information efforts campaign was detected during the 2017 UK "snap" election or the 2017 German federal election, in spite of prior Russian information efforts directed at both of these countries. Russian efforts were also limited in the Dutch 2017 general election and did not have the appearance of an organized campaign. See Erik Brattberg and Tim Maurer, *Russian Election Interference: Europe's Counter to Fake News and Cyber Attacks*, Washington, D.C.: Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 2018, pp. 14, 15–16, 6.

Chapter Summary

Although not explicitly involving distinct objectives or top-down planning, Russia's malign or subversive information activities can be conceptualized within a framework of objectives and information efforts. This framework might assist with better understanding and addressing the information activities of Russia and its agents. Strategic objectives within such a framework include the following: (1) Shape perceptions to advance specific foreign policy aims, (2) shape perceptions to advance Russia's broader worldview, and (3) sow confusion and mistrust. A series of more specific objectives, derived from observation of apparent Russian activities, fall within these broader, strategic objectives, and these objectives are variously pursued as part of proactive campaigns, reactive campaigns, or long-term steady-state efforts.

In the next chapter we complete the framework by describing the various TTPs that Russia uses as part of these efforts. Perhaps surprisingly, Russia uses the entire range of TTPs as needed to meet specific objectives, with all TTPs used to at least some extent across all objectives.

The complete framework (as described in Chapters Two and Three) should allow one to take any Russian message or message set and identify the objective or objectives pursued, whether it is part of a proactive campaign, a reactive campaign, or a steady-state effort, and which TTPs that message or set incorporates.

Tactics, Techniques, and Procedures in Russia's Malign or Subversive Information Efforts

Chapter Two described a framework of objectives that can help to organize and conceptualize the malign or subversive information efforts implemented by Russia and its agents in Europe. Better understanding and countering Russian information efforts requires answering a further question: How do Russia and its agents pursue these objectives? To answer this question, we identify and describe key dimensions that define the TTPs used by Russia and its agents in Europe, which span the production, dissemination, and consumption of information: content, information manipulation techniques, dissemination techniques, and audiences. Specifically, *content* employing *information manipulation techniques* is distributed via *dissemination techniques* to various *audiences*. In this chapter, we synthesize across each of these four dimensions so as to characterize the currently key known (and suspected) Russian information efforts. This information can help observers understand the range and variation in the TTPs and to appreciate the ways in which the first three dimensions are tailored to different audiences. These TTPs can be and have been used to support pursuit of all the Russian objectives identified in Chapter Two.

What Content Is Produced and Disseminated by Russia and Its Agents?

The first dimension of TTPs is the content, or the substance, theme, or message conveyed by the information effort. The content produced by Russia and its agents is highly diverse and difficult, if not impossible, to capture completely and in full detail. However, existing research and analysis suggests a set of content categories that appear to be most prominent and commonly employed, summarized in Table 3.1.

Malign or Attack Other Countries' Government/Nongovernment Actors

One common theme uniting Russia's disparate information efforts entails maligning (in the sense of slandering or falsely accusing) and otherwise attacking other countries' government institutions, politicians, officials, and other prominent individuals. Such

Table 3.1
Types of Content Disseminated by Russia and Its Agents

| Content Category | Description | Example |
|---|--|---|
| Malign or attack other countries' government and nongovernment actors | Maligning (slandering or falsely accusing) and otherwise attacking other countries' government institutions, politicians, officials, and/or other actors | Emmanuel Macron is gay, "agent of the big American banking system" ^a |
| Malign or attack Western actions, policies, institutions, culture | Maligning the West broadly (Europe and the U.S.) through attacks on its alleged flaws, culture, actions, or policies | West foments color revolutions to "destroy statehood and sovereignty under the pretext of democratization" ^b |
| Promote other countries' government and non-government actors | Promoting other countries' actors, typically those who are seen as friendly to Russia's interests and/or those who favor actions friendly to Russian interests | More favorable coverage of François Fillon and Marine Le Pen than opponent Emmanuel Macron ^c |
| Promote Russian actions, policies, institutions, culture, successes | Promoting and bolstering Russian image abroad by amplifying Russian successes and promoting Russia's image as a counterpoint to the West | Messaging by Sputnik France highlighting Russia's successes in hosting the 2018 World Cup and critiquing Russophobic skeptics ^d |
| Appeal to common heritage, culture, history, interests, etc. | Promoting cultural, linguistic, religious, or ethnic ties between target audiences and Russia and/or Russian people | "Unwavering Brotherhood and Friendship" between Russia and Serbia ^e |
| Defend or deflect from accusations of wrongdoing | Responding to accusations of wrongdoing or criticism by denying Russia's role, offering competing narratives, or attacking their accusers | Multiple, conflicting explanations for the downing of MH-17 and the poisoning of Sergei Skripal |
| Fan divisive sentiments | Stoking existing divisions within and between countries, whether based on historical grievances or currently contentious issues | Messaging exploiting anti-migrant and anti-Islamic sentiments; associating ills of migrant influx with Western states and institutions ^f |

^a "Ex-French Economy Minister Macron Could Be 'US Agent' Lobbying Banks' Interests," 2017.

^b "Western 'Attempts to Carry Out Color Revolutions in Russia Futile,'" 2017.

^c Prior to the first round of voting, "evidence shows Russian state media used dubious opinion poll data in the run up to the French election to promote François Fillon, at a time when mainstream polls showed him trailing in third place" ("Russia Attempted to Influence French and Dutch Elections with Suspect Polls," 2017). After the first round, analysis suggests Sputnik France's reporting was more favorable to Le Pen than to Macron (Digital Forensic Research Lab, 2017).

^d "Coupe du Monde 2018 en Russie: Une réussite totale?" 2018.

^e For an example of content focusing on the countries' political, economic, and cultural ties, see "Russia and Serbia: Unwavering Brotherhood and Friendship," 2017.

^f For example, Sputnik Česká Republika (Czech Republic) published an article falsely claiming that the EU's Euro-Mediterranean Free Trade Area (MEDA) program allows for the immigration of 56 million Muslims to the EU, though the program is exclusively focused on issues related to free trade (EU vs. Disinfo, undated b). Also see EU vs. Disinfo, 2017. It is important to reiterate that the connections between some of the cited outlets sowing anti-Islamist and antimigrant messaging and Russia are murky.

attacks are commonplace across different contexts. For example, information campaigns launched around elections malign and attack officials running for office, and those aimed at influencing a particular decision—such as a country's joining NATO or the EU—malign and attack individuals who favor joining these institutions.¹ Attacks against individuals not affiliated with any government are also part of the repertoire, focusing on individuals who are publicizing information adverse to Russia, such as journalists or experts.² This content can serve a range of objectives, including influencing the decisionmaking and behavior of other countries' populations to Russia's advantage, shaping perceptions in connection with matters implicating Russia, shaping perceptions of the West, and undermining the unity of both the West and individual nations.

Malign or Attack Western Actions, Policies, Institutions, Culture

Russian information efforts are particularly saturated with themes maligning or attacking the West—that is, Europe and the United States—rather than specific national governments or individuals. These span outright fabrications and conspiracy theories, such as a suggestion that the United States is behind the Ebola outbreak, as well as attacks on actual U.S. and Western actions.³ Staple themes include attacks on the U.S. and Western alliance on the basis of its claimed unilateralism, imperialism, and hypocrisy, such as claims that the West cynically uses the “pretext of democratization” to foment “color revolutions” in other countries to “destroy statehood and sovereignty.”⁴ Assaults on Western culture feature an emphasis on its moral degeneracy and decline exemplified by familiar tropes in Russian media portraying Europe as “Gayropa” (insinuating corrupt influence of the lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender [LGBT] move-

¹ Information efforts surrounding elections often spread false information about a candidate disfavored by Russia; for example, in France, Russian information efforts alleged that Emmanuel Macron was secretly gay, controlled by the American banking system, and supported by Saudi Arabia (“Ex-French Economy Minister Macron Could Be ‘US Agent’ Lobbying Banks’ Interests,” 2017; Vilmer et al., 2018, p. 89).

² For example, pro-Russian “trolls,” some of whom may be affiliated with Russia, mounted a sustained attack on the Finnish journalist Jessikka Aro, who was investigating Russian information activities. “Jessikka Aro: How Pro-Russian Trolls Tried to Destroy Me,” *BBC Trending*, October 6, 2017. Similarly, pro-Kremlin media launched a campaign to discredit Eliot Higgins of Bellingcat, to undermine the credibility of his conclusions regarding Russia's responsibility for the downing of MH-17. Ben Nimmo, “Putin Sets His Disinformation Trolls on the MH 17 Investigators,” *Newsweek*, September 28, 2016; Steven Livingston, “Disinformation Campaigns Target Tech-Enabled Citizen Journalists,” *Brookings Institution*, March 2, 2017.

³ Pomerantsev and Weiss, 2014, p. 16.

⁴ For instance, Sputnik amplified the comments of Nikolai Patrushev, the secretary of Russia's security council, accusing Western “spin doctors” of using color revolutions as a tool in Russia. See “Western ‘Attempts to Carry Out Color Revolutions in Russia Futile,’” 2017. Additionally, support for the secession of Kosovo, for example, is used to highlight perceived hypocrisy of the West when it comes to international law. See “Why Isn't NATO Bombing Madrid for 78 Days?” *RT*, October 4, 2017. Narratives featuring the hypocrisy of the West are frequent in Russian information efforts and also propagated by Russian officials. Shaun Walker, “Putin Condemns Western Hypocrisy as He Confirms Annexation of Crimea,” *The Guardian*, March 18, 2014.

ment) and “Eurabia” (insinuating a takeover by Arab or Muslim immigrants).⁵ Generally, an analysis of all the Sputnik articles published in 2015 in Swedish identifies “crisis in the West” and “Western aggressiveness” as two of the top three themes.⁶ Such themes appear to be commonly deployed in information efforts aimed at shaping perceptions of the West, undermining its unity, and influencing other countries’ decision-making or behavior.

Promote Other Countries’ Government/Nongovernment Actors

The converse of maligning or attacking is promoting other countries’ government institutions, politicians, officials, and other prominent individuals. Russia’s information efforts promote those candidates for public office who are viewed as friendlier to Russia’s interests, as well as individuals or groups who favor policies and decisions friendly to Russian interests.⁷ For example, there is evidence that Russia promoted far-right candidates Marine Le Pen and Geert Wilders in the French presidential election and the Dutch general election, respectively.⁸ Generally, Russia and its agents are believed to disseminate content favorable to politicians or prominent figures who oppose their countries’ NATO or EU membership, support Russia’s actions in Crimea, or oppose the sanctions regime.⁹ Russian sources also tend to promote divisive and controversial

⁵ “Gayropa” themes are often supported by fabrications such as that of a “zoophilic brothel” in Denmark—a false story amplified by NTV, a Russian TV channel owned by the state-run company Gazprom, which has circulated other sources in Georgia, Belarus, and Russia. See “No, Denmark Is Not Legalising Sexual Abuse of Animals,” *EU vs Disinfo*, September 9, 2017; Vilmer et al., 2018, p. 78.

⁶ Martin Kragh and Sebastian Åsberg, “Russia’s Strategy for Influence Through Public Diplomacy and Active Measures: The Swedish Case,” *Journal of Strategic Studies*, Vol. 40, No. 6, 2017, p. 782. To be sure, not every story—and perhaps not even most stories—pertaining to these themes would qualify as malign or subversive information efforts; however, the authors observe that “[m]isleading half-truths, such as the narrow focus on . . . the deployment of NATO troops in Europe, are the norm” (p. 788).

⁷ For example, Russian information efforts promoted François Fillon and then Marine Le Pen, alongside attacking her opponent in the French presidential elections (“Russia Attempted to Influence French and Dutch Elections with Suspect Polls,” 2017; Digital Forensic Research Lab, 2017). Favorable content often follows other means of support and official ties between Russia and the promoted individual or group; for instance, Le Pen’s Front National also received funding from Russia. Gabriel Gatehouse, “Marine Le Pen: Who’s Funding France’s Far Right?” *BBC News*, April 3, 2017.

⁸ Sarts, 2017

The Atlantic Council’s Digital Forensic Research Lab has tracked down networks of bots involved in promoting the candidates favored by Russia in various elections including Geert Wilders in the Dutch general election campaign and Marine Le Pen in the French Presidential election campaign. Although their connection to the Kremlin cannot be confirmed, the narrative spread by the bots was identical to that of the Kremlin-funded media, and synergies between two were frequent and consistent.

(p. 4)

⁹ For example, it is suspected that Russian information efforts promoted Milos Zeman, the Czechs’ pro-Russian president, and contributed to the fabricated content circulating about the pro-Euroatlanticist challenger, Jiří

figures, such as separatist and extreme nationalist leaders.¹⁰ This content is employed much for the same objectives as above.

Promote Russian Actions, Policies, Institutions, Culture, Successes

The counterpart to maligning the West is promoting Russia and building up its image abroad. The analysis of all the Sputnik articles published in 2015 in Swedish, for instance, identifies “positive image of Russia” as the second most represented theme.¹¹ Promotion efforts often portray Russia as a moral bulwark of traditional, Christian values in the face of Western moral decay, as well as a powerful force that stands up to Western unilateralism on the international stage.¹² These themes are often used to shape perceptions of Russia but also serve other objectives, such as influencing other countries’ decisionmaking and behavior, where the decision in question may implicate Russia.

Appeal to Common Heritage, Culture, History, Interests

Another set of themes seeks to foster perceptions of commonality between particular audiences and Russia or the Russian people. These themes can include appeals to shared religious values, a shared ethnocultural background, and a shared history of opposition of particular forces, as well as the union of contemporary interests and political values. For example, appeals to shared Christian Orthodox values and pan-Slavism are common for the appropriate audiences. These themes can also serve a diversity of objections, including undermining the cohesion of the West and individual countries and in pursuit of influence over other countries’ decisionmaking.¹³

Defend or Deflect from Accusations of Wrongdoing

A distinctive subset of content propagated by Russia and its agents responds to numerous accusations of wrongdoing or criticisms of Russia’s actions, or the actions of its agents abroad. The responses can take various forms, from flat denials to obfuscations and rhetorical fallacies, to floating multiple inconsistent alternative accounts for the

Drahoš, in the 2018 Czech presidential election. Alan Crosby, “Fake News Kicks into High Gear in Czech Presidential Runoff,” *Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty*, January 21, 2018.

¹⁰ For example, Russia’s support for Milorad Dodik, president of Republika Srpska and leader of the movement for greater Bosnian Serb autonomy, is well established. David Salvo and Stephanie De Leon, *Russia’s Efforts to Destabilize Bosnia and Herzegovina*, Washington, D.C.: Alliance for Securing Democracy, The German Marshall Fund of the United States, No. 017, 2018, p. 4. For further discussion, see section on the Balkan states below.

¹¹ Kragh and Åsberg, 2017, 782. To be sure, positive portrayals of Russia as such do not necessarily qualify as malign information efforts; yet, as the authors observe, “[m]isleading half-truths . . . are the norm” (p. 788).

¹² Krekó et al., 2016, p. 12, describing Russia’s self-promotion as “a moral fighter against Western amoralism.”

¹³ According to Pomerantsev and Weiss, “[t]he Kremlin is helping foster an anti-Western, authoritarian Internationale that is becoming ever more popular in Central Europe and throughout the world” (Pomerantsev and Weiss, 2014, p. 6).

outcome of which Russia is accused. Some of the most notorious Russian information campaigns use this content, including its denying responsibility for the downing of MH-17, denying poisoning Sergei Skripal, blaming the Syrian opposition rather than its client President Assad for the use of chemical weapons in the Syrian conflict, and interfering in elections.¹⁴ As the examples suggest, such themes are typically deployed to shape perceptions of matters in which Russia is implicated.

Fan Divisive Sentiments

An important subset of themes in Russian malign information efforts stokes or fuels divisions, both within and between countries. Content that serves this function includes divisive themes channeled to one or both sides of contentious issues such as immigration, gay rights, and minority rights. It also includes content that fans the flames of historically rooted grievances between ethnic groups, religions, or nations, including separatism.¹⁵ For example, in the lead-up to the 2017 Catalan independence referendum, Russian media outfits such as Russia Today (RT) and Sputnik pushed content supportive of independence, which was often fabricated or manipulated, combined with a social media campaign.¹⁶ This also includes inflating the conflict between a particular society and the West or Western institutions, and between nationalist and pro-Western factions within a society—for example, Russian-produced content sought to stoke lingering anti-NATO sentiment in Montenegro prior to the country's accession to the alliance.¹⁷ And, closer to Russia's central concerns, this includes instigating and stoking conflicts between Ukraine and other countries, especially in Eastern Europe.¹⁸ These themes appear to be calculated to undermine the cohesion of the West and individual countries, but also in service of nearly every other specific objective identified above.

¹⁴ Alexandra Ma and Kieran Corcoran, "Russia Is Pushing These 15 Mutually Contradictory Theories to Claim They Weren't Behind the Nerve Agent Attack," *Business Insider*, April 18, 2018; Nimmo, 2018; Adam Rawnsley, "Russian Trolls Denied Syrian Gas Attack—Before It Happened," *The Daily Beast*, April 12, 2018.

¹⁵ Appeals to historical grievances often feature stoking revisionism with regard to World War II and Nazism. See Vilmer et al., 2018, p. 78; Giles, 2016a, p. 23.

¹⁶ As Vilmer and coauthors note, the Russian media "produced indulgent, sensationalist coverage of the Catalan movement, spreading all kinds of fake news," including claims that "European officials supported violence in Catalonia," and "publishing false maps indicating which European States supported independence" (Vilmer et al., 2018, p. 94).

¹⁷ See "'Stockholm Syndrome': Drawing Montenegro into NATO Humiliates the Country," *Sputnik*, February 24, 2016, for such messaging in English; and "Kak chernogorcy proglotili gor'kuju tabletku NATO," *Sputnik Srbija*, June 13, 2018, for an example of such messaging in Serbian.

¹⁸ Interview with subject matter expert (SME), June 11, 2018, on a not-for-attribution basis; Lóránt Győri, Péter Krekó, Jakub Janda, and Bernhard Weidinger, *Does Russia Interfere in Czech, Austrian and Hungarian Elections?* Political Capital, European Values, DoW, 2017, pp. 2, 7.

How Do Russia and Its Agents Manipulate Information?

The second dimension of TTPs consists of various techniques through which Russia and its agents may manipulate the information communicated to target audiences. These techniques range from outright lies to subtle manipulation of facts in ways that mislead or deceive. We present a categorization of these techniques, with the first five categories in Table 3.2 involving falsifications, or lies, while the last three capture more subtle forms of manipulation. These techniques are not mutually exclusive and are often used in tandem in any given information effort or campaign.¹⁹

Fabrication

In some cases, Russia and its agents manufacture and propagate content that is purposely entirely fabricated and misleading. By fabrication, we mean the origination of complete falsehoods, including the creation of fraudulent evidence such as forgeries or the concoction of fictitious events, accusations, claims, and/or people. Russia's use of fabrication has taken many forms. In some cases, Russia and its agents create fictitious events that reinforce their broader messages.²⁰ To substantiate their efforts, it is believed that Russia and its agents produce phony evidence in the form of falsified government documents, email exchanges, audio of fictional conversations, and manufactured video and still images (using hired actors or other individuals). For instance, in 2017, an unnamed Russian TV crew allegedly attempted to fabricate evidence of violence in Sweden perpetrated by immigrants or refugees from the Middle East or North Africa, offering a group of young men bribes in return for allowing the crew to shoot scenes of "some action."²¹ When framed as a leak of closely held information about a target (the West, EU, NATO, or others), fabrication is used to undermine targets in the eyes of the audience by creating the impression that the target is behaving dishonorably.²²

¹⁹ For an example in which a troll with alleged ties to the Russian state uses multiple information manipulation techniques, see "Lie 81" on "Russia's Top 100 Lies About Ukraine," *Examiner.com* (hosted by *StopFake*), August 12, 2014.

²⁰ See "The 'Lisa Case': Germany as a Target of Russian Disinformation," *The NATO Review Magazine*, 2016.

²¹ Robbie Gramer, "Russian TV Crew Tries to Bribe Swedish Youngsters to Riot on Camera," *Foreign Policy*, March 7, 2017. The city of Rinkeby, Sweden, had recently experienced a riot over fears regarding immigrants and refugees—a sentiment Russian information efforts attempt to exploit throughout Western Europe. The identity of the station remains unknown, though NTV (a Russian station with ties to the state) broadcast a story titled "Migrants Have Turned Stockholm Suburb into a Zone of Extreme Danger." The report included another falsehood—that the inciting incident for the riot was the investigation by the authorities of a sexual assault case, when in fact it was a case related to drugs. "Russian TV Offers Money for Staged 'Action' in Sweden," *EU vs Disinfo*, March 8, 2017.

²² Scholars Martin Kragh and Sebastian Åsberg outline a recent uptick in the production and surfacing of forgeries in the Swedish information environment. They discuss several examples of forged letters whose content indicates that their authors attempted to implicate Sweden in secret, nefarious dealings. It is important to note

Table 3.2
Information Manipulation Techniques Used by Russia and Its Agents

| Information Manipulation Technique | Description | Example |
|------------------------------------|--|---|
| Fabrication | Information that is purposefully entirely false and misleading | Publication of forgeries (e.g., falsified government documents and email exchanges, audio of fictional conversations, and manufactured video and still images) |
| Misappropriation | Misleading content that uses existing events, people, or documentary evidence to misrepresent facts | Translations of interviews that directly contradict what the interviewee said |
| Deceptive identities | Imitation or impersonation of a genuine and credible source of information ^a | Impersonating categories of individuals with authority by using terms such as "specialist," "expert," or "witness" when referring to individuals or organizations used to authenticate messages |
| Obfuscation | Clouding public discourse, often by offering multiple, contradictory accounts for the same event/phenomenon | Multiple contradictory accounts offered for the same event (such as who was responsible for poisoning former KGB agent Sergei Skripal) |
| Conspiracy theories | Proposed covert plots by powerful individuals, organizations, or alliances to accomplish a goal, which is often nefarious in nature ^b | Stories regarding secretive actions taken by the West, U.S., Central Intelligence Agency (CIA), Brussels (EU), and homosexuals and the "gay lobby" |
| Selective use of facts | Use of factual information in manipulative ways | Sputnik's selective presentation of facts as evidence |
| Rhetorical fallacies | Messages that contain deliberately flawed reasoning "which [is] logically invalid but cognitively effective" ^c | "Whataboutism," countering strawman arguments, appealing to a slippery slope, and propagating red herrings |
| Appeals to emotion/authority | Messages that elicit emotional responses, often at the expense of logic or evidence | Emotionally charged framing regarding a (false) story of how refugees treated a young girl |

^a Swedish Civil Contingencies Agency, 2018, p. 21.

^b Douglas and Sutton, 2008; Wood, Douglas, and Sutton, 2012.

^c Lieto and Verner, 2013, p. 2; Clements, 2013, p. 333.

Misappropriation

In some cases, rather than fabricating entirely, Russia and its agents produce content that appropriates existing events, people, or documentary evidence to misrepresent or twist the true nature of the facts around the case. This technique manifests in vari-

that though there are indications that these forgeries are linked to Russia, they acknowledge these linkages are "indirect" (Kragh and Åsberg, 2017, pp. 790–797).

ous forms. For example, Russia and its agents have been accused of misappropriating images—that is, lifting images from various sources and attempting to pass the content of the images as depicting different people or events than in the originals. In such cases, the content of the images, video, or audio recording has not been doctored as it would be in a fabrication but rather has been manipulated.²³ For instance, in 2015 the Russian embassy in the UK posted a photo of British World War II veterans to its official Twitter account claiming the veterans had attended an event in Russian-occupied Crimea when in fact the photo was taken at a ceremony in St. Petersburg in 2014.²⁴

Deceptive Identities

Russia and its agents also create “deceptive identities” in attempts to impersonate legitimate and credible sources of information. This can be done by creating personas or entities that deliberately resemble the genuine source so closely that they are confused for it.²⁵ Russia and its agents also mislead through labeling individuals with terms that unjustifiably connote authority such as “specialist,” “expert,” or “witness.”²⁶ For instance, media outlets such as RT often clearly misrepresent the credentials of the authorities they call on, even if the characterizations offered are not wholly fictitious.²⁷ Last, Russia and its agents cite nonexistent information allegedly put out by legitimate sources as a means of validating or substantiating Russia's messages without providing links to the original source.²⁸

²³ In a statement to the United States Select Committee on Intelligence, Janis Sarts, director of NATO Strategic Communications Centre of Excellence, referenced a case of misappropriation related to France. He noted: “During the peak of the European refugee crisis in May 2016, Russia's Channel 24 interviewed locals in France and later reported on these interviews. However, the so-called translations directly contradicted what was actually said in the interviews” (Sarts, 2017, p. 30).

²⁴ “Russian Embassy in Great Britain Uses Fake Photo of British Veterans,” *StopFake*, October 16, 2015.

²⁵ In our discussion with SME on June 28, 2018, the interview subject referenced the near-simultaneous founding of the European Centre of Excellence for Countering Hybrid Threats, an intergovernmental think tank located in Helsinki, and a copycat, the European Centre of Excellence for Counteracting Hybrid Threats. The interviewee noted that the imposter sent invitations for events that mirrored events held by the legitimate center. The genuine center was contacted by representatives of embassies asking which of the organizations and events were legitimate. Interview with SME, June 28, 2018, on a not-for-attribution basis.

²⁶ NATO spokesperson Oana Lungescu speaks of this issue, noting: “If you look at the byline of people who write commentaries for Sputnik or RT, a lot of them are extremely obscure individuals connected to the far right or the far left, or so-called specialists or experts who nobody's heard of. . . . You can always find somebody to say anything but that doesn't make it journalism.” Lungescu quoted in Mike Wendling and Will Yates, “NATO Says Viral News Outlet Is Part of ‘Kremlin Misinformation Machine,’” *BBC News*, February 11, 2017.

²⁷ Pomerantsev and Weiss discuss two such examples. RT introduced Holocaust denier “Ryan Dawson” as a “human rights activist,” and Manuel Ochseneiter, a neo-Nazi, as a “Middle East analyst” (Pomerantsev and Weiss, 2014, p. 15). Also see Alandette, 2018.

²⁸ Following the downing of MH-17, RT claimed the Malaysian newspaper *New Straits Times* validated the theory that a Ukrainian Su-25 shot down the plane. The Malaysian periodical denied having ever made these claims. See “Lie 87” on “Russia's Top 100 Lies About Ukraine,” 2014. Pomerantsev and Weiss reference other

Obfuscation

Russia and its agents attempt to cloud public discourse and debates by propagating multiple, sometimes contradictory accounts for the same event or phenomenon, and obstructing fact-checkers (through, for example, cloning fact-checking sites). This technique appears to be used more frequently when Russia and its agents attempt to defend Russia's position, deny Russian involvement, or distract from criticism of Russia through techniques other than engaging with the evidence or outright fabrication. Often, obfuscation in these contexts consists of promoting a dizzying array of alternative theories, intended to create the impression that there are many legitimate, competing explanations, and evaluating them all is difficult. This was seen in the response to the poisoning of former KGB agent Sergei Skripal and the downing of MH-17.²⁹ Commenting on the multiple contradictory claims Russia and its agents made about Russian production of Novichok, the poison used in Skripal's case, British foreign secretary Boris Johnson referred to this technique as "a classic Russia strategy of trying to conceal the needle of truth in a haystack of lies and obfuscation."³⁰ Russia appears to have used the same technique in its 2008 conflict with Georgia, propagating different explanations of its behavior.³¹

Conspiracy Theories

Russia and its agents also attempt to appeal to target audiences through the propagation of conspiracy theories.³² While there is some overlap between fabrication and conspiracy theories, conspiracy theories constitute a distinctive kind of fabrication that warrants separate treatment. According to the political scientist Michael Barkun, conspiracy theories are intellectual constructs, which seek to explain individual events through "impos[ing] order on a wide range of phenomena."³³ Another distinguishing feature of conspiracies is the theorists' portrayal of the "truth" (about the event or

instances of Russia and its agents attempting to use the credibility of other legitimate sources (Pomerantsev and Weiss, 2014, p. 16).

²⁹ For an outline of theories related to the Skripal poisoning put forward by Russia and its agents, see Ma and Corcoran, 2018. For a discussion of the theories related to the MH-17 incident, see Nimmo, 2018.

³⁰ Jennifer Rankin, "UK Must Prove Russian Role in Spy Poisoning or Apologise, Kremlin Says," *The Guardian*, March 19, 2018.

³¹ Helmus et al., 2018, p. 15.

³² Pomerantsev and Weiss discuss the prevalence of conspiracy theories included in RT's messaging (Pomerantsev and Weiss, 2014, p. 11). Some of the most highly visible conspiracy theories propagated by Russia and its agents are those related to the downing of MH-17 over Eastern Ukraine. For a discussion of these theories, see "The Most Comprehensive Guide Ever to MH17 Conspiracies," *StopFake*, July 18, 2016; Robert Coalson, "MH17 Downing: One Tragedy, One Truth, but Many Stories," *Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty*, July 16, 2015.

³³ Michael Barkun, "Conspiracy Theories as Stigmatized Knowledge," *Diogenes*, October 2016, p. 1.

phenomenon at hand) as privileged information, available to only a small group in the know.³⁴

The use of conspiracy theories and fabrication often goes hand in hand, as Russia and its agents use fabricated evidence to support the conspiracy theories they propagate (however, use of fabrication is not always in service of a conspiracy theory).³⁵ The boogymen in many of the conspiracy theories promulgated by Russia and its agents—the West, United States, CIA, Brussels (EU), homosexuals and the “gay lobby,” liberal philanthropists like George Soros, and so on—tend to mirror those targeted by contemporary information efforts.³⁶ Likewise, Russia and its agents also leverage existing, and in some cases centuries old, conspiracy theories to their advantage, referencing well-known conspiratorial tropes and using them in Russian messaging that targeted the 2017 French presidential election (e.g., conspiracies regarding the Rothschild family).³⁷

Conspiracy theories are concerning as they are particularly difficult to disprove.³⁸ Unlike other kinds of fabrications, the pernicious aspect of conspiracy theories—provided the existence of audiences predisposed to believe them—is that they are “non-falsifiable” because “the conspiracy is so powerful, it controls virtually all of the channels through which information is disseminated,” and thus the “very attempt at falsification is dismissed as a ruse.”³⁹

³⁴ Barkun, 2016, pp. 1–2.

³⁵ Some of the MH-17 conspiracy theories were paired with evidence that subsequent analysis has determined was likely fabricated. The Russian Ministry of Defense published satellite images to support its finding that a Ukrainian Su-25 fighter plane was the culprit, though evidence suggests the images were doctored. See Bellingcat, *Forensic Analysis of Satellite Images Released by the Russian Ministry of Defense*, May 2015. Other actors involved in the propagation of these theories used fabricated evidence to substantiate these claims. For example, see “Report on the Results of the Possible Causes of the Aircraft of the Malaysian Passenger Boeing 777-200 9M-MRD Plane After 17.07.2014,” posted by @Albert_lex, July 14, 2015, referenced in Coalson, 2015.

³⁶ For an example of several conspiracy tropes combined, see “Arab revolutions that led to civil wars were organized by agencies working with George Soros’s NGOs. It was there that the plan of an influx of immigrants to Europe began. // The burning of citizens in Odessa in 2014 was a planned action to break the resistance of citizens // The downing of MH17 was planned by the CIA and Kyiv regime,” *EU vs Disinfo*, March 28, 2017.

³⁷ For a discussion of the history of conspiracy theories linked to the Rothschild family, particularly as they relate to France, see David Clay Large, “Emmanuel Macron Is About to Face Five Years of Crazy Rothschild Conspiracy Theories,” *Foreign Policy*, May 18, 2017. During Macron’s campaign, Sputnik made reference to the candidate’s association with the Rothschild bank, calling him an “agent of the big American banking system” (“Ex-French Economy Minister Macron Could Be ‘US Agent’ Lobbying Banks’ Interests,” 2017).

³⁸ Jan Willem van Prooijen and Karen M. Douglas, “Conspiracy Theories as Part of History: The Role of Societal Crisis Situations,” *Memory Studies*, Vol. 10, No. 3, 2017.

³⁹ Michael Barkun, *A Culture of Conspiracy: Apocalyptic Visions in Contemporary America*, Berkeley: University of California Press, 2003, p. 7.

Selective Use of Facts

While several of the information manipulation techniques discussed involve the use of partially or wholly fictitious information, Russia and its agents also use factual information in manipulative ways. In these cases, Russia and its agents frame the context by covering only one interpretation of an event/phenomenon or one side of an argument, but report it as if they are covering all angles. Researcher Ben Nimmo has commented on Sputnik's use of this technique, identifying the outlet's selective presentation of facts as evidence of its bias: "Balance is where so much of the time I see Sputnik falling down. It will quote one side, but it won't give an appropriate screen time, column inches or airtime to the other side. . . ." ⁴⁰

Rhetorical Fallacies

Russia and its agents also use rhetorical devices and/or logical fallacies—that is, deliberately flawed reasoning “which [is] logically invalid but cognitively effective”—as a means of persuading Russia's target audiences.⁴¹ These techniques, which often take advantage of cognitive biases, are used to construct “seemingly compelling arguments” in lieu of genuine evidence.⁴² The use of rhetorical fallacies allows Russia and its agents to offer seemingly persuasive alternative messages, but which consist of arguments that are “either inductively very weak . . . contain an unjustified premise, or ignore relevant, available evidence that [Russia and its agents] should know about.”⁴³

Information efforts carried out by Russia and its agents use numerous recurring rhetorical fallacies. In some cases, rather than responding to the arguments or reporting on Russian actions, Russia and its agents respond with *ad hominem attacks*, by attacking the critics themselves. As the Atlantic Council's Digital Forensics Research Lab explains, this tactic is used to “dismiss the work of journalists, policy makers, and researchers who contradict the Kremlin's statements or chosen narratives.”⁴⁴ Other rhetorical fallacies used by Russia and its agents include tactics such as “whataboutism,” countering strawman arguments, appealing to a slippery slope, and propagating red herrings (or misdirection), among others.⁴⁵

⁴⁰ Nimmo quoted in Wendling and Yates, 2017.

⁴¹ Lieto and Venero, 2013, p. 2; Clements, 2013, p. 333.

⁴² Digital Forensics Research Lab, “Logical Fallacies Fuel Kremlin Disinfo: How the Kremlin and Its Disinformation Networks Use Logical Fallacies to Dismiss, Dismay, Distract, and Distort,” *Atlantic Council*, April 22, 2018.

⁴³ Clements, 2013, p. 333.

⁴⁴ Digital Forensics Research Lab, 2018. This source offers two examples of Russia's use of the *ad hominem* fallacy. For instance, the journalist Jessikka Aro's investigation into the connections of pro-Russian trolls to the Russian state spurred a response by trolls that targeted her personally. False claims surfaced stating that Aro had brain damage and was a “NATO drug dealer” (“Jessikka Aro: How Pro-Russian Trolls Tried to Destroy Me,” 2017).

⁴⁵ See Digital Forensics Research Lab, 2018, for examples of each.

Appeals to Emotion or Authority

Russia and its agents also craft messages designed to elicit emotional responses, often at the expense of logic or evidence. This technique includes fearmongering, inciting outrage, distracting from facts with emotion-provoking language, or using authority figures for credibility. For instance, as the aforementioned Lisa case was unfolding, Russian state-owned television channels Vesti, Channel One, and others (which are broadcast to Russian-speaking audiences outside Russia) adopted highly emotionally charged framing for the (false) story, reporting that the young girl in question was “raped and beaten for 30 hours and then thrown out” by “sexually frustrated refugees.”⁴⁶ State-owned media described her as gullible and “a child.”⁴⁷

How Do Russia and Its Agents Disseminate Information?

The third dimension of TTPs concerns the ways in which Russia communicates the content/information to its target audiences, or what we call “dissemination techniques.” Dissemination techniques are defined by the conjunction of *actors* and *modes of communication*. Actors are individuals or entities that direct, plan, and/or execute malign/subversive information efforts, using modes of communication, or conduits, to transmit messages to their target audiences. Table 3.3 depicts the resulting array of dissemination techniques.

Types of Actors

We categorize actors by the extent of their suspected affiliation with the Russian state (in the leftmost column of Table 3.3), ranging from entities overtly controlled by the Kremlin to those that likely lack any direct connection to the state.⁴⁸ The first category of actors captures entities involved in information efforts that are openly affiliated with the Russian state. This includes three distinct subcategories (specified in the second-from-left column in Table 3.3):

- State actors such as officials or members of the Russian security and intelligence services (e.g., KGB, GRU, SVR)
- Overtly state-controlled domestic media organizations whose content is broadcast in other states with Russian-speaking audiences
- Overtly state-controlled externally facing media organizations—that is, media outlets that operate outside Russia itself, such as RT and Sputnik.

⁴⁶ Digital Forensics Research Lab, 2018. For an example of an article by Channel One (in Russian) using appeals to emotion in the context of the Lisa case, see Pervyj kanal, “Avstrija vremenno priostanavlivaet dejstvie Shengenskogo soglashenija iz-za sluchaev nasilija v Germanii,” January 16, 2016.

⁴⁷ Pervyj kanal, 2016.

⁴⁸ We restate the caveat that given the difficulties related to attribution discussed earlier, determining the precise nature of a particular actor's ties to Russia can be challenging.

Table 3.3
Russian Dissemination Techniques

| Relationship with Russia | Type of Actor | Modes of Communication/Dissemination Mechanisms | | | |
|--|--|---|--|---|---|
| | | Traditional Media (TV, Radio, Print) | Online Media | Social Media | In Real-Life Events/Other |
| Actors directly controlled by or openly affiliated with Russian state | Russian state actors | State officials' appearances on/in traditional media programming/publications ^a | Official websites of Russian Foreign Ministry, Russian Ministry of Defense ^b | Official government social media accounts ^c | State officials' remarks, press conferences, other events (in-person attendees, and only when propagating messaging related to information efforts) |
| | Russian domestic state-controlled media | TV broadcasts and publications of state-owned newspapers in former Soviet states ^d | Websites of Russian domestic state-controlled media | Social media accounts of state-controlled domestic media organizations | |
| | Russian foreign-facing overtly state-controlled media | TV programming, radio, and print media in foreign languages ^e | Websites of outlets such as RT, Sputnik, and Ruptly and associated streaming video channels ^f | Social media accounts associated with outlets like RT, Sputnik, Ruptly, etc. ^g | |
| Actors with opaque ties to Russian state | Pro-Russian media with opaque ties to Russian state | Other country traditional media outlets broadcasting content produced by Russian state-controlled media | Websites with opaque ties to the Russian state ^h | Social media accounts of pro-Russian media outlets with opaque ties to Russian state ⁱ | |
| | Nonmedia proxies with opaque ties to Russian state | | Websites with suspected links to Russian state that disseminate Russian messages or act as facilitators for Russian information; troll posts in comments sections of articles, images, or videos | Social media accounts with opaque ties to Russian state conducting activities like posting, liking, purchasing ads, friend invites, rally organization on social media accounts, use of bots, etc. ^j | Proxy actors organizing rallies, and discussion forums, for causes in line with Russian interests ^k |

Table 3.3—Continued

| Relationship with Russia | Type of Actor | Modes of Communication/Dissemination Mechanisms | | | |
|---|--|---|--|--|---|
| | | Traditional Media (TV, Radio, Print) | Online Media | Social Media | In Real-Life Events/Other |
| Actors without known affiliation to Russian state | Pro-Russian nonmedia actors without affiliation to Russian state | | Use of “unaffiliated” third parties to leak information ^l | Social media accounts of actors with no affiliation used to propagate pro-Russian messaging ^m | Pro-Russian actors that disseminate pro-Russian messaging to audiences in person ⁿ |
| | Other country pro-Russian media without known affiliation to Russian state | Journalists and pundits that propagate pro-Russian (or anti-Western) messages on local TV, and radio and in newspapers ^o | Media outlets’ websites that propagate pro-Russian (or anti-Western) messages and/or directly appropriate content from Russian state-controlled media outlets ^p | Social media pages and posts operated by actors unaffiliated with the Russian state that propagate pro-Russian messages and/or directly appropriate content from Russian-state controlled media outlets ^q | |

NOTE: Gray boxes denote categories that we did not identify reliably documented examples; however, this should not be taken to mean that such do not exist.

^a Maria Zakharova’s comments about the Skripal case on a state-owned television channel is an example of an official Russian state actor using a traditional media outlet to conduct information efforts (Ruptly, 2018).

^b For instance, the Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs established a webpage on its official website devoted to debunking what it claims is fake news about Russia. For the site in English, see Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation, undated. Likewise, the Russian Ministry of Defense runs Zvezda, an outlet that publishes written and video content on its website, and produces television and radio programming. While some of the state-run outlet’s information is factual, it has also contributed to information efforts by propagating false narratives. See “Dependent Media – Russia’s Military TV Zvezda,” 2017.

^c For an example of a Russian state actor, in this case the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, using its official social media account (Twitter) to propagate false narratives, see Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation (@mfa_russia), 2018b.

^d For example, Russian state-controlled traditional media programming was available in Ukraine before it was banned by the Ukrainian interior ministry for “broadcasting propaganda” (Reuters, 2014b; Helmus et al., 2018, pp. 66–67).

^e Russian newspaper *Argumenty i Fakty*, for instance, began publishing a Serbian-language edition in 2018. The newspaper was acquired by the Moscow city government in 2014 (Rudic, 2018; Russell, 2015).

^f For instance, RT operates video streaming channels in various languages on YouTube (Nicas, 2017).

Table 3.3—Continued

^g Outlets openly affiliated with the Russian state, such as RT, Ruptly, and Sputnik, all operate accounts on social media platforms where content from the websites is often republished.

^h For instance, evidence uncovered by reporting indicates that the site Baltnews, a news portal in the Baltic states, is connected to the Russian state. For an analysis of the site's content, see "Sputnik's Unknown Brother," April 7, 2017.

ⁱ Baltnews, referenced above, also operates social media accounts. For the organization's main Twitter account, see Baltnews (@Balt_news), 2018.

^j The Internet Research Agency (IRA), a "troll factory" with suspected ties to the Russian state, operates social media accounts that conduct information efforts while masquerading as legitimate users (Parfitt, 2015). Likewise, the Patriots of Ukraine group is an example of nonmedia proxies with opaque ties to the state. Helmus et al. (2018) note, "[I]n the beginning of 2016, Ukrainian journalists exposed a network of dozens of social media groups, including Patriots of Ukraine, across multiple social media platforms, coordinated from Moscow. These groups used pro-Ukraine symbolic and nationalistic rhetoric to undermine trust in the Ukrainian government and mobilize people for a 'Third Maidan'" (p. 16).

^k According to the Estonian Security Service, "propaganda clubs" such as Impressum in Estonia and Format A-3 (founded in Moldova and Crimea), which began holding meetings in Latvia and Lithuania, convene meetings featuring well-known Russian speakers. These presentations propagate messaging that is both pro-Russian and against the state where the meetings are held. While many of those involved in the clubs may have some connections to the Russian state, it is unclear whether the clubs themselves are funded by the state (Estonian Internal Security Service, 2013, pp. 8–9).

^l While reporting by the U.S. intelligence community indicates that the GRU likely used the sites WikiLeaks and DCLeaks to leak information related to the 2016 presidential election, it is unclear what the relationship between these entities is. Likewise, it is unclear whether this applies to Russian information efforts in Europe (Office of the Director of National Intelligence, 2017, pp. 2–3).

^m For a discussion of pro-Russian nonmedia actors (sometimes referred to as "useful idiots") without a known affiliation to the Russian state who propagate Russian messaging verbatim or messaging in line with Russian narratives and messages using social media platforms, see Helmus et al., 2018, pp. 67–68.

ⁿ For example, some clergy in the Orthodox church are believed to use religious services and events as a means of propagating anti-Western and pro-Russian narratives and messages. It is possible that some have connections to the Russian state, whereas others may not. See Higgins, 2016.

^o For examples of Bulgarian pro-Russian media without a known affiliation to the Russian state that propagate Russian messaging verbatim or messaging in line with Russian narratives and messages using traditional media platforms, see Bechev, 2015, pp. 22–23.

^p As is discussed in the section of the chapter on the Balkans, some media outlets without any known affiliation to the Russian state either propagate messages or narratives that mirror those propagated by the Kremlin or republish content produced by outlets affiliated with the state verbatim. See Tomovic, 2017.

^q For a discussion of other country pro-Russian media without a known affiliation to the Russian state that propagate Russian messaging verbatim or messaging in line with Russian narratives and messages using social media platforms, see Helmus et al., 2018, pp. 67–68.

The second major category of actors consists of entities involved in information efforts whose ties to the Russian state are opaque. This includes actors that are reasonably suspected to have ties to the Russian state, though their relationship is not acknowledged by either party, and/or the nature of the relationship is unclear.⁴⁹ These include

- nonmedia proxies such as the now-infamous IRA or WikiLeaks
- media organizations with opaque ties to the Russian state, such as Baltnews.⁵⁰

Notably, while the IRA and WikiLeaks fall into the same group (nonmedia organizations with opaque ties to the Russian state) in our scheme, the nature of their respective relationships with the Russian state is almost certainly quite different.⁵¹

The last category consists of actors without a known affiliation to the Russian state, which is meant to capture actors with even more tenuous and likely no links to the Russian state. More specifically, this includes actors who do not receive funding or direction from the Russian state and/or actors who knowingly or unknowingly contribute to Russian information efforts.⁵² This category includes two subgroups:

- Nonmedia actors without affiliation to the Russian state
- Media outlets external to Russia without a known affiliation to the Russian state.

The former includes figures, such as those on the far right and far left of some European countries, who support and propagate a pro-Kremlin agenda.⁵³ In some

⁴⁹ For a discussion of the level of Russian state control of nongovernmental Russian groups, see Robinson et al., 2018, p. 56.

⁵⁰ Founded in 2014, Baltnews is a group of three websites that operated for several years masquerading as independent media organizations in the Baltic states. In 2018, investigative journalism uncovered evidence tying these sites to the Russian state-owned news agency Rossiya Segodnya. Since this discovery, Baltnews now acknowledges its affiliation with the Russian state and its websites. For a more detailed discussion of the investigative journalism conducted, see Holger Roonemaa and Inga Springe, "This Is How Russian Propaganda Actually Works in the 21st Century," *BuzzFeedNews*, August 31, 2018.

⁵¹ WikiLeaks appears to have begun as an independent organization whose website now acts as a platform for hosting leaked information obtained by the Russian state (or its proxies) (Office of the Director of National Intelligence, 2017, p. 2). There appears to be some disagreement about the nature of the relationship between the Russian state and WikiLeaks. A former WikiLeaks collaborator notes the relationship exists, saying the group's leader, Julian Assange, "sees Russia as a supporter, and views the U.S. and Britain as his enemies. . . . [I]n recent years, WikiLeaks and the Russian state have effectively joined forces." By contrast, Russia analyst Mark Galeotti finds the relationship to be more transactional. Matthew Kupfer, "How Russia and WikiLeaks Became Allies Against the West," *The Moscow Times*, March 16, 2017.

⁵² To note, some of the literature on this issue refers to actors without an affiliation who sympathize with the positions Russian information efforts take on issues, and unknowingly contribute to Russian information efforts when propagating Russian messaging, as "useful idiots." See Andrew Wilson, "Russia's 'Nudge' Propaganda," *New Eastern Europe*, September 15, 2015. Vilmer et al. also discuss the role of unaffiliated actors. See Vilmer et al., 2018, p. 74.

⁵³ For examples in the Serbian context, see John T. Cappello and Daniel Sunter, *The Kremlin's Infowar in the Western Balkans*, Washington, D.C.: Foundation for Defense of Democracies, Euro-Atlantic Initiative, 2018.

cases, nonmedia actors without ties to the Russian state become directly or indirectly affiliated over time. Some actors that consistently parrot Russian narratives are invited to pan-Slavic conferences hosted directly or indirectly by the Russian state. During these events, many of which involve trips to Russia, these actors are entertained with the intention that they will continue praising Russia.⁵⁴ In the Czech Republic, for instance, prior to 2014, many of the unaffiliated media outlets propagated conspiracy theories (e.g., “chem trails,” the Rothschilds, etc.) but began parroting Russian conspiracy theories once these began surfacing in 2014.⁵⁵

Modes of Communication

These actors disseminate content by means of some mode of communication, specified across the top row of Table 3.3. Modes include *traditional media*, or television and radio programming and print media such as periodicals. *Online media* includes all internet-hosted platforms (e.g., websites) where information in the form of text, video, audio, or images can be transmitted or accessed. This excludes *social media* platforms, which are a distinct third category.⁵⁶ The final mode of communication is what we term “*in real-life events/other*,” which encompasses the use of on-the-ground events, meetings, discussion fora, and so on as a means of transmitting information to in-person audiences.

Dissemination techniques are the intersection of these two axes, and examples are identified in each cell of Table 3.3. For example, the Russian Foreign Ministry's use of its official Twitter account to propagate misleading messaging about the poisoning of former KGB agent Sergei Skripal is a dissemination technique defined by the intersection of a state actor using social media.⁵⁷ Official actors also use online media

⁵⁴ Interview with SME, July 11, 2018, on a not-for-attribution basis.

⁵⁵ Interview with SME, July 11, 2018, on a not-for-attribution basis.

⁵⁶ While the literature on social media does not appear to agree on a single definition, it does converge around several shared characteristics. Two oft-cited definitions are that of Kietzmann et al., which defines social media as “employ[ing] mobile and web-based technologies to create highly interactive platforms via which individuals and communities, share, co-create, discuss, and modify user-generated content.” Jan H. Kietzmann, Kristopher Hermkens, Ian P. McCarthy, and Bruno S. Silvestre, “Social Media? Get Serious! Understanding the Functional Building Blocks of Social Media,” *Business Horizons*, Vol. 54, 2011, p. 241. The second is Boyd and Ellison's definition of social networking sites: “web-based services that allow individuals to (1) construct a public or semi-public profile within a bounded system, (2) articulate a list of other users with whom they share a connection, and (3) view and traverse their list of connections and those made by others within the system.” Danah M. Boyd and Nicole B. Ellison, “Social Networking Sites: Definition, History, and Scholarship,” *Journal of Computer-Mediated Communication*, Vol. 13, No. 1, 2008, p. 211.

⁵⁷ The tweet about the Skripal case by (we presume) a Russian government actor using the official Twitter account of the Russian Foreign Ministry is an example of using misleading messaging. See Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation (@mfa_russia), “In Connection with the Accusations of Poisoning S.#Skripal and His Daughter in #Salisbury, We Suggest You to Read the Article Published in 2004 by the #UK ‘Guardian’ on the Activities of the Defence Science and Technology Laboratory in Porton Down,” Twitter, March 26, 2018a, 10:24 p.m.

as a means of communicating with audiences. Take, for instance, the Russian Foreign Ministry's 2017 dedication of a page on its official website to fact-check what it claims is "fake" news coverage of Russia.⁵⁸ The format of the content bears a close resemblance to that of the Western nonprofit fact-checking organizations StopFake and EU vs Disinfo.⁵⁹ By establishing the website, Russia may be attempting to either discredit Western media outlets by labeling them as disseminators of fake news or delegitimize Western claims that Russia is propagating disinformation.

Many of the most notorious actors engaged in Russian information efforts use a variety of modes of communication to reach their target audiences. For example, both RT and Sputnik operate websites and YouTube channels, and maintain a social media presence, with RT also broadcasting on traditional media (TV).⁶⁰ In some states, such as Hungary, the Russian state does not operate separate outlets (like RT or Sputnik) in the local language.⁶¹

What Audiences Do Russian Malign or Subversive Information Efforts Target?

The final dimension of the TTPs employed in Russian information efforts is the target audience. The question of who Russian information efforts are seeking to reach does not always have a straightforward answer. Notably, when particular messages or campaigns fail to resonate with an intended audience, the message itself may go largely unnoticed by analysts. Moreover, the audience with which any given message or campaign does resonate may or may not be the intended one. Indeed, there may not be a specific intended audience as such. Nonetheless, we can identify *likely* audiences Russia and its agents seek to reach and influence on the basis of the content as well as the ultimate reach or resonance of a given information effort.

As Keir Giles argues, Russia's information efforts either seek to influence foreign decisionmaking by manipulating the information that reaches the decisionmakers

⁵⁸ Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation, undated.

⁵⁹ "About Us," *StopFake*, undated; EU vs. Disinfo, "About," webpage, undated a.

⁶⁰ RT operates several YouTube channels in different languages. For the outlet's flagship channel, see RT, *YouTube*, undated. The RT network also includes separate channels on YouTube: RT France, RT Español, RT на русском (in Russian), RT Deutsch, RT Arabic, RT Chinese, RT Sport, RT Documentary, RT UK, and RT America. Elizabeth Nelson, Robert Orttung, and Anthony Livshen, "Measuring RT's Impact on YouTube," *Russian Analytical Digest*, No. 177, December 8, 2015, p. 2. Sputnik is a Russian state-funded media organization aimed at audiences outside Russia. The Russian government maintains that Sputnik operates as an independent news outlet, with "its own editorial policy" not unlike the "taxpayer-funded BBC." Lizzie Dearden, "NATO Accuses Sputnik News of Distributing Misinformation as Part of 'Kremlin Propaganda Machine,'" *The Independent*, February 11, 2017.

⁶¹ Krekó et al., 2016, p. 31.

themselves or seek to “create a permissive public opinion environment where Russian narratives are presented as factual,” and “to win public support in adversary nations, and thereby attenuate resistance to actions planned by Russia.”⁶² Thus, at a high level of generality, audiences targeted by Russia’s malign information efforts in European countries consist of *general publics*, *decisionmakers*, and *influencers* (i.e., actors who may not be decisionmakers themselves but have the ability to influence decisions and public opinion). While some malign information efforts are aimed at the general public of European countries, others appear to target publics that are more narrowly defined: notably, publics on the *extreme political right and extreme left*, especially those identified with anti-Western, antiestablishment, anti-immigrant, and nationalist viewpoints;⁶³ *Russian-speaking communities* within former Soviet republics as well as other European states; and *publics with cultural, historical, religious, or political affinities to Russia*, such as Slavs, the Christian Orthodox, and historical allies or partners long supported by Russia, as well as the socially conservative and otherwise pro-Russian constituencies.

Tailoring Information Efforts to Specific Target Audiences

An important aspect of Russian TTPs lies in *tailoring* the content, information manipulation, and dissemination techniques to susceptible audiences. Since the aim of Russian malign or subversive information efforts no longer appears to be to win its audiences over to the cause of a singular ideology, Russia and its agents are able to direct different messages to different audiences, even within the same country.⁶⁴ For example, content appealing to common heritage, culture, and history is tailored to particular publics with cultural, historical, or religious affinities to Russia.⁶⁵ Thus, appeals to pan-Slavism, or the notion of a regional culture championed by Russia above all, are directed at the Slavic communities in Eastern, Central, and Southeastern Europe. Similarly, appeals to Christian Orthodox values are directed at Christian Orthodox communities in those same regions of Europe. Appeals to common socially conservative values more generally resonate with conservative, often religious publics that need

⁶² Giles, 2016a, p. 22.

⁶³ As numerous sources note, key actors of Russia’s information efforts like *RT* tend to appeal to both fringes of the political spectrum, typically unified by “their disillusionment with their governments and skepticism toward Western media” (Robinson et al., 2018, p. 66).

⁶⁴ Pomerantsev and Weiss, 2014, p. 6; Vilmer et al., 2018, p. 74; Robinson et al., 2018, p. 66.

⁶⁵ As Krekó et al. observe:

The Kremlin is clearly taking different approaches to spreading its influence in each country, adjusting the forms of influence and the messages to the particularities of the recipient countries. The two most important factors in this process are the host country’s cultural proximity (e.g., shared cultural and historical origin, language, and values) to Russia and the public’s perception of Moscow. The pro-Russian orientation of the elite and the public in general determines the room for maneuvering and *modus operandi* (e.g., using more manifest or subtle channels of influence).

(Krekó et al., 2016, p. 8)

not be Orthodox.⁶⁶ Content maligning and attacking the West resonates with various Eurosceptic publics on the extreme right and groupings on the extreme left who oppose U.S. hegemony.⁶⁷

Content fanning divisions within countries is crafted in response to the extant cleavages present in a given society, whether these are issue-based, as in the notorious cases of controversies surrounding migration to Europe or membership in Western institutions, or identity-based, as in the cases of the historical ethnonational rivalries that plague many European societies.⁶⁸ Content fanning divisions between countries is tailored to pander to each country's national preoccupations on both sides of the divide; for example, Russian messages aimed at Romania pander to the nationalist sentiment that Moldova is properly a part of Romania, while messages in Moldova support its identity as a separate and distinct national entity.⁶⁹ And unsurprisingly, content maligning other countries' political actors resonates with audiences in those countries already opposed to those actors or their positions, as in the cases of Russian information campaigns focused on elections and referenda. In the context of military operations, content can be calculated to have a demoralizing effect; for example, in Ukraine, Russian content included assertions of a lack of concern by the Ukrainian Armed Forces leadership and the West for the common soldier, and the availability of escape.⁷⁰

Information dissemination techniques are also tailored to audiences and take into consideration the constraints posed by the characteristics of different European societies. For example, social media penetration in many Eastern and Central European countries is relatively low, especially for some platforms; thus, Russia's agents do not appear to invest in more sophisticated dissemination techniques there, reportedly opting instead for simpler techniques such as chain emails, while the most prominent cases of social media information campaigns attributed to Russia have taken place in Western Europe.⁷¹ Experts from Eastern Europe observe that “[w]hile the West proved to be a breeding ground for state of the art information warfare utilizing ‘bots,’ the East has a multitude of local mainstream political, economic and disinformation actors

⁶⁶ For example, anti-LGBT narratives gain little traction in the Czech Republic, one of the more atheist countries in Europe, but resonate in neighboring Slovakia, one of the most Catholic countries on the continent (interview with SME, July 11, 2018, on a not-for-attribution basis).

⁶⁷ Pomerantsev and Weiss, 2014, p. 19.

⁶⁸ For example, Vilmer et al. (2018, p. 74) observe on the basis of their investigation of Sweden: “[P]arties as diverse as the Swedish Democrats and the far-right Nordic Resistance Movement or the Left Party and the Far Left Feminist Initiative are all potential relays of anti-NATO narratives or anti-migrant sentiment (in the case of the far right).”

⁶⁹ Corina Rebegea, “Moscow’s Game of Narratives Between Bucharest and Chişinău,” Center for European Policy Analysis, Brief, undated.

⁷⁰ Nataliya Popovych and Oleksiy Makhuhin, “Countering Disinformation: Some Lessons Learnt by Ukraine Crisis Media Center,” *Ukraine Crisis Media Center*, April 20, 2018.

⁷¹ Interview with SME, June 11, 2018, on a not-for-attribution basis.

in the pockets of the Kremlin.”⁷² Where Russia and its agents have been able to establish informational sources in the local language, common means of dissemination rely on those local-language outlets, an avenue for dissemination that is otherwise unavailable. Scholars such as Péter Krekó conclude that more covert dissemination techniques are employed in environments with lower public or elite support for pro-Russian views, whereas more open means of influence are reserved for more favorable settings.⁷³

Assessments of the local environment also influence Russian decisions as to where to devote resources for particular dissemination channels; for example, Russia decided against opening an RT office in Hungary, reportedly because its preferred messages received ample dissemination in that country as is.⁷⁴ While examples may be less readily identifiable, *information manipulation techniques* also appear tailored to some extent. Some of the wildest conspiracy theories produced and propagated by Russia and its agents unsurprisingly resonate with the conspiracy-minded fringes in European societies, and tend to appear on more obscure, conspiracy-oriented websites. By contrast, more subtle manipulation techniques are common on media outlets that are intended to reach a broader audience, notably RT, where false and manipulated content is also surrounded by other, often unremarkable reporting intended to build up trust among that broader audience.⁷⁵

Many experts and observers of Russian information efforts thus observe that Russia and its agents have displayed an astute and strategic awareness of the environments and audiences that they seek to influence.⁷⁶ The attention to local context is an important aspect of Russian information efforts, but it should not be inferred from this that Russia has been uniformly successful and prescient in crafting its information efforts. Two observations are worth emphasizing in this regard. First, we know less about unsuccessful efforts to influence in and through the information environment precisely because they fail to resonate with an audience or make any sort of an impact that would draw analysts' and observers' attention. Second, we have indeed encountered concrete examples of efforts to manipulate information for a particular audience that appear to fail; for example, efforts to spread fabricated and manipulated news in Finland, usually targeting the Russian-speaking population, often appear to land flat, as have Russia's efforts to rally the Russian-speaking communities in the Baltics for patriotic Russian purposes such as participating in the May 9 commemorations of Soviet victory in World War II.⁷⁷

⁷² Gyóri et al., 2017, p. 2.

⁷³ Krekó et al., 2016, p. 8.

⁷⁴ Interview with SME, June 11, 2018, on a not-for-attribution basis.

⁷⁵ See the account of the RT approach in Peter Pomerantsev, *Nothing Is True and Everything Is Possible: The Surreal Heart of the New Russia*, New York: PublicAffairs, 2014.

⁷⁶ See, for example, Vilmer et al., 2018, p. 76; Robinson et al., 2018, p. 66.

⁷⁷ Interview with SME, June 28, 2018, on a not-for-attribution basis; Vilmer et al., 2018, p. 67.

What Vulnerabilities Do Russian Information Efforts Exploit?

Tailoring of Russia's malign information efforts, as well as audience receptivity to the same, is in large part a function of certain identifiable societal vulnerabilities exploited by Russia and its agents. An awareness of the vulnerabilities across European nations would help U.S. and allied decisionmakers craft more appropriate and targeted responses to Russia's activities. Research and analysis of Russian information efforts tend to converge on four broad categories of vulnerabilities.

Vulnerable Media Environment

Russian information efforts exploit the shortcomings in other countries' media environments and appear to enjoy the greatest resonance in the absence of robust, professional media institutions. Weak journalistic standards facilitate the penetration of manipulated information into mainstream media outlets.⁷⁸ A shortage of media institutions trusted by the population creates a fertile environment for the reception of manipulated information.⁷⁹ And finally, a media environment that leaves some communities—notably, Russian speakers but potentially also others—without alternatives to Russian-controlled or Russian-influenced media sources allows the latter to dominate the field.⁸⁰

Internal Divisions

As many experts observe, Russia and its agents exploit existing fissures and wedges rather than seek to create new ones.⁸¹ Internal divisions exploited by Russia's information efforts include controversies over particular issues, such as migration and LGBT rights, split opinion about membership in Western institutions, and societal divisions along ethnonational, religious, or class lines.⁸²

⁷⁸ Robinson et al., 2018.

⁷⁹ See Cappello and Sunter, 2018; Iona Allan, *Fake News: A Roadmap, Executive Summary*, NATO StratCom Center of Excellence and—King's Centre for Strategic Communications, 2019, p. 2.

⁸⁰ For instance, much of the content reaching Russian-speaking minorities in the Baltic states is produced by outlets affiliated with the Russian state. The Baltic states have undertaken recent efforts to produce Russian-language content for the minorities. See Reuters, "Battle of the Airwaves: Baltics Compete with Russia for Hearts and Minds," February 13, 2015; "Latvian Public Broadcasting to Launch Russian-Language Channel," *ERR*, March 20, 2015; "Estonia Launches Own Russian-Language TV Channel," *DW*, September 28, 2015.

⁸¹ See Vilmer et al., 2018, p. 67; 2017 Intel Comm, NATO COE, p. 31: "Most of these activities seek to exploit preexisting vulnerabilities such as prejudice against minorities, social inequality, migration and corruption."

⁸² For example, Vilmer and coauthors (2018, p. 67) note that "[m]anipulation attempts are facilitated by the presence of minorities, as they exploit the feeling of non-belonging that these communities might have with regard to their integration."

International Divisions

Similarly, the existence of divisions among European states and between some of these states and the United States creates a receptive environment for content that attacks the West and Western institutions. Thus, the spread of Euroskepticism and anti-American sentiments, in whichever form these occur, conduces to more successful efforts to disseminate such content in service of various objectives. Likewise, tensions among neighbors also present opportunities for exploitation and exacerbation through Russian information efforts.⁸³

Russian-Speaking Communities

Russia exploits the existence of Russian-speaking communities, much in the same way it exploits other ethnonational divisions. This is the case with the Russian speakers both within the former Soviet space and outside it, as in Germany.⁸⁴ Yet, because Russia and its agents command a distinctive set of TTPs with regard to this audience—namely, the option of using domestic Russian media to reach this audience—it is worth distinguishing it as a separate source of vulnerabilities.⁸⁵

Corruption and Weak State Institutions

Russian information efforts also thrive in an atmosphere of corruption and/or weak state institutions. Where state structures and the governing elite are for sale, Russia and its agents have the greatest opportunities for establishing influence and creating an environment that is more susceptible to its information efforts.⁸⁶ Countries where corruption, rather than transparency, is the norm allow the greatest opportunities for covert recruitment and establishment of actors to execute Russia's information efforts. The entrenchment of Russian influence among corrupt and/or weak state institutions, in turn, erodes the state's will and ability to counter Russian influence including information efforts.⁸⁷ Finally, corrupt and weak institutions breed popular distrust, making state bodies and political figures into easy targets for information efforts.⁸⁸

⁸³ Vilmer et al., 2018, p. 68.

⁸⁴ On Russia's attempts to exploit the German Russian population, see Judy Dempsey, "Russia's Manipulation of Germany's Refugee Problems," *Carnegie Europe*, January 28, 2016.

⁸⁵ See Vilmer et al., 2018, p. 67: "The Russian media is . . . developing narratives that specifically target this minority abroad (claiming, for example, that Russian-speaking Latvians would be discriminated against, oppressed, mentioning 'apartheid' and even occasionally 'genocide')."

⁸⁶ As Galeotti explains, states where "corruption is rife" and "checks and balances are rudimentary offer all kinds of opportunities for acquiring influence, as the Russians buy allies and clients within the elite." Mark Galeotti, *Do the Western Balkans Face a Coming Russian Storm?* London: European Council on Foreign Relations, ECFR/250, April 2018, p. 12. By contrast, "[w]here institutions are strong, the best Moscow really can hope for is disruption, encouraging internal divisions and uncertainties" (Galeotti, 2017a, p. 7).

⁸⁷ Conley et al., 2016, p. 17.

⁸⁸ See Vilmer et al., 2018, p. 70.

Chapter Summary

Russia and its agents appear to use a diversity of TTPs as part of messaging efforts that address Russian objectives. All of these TTPs can be used to support all of the objectives identified in Chapter Two. We organize these TTPs within four categories that address content, information manipulation, dissemination, and target audience. In addition to broad attacks on adversaries and support for potential allies, much of the content disseminated as part of Russia's malign or subversive information efforts centers on supposed attacks on tradition and morality. The disseminated content often involves information that is completely false or somehow misrepresentative of facts. Further, content is disseminated to and tailored for various audiences, including general publics, those with extreme ideologies, Russian-speaking communities, and publics with various Russian affinities. Who is targeted and how Russia's malign or subversive information is tailored to these audience often seems to involve exploitation of various existing vulnerabilities within and across different European countries.

Application of Research on Influence and Manipulation to Russia's Malign or Subversive Information Efforts

Identifying the causal impact of Russia's information efforts is challenging, if not impossible, due to multiple factors, including difficulties in clearly determining whether an effort is connected to Russia or its agents, ascertaining exactly which individuals were exposed to an effort, examining how or whether those exposed to a messaging effort engaged with or processed the content, and analyzing which efforts might have had effects among individuals who were exposed to multiple messages. However, categorizing the key dimensions of Russia's malign or subversive information efforts, as outlined in Chapters Two and Three, facilitates consideration of whether, when, and why characteristics of these efforts might be effective in persuading various audiences, such that the research that has been conducted on or is related to these dimensions may address their persuasive efficacy.¹ This categorization also assists with identifying possible defensive approaches that might be most effective in reducing or eliminating the persuasive impact of these efforts. In this chapter, we review available literature and research—focusing on research in psychology but also drawing from media studies and other relevant fields—on influence and manipulation to examine the possible persuasive impact of Russia's malign or subversive information efforts. We organize this information by three of the key TTP dimensions of these efforts that we discussed previously—content, information manipulation, and dissemination techniques—and within these dimensions, we also address the potential target audiences that consume manipulated and disseminated content. In the next chapter, we identify promising practices for defending against information efforts implemented by Russia and its agents.

¹ For more on measurement of influence efforts, see Christopher Paul, Jessica Yeats, Colin P. Clarke, Miriam Matthews, and Lauren Skrabala, *Assessing and Evaluating Department of Defense Efforts to Inform, Influence, and Persuade: Handbook for Practitioners*, Santa Monica, Calif.: RAND Corporation, RR-809/2-OSD, 2015.

Messages Produced by Russia and Its Agents

Russia and its agents appear to disseminate several major types of content (see Chapter Three, Table 3.1). In addition to generally attacking countries or actors that do not support Russian interests and broadly promoting those entities that do align with its interests, much of the content within Russia's information efforts appears to focus on the supposed threats to tradition and conservative social norms allegedly presented by those opposing Russian interests and actions. This emphasis on traditional social norms and standards can be seen within the messages used to malign or attack Western culture, to promote Russian institutions and culture, to appeal to Russia's common culture and history with selected audiences, and to fan divisive sentiments. Across each of these content types, the messages disseminated by Russia and its agents emphasize the depravity of those who are not supportive of Russian interests while promoting Russia and its supporters as moral bulwarks (see Chapter Three). Research in psychology and related fields provides some insights into the possible effects on audience engagement, opinions, and behaviors stimulated by this emphasis on threats to traditional cultural values, conservative social norms, and conventional morality. For example, this research has addressed the limited influence fear appeals have on broad audiences, how and when threatening messages might have a persuasive influence, and how threats to different components (resources or values) can differentially influence groups.

Use of Threatening Messages to Influence Attitudes and Behaviors

Research suggests that threat-based messages have at least some potential to influence attitudes and behaviors. These threatening communications include, and are often associated with, fear appeals.

Fear Appeals

Fear appeals are persuasive messages that present threatening information in order to arouse fear and motivate audiences to respond in self-protective ways.² Thus, in most fear appeals, audiences receive a communication that encourages the audience members to think about their risk for experiencing a threat (e.g., threat to values, economic resources, life, health, family), including the severity of the threat and their own susceptibility to it. The communicator presumably expects these threatening thoughts will first stimulate the emotion of fear, and then this fear will motivate attitudinal and behavioral responses in line with the recommendations provided in or suggested by the threatening communication. Traditionally, public health campaigns have used

² Ronald W. Rogers, "Cognitive and Physiological Processes in Fear Appeals and Attitude Change: A Revised Theory of Protective Motivation," in J. T. Cacioppo and R. E. Petty, eds., *Social Psychophysiology: A Sourcebook*, New York: Guilford Press, 1983.

fear appeals to encourage audiences to engage in healthier behaviors.³ However, these appeals have also been used in political rhetoric, and communications regarding threats to tradition and conservative social norms that are intended to stoke fear (messages that appear to be used in different campaigns disseminated by Russia and its agents in Europe [see Chapter Three]) can be considered one type of fear appeal.⁴

Although they have the potential to exert some influence, fear appeals are not universally effective, and assumptions that all or most fear appeals will strongly influence mass audiences are not supported by research and appear to be inappropriate.⁵ Meta-analyses that have considered various characteristics of studies addressing fear appeals suggest that these appeals are most likely to be effective when the threatening communication elicits stronger feelings of fear and when those experiencing this fear perceive they can and will respond in ways that will effectively avert or address the threat.⁶ In other words, when audience members are motivated to address the presented threats and believe they can do something that will effectively reduce or eliminate the threats, fear appeals are more likely to effectively influence audiences. Even when fear appeals influence attitudes and behaviors, however, their effects are relatively weak.

Beyond Broad Fear Appeals

Given the seemingly limited overall impact of fear appeals, the continued use of threat-based messages as part of persuasive tactics might seem questionable. However, threatening messages can have influential effects beyond the focus of the message. Research suggests that individuals increase identification with—or show greater solidarity to—social groups in response to personal and collective threats. For example, threats to perceptions of personal control appear to contribute to increases in the extent to which individuals perceive certain groups as attractive, trust those groups, and identify with those groups.⁷ Further, social threats, including intergroup threats, are associated with

³ Kim Witte and Mike Allen, "A Meta-Analysis of Fear Appeals: Implications for Public Health Campaigns," *Health Education & Behavior*, Vol. 27, No. 5, 2000.

⁴ Krista De Castella, Craig McGarty, and Luke Musgrove, "Fear Appeals in Political Rhetoric About Terrorism: An Analysis of Speeches by Australian Prime Minister Howard," *Political Psychology*, Vol. 30, No. 1, 2009; Jennifer Jerit, "Survival of the Fittest: Rhetoric During the Course of an Election Campaign," *Political Psychology*, Vol. 25, No. 4, 2004.

⁵ Gjal-Jorn Peters, Robert A. C. Ruiter, and Gerjo Kok, "Threatening Communication: A Critical Re-Analysis and Revised Meta-Analytic Test of Fear Appeal Theory," *Health Psychology Review*, Vol. 7, No. 1, 2013.

⁶ Donna L. Floyd, Steven Prentice-Dunn, and Ronald W. Rogers, "A Meta-Analysis of Research on Protection Motivation Theory," *Journal of Applied Social Psychology*, Vol. 30, No. 2, 2000; Witte and Allen, 2000.

⁷ Immo Fritsche, Miguel Moya, Marcin Bukowski, Philipp Jugert, Soledad de Lemus, Oliver Decker, Immaculada Valor-Segura, and Gines Navarro-Carrillo, "The Great Recession and Group-Based Control: Converting Personal Helplessness into Social Class In-Group Trust and Collective Action," *Journal of Social Issues*, Vol. 73, No. 1, 2017; Janine Stolberg, Immo Fritsche, and Anna Backer, "Striving for Group Agency: Threat to Personal Control Increases the Attractiveness of Agentic Groups," *Frontiers in Psychology*, Vol. 6, 2015.

greater group identification among those for whom the group is important.⁸ Therefore, by emphasizing various threats from the West among groups who are or could be supportive of Russia, Russia's malign or subversive information efforts may promote cohesion among those groups.

In addition, threat-based messages could have stronger effects on selected groups or individuals than others. Addressing this, researchers have noted that “[d]ifferent people fear different things. No threat evokes the same response from all people. . . .”⁹ Thus, targeting particular groups with threats that are most salient to those groups might increase the persuasive efficacy of threat-based communications among the selected groups. In the context of the malign or subversive information efforts that appear to be disseminated by Russia and its agents, this would suggest that the tactic of tailoring threatening communications to particular audiences helps promote the persuasive impact of these messages.

Addressing who might be more likely to respond to threat-based messages, research that has considered differences among individuals suggests intelligence, knowledge, and formal education level may play a role in responses to diverse messages. For example, studies have shown that individuals who are more intelligent and more politically attentive are less likely than their counterparts to be influenced by the persuasive content of political messages, and those who are more politically knowledgeable regarding particular issues are more resistant to the persuasive influence of diverse media portrayals of those issues.¹⁰

Additional research in political psychology suggests that those holding differing political views respond differently to negative stimuli, such that those with more conservative views tend to demonstrate stronger physiological responses and devote greater cognitive resources to addressing negative stimuli, including threats, compared with their more liberal counterparts.¹¹ Further, studies have also shown that uncertainty, perceptions of threats to the social system, and resistance to change are each associated with greater conservatism (vs. liberalism).¹² Europeans who are more supportive of tradition and conservative social norms might be more likely to respond to threat-based messages than their more liberal counterparts.

⁸ Katharina Schmid and Orla T. Muldoon, “Perceived Threat, Social Identification, and Psychological Well-Being: The Effects of Political Conflict Exposure,” *Political Psychology*, Vol. 36, No. 1, 2015.

⁹ Michael S. LaTour and Herbert J. Rotfeld, “There Are Threats and (Maybe) Fear-Caused Arousal: Theory and Confusions of Appeals to Fear and Fear Arousal Itself,” *Journal of Advertising*, Vol. 26, No. 3, 1997.

¹⁰ William J. McGuire, “Personality and Susceptibility to Social Influence,” in E. F. Borgatta and W. W. Lambert, eds., *Handbook of Personality Theory and Research*, Chicago: Rand McNally, 1968; Christian Schemer, “The Influence of News Media on Stereotypic Attitudes Toward Immigrants in a Political Campaign,” *Journal of Communication*, Vol. 62, No. 5, 2012; John Zaller, *The Nature and Origins of Mass Opinion*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992.

¹¹ Hibbing, Smith, and Alford, 2014.

¹² Jost et al., 2007.

Political Polarization

Notably, research also suggests that after being exposed to threatening messages, groups or individuals who prefer to defend the current social order against less conventional values and ideas, or those high in authoritarianism, become more interested in messages that support their own attitudes and viewpoints and less interested in two-sided arguments.¹³ In other words, after exposure to threatening messages, these individuals and groups prefer to read or follow content that bolsters their own viewpoints, rather than seeking out or considering more balanced messages. Thus, exposure to threatening messages might reduce the willingness of at least some audiences to consider diverse viewpoints, promoting the popularity of one-sided media and more extreme views.¹⁴

Relatedly, communications regarding values and morals, including political debates regarding possible moral threats, can have polarizing effects. For example, messages that use moral-emotional words, such as hate, shame, peace, war, love, and free, are more likely to be disseminated within social networks than messages that do not invoke moral emotions. Importantly, dissemination of these messages is bounded by group membership.¹⁵ Thus, communication that focuses on the emotions associated with values, which encompasses threatening messages regarding threats to tradition, values, and morals, can be considered socially contagious within groups, but is less contagious between groups. This within-group moral contagion, observed within both liberal and conservative groups, can have a polarizing effect, thereby serving to further promote divisive sentiments.

Manipulating Threat Appeals and Party Support

Moving beyond the association between conservatism or authoritarianism and responses to threat, research has also begun to consider messages to and from various political parties and groups. For example, one study considered the association between perceived group threats and support for populist parties in the Netherlands and Germany. Results of this research suggested that believing the interests of one's group are threatened promoted preferences for radical right-wing populist parties.¹⁶ Related research, conducted in Switzerland, showed that beyond individual-level perceptions of group threat, an ideological climate of perceived group threat predicted support for radical right-wing populist parties.¹⁷ In other words, pervasive social threat

¹³ Howard Lavine, Milton Lodge, and Kate Freitas, "Threat, Authoritarianism, and Selective Exposure to Information," *Political Psychology*, Vol. 26, No. 2, 2005.

¹⁴ See, for example, Magdalena Wojcieszak, "'Don't Talk to Me': Effects of Ideologically Homogenous Online Groups and Politically Dissimilar Offline Ties on Extremism," *New Media & Society*, Vol. 12, No. 4, 2010.

¹⁵ William J. Brady, Julian A. Wills, John T. Jost, Joshua A. Tucker, and Jay J. Van Bavel, "Emotion Shapes the Diffusion of Moralized Content in Social Networks," *PNAS*, Vol. 114, No. 28, 2018.

¹⁶ Berning and Schlueter, 2016.

¹⁷ Carl C. Berning, "Contextual Perceived Group Threat and Radical Right-Wing Populist Party Preferences: Evidence from Switzerland," *Research and Politics*, Vol. 3, No. 1, 2016.

perceptions, which provide social contextual cues, appear to influence individual-level support for these parties.

Threat-based messages, including threatening political advertisements, appear to further bolster support for right-wing populist parties in Europe. Experimental research examining the effects of populist political advertising in Europe found that threatening political advertisements regarding immigrants invoke feelings of intergroup anxiety and increase negative stereotypes toward this group, which subsequently contributes to more negative intergroup attitudes. The effects of these messages are particularly powerful among less educated voters.¹⁸ Further, the negative intergroup attitudes, including both implicit attitudes and explicit hostile attitudes, prompted by right-wing populist political advertisements appear to promote voting preferences for these populist parties.¹⁹

Economic and Symbolic Threats

Additional research has also considered the different types of threats that might be most influential in increasing support of and intentions to vote for right-wing populist parties in Europe. Different studies on this topic have focused on two broad categories of threat: economic (or realistic) threats and symbolic threats.²⁰ Economic threat appeals address dangers to financial security and competition for various economic resources, including jobs, housing, and social services. By contrast, symbolic threat appeals focus on challenges to shared cultural practices, including tradition, conventional social norms, religious values, and language. As mentioned previously, the malign or subversive information efforts that appear to be disseminated by Russia and its agents might address both categories of threats, but seem to heavily emphasize symbolic threats in particular.

Drawing from the European Social Survey to examine workers' support for right-wing populist parties in Western Europe, research found that cultural protectionism, or concerns regarding possible negative influences on a country's cultural identity, was more influential of support for right-wing populist parties than economic grievances, and this was particularly pronounced among production and service workers.²¹ Subsequent research considering the effects of different types of threat appeals in right-wing populist political advertisements on Europeans found that, overall, symbolic threats

¹⁸ Jorg Matthes and Desiree Schmuck, "The Effects of Anti-Immigrant Right-Wing Populist Ads on Implicit and Explicit Attitudes: A Moderated Mediated Model," *Communication Research*, Vol. 44, No. 4, 2015.

¹⁹ Desiree Schmuck and Jorg Matthes, "Voting 'Against Islamization'? How Anti-Islamic Right-Wing, Populist Political Campaign Ads Influence Explicit and Implicit Attitudes Toward Muslims as Well as Voting Preferences," *Political Psychology*, 2018.

²⁰ Walter G. Stephan, Oscar Ybarra, Carmen Martinez, Joseph Schwarzwald, and Michal Tur-Kaspa, "Prejudice Toward Immigrants to Spain and Israel: An Integrated Threat Theory Analysis," *Journal of Cross-Cultural Psychology*, Vol. 29, No. 4, 1998.

²¹ Oesch, 2008.

were more influential, showing stronger effects on those exposed to the messages, than economic threat appeals.²² As with previous research, described earlier, the observed effects of these appeals were particularly strong among less-educated individuals.

Russia and European Populist Parties

Given the potential impact of negative communications and threatening messages on those who support right-wing populist parties in Europe, a subsequent consideration is whether there could be substantial utility for Russia in implementing messages to influence these party supporters. Indeed, in the context of Europe, researchers have argued that the rise of populist parties, particularly right-wing populist parties, has benefited Russia, such that many of these groups appear to express more pro-Russian sentiments than their more mainstream counterparts.²³ Although Russian president Vladimir Putin is not often considered to be a populist himself, Russian support for and influence of populist movements in Europe might serve to promote Russian interests.²⁴ Therefore, by opportunistically tailoring their malign or subversive information efforts within European countries to populist parties specifically, Russia and its agents might be able to gain support and political advantage for Russia over other countries or international entities.

Information Manipulations by Russia and Its Agents

When disseminating content that covers various topical categories, Russia and its agents may manipulate or completely falsify information as part of efforts to promote Russian interests. In terms of the information manipulation techniques that Russia and its agents appear to employ, most of these practices involve various kinds of falsehoods, ranging from completely manufacturing content to the misuse, or misapplication, of factual information. For example, fabrication, misappropriation, deceptive identities, obfuscation, conspiracy theories, and selective use of facts (see Chapter Three) all involve at least some element of falsifying or biasing information. Below, we consider research addressing audience responses to and abilities to detect manipulation of information.

²² Desiree Schmuck and Jorg Matthes, "Effects of Economic and Symbolic Threat Appeals in Right-Wing Populist Advertising on Anti-Immigrant Attitudes: The Impact of Textual and Visual Appeals," *Political Communications*, Vol. 34, 2017.

²³ Yulia Netesova and Torrey Taussig, "Putin's No Populist, but He Can Gain from Populist Movements Worldwide," *Brookings*, March 30, 2017; Slawomir Sierakowski, "In Europe, the Only Choice Is Right or Far-Right," *Foreign Policy*, May 21, 2018.

²⁴ Julia Gurganus, "Putin's Populism Trap," *Carnegie Endowment for International Peace*, November 21, 2017; Jussi Lassila, "Putin as a Non-Populist Autocrat," *Russian Politics*, Vol. 3, No. 2, 2018; Marcel H. Van Herpen, "Will Populism Come to Russia? Is a Flash Mob on Red Square the Ultimate Nightmare for the Kremlin?" *National Interest*, September 20, 2017.

Fabrications, Misappropriations, and Selective Use of Facts

As noted in Chapter Three, Russia and its agents appear to disseminate content that has been purposely fabricated, that misrepresents facts, or that selectively uses (i.e., cherry-picks) facts in order to mislead various audiences. These information manipulations have the potential to reach and influence large numbers of people. Research examining the spread of true and false information online has suggested that fabricated information reaches a larger number of people and reaches them faster than does true information. Specifically, this research has shown that false information is disseminated faster, farther, and more broadly on social media than true information.²⁵ Further, after initial publication, false information tends to be recirculated multiple times (i.e., rumor resurgence), whereas true information is not.²⁶

Although not the sole supplier of falsehood diffusion, social bots—which Russia and its agents appear to use with frequency—contribute to the spread of low-credibility content by amplifying content and targeting social media users who have a greater number of followers.²⁷ Certain groups of users also appear to be more likely to share false information than others, such that research has shown that older (i.e., over 65 years of age) and more conservative individuals are more likely than younger and more liberal individuals to share fabricated information.²⁸ Related research suggests that the consumption of fake news tends to be concentrated among those who are more conservative.²⁹

Consequences of Exposure

Beyond considering the spread of fabricated and manipulated information, research has also considered responses to this information, including the consequences of exposure to falsehoods. Based on how people cognitively process information, research on this topic suggests that exposure to fabricated or manipulated information can substantially influence what individuals remember and how they process new information. Specifically, research suggests that people process information by first believing the information to which they are exposed and then either assenting to or rejecting this

²⁵ Vosoughi, Roy, and Aral, 2018.

²⁶ Jjeun Shin, Lian Jian, Kevin Driscoll, and François Bar, “The Diffusion of Misinformation on Social Media: Temporal Pattern, Message, and Source,” *Computers in Human Behavior*, Vol. 83, 2018.

²⁷ Helmus et al., 2018; Chengcheng Shao, Giovanni Luca Ciampaglia, Onur Varol, Kai-Cheng Yang, Alessandro Flammini, and Filippo Menczer, “The Spread of Low-Credibility Content by Social Bots,” *Nature Communications*, Vol. 9, No. 1, 2018.

²⁸ Adam Badawy, Kristina Lerman, and Emilio Ferrara, “Who Falls for Online Political Manipulation?” *arXiv*, August 2018; Andrew Guess, Jonathan Nagler, and Joshua Tucker, “Less Than You Think: Prevalence and Predictors of Fake News Dissemination on Facebook,” *Science Advances*, Vol. 5, No. 1, 2019.

²⁹ Nir Grinberg, Kenneth Joseph, Lisa Friedland, Brioney Swire-Thompson, and David Lazer, “Fake News on Twitter During the 2016 U.S. Presidential Election,” *Science*, Vol. 363, No. 6425, 2019.

information.³⁰ Thus, exposure to fabricated or inaccurate information can contribute to recipient confusion regarding what is true and accurate and can increase audience reliance on the inaccurate information.³¹ For example, research has shown that misleading news article headlines that contain subtle misrepresentations of an article's content affect readers' memory, reasoning, and impressions.³² Similarly, social media users who read misleading social commentary attached to a news article preview tend to rely on the inaccurate social commentary when remembering content.³³ More heavily weighting the initially received information and the inability to discern the inconsistency between a headline or social comments and the article's content likely contribute to the formation or modification of judgments on a topic.³⁴

People are able to repair their initial acceptance of fabricated or manipulated information, but these repairs are more difficult if individuals are repeatedly exposed to falsehoods—a likely scenario in the current context, given the frequent and repeated distribution of falsehoods by Russia and its agents—or if they do not have sufficient motivation or ability (e.g., distracted) to counter the fabricated information.³⁵ The availability of alternative, accurate information to counter a fabrication or manipulation plays a role in sustained beliefs in this inaccurate information. Simply informing people that a communication was false or manipulated is unlikely to address their reliance on the fabrication, so an alternative explanation needs to be provided with the correction.³⁶ To maximize effectiveness, this alternative explanation, or debunking, needs to be provided before individuals have time to generate multiple reasons to support the inaccurate information.³⁷

³⁰ Daniel T. Gilbert, Romin W. Tatarodi, and Patrick S. Malone, "You Can't Not Believe Everything You Read," *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, Vol. 65, No. 2, 1993.

³¹ David N. Rapp and Nikita A. Salovich, "Can't We Just Disregard Fake News? The Consequences of Exposure to Inaccurate Information," *Policy Insights from the Behavioral and Brain Sciences*, Vol. 5, No. 2, 2018, pp. 232–239.

³² Ullrich K. H. Ecker, Stephan Lewandowsky, Ee Pin Chang, and Rekha Pillai, "The Effect of Subtle Misinformation in News Headlines," *Journal of Experimental Psychology: Applied*, Vol. 20, No. 4, 2014.

³³ Nicolas M. Anspach and Taylor N. Carlson, "What to Believe? Social Media Commentary and Belief in Misinformation," *Political Behavior*, 2018.

³⁴ David N. Rapp, "The Consequences of Reading Inaccurate Information," *Current Directions in Psychological Science*, Vol. 25, No. 4, 2016.

³⁵ Amalia M. Donovan, Elias Theodosios, and David N. Rapp, "Reader, Interrupted: Do Disruptions During Encoding Influence the Use of Inaccurate Information?" *Applied Cognitive Psychology*, Vol. 32, 2018; Gilbert, Tatarodi, and Malone, 1993.

³⁶ Ullrich K. H. Ecker, Stephan Lewandowsky, Candy S. C. Cheung, and Murray T. Mayberry, "He Did It! She Did It! No, She Did Not! Multiple Causal Explanations and the Continued Influence of Misinformation," *Journal of Memory and Language*, Vol. 85, 2015.

³⁷ Man-pui Sally Chan, Christopher R. Jones, Kathleen Hall Jamieson, and Dolores Albarracín, "Debunking: A Meta-Analysis of the Psychological Efficacy of Messages Countering Misinformation," *Psychological Science*, Vol. 28, No. 1, 2017.

Susceptibility

Research also provides additional insights into who might be most likely to believe in, or fall for, the fabricated or manipulated information that Russia and its agents disseminate. Broadly, individuals with a lower propensity to think analytically (vs. intuitively) appear to have greater difficulty differentiating real and fake information.³⁸ In addition, those who display greater dogmatism and religious fundamentalism also appear more likely to believe fake news. Notably, dogmatism and religious fundamentalism are associated with lower engagement in analytic thinking.³⁹ Further, those who place greater faith in intuition have a lower need for cognition, and lower cognitive abilities are more likely to believe pseudo-profound statements.⁴⁰ Related research suggests that partisan bias, such as preference for one political party over another, contributes less to fake news susceptibility than it does to propensity to think analytically.⁴¹ Therefore, people engage in less analytic thinking and rely more on intuition when exposed to partisan information. This suggests that, rather than showing a greater propensity to accept fake or manipulated information that aligns with their political ideologies, people might be more likely to believe fabrications when they do not engage in more deliberative and systematic reasoning regarding the information to which they are exposed (i.e., laziness, not bias, appears to influence beliefs in fabrications).

In addition to people showing individual differences in the extent to which they tend to engage in analytic reasoning and are, thus, more susceptible to believing fabrications, additional factors contribute to whether a person more deliberately processes a communication (see Figure 4.1). These include factors that affect one's ability to process information, such as the presence of distractions (decreases deliberate processing, increases susceptibility), repetition of information (decreases deliberate processing, increases susceptibility), and prior knowledge of a topic or issue (increases deliberate processing, decreases susceptibility).⁴² Recent research suggests that fake news articles exploit these distracting and cognitively biasing elements to persuade readers, such as by using simple and repetitive content.⁴³

³⁸ Pennycook and Rand, 2018b.

³⁹ Michael Bronstein, Gordon Pennycook, Adam Bear, David G. Rand, and Tyrone Cannon, "Belief in Fake News Is Associated with Delusionality, Dogmatism, Religious Fundamentalism, and Reduced Analytic Thinking," *Journal of Applied Research in Memory and Cognition*, Vol. 8, No. 1, 2018.

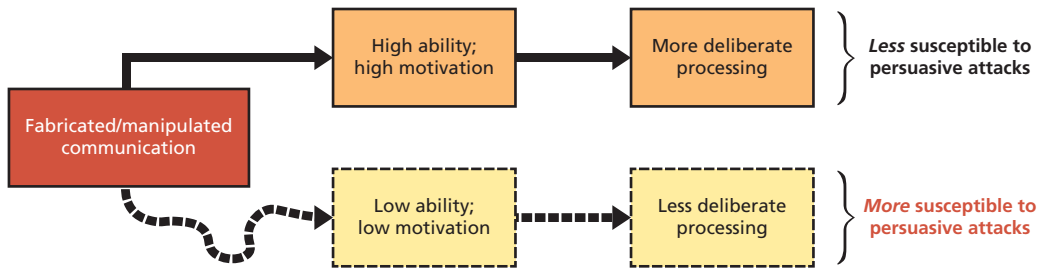
⁴⁰ Joanna Sterling, John T. Jost, and Gordon Pennycook, "Are Neoliberals More Susceptible to Bullshit?" *Judgment and Decision Making*, Vol. 11, No. 4, 2016.

⁴¹ Gordon Pennycook and David G. Rand, "Lazy, Not Biased: Susceptibility to Partisan Fake News Is Better Explained by Lack of Reasoning Than by Motivated Reasoning," *Cognition*, Vol. 188, 2018a.

⁴² Petty and Cacioppo, 1986.

⁴³ Benjamin D. Horne and Sibel Adah, "This Just In: Fake News Packs a Lot in Title, Uses Similar, Repetitive Content in Text Body, More Similar to Satire Than Real News," presented at the 2nd International Workshop on News and Public Opinion at ICWSM, 2017.

Figure 4.1
Factors That Might Contribute to Susceptibility to Persuasive Attacks



SOURCE: Adapted from Richard E. Petty, John T. Cacioppo, Alan J. Strathman, and Joseph R. Priester, "To Think or Not to Think: Exploring Two Routes to Persuasion," in T. C. Brock and M. C. Green, eds., *Persuasion: Psychological Insights and Perspectives*, Thousand Oaks, Calif.: Sage Publications, 2005.

Other factors associated with susceptibility to believe persuasive communications, including fabrications, are those that affect one's motivation to process information. Specifically, greater motivation increases the likelihood of more deliberate processing, which can decrease susceptibility to fabrications. Personal relevance of the communication, such as whether it contains value-relevant, outcome-relevant (e.g., ability to assist with obtaining desired outcomes), or impression-relevant (e.g., ability to assist with impression management) information, increases individual motivation to engage in more effortful cognitive processing.⁴⁴ If individuals do not believe a topic addressed as part of Russia's information dissemination efforts is personally relevant, they might be more likely to accept the false or misleading information regarding the issue.

Deceptive Identities

Another factor that influences how people process communications and the potential that they may believe the provided information is their assessment of the presenter, or who is doing the communicating. As mentioned previously, Russia and its agents use deceptive identities to promote perceptions that a source is legitimate or credible. Broadly, communicators, also known as sources, perceived to be more credible are likely to be more persuasive. Information tends to be more readily accepted when it is presented by credible sources than when it is presented by less credible sources.⁴⁵ Relatedly, when a credible source provides inaccurate information, people are more likely to

⁴⁴ Blair T. Johnson and Alice H. Eagly, "Effects of Involvement on Persuasion: A Meta-Analysis," *Psychological Bulletin*, Vol. 106, No. 2, 1989.

⁴⁵ Jeffrey E. Foy, Paul C. LoCasto, Stephen W. Briner, and Samantha Dyer, "Would a Madman Have Been So Wise as This? The Effects of Source Credibility and Message Credibility on Validation," *Memory and Cognition*, Vol. 45, No. 2, 2017; Chanthika Pronpitakpan, "The Persuasiveness of Source Credibility: A Critical Review of Five Decades of Evidence," *Journal of Applied Social Psychology*, Vol. 34, No. 2, 2004.

believe and use the inaccurate information than when it is provided by a less reliable or less credible source.⁴⁶

Sources are considered to be more credible when they are more trustworthy, do not have a vested interest in promoting a particular issue position or product, have expertise on a topic (e.g., can provide correct information), have positions of authority or status, or are considered similar to the message recipient(s) on certain attributes (e.g., political group membership, nationality, level of education, social status).⁴⁷ By deceptively portraying a source or website (e.g., news site) as possessing one or several of these attributes, Russia and its agents can increase the persuasiveness of messages presented by the source.

Conspiracy Theories and Rhetorical Fallacies

In addition to fabricating or manipulating information and identities, Russia and its agents also appear to use conspiracy theories and rhetorical/logical fallacies, or deliberately flawed reasoning, to promote Russian interests (see Chapter Three). As noted previously, conspiracy theories have the potential to influence audiences, in part, because they are difficult to disprove. Specifically, conspiratorial thinking is considered to be self-sealing, such that evidence provided to disprove a conspiracy is often reinterpreted as evidence that helps support the conspiracy.⁴⁸ Further, one conspiracist idea is often used to support new, additional conspiracist ideas.⁴⁹ Rhetorical fallacies that draw from biases in reasoning can be used in conjunction with or independently of conspiracy theories.⁵⁰

Research examining who is most likely to believe conspiracy theories has found that those who are more politically cynical, who have lower general and self-assessed intelligence, and who have a tendency to infer intentionality from ambiguous actions are most likely to hold these beliefs.⁵¹ People are also more likely to believe in or draw

⁴⁶ Rapp, 2016.

⁴⁷ Elvira Ismaglovia, Emma Slade, Nripendra P. Rana, and Yogesh K. Dwivedi, "The Effects of Characteristics of Source Credibility on Consumer Behavior: A Meta-Analysis," *Journal of Retailing and Consumer Services*, 2019; Zakary L. Tormala, Pablo Brinol, and Richard E. Petty, "Multiple Roles for Source Credibility Under High Elaboration: It's All in the Timing," *Social Cognition*, Vol. 25, No. 4, 2007.

⁴⁸ Stephan Lewandowsky, John Cook, and Elisabeth Lloyd, "The 'Alice in Wonderland' Mechanics of the Rejection of (Climate) Science: Simulating Coherence by Conspiracism," *Synthese*, Vol. 195, 2018.

⁴⁹ Viren Swami and Adrian Furnham, "Examining Conspiracist Beliefs About the Disappearance of Amelia Earhart," *Journal of General Psychology*, Vol. 139, 2012.

⁵⁰ Pascal Diethelm and Martin McKee, "Denialism: What Is It and How Should Scientists Respond?" *European Journal of Public Health*, Vol. 19, No. 1, 2009; Edmund Fantino, Stephanie Stolarz-Fantino, and Anton Navarro, "Logical Fallacies: A Behavioral Approach to Reasoning," *The Behavior Analyst Today*, Vol. 4, No. 1, 2003.

⁵¹ Robert Brotherton and Christopher C. French, "Intention Seekers: Conspiracist Ideation and Biased Attributions of Intentionality," *PLoS One*, Vol. 10, No. 5, 2015; Viren Swami, Rebecca Coles, Stefan Stieger, Jakob Pietsching, Adrian Furnham, Sherry Rehim, and Martin Voracek, "Conspiracist Ideation in Britain and Austria:

from conspiracy theories when attempting to understand and explain complex and anxiety-provoking events and under conditions of uncertainty and stress.⁵² This suggests that, in the face of stressful or distressing events, people are more likely to accept conspiracy theories regarding the events, in part to gain a sense of control and agency. By quickly disseminating conspiracy theories that support Russian interests during or after such worrying events, Russia and its agents have the potential to influence audience beliefs and perceptions in ways that are advantageous to Russia.⁵³

Obfuscation

Obfuscation, including propagation of multiple accounts for an event or phenomenon, appears to be an additional information technique used by Russia and its agents. Obfuscatory information has the potential to bias recipient processing, such that people have difficulty deliberately processing multiple explanations for incidents. The provision of multiple accounts by multiple communicators increases the amount of distracting information to which recipients are exposed, and this can decrease their cognitive processing ability.⁵⁴ Under these circumstances, people are more likely to use peripheral cues that are not central to the topic of interest to guide their interpretation of information. For example, if multiple weak explanations indicate that Russia was not responsible for a negative event and only one explanation suggests that Russia was accountable, then recipients who are not able or willing to carefully process all of the communications regarding the event might be more influenced by the multiple weak messages.⁵⁵ In this instance, the recipients would use peripheral cues to assume that more communications suggesting Russia was not responsible for an event, even if they are conflicting or poorly supported cues, are more persuasive than one communication indicating that Russia was responsible. This suggests that obfuscation can be persuasively advantageous for Russia and its agents.

Evidence of Monological Belief System and Associations Between Individual Psychological Differences and Real-World and Fictitious Conspiracy Theories," *British Journal of Psychology*, Vol. 102, 2011.

⁵² Viren Swami, Adrian Furnham, Nina Smyth, Laura Weis, Alixe Lay, and Angela Clow, "Putting the Stress on Conspiracy Theories: Examining Associations Between Psychological Stress, Anxiety, and Belief in Conspiracy Theories," *Personality and Individual Differences*, Vol. 99, 2016; Jan Willem van Prooijen, "Suspicion of Injustice: The Sense-Making Function of Belief in Conspiracy Theories," in E. Kals and J. Maes, eds., *Justice and Conflict: Theoretical and Empirical Contributions*, Berlin: Springer-Verlag, 2011; Jan Willem van Prooijen and Nils B. Jostmann, "Belief in Conspiracy Theories: The Influence of Uncertainty and Perceived Morality," *European Journal of Social Psychology*, Vol. 43, 2013.

⁵³ Kohei Watanabe, "Conspiracist Propaganda: How Russia Promotes Anti-Establishment Sentiment Online?" paper presented at ECPR General Conference, Hamburg, 2018.

⁵⁴ Richard E. Petty and Pablo Brinol, "Psychological Processes Underlying Persuasion: A Social Psychological Approach," *Diogenes*, Vol. 55, No. 1, 2008.

⁵⁵ Petty et al., 2005.

Appeals to Emotion

Russia and its agents also appear to use appeals to emotion within their information manipulation efforts. As noted earlier in this chapter, fear appeals generally appear to have limited persuasive impact across broad audiences, but targeted threat appeals have the potential to influence the targeted groups. Beyond fear, other emotions that persuasive communications can elicit include anger, sadness, annoyance, happiness, and so forth.⁵⁶

The impact of emotions on attitude change can vary, depending on when the emotion is experienced and whether people engage in analytic thinking in response to a communication. For example, emotions felt before receiving a communication can bias subsequent cognitive processing of the communication. By contrast, emotions experienced soon after receiving a communication might be used as evidence in favor of the communication's argument, if the emotions are relevant to the argument. When individuals engage in limited analytic thinking, or more constrained deliberate processing, in response to a communication, the emotions elicited by that communication can cause recipients' attitudes to change in ways that are consistent with the emotions.⁵⁷ For example, pairing a stimulus with which recipients have little or no familiarity, such as a person, place, item, or issue, with positive images can elicit positive reactions to that stimulus, whereas pairing a stimulus with negative images can elicit negative reactions. Russia and its agents might use that to their advantage within social media—including through use of memes—by pairing a stimulus of interest to Russia with a positive or negative image or sentiment, depending on the desired attitude toward the stimulus.⁵⁸

Distribution Techniques

Thus far, this chapter has addressed the possible influence that the content of messages produced by Russia and its agents might have on diverse audiences and the potential persuasive impact of the information manipulation techniques used when distributing content. The distribution techniques that appear to be used by Russia and its agents can also play a role in influencing audiences. Various actors who appear to be differentially connected to the Russian state make use of different modes when communicat-

⁵⁶ David DeSteno, Richard E. Petty, Derek D. Rucker, Duane T. Wegener, and Julia Braverman, "Discrete Emotions and Persuasion: The Role of Emotion-Induced Expectancies," *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, Vol. 86, No. 1, 2005.

⁵⁷ Richard E. Petty and Pablo Brinol, "Emotion and Persuasion: Cognitive and Meta-Cognitive Processes Impact Attitudes," *Cognition and Emotion*, Vol. 29, No. 1, 2015.

⁵⁸ Bradley E. Wiggins, "Crimea River: Directionality in Memes from Russia-Ukraine Conflict," *International Journal of Communication*, Vol. 10, 2016.

ing information. These modes include more traditional television or radio programming, websites, social media, and real-life events (see Chapter Three).

Social Media

Social media encompasses one of the newest and most frequently used communication distribution techniques used by Russia and its agents.⁵⁹ Research suggests that the use of social media sites might increase the amount of inaccurate and falsified information to which individuals are exposed—one study found that visitors to fake news websites are likely to navigate to these sites from social media sites.⁶⁰ In part, the ability for outside groups, including Russia and its agents, to use deceptive identities (described previously) when sharing malign or subversive information appears to increase the number of people exposed to, and the possible effects of, these messages.⁶¹ For example, groups can use social engineering, native advertising, or stealth marketing, including advertisements that look like regular social media posts from other social media users, to promote distribution of communications, as social media users are more likely to share and respond to communications that they believe to be regular posts from similar users.⁶²

Some social media users also appear to share inaccurate and misleading information with friends and followers, even when they are cognizant of possible inaccuracies in the information they are sharing. Despite the inaccuracies of this information, sharing it supports efforts to socialize with other social media users (e.g., can use it as a conversation piece).⁶³ Relational motivations, or desires to achieve a shared understanding of reality with others, appear to underlie both information and misinformation sharing among social media users, particularly among those who are more conservative, value conformity, and prefer to interact with similar others.⁶⁴

Personalization

One aspect of social media that allows it to influence users is the ability for state actors, agents, and others to psychologically target audiences on social media. In other words,

⁵⁹ Bodine-Baron et al., 2018; Helmus et al., 2018.

⁶⁰ Nelson and Taneja, 2018.

⁶¹ Kim et al., 2018.

⁶² Abdullah Algarni, Yue Xe, and Taizan Chan, "An Empirical Study on the Susceptibility to Social Engineering on Social Networking Sites: The Case of Facebook," *European Journal of Information Systems*, Vol. 26, No. 6, 2017.

⁶³ Xinran Chen, Sei-Chung Joanna Sin, Yin-Leng Theng, and Chei San Lee, "Why Students Share Misinformation on Social Media: Motivation, Gender, and Study-Level Differences," *Journal of Academic Librarianship*, Vol. 41, 2015.

⁶⁴ John T. Jost, Sander van der Linden, Costas Panagopoulos, and Curtis D. Haden, "Ideological Asymmetries in Conformity, Desire for Shared Reality, and the Spread of Misinformation," *Current Opinion in Psychology*, Vol. 23, 2018.

Microtargeting

Microtargeting, also known as precision marketing, has roots in the advertising community and seeks to get just the right ads in front of just the right individuals. When used as originally intended, microtargeting meets everyone's interests: producers get their products and services displayed to those most likely to want/need/buy them, advertisers serve producers well and are rewarded for their success, and consumers are exposed to products and services they are likely to desire. The system works by exploiting big data jointly with other technologies to identify very small market segments and put the ads tailored to appeal to that segment in front of them. Unfortunately, when microtargeting is used for precision propaganda as part of an influence campaign, the incentive and reward structure no longer aligns favorably for everyone and is not in the public interest. (See Dipayan Ghosh and Ben Scott, *Digital Deceit: The Technologies Behind Precision Propaganda on the Internet*, New America, Policy Paper, January 23, 2018.)

social media communications can be tailored to selected groups of interest with relative ease. Adapting messages and information to address the needs of social media user groups appears to increase the persuasive effectiveness of these communications.⁶⁵ For example, promoting the social aspects of a product or event increases the persuasiveness of a communication among those high in extraversion, whereas suppressing social elements increases a communication's persuasiveness among those low in extraversion. Personalization of social media communication, including by microtargeting users and groups on social media, appears to be one tactic Russia and its agents have used as part of efforts to influence various audiences.⁶⁶

Multimodal Communication

As noted previously, social media is far from the only distribution method Russia and its agents use to distribute malign or subversive information. Use of other communications modes—including television, newspapers, radio broadcasts, live events, and online media other than social media—might promote the likelihood that audiences are exposed to certain messages at all, and exposure to or awareness of a message can increase its potential influence. In addition, distribution of a message or argument by multiple sources increases the extent to which the communication influences audience

⁶⁵ S. C. Matz, M. Kosinski, G. Nave, and D. J. Stillwell, "Psychological Targeting as an Effective Approach to Digital Mass Persuasion," *PNAS*, Vol. 114, 2017.

⁶⁶ Flemming Splidsboel Hansen, "Russian Influence Operations: Trying to Get What You Want," *Danish Institute for International Studies*, 2018; House of Commons, *Disinformation and Fake News: Final Report, Eighth Report of Session 2017–2019*, London: House of Commons, February 18, 2019.

attitudes and behaviors, and the use of diverse communication modes to distribute messages can also increase the audience's repeated exposure to the messages.⁶⁷

Repeated Exposure

Research on the mere exposure effect has shown that people's liking for a stimulus increases after repeated exposure to that stimulus.⁶⁸ Therefore, repeatedly presenting a stimulus, including an argument or person, across diverse modes of communication has the potential to increase audience liking for this stimulus. Further, as noted previously, moderate repeated exposure to a message can also increase its persuasive efficacy, such that audiences are more likely to accept information to which they have been previously exposed.⁶⁹ Notably, there are limits to the efficacy of repeated exposure. Specifically, overexposure can lead to message fatigue, which is associated with avoidance, annoyance, desensitization, and counterargumentation of the message.⁷⁰

Communication Synergy

Information communication across diverse modes often involves more than simply repeating a message or argument across each mode. In other words, related arguments or messages might be communicated across diverse modes. In the case of Russia and its agents, this might involve messages on television, radio, and websites, and speeches that undermine the West and Western institutions or promote Russia. Research examining the synergistic effects of communications across diverse modes has shown that this strategy of communicating interrelated messages across mixed modes is more influential in changing attitudes than simply repeating the same message across diverse modes.⁷¹

Chapter Summary

Building from key dimensions across the malign or subversive information efforts that Russia and its agents appear to disseminate, this chapter considered the possible persuasive effects of these efforts. Table 4.1 provides a summary of findings reported in this chapter.

⁶⁷ Harkins and Petty, 1981.

⁶⁸ Xiang Fang, Surendra Singh, and Rohini Ahluwalia, "An Examination of Different Explanations for the Mere Exposure Effect," *Journal of Consumer Research*, Vol. 34, 2007.

⁶⁹ Cacioppo and Petty, 1989.

⁷⁰ Jiyeon So, Soela Kim, and Heather Cohen, "Message Fatigue: Conceptual Definition, Operationalization, and Correlates," *Communication Monographs*, Vol. 84, No. 1, 2017.

⁷¹ Maria Angeles Navarro-Bailon, "Strategic Consistent Message in Cross-Tool Campaigns: Effects on Brand Image and Brand Attitude," *Journal of Marketing Communications*, Vol. 18, No. 3, 2012.

Table 4.1
Summary of Reviewed Research on Influence and Manipulation

| Topic | General Findings | Broad Implications |
|-------------------------------|--|---|
| Production | | |
| Fear appeals | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Fear appeals are more persuasive when they elicit stronger fear and those experiencing fear perceive they can respond effectively to it • The effects of fear appeals are weak | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Fear appeals to broad audiences are unlikely to have strong persuasive effects |
| Threat-based messages | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Those who are more intelligent, attentive to, and knowledgeable on issues are more resistant to influence of threats on those issues • Those with more conservative views show stronger physiological responses and devote greater cognitive resources to threats | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Targeting particular groups with threats that are most salient to those groups can increase persuasiveness of threat-based communications |
| Political polarization | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • After exposure to threats, those higher in authoritarianism become more interested in messages supporting their own viewpoints and less interested in two-sided arguments | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Exposure to threatening messages can promote the popularity of one-sided media and extreme views, particularly among certain groups |
| Party support | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Threat-based messages appear to bolster support for right-wing populist parties in Europe | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Right-wing populist parties express more pro-Russian sentiments, so bolstering these parties might assist Russia |
| Economic and symbolic threats | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Cultural protectionism appears more influential in increasing support for right wing populist parties than economic grievances | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Right-wing populist parties express pro-Russian sentiments. Bolstering these parties via messages on cultural threats may aid Russia |
| Manipulation | | |
| Fabrications, etc. | | |
| Exposure | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Exposure to fabricated/inaccurate information adds to confusion on what is true/accurate • Only informing people that a communication was false is unlikely to address their reliance on the fabrication | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Exposure to fabrications/manipulations can contribute to reliance on and support for the inaccurate information |
| Susceptibility | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Individuals with a lower propensity or ability to think analytically are more susceptible to influence of fabrications | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Distracting and repetitive communication on topics about which audiences have limited knowledge can be persuasive |
| Deceptive identities | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Information presented by credible sources tends to be more readily accepted than information presented by less credible sources | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • By deceptively portraying a source or website as credible, Russia and its agents can increase the persuasiveness of messages |

Table 4.1—Continued

| Topic | General Findings | Broad Implications |
|---|---|--|
| Conspiracy theories, rhetorical fallacies | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Evidence provided to disprove a conspiracy is often reinterpreted as evidence to support it • Those who are more politically cynical, have lower intelligence, and tend to infer intentionality from ambiguous actions are more likely to believe conspiracies • People are also more likely to believe in conspiracies when attempting to understand complex and anxiety-provoking events and under conditions of uncertainty and stress | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • By quickly disseminating conspiracy theories that support Russian interests during or after worrying events, Russia and its agents have the potential to influence audience beliefs |
| Obfuscation | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • People have difficulty deliberately processing multiple explanations for incidents | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Obfuscation can be persuasively advantageous for Russia and its agents |
| Appeals to emotion | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Emotions elicited by a communication can cause recipients' attitudes to change in ways that are consistent with the emotions | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • By pairing a stimulus of interest to Russia with a positive or negative image/sentiment, appeals to emotion might advantage Russia |
| Distribution | | |
| Social media | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The use of social media sites might increase the amount of inaccurate and falsified information to which individuals are exposed | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Russia and its agents can use deceptive identities, social engineering, native advertising, and stealth marketing on social media to distribute malign or subversive information |
| Personalization | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Adapting messages and information to address the needs of social media user groups appears to increase the persuasive effectiveness of these communications | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Personalization of social media communication, including by microtargeting users and groups, is one tactic Russia and its agents have used |
| Multimodal communication | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Distribution of a message by multiple sources increases the extent to which the communication influences audience attitudes and behaviors | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Use of multiple communication modes—including television, newspapers, radio broadcasts, live events, and online media other than social media—might increase the persuasiveness of messages distributed by Russia and its agents |
| Repeated exposure | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The use of diverse communication modes to distribute a message can increase an audience's repeated exposure to the messages • People's liking for a stimulus increases after repeated exposure to that stimulus | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Repeated exposure to the same/similar message from Russia and its agents can increase the persuasiveness of the message |
| Communication synergy | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Communicating interrelated messages across mixed modes is more influential in changing attitudes than simply repeating the same message across diverse modes | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Distribution of interrelated messages on television, radio, and websites, and through speeches to undermine the West and Western institutions or promote Russia may be persuasive |

As noted previously, it is difficult, if not impossible, to definitively determine the impact of these efforts, but research in psychology, communications, and other fields suggests possible impacts these efforts might have. Of course, many are commonly used in both commercial and political marketing. Overall, the characteristics of these efforts do appear to have the potential to influence at least some audiences. For example, targeted content has the potential to affect the thoughts, attitudes, and behaviors of selected audiences. Further, diverse audiences might have difficulty deliberately processing the deluge of fabricated and misleading information to which they are exposed, thereby increasing the potential that they will be affected by these efforts. As discussed in depth in Chapter Five, various options are being explored to counter the persuasive influence of these and related efforts.

Defending Against Malign or Subversive Information Efforts

Thus far, we have reviewed, categorized, and analyzed apparent malign or subversive information efforts implemented by Russia and its agents in Europe and the possible psychological effects of these efforts. In this chapter, we provide general avenues for countering the persuasive effects of these efforts and review some of the more specific practices that governmental, military, and NGOs might use to defend against such malign or subversive information efforts.¹ Although focused on defending against information efforts that experts believe are from Russia and its agents, many of the practices discussed could be used to defend against malign information efforts from other state or nonstate actors. We describe a variety of practices that, when used in coordination with each other, have the potential to reduce the extent of influence that such information efforts will have.

We have organized this chapter into three parts. First, we review the nature of Russia's "firehose of falsehoods," outlining a model that builds from the previously discussed characteristics of Russia's information efforts. This model contains three parts: the production of content (or content and information manipulation), the distribution of content to others (or dissemination techniques), and the audiences who consume this content. Second, we use this model to organize and discuss various practices that defend against the production, distribution, and consumption of content from Russia's information efforts. Finally, we summarize key points and outline potential avenues for defending against Russia's malign or subversive information efforts.

Pathology of Malign or Subversive Information Efforts

As noted in Chapter Three, Russia has a history of using information to influence foreign populations in order to advance its foreign policy goals.² What is new about con-

¹ These information efforts occur within a context that we refer to as the information environment. We define this environment as the aggregate of individuals, organizations, and systems that collect, process, disseminate, or act on information. For more information, see Joint Publication 3-13, 2012, p. ix.

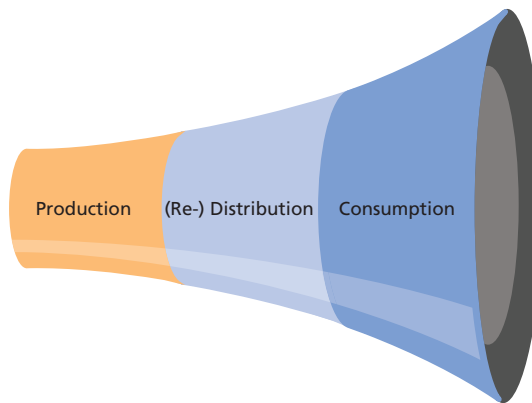
² Lawrence Eagleburger, "Unacceptable Intervention: Soviet Active Measures," *NATO Review*, Vol. 31, No. 1, 1983; Fletcher Schoen and Christopher Jon Lamb, *Deception, Disinformation, and Strategic Communications*:

temporary Russian information efforts, however, is the quality and quantity of pathways available for Russia to create and distribute content to consumers and the capacity for consumers to retransmit this content to others.³ In previous research, we referred to these characteristics as the “firehose of falsehood model,” because they involve high volumes of false information, transmitted rapidly and continuously, delivered to consumers via a multitude of channels.⁴ To understand how best to defend against these information efforts, we first delimit the apparent pathology that Russia uses to create and distribute content to others. To do so, we view Russia’s current information efforts as a firehose having three distinct parts, each displayed in Figure 5.1.⁵

Production of Content

The first part of this model is the **production of content**, which is akin to a spigot that controls the flow of content into this metaphorical hose. The production of content focuses on the content that Russia and its agents generate as well as their information manipulation techniques. What is or is not a “falsehood” is rarely black or white. Put another way, the veracity of malign or subversive information efforts is typically a continuous—not a dichotomous—variable. Some research has described

Figure 5.1
Model of the Pathology of Russian Malign/Subversive Information Efforts



How One Interagency Group Made a Major Difference, Washington, D.C.: National Defense University Press, 2012; Timothy Thomas, “Russia’s Reflexive Control Theory and the Military,” *Journal of Slavic Military Studies*, Vol. 17, No. 2, 2004.

³ Nicholas J. Cull, Vasily Gatov, Peter Pomerantsev, Anne Applebaum, and Alistair Shawcross, *Soviet Subversion, Disinformation, and Propaganda: How the West Fought Against It*, London: London School of Economics Consulting, October 2017.

⁴ Paul and Matthews, 2016.

⁵ Claire Wardle and H. Derakhshan, *Information Disorder: Toward an Interdisciplinary Framework for Research and Policy Making*, Council of Europe, September 2017.

this continuous variable in a variety of ways, including distinctions made for mis-, dis-, and mal-information.⁶ In Chapter Three, we addressed this part of the model when categorizing several types of content (e.g., promote other countries' government and nongovernment actors, fan divisive sentiment, appeal to common heritage) and various information manipulation techniques (e.g., rhetorical fallacies, fabrication, obfuscation) that Russia and its agents appear to use in Europe. As noted in that chapter, the production of content often spans categories. For example, some content may have rhetorical fallacies that have deliberately flawed reasoning, other content may try to obfuscate specific claims related to an event, while other content may contain fabrications that are completely false or misleading.

Distribution (and Redistribution) of Content

The second part of the model is the **distribution (and redistribution) of content** produced by Russia and the country's agents, wittingly or unwittingly.⁷ The distribution part of this model is akin to the firehose that carries malign or subversive information to the people who may consume the information. This part of the model spans the different dissemination techniques that Chapter Three identified: traditional media (e.g., television, radio, print), online media, social media, and in-person engagements.

As an example of distribution, Russia and its agents may spread damaging information to the public, which the public then distributes further. This was observed in the breach of French president Emmanuel Macron's emails before his election in 2017. News outlets reported that Russian-backed actors hacked Macron's emails, distributed them on a document sharing website, and then announced the release of these files on the message board 4chan.⁸ While Russian-backed actors appear to have initiated the collection and distribution of content (President Macron's emails), seemingly unwitting users on 4chan and other social media platforms reshared links to this information. Soon after, the owner of 4chan—Hiroyuki Nisimura—asked the public not to involve his site in this French election leak.

Further, both bad actors and unwitting actors without a known affiliation to Russia may use a variety of channels to spread content. Information efforts through traditional television and newspapers still exist, but social media, amateur journalism, and online forums are newer methods for conducting these same efforts. Consumers of malign or subversive content may further redistribute this content using these same channels. For example, some Russian tactics include "sleeper" social media accounts that appear to be from a real person in the target country but are a bot or actor located

⁶ Kavanagh and Rich, 2018, pp. 8–10; Wardle and Derakhshan, 2017, p. 5.

⁷ For simplicity, we use the term "distribution" to encompass both distribution of falsehoods that bad actors produce and the redistribution of this content (and derivative content based on the original falsehoods) by consumers.

⁸ Megha Mohan, "Macron Leaks: The Anatomy of a Hack," *BBC*, May 9, 2017.

elsewhere. After years of posting and gaining followers as if they are a real person, the same accounts begin to post pieces of malign or subversive information, which others in the false account's social network may further distribute.⁹

Consumption of Content

The last part of the model is the **consumption of content** by individuals. These consumers are the people whom Russia and its agents are targeting with content from their information efforts. Put simply, consumers are those who are being sprayed with this proverbial firehose. This part of the model addresses the target audiences for Russia's malign or subversive information efforts. As noted in Chapter Three, these audiences include general publics in European countries, influencers in Europe, publics with extreme political views, and/or Russian-speaking audiences.

Some examples of consumption by these target audiences include the content that people consume from trolls and bots against key countries during critical times. For example, a study by the National Defence Academy of Latvia found that specific regions are receiving targeted meta-narratives from Russia, stories designed to make Latvian society less stable and to endear Russian-speaking Latvians to Russia.¹⁰ These people are examples of what we refer to as consumers in our model.

Overview of Approaches to Defending Against Malign or Subversive Information Efforts

Using our model of the pathology of malign/subversive information efforts, we categorize approaches by whether they intend to affect the production, distribution, or consumption stage of information efforts. Because malign/subversive information must transit all three stages to be successful, protecting citizens and societies against such efforts can result from defensive efforts aimed at any or all of the stages. Those implementing specific defensive measures should be explicit about where in the chain of information efforts they intend to have an impact in order to enable planning, assessment, and refinement of these efforts.¹¹

Table 5.1 organizes these purposes by each part of the pathology of malign/subversive information efforts. Specific defensive practices should be tailored to the type of content, information manipulation techniques, dissemination techniques, and target

⁹ Kara Frederick, "How to Defend Against Foreign Influence Campaigns: Lessons from Counter-Terrorism," War on the Rocks, October 19, 2018; Helmus et al., 2018.

¹⁰ National Defence Academy of Latvia, Center for Security and Strategic Research, *The Possibility of Societal Destabilization in Latvia: Potential National Security Threats*, ed. Ieva Berzina, Riga, Latvia, 2016.

¹¹ See, for example, the discussions of objective setting in Paul et al., 2015; or Christopher Paul and Miriam Matthews, *The Language of Inform, Influence, and Persuade: Assessment Lexicon and Usage Guide for U.S. European Command Efforts*, Santa Monica, Calif.: RAND Corporation, RR-2655-EUCOM, 2018.

Table 5.1
Purposes of Defensive Practices

| Production | (Re-) Distribution | Consumption |
|--|--|---|
| Reduce the volume of new malign or subversive content from Russia and its agents | Decrease the spread of existing malign or subversive content | Promote awareness of the information space by consumers |

NOTE: When engaging in any specific practice to achieve a general purpose, we recommend the practice have a SMART objective: specific, measurable, achievable, relevant and results-oriented, and time-bound (Michael J. McNerney, Jefferson P. Marquis, S. Rebecca Zimmerman, and Ariel Klein, *SMART Security Cooperation Objectives: Improving DoD Planning and Guidance*, Santa Monica, Calif.: RAND Corporation, RR-1430-OSD, 2016).

audiences of Russia’s information efforts. These purposes may not always be mutually exclusive, in part, because the lines between production, distribution, and consumption of content are not always clearly delineated, especially for social media.¹² For example, a consumer of content on Facebook may change this content and redistribute it to his or her immediate social network. In this example, the consumer becomes both a producer and a distributor of new content.¹³ While imperfect, the goals outlined in Table 5.1 provide a starting point to organize a range of selected defensive practices against Russian information efforts.

Addressing Production by Limiting Exposure

The first approach to defense, outlined in Table 5.1, addresses limiting exposure to misleading and harmful information, or **reducing the volume of new malign or subversive content** produced by Russia and its agents. The purpose of defensive practices captured within this approach is to reduce the volume of false or misleading information that Russia and its agents produce. This may be addressed by, for example, reducing the ability for state actors and others to disseminate new content that is misleading or completely fabricated and by reducing the distribution and redistribution of previously produced inaccurate and misleading content.

However, limiting exposure to fabricated information is a challenging endeavor. Beliefs in conspiracies often persist because the fabrications used to support these conspiracies are repeated by multiple individuals, including politicians, reporters, individuals in one’s social groups, and other actors, across multiple communication modes.¹⁴

¹² Taina Bucher and Anne Helmond, “The Affordances of Social Media Platforms,” in J. Burgess, T. Poell, and A. Marwick, eds., *SAGE Handbook of Social Media*, London: Sage, 2017.

¹³ Some scholars refer to the merging of production and consumption of online content as prosumption. For more information, see George Ritzer and Nathan Jurgenson, “Production, Consumption, Prosumption: The Nature of Capitalism in the Age of the Digital ‘Prosumer,’” *Journal of Consumer Culture*, Vol. 10, No. 1, 2010.

¹⁴ Dietram Scheufele and Nicole M. Krause, “Science Audience, Misinformation, and Fake News,” *PNAS*, Vol. 116, No. 16, 2018.

Therefore, exposure to the falsehoods could occur at any time and could come from a diversity of sources. Limiting possible exposure on certain platforms—such as social media sites—through use of algorithms and regulations might be most feasible, and we discuss techniques that address this in the next section. Notably, however, these focused actions will not eliminate all possibility of audience exposure to malign or subversive information.¹⁵ Further, the development and implementation of standards for detecting and addressing different types of potentially misleading or inaccurate information can contribute to difficulties in establishing well-accepted regulations and algorithms.¹⁶ Researchers have previously noted that different types of inaccurate and misleading information are created and disseminated for a diversity of reasons, so combatting misinformation requires recognition of and general agreement regarding whether and how to address these different misinformation types.¹⁷

Reducing (Re-) Distribution of Content

The second purpose of defensive practices is to **reduce the spread of existing malign or subversive content**. The targets of defensive practices for this purpose are actors who knowingly spread false or misleading content, unknowingly spread this content, or produce and spread derivative content based on existing information. In addition to deprioritizing content displayed to social media users, discussed later in this chapter, organizations might consider refuting or debunking malign/subversive information. The underlying assumption in disseminating refutations is that, after being informed of the truth, audiences will discontinue believing in and being influenced by the previous inaccurate and misleading information to which they were exposed. Research suggests that this is a flawed assumption. Even after information has been retracted or misinformation has been corrected, people frequently continue to rely on the inaccurate information to which they were initially exposed.¹⁸ This phenomenon is often referred to as either belief persistence or the continued influence effect.¹⁹

¹⁵ John Cook, Ullrich Ecker, and Stephan Lewandowsky, “Misinformation and How to Correct It,” in Robert Scott and Stephan Kosslyn, eds., *Emerging Trends in the Social and Behavioral Sciences*, Hoboken, N.J.: John Wiley & Sons, 2015.

¹⁶ Mike Ananny, *The Partnership Press: Lessons for Platform-Publisher Collaborations as Facebook and News Outlets Team to Fight Misinformation*, Columbia Journalism School, Tow Center for Digital Journalism, 2018.

¹⁷ Aaron M. Mcwright and Riley E. Dunlap, “Combatting Misinformation Requires Recognizing Its Types and the Factors That Facilitate Its Spread and Resonance,” *Journal of Applied Research in Memory and Cognition*, Vol. 6, 2017; M. Mitchell Waldrop, “The Genuine Problem of Fake News,” *PNAS*, Vol. 114, No. 48, 2017.

¹⁸ Emily Thorson, “Belief Echoes: The Persistent Effects of Corrected Misinformation,” *Political Communication*, Vol. 33, No. 3, 2016.

¹⁹ Ullrich K. H. Ecker, Joshua L. Hogan, and Stephan Lewandowsky, “Reminders and Repetition of Misinformation: Helping or Hindering Its Retraction?” *Journal of Applied Research in Memory and Cognition*, Vol. 6, No. 2, 2017.

Social psychological research has considered the potential mechanisms that contribute to the continued influence of corrected information. Oftentimes, when correcting inaccurate communications, the erroneous information is first repeated and then briefly refuted. The initial repetition of the falsehood appears to inadvertently reinforce it, such as by increasing recipients' familiarity with it.²⁰ To more strongly debunk fabrications, research suggests that a more detailed debunking message that also encourages audiences to counterargue the originally received misinformation can decrease the persistent influence of the misinformation.²¹ Rather than simply stating that the original misinformation is false, counterargumentation of the misinformation can be facilitated by providing an alternative explanation to that provided by the inaccurate or misleading information (e.g., a causal alternative).²²

Fact-Check Tags

As noted previously, social media is one source that has facilitated the circulation of malign or subversive information. Therefore, research has addressed whether providing general warnings regarding social media content or adding tags (e.g., "disputed," "rated false") to headlines on social media can assist with addressing the influence of false or misleading communications.²³ Rather than correcting previously received information, tagging involves labeling content at the same time as exposure to the content. Initial research suggests that tagging content as disputed or false contributes to lowered perceptions of content accuracy among social media users exposed to this content. However, provision of general warnings regarding the possibility of exposure to inaccurate information on social media contributes to decreased perceptions of accuracy for both true and untrue information and headlines on social media. Additional research is needed to address the potential effects of different types of tags (e.g., sizes, labels, colors) on recipients' perceptions and behaviors.

²⁰ Briony Swire, Ullrich K. H. Ecker, and Stephan Lewandowsky, "The Role of Familiarity in Correcting Inaccurate Information," *Journal of Experimental Psychology: Learning, Memory, and Cognition*, Vol. 43, No. 12, 2017.

²¹ Chan et al., 2017; Graham N. Dixon, Brooke Weberling McKeever, Avery E. Holton, Christopher Clarke, and Gina Eosco, "The Power of a Picture: Overcoming Scientific Misinformation by Communicating Weight-of-Evidence Information with Visual Exemplars," *Journal of Communication*, Vol. 65, 2015.

²² John Cook and Stephan Lewandowsky, *The Debunking Handbook*, St. Lucia, Australia: University of Queensland, 2011; Ullrich K. H. Ecker, Stephan Lewandowsky, and Joe Apai, "Terrorists Brought Down the Plane!—No, Actually It Was a Technical Fault: Processing Corrections of Emotive Information," *Quarterly Journal of Experimental Psychology*, Vol. 64, No. 2, 2011.

²³ Katherine Clayton, Spencer Blair, Jonathan A. Busam, Samuel Forstner, John Glance, Guy Green, Anna Kawata, Akhila Kovvuri, Jonathan Martin, Evan Morgan, Morgan Sandhu, Rachel Sang, Rachel Scholz-Bright, Austin T. Welch, Andrew G. Wolff, Amanda Zhou, and Brendan Nyhan, "Real Solutions for Fake News? Measuring the Effectiveness of General Warnings and Fact-Check Tags in Reducing Belief in False Stories on Social Media," *Political Behavior*, 2019.

Affecting Consumption of Content

The last purpose of defensive practices is to **promote awareness of the information space by consumers**. This may be addressed by educating audiences regarding the tactics used, or raising awareness of these tactics, and the false and misleading information associated with them. For this purpose, the targets of these practices include people with a tendency to consume false or misleading content.

Inoculation

In addressing the tactics that are used to mislead and misinform audiences, researchers have considered the potential impact of inoculation. Inoculation theory applies a biological metaphor, where weakened forms of a virus are used to inoculate one's immune system, to psychological processes. Specifically, inoculation theory proposes that exposure to weakened arguments or diluted oppositional statements against one's attitudes and beliefs can help increase resistance to future, potentially stronger, persuasive attacks.²⁴ A meta-analysis examining the effectiveness of inoculation across 54 cases found that inoculated individuals are more resistant to future persuasive attacks than those who are not inoculated.²⁵ Further, resistance to persuasive attacks generalizes beyond just the core arguments addressed within the inoculation treatment; the effects of inoculation are relatively consistent across both minimally involved and highly involved individuals; and the effects of inoculation treatments on resistance to persuasion appear to be consistent even after a relatively long delay between inoculation treatment and exposure to a persuasive attack. Inoculation treatment can also assist in countering the negative effects of the frequently flawed argumentation technique involving presentation of both sides of an argument as being valid and equally supported when, in fact, strong consensus in support of one side has been achieved.²⁶ Overall, this suggests inoculating audiences to malign or subversive persuasive attacks can reduce the impact of these attacks.

Media Literacy

Media literacy is an additional option for educating audiences on the persuasive tactics used by Russia and its agents, among others. As discussed in more detail in Chapter Five, media literacy education is a large and diverse area, involving different admin-

²⁴ Josh Compton, Ben Jackson, and James A. Dimmock, "Persuading Others to Avoid Persuasion: Inoculation Theory and Resistant Health Attitudes," *Frontiers in Psychology*, Vol. 7, 2016; Lindsay L. Dillingham and Bobi Ivanov, "Using Postinoculation Talk to Strengthen Generated Resistance," *Communication Research Reports*, Vol. 33, No. 4, 2016.

²⁵ John A. Banas and Stephen A. Rains, "A Meta-Analysis of Research on Inoculation Theory," *Communication Monographs*, Vol. 77, No. 3, 2010.

²⁶ John Cook, Stephan Lewandowsky, and Ulrich K. H. Ecker, "Neutralizing Misinformation Through Inoculation: Exposing Misleading Argumentation Techniques Reduces Their Influence," *PLoS One*, Vol. 12, No. 5, 2017.

istrators, audiences, topics of interest, and tactics to improve knowledge and skills related to processing media content. Therefore, rather than assuming any intervention that seeks to increase knowledge and critical evaluation of media content is effective, each intervention must be systematically designed and evaluated, but oftentimes this additional measurement and analysis of outputs and outcomes does not occur.²⁷ Generally, research considering media literacy programs and interventions that have included evaluations suggests they can have positive effects on media literacy skills, such as by increasing media knowledge and promoting critical thinking about media content.²⁸ However, their effects on attitudes and behaviors might be relatively weak.²⁹

Perceived Invulnerability

One factor that can increase or decrease the efficacy of education and interventions to address the impacts of malign or subversive information efforts is audience perceptions of their perceived invulnerability to the influence of these efforts.³⁰ Oftentimes, people assume that others are more prone to cognitive and motivational biases than they themselves are (i.e., they have a bias blind spot).³¹ This can extend to assumptions that others are more vulnerable to being influenced by the media in general, and malign or subversive information efforts specifically, than one's self—even though these assumptions are inaccurate. When people hold these inaccurate assumptions regarding their own invulnerability, they appear to be less receptive to inoculation treatments and media literacy interventions. Specifically, assuming they are invulnerable, they feel less motivated to resist persuasive attacks. Research addressing this suggests that first demonstrating a recipient's vulnerability to persuasive attacks and then providing information addressing resistance to these attacks can increase the effectiveness of the subsequent resistance-related information.³²

²⁷ Smita C. Banerjee and Robert Kubey, "Boom or Boomerang: A Critical Review of Evidence Documenting Media Literacy Efficacy," in Angharad N. Valdiva and Erica Scharrer, eds., *The International Encyclopedia of Media Studies: Media Effects/Media Psychology*, Malden, Mass.: Blackwell Publishing, 2013.

²⁸ Erica Weintraub Austin, Adrienne Muldrow, and Bruce W. Austin, "Examining How Media Literacy and Personality Factors Predict Skepticism Toward Alcohol Advertising," *Journal of Health Communication*, Vol. 21, No. 5, 2016; Se-Hoon Jeong, Hyunyu Cho, and Yoori Hwang, "Media Literacy Interventions: A Meta-Analytic Review," *Journal of Communication*, Vol. 62, 2012.

²⁹ Zahra Vahedi, Annabel Sibalis, and Jessica E. Sutherland, "Are Media Literacy Interventions Effective at Changing Attitudes and Intentions Toward Risky Health Behaviors in Adolescents? A Meta-Analytic Review," *Journal of Adolescence*, Vol. 67, 2018.

³⁰ Brad J. Sagarin, Robert B. Cialdini, William E. Rice, and Sherman B. Shea, "Dispelling the Illusion of Invulnerability: The Motivations and Mechanisms of Resistance to Persuasion," *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, Vol. 83, No. 3, 2002.

³¹ Emily Pronin, Daniel Y. Lin, and Lee Ross, "The Bias Blind Spot: Perceptions of Bias in Self vs. Others," *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin*, Vol. 28, No. 3, 2002.

³² Sagarin et al., 2002.

Practices for Defending Against Malign or Subversive Information Efforts

Having discussed general avenues to defending against malign or subversive information efforts, we now move to describing specific practices that are being used or have been considered for use.

Purpose 1: Reduce the Volume of Content

Table 5.2 summarizes four types of defensive practices that may reduce the volume of false or misleading content from Russia and its agents. Each practice varies in how intrusive it is within the information space. In the following subsections, we discuss additional details of the practices listed in Table 5.2.

Digital Identity Verification

As noted in Chapter Three, Russia and its agents appear to use deceptive identities as part of its information manipulation practices. This includes use of false accounts to post content online. Identity verification, which ensures that users are who they claim to be, is one way to address this manipulation. Specifically, digital identity verification is a practice to confirm that people are who they claim to be online. There are a variety of ways to verify users:³³

Table 5.2
Summary of Defensive Practices That Target Production of Content

| Defensive Practice | Examples | Benefits | Limitations |
|--|--|---|---|
| Digital identity verification | IP addresses; cell phone verification; blockchain | Reduces fraudulent accounts | Hinders user growth on social media platforms |
| Government-enforced data protection laws | GDPR; Swiss Federal Data Protection Act; UK Data Protection Act of 2018 | Prevents micro-targeting by bad actors | Prevents microtargeting by legitimate actors |
| Government regulation of content | UK Office of Communications (Ofcom); Ukraine's National Radio and TV Counsel | Ensures a balanced information space | Censorship may appear undemocratic to the public |
| Cyber operations | NATO Cooperative Cyber Defense Centre of Excellence; Bundeswehr's Department of Information and Community Network Operations; France's Cyber Command | Immediately disrupt Russian information efforts | Public exposure of cyber operations may appear undemocratic to the public; risk of escalation |

NOTE: GDPR = General Data Protection Regulation; Ofcom = Office of Communications

³³ Sarah Clark, "Fighting Fraud with Digital Verification Tools," *Risk Management*, March 1, 2018.

- **Check tools**—lists that governments or industry curate that flag users with a problematic history (e.g., Social Security numbers, IP address blocking)
- **Device analysis**—unique identifiers from the devices that people use (e.g., smart-phone type, carrier billing data, operating system)
- **Data analytics**—analysis of user behavioral data to identify problematic patterns of behaviors (e.g., geolocation data, click rates, social media profile characteristics)
- **Data bureaus**—collaboration of large companies or institutions that share information about consumers (e.g., credit bureaus, data brokers, social media companies)
- **Biometrics**—require biometric identifiers to register for social media platforms (e.g., fingerprint readers, facial recognition, or voice recognition).

If Russia and its agents have the capacity to create multiple false accounts, they also have opportunities to generate more content from these accounts. Identity verification reduces the number of these accounts, which in turn may reduce the quantity of content from them. Some have proposed that every social media website should ensure that its users register with real names, addresses, or other personally identifiable markers.³⁴

However, there are limitations to implementation of these or similar identity verification requirements. Users may not feel comfortable sharing information regarding their identity and may be unwilling to provide this information, especially given high-profile data breaches by companies such as Equifax, Facebook, and Marriott. Social media platforms may resist collecting this information from individuals because it creates barriers for them to attract new users to their platforms. In addition, collection of this data may violate data privacy laws in certain countries (e.g., GDPR), and holding this sensitive information may expose sites to unnecessary risks in the event they are exposed to data breaches.

Moving beyond actively confirming users are who they claim to be, other defensive practices involve using more passive methods—such as Internet Protocol (IP) addresses or patterns of behavior on the platform—to infer the identity of malicious actors and remove them from platforms.³⁵ For example, Facebook has developed technology to identify behaviors of inauthentic accounts, including detection of repeated postings of the same content. The company reports that it took action against 30,000 accounts in France as of April 13, 2017.³⁶ In recent years, the Swedish Civil Contingen-

³⁴ Will Burns, “Is It Time to Require Identity Verification for Everyone Using Social Media?” *Forbes*, February 22, 2018.

³⁵ Barry Leiba and Nathaniel S. Borenstein, “A Multifaceted Approach to Spam Reduction,” in *CEAS*, 2004, First Conference on Email and Anti-Spam, July 30–31, 2004, Mountain View, Calif.

³⁶ Jen Weden, William Nuland, and Alex Stamos, “Information Operations and Facebook,” version 1.0, April 27, 2017.

cies Agency coordinated with social media companies, including Google, Facebook, and Twitter, to help them identify features of Russian information operations on their platforms.³⁷

Another promising technology for identity verification is blockchain, which is a decentralized ledger that stores data about users. According to information technology company IBM, blockchain identity verification involves “cryptographic techniques that allow an entity to prove a statement, such as knowing a secret, without revealing information about the secret.”³⁸ The data to prove these secrets are stored in various locations across a network, instead of a centralized database. The emerging technology of blockchain has attracted the attention of both government and industry. Microsoft and Mastercard have joined forces to develop a “universally-recognized digital identity.”³⁹ The Defense Advanced Research Projects Agency (DARPA) has funded research on blockchain-based verification systems,⁴⁰ and one start-up has adapted bitcoin technology to limit online trolls and inauthentic accounts.⁴¹

Data Protection Laws

A second, more intrusive, defensive practice to reduce the volume of malign or subversive information involves development and implementation of government-enforced data protection laws. These laws regulate the disclosure and trafficking of user data. One benefit of these laws is that they reduce the granularity of detail about market segments. Put another way, data protection laws make it difficult for bad actors to deliver content to their target audiences. However, they may also restrict legitimate actors from microtargeting audiences. Several countries have data protections in place, including the EU's GDPR, Switzerland's Federal Data Protection Act, and the UK's Data Protection Act of 2018.

The GDPR is a law enacted in 2018 requiring businesses and their contractors to protect the personal data of EU citizens or face heavy fines.⁴² The law ensures EU citizens have rights regarding the collection, processing, and use of their data, including the right to erasure, restriction, and objection, and the right to receive informa-

³⁷ Dominik Swiecicki and Irene Christensson, “MSB Activities on Countering Information Influence Campaigns,” presentation at the RAND Corporation in Santa Monica, Calif., November 29, 2018.

³⁸ Adam Gunther, “Collaboration: Unlocking Decentralized, Digital Identity Management Through Blockchain,” *IBM*, April 4, 2018.

³⁹ Mastercard, “Mastercard, Microsoft Join Forces to Advance Digital Identity Innovations,” December 3, 2018.

⁴⁰ Galois, “Galois and Guardtime Federal Awarded \$1.8M DARPA Contract to Formally Verify Blockchain-Based Integrity Monitoring System,” September 13, 2016.

⁴¹ Authenteq, “Self-Sovereign Electronic ID Requires User Consent for Any Use. Your Identity Is Private - Even to Authenteq.” Online as of December 5, 2018: <https://authenteq.com/trollteq-getting-rid-of-online-trolling/>, 2018.

⁴² Michael Nadeau, “General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR): What You Need to Know to Stay Compliant,” *CSO*, May 29, 2019.

tion notices about their data.⁴³ The GDPR casts a wide net for the types of personally identifiable data under its protection, including names and contact information of users, biometric data, financial information, and social media data.⁴⁴ According to the European Data Protection Supervisor, an independent entity of the EU, the GDPR specifically “defines personal data revealing political opinions as special categories of data” and affords specific protections for how organizations handle these data.⁴⁵ Data protection laws like the GDPR may reduce the capacity for both good and bad actors to microtarget users online.

Government Regulation of Content

Related to the implementation of data protection laws, government regulation of content is a third practice to reduce the production of malign or subversive content from Russia and its agents. These regulatory practices range from using legal methods to restrict the production of bad actors (e.g., fining broadcasters or restricting broadcast licensing) to overt censorship of content by the government. In general, legal methods for regulating content are preferable to outright censorship. Legal methods reaffirm the rule-of-law in democracies, while censorship outside the bounds of a country’s laws undermines these same democratic ideals.

The UK’s Ofcom regulates broadcasters in the country. As of April 2018, Ofcom has opened seven investigations into ANO TV Novosti, which holds two RT broadcast licenses in the UK and other licenses for RT Europe.⁴⁶ Ofcom has reported on a range of broadcast violations, including one about a Syrian chemical attack during broadcasts in March 2014.⁴⁷ While Ofcom has the authority to report on broadcast violations and publicize them, it also has authority to issue financial penalties to broadcasters or revoke their licenses to operate in the country altogether. Other countries in Europe also regulate the type or quantity of content that comes from broadcasters. For example, Ukraine requires that at least 75 percent of national television broadcasts be in Ukrainian.⁴⁸ Similarly, Latvia’s Network Information Center suspended the Kremlin-backed newspaper, *Sputnik News*, from using the .LV domain name in 2016.⁴⁹

These forms of government regulation may carry risks, however. For example, Ukraine’s National Radio and TV Council banned Russian Doxhd TV from broad-

⁴³ “What Does GDPR Mean for Social Media Strategies?” *Digital Marketing Institute*, undated.

⁴⁴ “What Does GDPR Mean for Social Media Strategies?” undated.

⁴⁵ European Data Protection Supervisor, “Opinion 3/2018 EDPS Opinion on Online Manipulation and Personal Data,” March 19, 2018.

⁴⁶ United Kingdom’s Office of Communication, “Update on the RT News Channel,” April 18, 2018.

⁴⁷ United Kingdom’s Office of Communication, “Update on the RT Service—New Broadcasting Investigations and Approach to Fit & Proper,” undated.

⁴⁸ Interfax-Ukraine News Agency, “Rada Approves Ukrainian Language TV Quotas,” May 23, 2017.

⁴⁹ Latvian Public Broadcasting, “Latvia Shuts Down Sputnik Propaganda Website,” March 29, 2018.

casting in the country. This resulted in outcries by some Ukrainians, claims of undemocratic practices by Russia, and criticism by various international organizations. In addition, researchers at Human Rights Watch claimed that Ukraine was “following the Kremlin’s example in silencing media they don’t like”;⁵⁰ and Freedom House said the ban was “censorship that restricts Ukrainians’ access to a choice of viewpoints.”⁵¹

Cyber Operations

Cyber operations are another technique that could be used for reducing the volume of false or misleading content. A variety of state actors have the capability to carry out these operations. These practices might be considered the most intrusive in the information environment because they involve governments directly targeting the source of content.

Although these operations have the capacity to immediately disrupt Russian information efforts, they are not without limitations. For example, these operations may appear to be undemocratic if they are exposed to the public; and countries may not be able to carry out these operations, because different types of laws address the degree to which the military or intelligence services are allowed to carry out these missions. Further, such operations are unlikely to go unnoticed by the perpetrators of the interrupted information efforts, and could lead to escalation.

Purpose 2: Decrease the Spread of Existing Content

The second purpose of defensive practices addresses content dissemination and focuses on preventing the spread of existing false or misleading content within the information environment. In general, people appear to be “rationally ignorant,” meaning they tend to act in their best interests, but also are uninformed and unmotivated about issues that do not directly affect their daily lives.⁵² Further, most people have low attention spans, particularly when exposed to online content.⁵³ If we assume that a sizable percentage of people have limited time and limited attention and are generally uninterested in a variety of topics, then certain practices might be more likely to discourage them from accessing and spreading false or misleading content online.

Table 5.3 displays four defensive practices that have the capacity to discourage the spread of existing malign or subversive information. In the following subsections, we describe each of these defensive approaches in more detail. We first discuss bottom-up approaches, which are executed by volunteers and are the least intrusive for the infor-

⁵⁰ Human Rights Watch, “Ukraine: TV Channel Ordered Banned,” January 18, 2017.

⁵¹ Freedom House, “Ukraine: Ban of Independent Russian TV Undermines Media Freedom,” January 13, 2017.

⁵² Margaret E. Roberts, *Censored: Distraction and Diversion Inside China’s Great Firewall*, Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2018.

⁵³ Dennis F. Galletta, Raymond Henry, Scott McCoy, and Peter Polak, “Web Site Delays: How Tolerant Are Users?” *Journal of the Association for Information Systems*, Vol. 5, No. 1, 2004.

Table 5.3
Summary of Defensive Practices That Target Distribution of Content

| Defensive Practice | Examples | Benefits | Limitations |
|------------------------|--|--|---|
| Bottom-up approaches | Wikipedia’s Bot Approval Group and Arbitration Committee; Reddit’s moderators and bots | Increases community engagement in monitoring the information space | Longer time frame to develop community self-monitoring; coordination costs |
| Flagging false content | StopFake.org, Facebook’s “disputed” flags | Immediate notification of consumers | Streisand effect; further entrench people’s beliefs |
| Friction | Facebook news feed prioritizing truthful content, deprioritizing false content | Prevents user exposure to false content | Appearance of government- or corporate-backed censorship; false content may get prioritized |
| Flooding | Information efforts by Russia and China; Facebook’s Related Articles feature | Increases users’ exposure to alternative content | Appearance of government censorship; harmful to social media platforms |

mation environment. Then, we discuss flagging false content. Finally, we discuss more intrusive methods, such as friction and flooding.

Bottom-Up Approaches

Bottom-up approaches rely on users to monitor the information environment. Wikipedia is one online platform that enlists its user community to self-monitor content. The website utilizes a “social immune system,” which includes bots that use artificial intelligence (AI) to monitor content (e.g., fix spelling errors), cyborgs that are intelligent user interfaces to help human editors quickly spot problematic content (e.g., falsehoods), and human volunteers who revise and enforce community standards.⁵⁴ Wikipedia has institutionalized this immune system to include various oversight committees. Specifically, Wikipedia has a Bot Approval Group of volunteer users who review proposals for new bots and address concerns about existing bots, and an Arbitration Committee that is akin to a supreme court for the platform where a panel of arbitrators hear cases related to editor conduct and post their final decisions online.⁵⁵ Decisions by this committee are not without controversy. In 2009, Wikipedia’s Arbitration Committee banned all IP addresses from the Church of Scientology due to violations of Wikipedia’s policies.⁵⁶

⁵⁴ Aaron Halfaker and John Riedl, “Bots and Cyborgs: Wikipedia’s Immune System,” *Computer*, Vol. 45, No. 3, 2012.

⁵⁵ Wikipedia, “Wikipedia: Arbitration,” December 8, 2017.

⁵⁶ Wikipedia, “Wikipedia: Requests for Arbitration/Scientology,” September 19, 2013.

Facets of Ukrainian society have also been active in bottom-up approaches, many coming from the private or civil sector. Both the Ukraine Crisis Media Center (UCMC) and StopFake are citizen-driven organizations involving private and public sector resources to counter Russian information efforts.⁵⁷ UCMC is a public-private partnership that coordinates Ukrainian media messages, particularly in response to Russian messages, and distributes them across multiple media channels. StopFake was set up by Ukrainian journalists to debunk false stories from Russia and holds both an online and TV presence.

One benefit of these bottom-up approaches is that they increase community engagement by growing a system of self-governance on the platform. This practice allows for the community to define norms, rules, and procedures on how people behave online. However, there are also several limitations with these approaches. First, it takes time for decentralized governance structures, like the one found on Wikipedia, to evolve. And, the nature of the structures takes time to change when new problems arise on the platform.⁵⁸ Thus, the creation of these structures is unlikely to have immediate effects on Russian information efforts. Further, there are coordination costs—particularly when platforms grow rapidly. In the case of Wikipedia, growth of the platform led to “conflicts between users, communication costs between users, and the development of procedures and rules for coordination and resolution.”⁵⁹ Emerging social media platforms may be reluctant to expose themselves to these costs, particularly when they are trying to increase their revenue by growing their user bases.

Flagging False Content/Fact-Check Tags

Flagging false content focuses on notifying users about limitations in material. This includes fact-check tags, as discussed earlier. The benefit of flagging false or misleading content is that it immediately notifies users of the falsehood. Websites like StopFake⁶⁰ in Ukraine debunk false content they believe comes from Russia and its agents. Similarly, Facebook tried flagging content it believed was false but later abandoned this practice in favor of a flooding technique that introduces new information to the consumer.

⁵⁷ Sijbren De Jong, Tim Sweijs, Katarina Kertysova, and Roel Bos, *Inside the Kremlin House of Mirrors: How Liberal Democracies Can Counter Russian Disinformation and Societal Interference*, The Hague: The Hague Centre for Strategic Studies, pp. 48–50, 52–53.

⁵⁸ Andrea Forte, Vanesa Larco, and Amy Bruckman, “Decentralization in Wikipedia Governance,” *Journal of Management Information Systems*, Vol. 26, No. 1, 2009.

⁵⁹ Aniket Kittur, Bongwon Suh, Bryan A. Pendleton, and Ed H. Chi, “He Says, She Says: Conflict and Coordination in Wikipedia,” *Proceedings of the SIGCHI Conference on Human Factors in Computing Systems, ACM*, 2007, p. 453.

⁶⁰ According to Stopfake.org, this website “is not supported financially or otherwise by any official Ukrainian organization or government agency. We are a journalists’ organization whose primary goal is to verify information, raise media literacy in Ukraine and establish a clear red line between journalism and propaganda” (“About Us,” *Stopfake*, undated).

Flagging false content is not without limitations. For example, these flags may backfire by further entrenching people's beliefs. Research on corrections finds that correcting false content may fail for people who already hold strong ideological beliefs.⁶¹ Studies have long known that people tend to consume information that reaffirms their preexisting beliefs. Since Russia tends to target subgroups that hold extreme views, informing these people that content that aligns with these strong beliefs is false may lead them to ignore the flags altogether.

In addition, flagging false content may draw more public attention to the content than if no flag existed. Some refer to this phenomenon as the "Streisand effect," whereby the attempt to censor information causes people to give more attention to this same information.⁶² A possible solution to this effect is coordinated exposure of Russian TTPs that includes the content it generates, information about its manipulation techniques, details of dissemination techniques, and who it is targeting. By focusing on the totality of Russian information efforts, flags prevent the unintended consequence of highlighting individual pieces of content to users of the broader public.

Friction

Friction is another defensive practice for addressing content dissemination. Friction effectively "taxes" the time and effort it takes users to access content that contains false or misleading content.⁶³ In effect, friction creates barriers for people to access some information. Examples of friction include increasing the time it takes to load a website on one's computer, down-ranking posts within online forums, and suggesting some posts over others on social media. These seemingly minor delays may produce noticeable impacts on who decides to view what content, with studies finding that websites may lose users if they experience delays that last four seconds or more when attempting to access content.⁶⁴

A recent example of this practice is the use of AI to deprioritize or reduce the ranking of content that platforms expose users to.⁶⁵ For example, Facebook has revised its algorithms to flag content on its news feed and reduce its ranking of content that users see. This has led to some criticism of the platform, with recent news reports claiming the platform uses AI to assign users a trustworthiness reputation score.⁶⁶ This and other examples highlight several limitations of friction.

⁶¹ Brendan Nyhan and Jason Reifler, "When Corrections Fail: The Persistence of Political Misperceptions," *Political Behavior*, Vol. 32, No. 2, 2010.

⁶² Sue Curry Jansen and Brian Martin, "The Streisand Effect and Censorship Backfire," *International Journal of Communication*, Vol. 9, 2015.

⁶³ Roberts, 2018.

⁶⁴ Galletta et al., 2004.

⁶⁵ Adam Mosseri, "Working to Stop Misinformation and False News," *Facebook for Media*, April 7, 2017.

⁶⁶ Elizabeth Dwoskin, "Facebook Is Rating the Trustworthiness of Its Users on a Scale from Zero to 1," *Washington Post*, August 21, 2018.

First, public exposure of the tactic may fuel narratives about government or corporate elites “controlling” information for the masses. This may become an issue when social media platforms flag and remove content inappropriately. Russian information efforts have tried to push the message that the United States controls local media outlets. For example, the Federal News Agency, an outlet that is reportedly associated with Russia’s Internet Research Agency, has run false reports that discuss the supposed dependency of German media on American owners.⁶⁷ RT has also run stories that claim Facebook is using algorithms to filter out stories by the Russian news outlet.⁶⁸ Put simply, these stories highlight a limitation of overt friction: opportunities for Russia and its agents to promote narratives about elite control of local media by American companies or the government.

Second, the failure of AI technologies to deprioritize false content may give falsehoods more legitimacy if users believe there is a system reviewing content for them. This is particularly a concern with the rise of “deep fake” content, which is human image synthesis that allows people’s faces in videos to be replaced with other people’s faces in order to make them appear to say and do things they never did.⁶⁹ DARPA has started up a media forensics program that funds AI research to study the emerging field of deep fake content.⁷⁰

Flooding

Flooding is a third practice to hinder the dissemination of false or misleading content in the information environment. The purpose of flooding is to distract users from content that one does not want the public to view. Flooding takes different forms, depending on what type of information, and how much, someone introduces into the information environment. For example, Facebook added a Related Articles feature to its news feed product.⁷¹ This feature introduces new content (i.e., related articles) from trusted sources into the information space (i.e., news feed) to present alternative views that could distract users from content that contains falsehoods.

In Lithuania, civilian volunteers formed a group to combat false content by Russia and its agents online. The group, named the Lithuanian Elves, numbers upward of 100 people who expose accounts they believe are Russian trolls and counter content they determine to be false with truthful responses.⁷² This group represents a form of

⁶⁷ “Are Americans Controlling German Media?” *StopFake*, November 22, 2018.

⁶⁸ Russia Today, “Facebook Will Soon Filter Out RT News, So This Is How You Fix It . . . Probably,” January 31, 2018.

⁶⁹ Will Knight, “The Defense Department Has Produced the First Tools for Catching Deepfakes,” *MIT Technology Review*, August 7, 2018.

⁷⁰ DARPA, “Media Forensics,” undated.

⁷¹ Sara Su, “New Test with Related Articles,” *Facebook Newsroom*, April 15, 2017.

⁷² Euronews, “Lithuania Has a Volunteer Army Fighting a War on the Internet,” September 28, 2017; NATO, “Elves vs Trolls—Fighting Disinformation in Lithuania,” *YouTube*, May 3, 2017.

flooding: It identifies false content within an information space online and introduces truthful information to counter it, for the purposes of discouraging users from consuming and spreading the falsehoods.

In a more extreme example, the Chinese government practices flooding, with some estimating that the government generates about 448 million social media comments a year to “distract and redirect public attention from discussions or events with collective action potential” that could undermine the state.⁷³ Further, there is some evidence from research on social media that flooding, when taken to extremes, has the capacity to destroy online communities. During the early 2000s, MySpace struggled with combating the onslaught of spam on the platform, and this eventually undermined the experiences of its users. One scholar noted how MySpace’s failure to address these issues with spam eventually led to spammers taking over like a street gang.⁷⁴

A benefit of flooding is that it increases user exposure to new information, distracting them from false content, to further prevent the popularity of content online. Flooding practices are most effective when done in a subtle manner to encourage users to view diverse types of content. When taken to the extreme, however, flooding becomes a tool of censorship, especially when done by government. Therefore, nongovernment entities and social media companies might be best suited to practice flooding.

Purpose 3: Promote Consumer Awareness

While promotion of consumer awareness includes inoculation, efforts to reduce perceived invulnerability, and media literacy, only media literacy takes the form of mature policy options at this time. Scaled efforts to inoculate against malign information or efforts to reduce perceptions of invulnerability require further development and constitute an area ripe for further research and policy development. The discussion below describes existing practice and supporting literature regarding media literacy programs.

Media Literacy Programs

Media literacy programs train individuals on how to access and critically analyze a variety of information types. As noted previously, evaluating these programs is challenging. First, there is little to no longitudinal data that evaluate the impact of specific types of media literacy programs. While education efforts may prove effective in the short term, participants may fall back into their old habits soon after each effort. Second, there is a potential for selection bias in sampling who enrolls in media literacy programs. It requires time, effort, and energy for people to participate in these pro-

⁷³ Gary King, Jennifer Pan, and Margaret E. Roberts, “How the Chinese Government Fabricates Social Media Posts for Strategic Distraction, Not Engaged Argument,” *American Political Science Review*, Vol. 111, No. 3, 2017.

⁷⁴ Danah Boyd, “White Flight in Networked Publics? How Race and Class Shaped American Teen Engagement with MySpace and Facebook,” in Lisa Nakamura and Peter A. Chow-White, eds., *Race After the Internet*, New York: Routledge, 2011.

grams. Thus, positive effects from these programs may only show that people willing to receive this training improved their media literacy.

Despite the challenges in their evaluation, some examples suggest media literacy programs are effective under the right conditions. For example, the International Research and Exchanges (IREX), a nonprofit organization focused on development and education, recently implemented the media literacy program Learn to Discern (L2D) in Ukraine.⁷⁵ From October 2015 through March 2016, the study organized media literacy seminars for Ukrainian adults, with each seminar consisting of three chapters. The first chapter provided an overview of mass media and basic concepts of information and propaganda. The second covered the dangers of manipulation, propaganda, and other types of falsehoods; and the third chapter focused on hate speech. One and a half years later, IREX drew a stratified random sample of L2D participants and compared them with a control group that they matched on age, gender, region, and education level. IREX found that L2D participants demonstrated higher media literacy levels than those who did not take the course. Compared with the control group, L2D participants were 28 percent more likely to show understanding of the news media industry, 25 percent more likely to check multiple sources, and 13 percent more likely than their peers to identify and analyze false news stories.⁷⁶

Another media literacy practice involves the use of gamification to train people how to spot false content. One example is an app developed by the UK's Archive, UK's Data Service, and the University of Essex that quizzes users about a range of universal facts, including public opinion trends, health information, and demographic data.⁷⁷ Other European researchers have developed a game where the user plays the role of a "fake news-monger" with the goal of building a "persona as an unscrupulous media magnate."⁷⁸ The intellectual basis for some of these gamification efforts is inoculation theory, whereby exposing people to TTPs beforehand will "inoculate them" from the actual effect of these information efforts in the future.⁷⁹ Exploratory research finds some evidence that playing these games has an indirect, albeit significant, benefit of reducing the effects of false news content.⁸⁰

Although there has been relatively limited research on evaluating media literacy efforts as they relate to reducing consumption of falsehoods, media literacy pro-

⁷⁵ Erin Murrock, Joy Amulya, Mehri Druckman, and Tetiana Liubyva, *Impact Study on Citizens' Ability to Detect Disinformation 1.5 Years After Completing a News Media Literacy Program*, IREX, 2017.

⁷⁶ Murrock et al., 2017.

⁷⁷ Cristina Magder, "Gamification and Fake News: A Thriller About the Challenges of Developing an In-House Quiz App," May 30, 2018; UK Data Service, "Quiz App," undated.

⁷⁸ DROG, "Bad News," undated.

⁷⁹ Cook, Lewandowsky, and Ecker, 2017.

⁸⁰ Jon Roozenbeek and Sander van der Linden, "The Fake News Game: Actively Inoculating Against the Risk of Misinformation," *Journal of Risk Research*, Vol. 19, No. 3, 2018.

grams targeting health behaviors (e.g., smoking, body image, and weight) and attitudes toward violence (e.g., bullying) find that literacy reduces adverse behaviors or attitudes that the media aggravate.⁸¹ Additionally, a large meta-analysis of 51 media literacy interventions found that these interventions had a positive effect on all measured outcomes, including media knowledge, criticism, perceived realism, influence, behavioral beliefs, attitudes, self-efficacy, and behavior.⁸² In all, these studies show that media literacy can positively affect certain attitudes and behaviors of consumers. Understanding some of the underlying psychological processes can help in gearing media literacy education toward ways that best help consumers navigate media.

Chapter Summary

This chapter began with the assumption that Russia and its agents use malign or subversive information efforts as a tool of their foreign policy. We have previously characterized these efforts as a “firehose of falsehood,” where Russia produces high volumes of false information and transmits them at rapid and continuous speeds to consumers via a multitude of channels. In this chapter, we extend this characterization and our Chapter Three discussion by dividing the pathology of Russian malign or subversive information efforts into three parts: production, distribution, and consumption of content that contains falsehoods. The goal for production is to reduce the volume of new false and misleading content that Russia and its agents produce. For distribution, the goal is to prevent the spread of existing false or misleading content and discourage consumers from redistributing or creating their own content based on this information. And the goal for consumption is to promote consumer awareness of the information space. We then describe current practices that might have the capacity to achieve each purpose. While this list is not exhaustive, each practice illustrates how groups may counter Russian malign or subversive information efforts. Overall, these information efforts are holistic by nature and, therefore, require a holistic response to counter their influence.

To this end, Table 5.4 organizes the practices discussed in this chapter by whether they focus on production, distribution, or consumption of false content from Russia

⁸¹ Kathryn Greene, Itzhak Yanovitzky, Amanda Carpenter, Smita C. Banerjee, Kate Magsamen-Conrad, Michael L. Hecht, and Elvira Elek, “A Theory-Grounded Measure of Adolescents’ Response to Media Literacy Interventions,” *Journal of Media Literacy Education*, Vol. 7, No. 2, August 28, 2015; Renee Hobbs and Richard Frost, “Measuring the Acquisition of Media-Literacy Skills,” *Reading Research Quarterly*, Vol. 38, No. 3, November 9, 2011; David S. Bickham and Ronald G. Slaby, “Effects of a Media Literacy Program in the US on Children’s Critical Evaluation of Unhealthy Media Messages About Violence, Smoking, and Food,” *Journal of Children and Media*, Vol. 6, No. 2, February 27, 2012; Tracey D. Wade, Susan Davidson, and Jennifer A. O’Dea, “A Preliminary Controlled Evaluation of a School-Based Media Literacy Program and Self-Esteem Program for Reducing Eating Disorder Risk Factors,” *International Journal of Eating Disorders*, Vol. 33, No. 4, March 20, 2003.

⁸² Jeong, Cho, and Hwang, 2012.

Table 5.4
Conditions for Effective Defensive Practices

| Time Frame | Production | Distribution | Consumption |
|----------------------|---|--|---|
| Long-Term Prevention | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Digital identity verification • Data protection laws | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Bottom-up approaches | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Media literacy programs |
| Immediate Impacts | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Government regulation of content • Cyber operations | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Flagging false content • Friction • Flooding | |

and its agents. This table also organizes these practices by a possible time frame for implementation.

Long-term preventive practices have a time horizon of at least a year or longer. For these practices, a top-down approach from a large government bureaucracy is not an optimal way of dealing with the decentralized tactics undertaken by Russia and its agents. Rather, collaboration among partners (e.g., local governments, industry, NGOs) combined with support from governments/government agencies may help maximize the effectiveness of long-term practices.

Table 5.4 also displays practices that may have more immediate impacts. Notably, actions taken by government/government agency could be seen as undemocratic, thus backfiring. Private industry and NGOs may be best suited to lead efforts that use many of these tactics (e.g., friction, flooding, flagging false content). For example, social media companies might be best suited to implement friction, flooding, and flagging of false content using AI technologies.

Overall, there was a paucity of research that directly evaluates the effectiveness of various practices that defend against malign or subversive information efforts from Russia and its agents. The academic literature on this topic is highly fragmented and uses different terms, with varying definitions, to describe similar concepts. Further, most of the research on this topic describes either what Russia is doing or how one could defend against these information efforts. There was limited research on why one defensive practice works better than others. Thus, additional rigorous and objective research to prioritize which practices are most useful under the relevant conditions is needed.

Overview of Terms and Definitions

Table A.1 provides additional descriptions and associated definitions for terms used throughout this report.

Table A.1
Terms and Brief Definitions

| Term | Definition |
|---|--|
| Campaigns | A series of seemingly related activities aimed at achieving an objective or interrelated set of objectives within a given time and space ^a |
| Proactive | Campaigns (1) waged to prospectively influence future outcomes of events or perceptions in other countries; (2) addressing issues of current concern; and (3) in which Russian participation is usually not invited |
| Reactive | Campaigns waged largely in response to past events or ongoing developments, rather than in anticipation of future events |
| Steady-state efforts | Campaigns or disparate information efforts aimed at shaping perceptions, not necessarily connected to more distinct outcomes or issues |
| Types of information manipulation techniques | |
| Fabrication | Information that is purposefully entirely false and misleading <i>Example:</i> Publication of falsified government documents and email exchanges, audio of fictional conversations, and manufactured video and still images |
| Misappropriation | Misleading content that uses existing events, people, or documentary evidence to misrepresent facts <i>Example:</i> Translations of interviews that directly contradict what was said |
| Deceptive identities | Imitation or impersonation of a genuine and credible source of information ^b <i>Example:</i> Impersonating categories of individuals with authority by using terms such as “specialist,” “expert,” or “witness” when referring to individuals or organizations used to authenticate messages |
| Obfuscation | Clouding public discourse, often by offering multiple, contradictory accounts for the same events/phenomena <i>Example:</i> Multiple contradictory claims put forth for who was responsible for the poisoning of former KGB agent Sergei Skripal |

| Term | Definition |
|--|--|
| Conspiracy theories | Proposed covert plots by powerful individuals, organizations, or alliances to accomplish a goal, which is often nefarious in nature ^c <i>Example:</i> Stories regarding secretive actions taken by the West, U.S., CIA, Brussels (EU), and homosexuals and the "gay lobby" |
| Rhetorical fallacies | Messages that contain deliberately flawed reasoning "which [is] logically invalid but cognitively effective" ^d <i>Example:</i> "whataboutism," countering strawman arguments, appealing to a slippery slope, and propagating red herrings |
| Appeals to emotion/authority | Messages that elicit emotional responses, often at the expense of logic or evidence <i>Example:</i> Emotionally charged framing regarding a (false) story of how refugees treated a young girl |
| Selective use of facts | Use of factual information in manipulative ways <i>Example:</i> Sputnik's selective presentation of facts as evidence |
| Actors | Individuals or entities that direct, plan, and/or execute <i>malign/subversive information efforts</i> |
| Modes of communication | The conduits through which actors transmit content to their target audiences |
| Content flow | |
| Production of content | The action of creating <i>content</i> that might use one or more <i>information manipulation techniques</i> |
| Distribution of content | Action(s) taken by <i>Russia and its agents</i> or consumers sharing information in the information environment that disseminate <i>content</i> via one or more modes of communication |
| Consumption of content | Exposure to <i>content</i> among <i>target audiences</i> |
| Defensive practices | |
| Identity verification | Practice of attempting to ensure users are who they claim to be |
| Government regulation of the information environment | Implementation of laws and directives that place requirements on individuals and entities producing and distributing <i>content</i> |
| Friction | Barriers that make it difficult or impossible for individuals to access information |
| Flooding | Activities involving subsidizing some information over other information |
| Media literacy | Knowledge and skills that permit individuals to analyze and evaluate media content and usage ^e |

NOTE: Terms are organized by their order of description in the text.

^a Modified from Joint Publication 5-0, *Joint Planning*, Defense Technical Information Center, Washington, D.C.: U.S. Joint Chiefs of Staff, June 16, 2017.

^b Swedish Civil Contingencies Agency, 2018, p. 21.

^c Douglas and Sutton, 2008; Wood, Douglas, and Sutton, 2012.

^d Lieto and Verner, 2013, p. 2; Clements, 2013, p. 333.

^e Jeong, Cho, and Hwang, 2012; Sonia Livingstone, *The Changing Nature and Uses of Media Literacy*, ed. Rosalind Gill, Andy Pratt, Terhi Rantanen, and Nick Couldry, London: London School of Economics and Political Science, 2003.

Scoping the Framework of Russia’s Malign or Subversive Information Efforts

This appendix describes the actions taken and assumptions made as part of our efforts to scope our review of Russia’s malign or subversive information efforts in Chapters Two and Three of this report.

Malign/Subversive Information Efforts

In view of the exponential growth in the literature addressing Russia’s activities in the information environment and the corresponding proliferation of terms and definitions, we begin by defining the scope of the phenomenon examined here. We focus on the activities undertaken by actors believed to be acting on behalf of or in the interests of the Russian state that occur in or operate through the information environment, where “information environment” refers to “the aggregate of individuals, organizations, and systems that collect, process, disseminate, or act on information.”¹ This means that we exclude from our focus efforts to exercise or build up “soft power.”² We also do not examine efforts to exert influence that proceed in or through anything other than the information environment. That is, Russia’s penetration of other countries’ economic, political, and civic domains is outside the scope of this chapter (except insofar as it becomes relevant to explain the character of information efforts).

Within the body of work focusing on the information environment, the policy-making and analytical communities have used a number of terms to describe recent Russian activities.³ Political warfare, hybrid warfare, information warfare, fake news, psychological operations, propaganda, and disinformation are among these. We found

¹ Joint Publication 3-13, 2012.

² Political scientist Joseph Nye defined soft power as “co-optive behavioral power—getting others to want what you want—and soft power resources—cultural attraction, ideology, and international resources.” Joseph S. Nye Jr., *Bound to Lead: The Changing Nature of American Power*, New York: Basic Books, 1990, p. 188.

³ For a discussion of the many terms used by the analytical community to refer to these related concepts, see Ulrik Franke, *War by Non-Military Means: Understanding Russian Information Warfare*, Swedish Defense

these terms and their definitions to be generally inadequate to describe the phenomenon we studied. The existing terms were often too broad and included activities that were beyond the scope of this research, such as “hybrid warfare,” which includes non-informational elements, or “propaganda,” which does not necessarily require political intent.⁴

The term we chose to describe the scope of this study is “malign or subversive information efforts” (sometimes abridged as “information efforts”).⁵ We borrow elements of two existing definitions to define such efforts, each of which we find to contain some shortcomings for the present purposes. The first is academics Jowett and O’Donnell’s definition of propaganda as “the deliberate, systematic attempt to shape perceptions, manipulate cognitions, and direct behavior to achieve a response that furthers the desired intent of the propagandist.”⁶ While the focus on aims appears to be important, this definition is both too broad, in that it appears to include factual and relatively unbiased information provided by a “propagandist,” and underinclusive, in requiring a conjunction of aims to shape perceptions/cognition *and* direct behavior. The second is one offered by Jean-Baptiste Jeangène Vilmer and coauthors in a prominent report issued for the French Foreign Ministry and the Ministry of the Armed Forces, for “information manipulation,” which they define as including three elements: “a coordinated campaign, the diffusion of false information or information that is consciously distorted, and the political intention to cause harm.”⁷ The requirement of a coordinated campaign may rule out efforts that neither look coordinated nor resemble “campaigns” as such but which we still find to be of concern. The last element appears to require a subjective intention to cause harm (on Russia’s part), which may not always be present or necessary to diagnose the kinds of information efforts that likely warrant defensive measures.⁸

We follow Vilmer and coauthors in defining information efforts as a conjunction of three elements, but depart somewhat on the specification of the elements. Malign

Research Agency, March 2015, pp. 11–42; Keir Giles and William Hagestad II, “Divided by a Common Language: Cyber Definitions in Chinese, Russian and English,” undated.

⁴ For example, propaganda can be used to deliberately affect consumer behavior in the commercial sphere, as a tool used by businesses in public relations campaigns, or as a tool to affect patient behavior in the public health domain, among other settings. Garth S. Jowett and Victoria O’Donnell, *Propaganda and Persuasion*, Thousand Oaks, Calif.: Sage Publications, 2012.

⁵ It is important to note that this is not a term used in Russian military doctrine or other Russian discourse.

⁶ Jowett and O’Donnell, 2012, p. 7.

⁷ Vilmer et al., 2018, p. 21.

⁸ That is, what may appear to be an intent to harm from the point of view of the targeted society may not be intended as “harm” by Russian perpetrators; for example, Russia and its agents may well believe that their efforts to alienate potential new members from institutions like NATO and the EU are helping, not harming, those countries.

or subversive information efforts by our definition require (1) sustained and multi-dimensional activities, (2) the dissemination of false information or information that is manipulated in other clearly identifiable ways, and (3) political intention to shape perceptions or affect behavior. The requirement that activities be sustained and multi-dimensional simply calls for the exclusion of isolated occurrences and focuses on efforts that include activities that take various forms, each of which serves to sustain the dissemination of information (a report airs on traditional media, is picked up by social media, is discussed offline, etc.). The requirement that the disseminated information be false or otherwise manipulated rules out the dissemination of strictly objective, factual information of the sort we expect to be produced by professional media and present in other modes of healthy public discourse.⁹ The requirement that there be a political intention points to the need for limiting the phenomenon of concern to the political realm (which includes military uses)—as opposed to, for example, information dissemination for business or entertainment purposes. We specify that the intention of the efforts we examine is to shape perceptions or affect behavior to ensure that the efforts in question are goal-oriented and not wholly idle or aimless activities. We recognize that “intention” remains a demanding requirement, for which there is only circumstantial evidence, and that in ordinary usage, intention requires a specific entity that harbors that intent. Given the difficulties of attribution and the lack of hierarchical organization for Russian information efforts, addressed in more detail below, identifying such a specific entity and discerning its intent cannot be an exact science. Thus, our aim is to focus on those information efforts where the existence of political intentions—on behalf of *some* actors involved, even if they cannot be identified with confidence—is plausibly inferable from the best available evidence.

It is important to make explicit some implications of our definition of malign or subversive information efforts. First, it implies that even infamous, Russian state-controlled purveyors of fabricated or misleading information, such as RT and Sputnik, are not inevitably and constantly engaging in malign or subversive information efforts, because their reporting is not always manipulated in some clear way.¹⁰ The same can be said about activity by Russia-linked social media accounts, when they are not impersonating other individuals and merely amplify content that is not fabricated or otherwise manipulated.

Second, the definition sweeps in various forms of official government communications through formal channels or formats where representatives of the state speak in their official capacity, if the information they offer might be manipulated. However,

⁹ In the more detailed treatment of TTPs below, we identify the main ways in which information can be manipulated.

¹⁰ As others have noted, much of RT's and Sputnik's reporting is not fabricated or manipulated and “is not qualitatively different from conventional opinion-infused cable news.” Jim Rutenberg, “RT, Sputnik and Russia's New Theory of War,” *New York Times*, September 13, 2017.

caution is warranted in reflexively treating such communications as part of Russia's malign or subversive information efforts. In general, these kinds of communications and channels are those that states ordinarily use to communicate and to announce and defend their policies, positions, and actions. The line between legitimate, official communication of positions—that is, diplomacy and exercises of soft power—and subversive information efforts can be a fine one, as many messages promoted through Russian information efforts also represent talking points in official discourse.

But political communications, even those by Western officials and leaders, often use facts selectively or resort to dubious rhetorical devices. Summarily treating such official communications as hostile actions against which defenses are needed risks delegitimizing analogous activities, when engaged in by the West.¹¹ Thus, we do not exclude this realm of communication from the definition wholesale, as Putin and other government officials have a central role in numerous malign information campaigns—for instance, the transparently false official Russian denials of military presence in Eastern Ukraine or fabrications regarding responsibility for the use of chemical weapons in Syria. However, we do de-emphasize information disseminated through formal channels or officials speaking in their official capacity outside of cases of falsehoods or more extreme forms of manipulation.

Geographic Scope

Our analysis focuses on Russian malign information efforts directed at European actors, including states, individuals, or populations. References to the “West” in the discussion include Europe, the United States, and any international bodies of which these are a prominent part. When referring to Western Europe, we mean to loosely denote countries and nonstate actors that are most centrally associated with the West in the Russian perspective (Germany, France, the EU, etc.). The third section of our chapter focuses on the Balkans or Southeast Europe, which we loosely understand to comprise Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Bulgaria, Croatia, Greece, Kosovo, Macedonia, Montenegro, Romania, Serbia, and Slovenia.

¹¹ Andrew Radin, Alyssa Demus, and Krystyna Marcinek make a related observation to a broader set of subversive Russian influence activities: “Describing the threat from Russia in broad terms could reinforce the idea that the West is simply against Russia as a country, with possible deleterious effects on efforts to reach out to countries considering closer ties with the West. For example, maligning Russian tactics that have analogues, if not parallels with Western activities, could delegitimize these Western activities, such as public outreach around the world, support for civil society, and economic activities by technology firms.” Andrew Radin, Alyssa Demus, and Krystyna Marcinek, *Understanding Russian Subversion Patterns, Threats, and Responses*, Santa Monica, Calif.: RAND Corporation, PE-331-A, 2020.

Target of Interest versus Target Audience

We use the terms “target of interest” and “target audience” to denote two distinct concepts. The target of interest is the subject of Russian information efforts. Information efforts are directed at the target audience, the intended recipients of the efforts’ content. In some campaigns, the target of interest and the target audience are one and the same. In others, this is not the case. For instance, in the now infamous Lisa case, disinformation about the alleged rape of a Russian German girl at the hands of Muslim immigrants was directed primarily at the Russian population (and the anti-immigrant right) in Germany (the target audience). The efforts maligned the German officials and institutions (targets of interest) by critiquing their alleged inaction and therefore appeared to be aimed at undermining the authority of the German government.¹²

Caveats and Limitations

Attribution

The deliberately opaque nature of information efforts makes conclusive judgments about their character inherently difficult. For many of the informational campaigns that Russia is suspected of perpetrating, there is little direct evidence tying the Kremlin to the efforts. The evidence that does exist (at least in unclassified open sources) is almost exclusively circumstantial.¹³ Given the high visibility of Russian information efforts in public discourse, the media, policymakers, and analysts may be quicker to presume a Russian hand in any new efforts than is strictly warranted by the evidence. However, Russia and its agents are far from the only actors waging malign or subversive information efforts.¹⁴ Thus, unless explicitly stated as substantiated with definitive evidence, we attempt to acknowledge this uncertainty throughout, and readers should presume some level of uncertainty in any attribution claims cited here.

¹² For a discussion of the Lisa case, see Stelzenmüller, 2017, p. 6.

¹³ A level of uncertainty about attribution is noted by various intelligence services. See, for example, Stelzenmüller, 2017, citing German intelligence reports about the difficulty of establishing “direct attribution” and lack of “smoking gun[s].” Many efforts that identify ostensibly Russian-controlled networks of bots on social media also cannot definitively tie these to Russia. See, for example, Sarts, 2017.

¹⁴ For example, a recent report examining such efforts in the case of the 2018 Swedish election concludes that “the Kremlin is not alone in its agenda to polarise European societies and increase support or populist, nationalist or fascistic political parties and fringe groups. The international far-right has attempted to influence European elections through the opportunistic collaboration” with other constituencies. Chloe Colliver, Peter Pomerantsev, Anne Applebaum, and Jonathan Birdwell, *Smearing Sweden: International Influence Campaigns in the 2018 Swedish Election*, London: The Institute for Strategic Dialogue, 2018, p. 9.

Organization of Russian Information Efforts

Further complicating confidence about the identity of perpetrators and their intent, actors planning and executing Russian information efforts are likely not organized and directed from the top, as was the case under the Soviet regime. Credible experts argue that many information efforts associated with Russia are ad hoc, conducted by a constellation of actors with varying degrees of affiliation with the Russian state.¹⁵ Even actors with direct ties to the Russian state could be acting without the explicit consent or direction of the highest levels of leadership.¹⁶ Furthermore, the widespread use of numerous, apparently unaffiliated actors and modes of information dissemination not linked to Russian-controlled outlets makes it difficult to distinguish activity that is part of Russia's information efforts from activity that reflects truly independent goals and initiatives that happen to coincide with Kremlin aims.¹⁷ We are mindful of these difficulties and, insofar as possible, seek to avoid relying on examples of falsification or manipulation of information where the connection to the Russian state appears most tenuous.

Throughout the discussion, we use the term "Russia and its agents" as a shorthand reference to denote this multitude of actors involved in Russian information efforts. The reference to agents in this context does not imply a legal agency relationship, but instead encompasses the broad range of actors with various degrees of connection to the Russian state.

We are further limited by the opaque nature of Russian efforts, which means that only efforts that have been discovered or discussed can be included. Furthermore, our analysis of the publicly known efforts may not be exhaustive in view of the now-considerable amount of attention directed to the phenomena by many analysts and organizations around the world, and by our limited resources.

¹⁵ Interview with SME, June 25, 2018, on a not-for-attribution basis. Expert Mark Galeotti (2017a, p. 8) notes the ad hoc nature of Russian information efforts: "Russia's is a broad-based campaign in which the majority of ventures come from the initiative of individuals within and without the government apparatus, guided by their sense of the Kremlin's desires rather than any detailed master plan."

¹⁶ Stelzenmüller, 2017.

¹⁷ Stelzenmüller's (2017) assessment is that "[s]ome [actors] are tied closely into a chain of command, others are linked much more tenuously to government authorities-e.g. subcontractors, businessmen, hacking organizations (Vladimir Putin's 'patriotic hackers'), freelancers, and even organized cybercrime networks." See also Mark Galeotti, "The 'Trump Dossier' or How Russia Helped America Break Itself," *Tablet Magazine*, June 13, 2017b.

Russian Malign or Subversive Information Efforts in the Balkans

This appendix addresses Russia's information efforts in the Balkans or Southeast Europe. In particular, we focus on the Western Balkans—that is, Bosnia and Herzegovina (BiH), Serbia, Macedonia, Kosovo, Montenegro, Albania, and Croatia—and touch more generally on a broader region that also includes Bulgaria, Greece, Romania, and Slovenia.

Russian Interest in the Balkans

The Balkan region has seen a resurgence of Russian attention in recent years—and especially since the Ukraine crisis. As several experts argue, the region's importance to Russia appears to be less about attributes of the Balkan countries themselves and more about their usefulness to Russia's competition with the West (and to a lesser extent, its relations with Turkey).¹ As the prominent Russia expert Mark Galeotti explains, "Russian leaders see the Balkans as critical piece in a new, broader 'Great Game,'" in which Russia, Europe, and the United States "will seek to gain advantage and apply leverage in the region in the pursuit of wider goals that have little to do with Balkan politics."² While experts doubt the existence of a Russian grand strategy for the Balkans, expert opinion converges on two sets of these wider, overarching goals: *discrediting and undercutting Western institutions* and *establishing Russia as a powerful actor in the region*.³

¹ Galeotti, 2018, p. 8.

² Galeotti, 2018, p. 16. Dimitar Bechev also observes that Russia's resurgence of attention to the region in the wake of Ukraine is intended to send a message to the West: "[I]f you interfere in our backyard . . . then we can and will most certainly do the same in yours." Dimitar Bechev, *Rival Power: Russia's Influence in Southeastern Europe*, New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 2017a, p. 84.

³ See, for example, Vera Zakem, Bill Rosenau, and Danielle Johnson, *Shining a Light on the Western Balkans: Internal Vulnerabilities and Malign Influence from Russia, Terrorism, and Transnational Organized Crime*, Arlington, Va.: CNA, May 2017, p. iv. Galeotti (2018, pp. 9–10) describes the Russian interest in the Western Balkans as threefold: "Acquire a role as a regional player and power," "[s]tying further NATO expansion," and "[e]xploit potential EU expansion (and its potential failures)." Janusz Bugajski and Margarita Assenova, *Eurasian Disunion*:

While experts appear to agree that undercutting Western institutions is an overarching foreign policy goal, there is less consensus about what undercutting Western institutions entails. The Balkan region is the frontier of NATO and EU enlargement, with Montenegro having joined NATO as the twenty-ninth member-state in 2017, and Serbia being the only state in the region not seeking membership.⁴ Serbia, Montenegro, Macedonia, and Albania are all candidates to join the EU; BiH submitted an application in 2016, and Kosovo signed a Stabilization and Association Agreement in 2015. Although Russia's general opposition to these institutions is in evidence, there is a lack of consensus among experts as to whether preventing the expansion of the EU and NATO is Moscow's real objective. Some maintain that Russia does seek to "pry the region away from the West"⁵—and with regard to resisting NATO expansion at least, there is an ample historical record of vocal and persistent official pronouncements from Moscow to support that claim.⁶ Others argue that Russia seeks to exploit the expansion—or the attempted expansion—of these Western institutions to foment instability within the region and create trouble within the Western space.⁷ Moreover, influence over NATO or EU countries offers Moscow a chance to "have at some point a degree of influence over collective decision-making, or even in some cases to try to incapacitate NATO and/or EU initiatives that contradict Russian interests."⁸

Russia's Vulnerable Flanks, Washington, D.C.: Jamestown Foundation, 2016, p. 219, suggest that "the Western Balkans are viewed as Europe's 'soft underbelly,' where the Kremlin can capitalize on local conflicts, democratic deficits, and nationalist surpluses to undermine Western objectives and promote its geopolitical ambitions." See also *Russia in the Balkans*, Conference Report, London School of Economics, March 13, 2015.

⁴ However, even Serbia cooperates formally with NATO through the Individual Partnership Action Plan.

⁵ Aubrey Belford, Saska Cvetkovska, Biljana Sekulovska, and Stevan Dojčinović, "Leaked Documents Show Russian, Serbian Attempts to Meddle in Macedonia," *Organized Crime and Corruption Reporting Project*, June 4, 2017. Per the experts from the German Marshall Fund, "The Kremlin's strategic objective in the Western Balkans is to block aspiring nations from joining the EU and NATO" (Salvo and De Leon, 2018, p. 1).

⁶ For example, in 2014, Russian foreign minister Sergei Lavrov called the expansion of NATO to Bosnia, Macedonia, and Montenegro a "provocation" and an "irresponsible policy that undermines the determination to build a system of equal and shared security in Europe." Reuters, "NATO's Planned Balkan Expansion a 'Provocation': Russia's Lavrov," September 29, 2014a. In response to the potential lifting of a veto on Macedonia's entry into NATO by Greece, Russian ambassador to the EU Vladimir A. Chizhov warned, "Sure, we will not shoot nuclear bombs, but, there are errors that have consequences." Helene Cooper and Eric Schmitt, "U.S. Spycraft and Stealthy Diplomacy Expose Russian Subversion in a Key Balkans Vote," *New York Times*, October 9, 2018.

⁷ For example, a collective of experts from the UK and Eastern Europe argue that the "goal is 'not to roll back NATO or EU enlargement but to build influence in countries that are either part of Western clubs, or are well on their way to joining them, and are therefore useful door openers'" (*Russia in the Balkans*, 2015). Galeotti (2018, pp. 9–10) argues that Russia does seek to stymie NATO expansion, but not EU expansion, which it wants to exploit. Eugene Rumer of the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace blends the two views, arguing that Russia "appears intent on disrupting EU efforts to stabilize the region and prevent Serbia and other Western Balkan countries—Albania, Macedonia, and Montenegro—from joining the EU, and thus sustaining a perennial point of vulnerability for Europe." Eugene Rumer, *Russia and the West in a New Standoff*, Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 2017, p. 8.

⁸ Mihail Naydenov, "The Subversion of the Bulgarian Defence System—the Russian Way," *Defense & Security Analysis*, Vol. 34, No. 1, 2018.

Russia's information efforts appear to support these overarching foreign policy goals. Indeed, Dimitar Bechev, a leading expert on the subject, concludes that Russia's "ability to shape discourse" is the "main achievement" of its overall influence efforts in the region.⁹ Malign or subversive information efforts in and about the region are only one tool of influence used toward that end (alongside other political, military, and economic means of influence), but they have in all likelihood contributed to that achievement. In Bechev's judgment, "Russia's capacity to shape the media landscape [via disinformation] and plant and cultivate messages pandering to local resentment of the United States and the EU, as well as fear of Islam, is beyond doubt."¹⁰ Within the Balkans, and especially the Western Balkans and Bulgaria, Russia has carved out a significant space in the information environment, which it uses to discredit Western institutions and foment divisions and instability in the region. Outside the Balkans, the region is instrumental to broader information efforts aimed at shaping perceptions about the West and Russia in the international system.

The following sections build from the framework we developed earlier and offer a selective overview of the key objectives that appear to be motivating these malign or subversive information efforts and the TTPs used in their service. While we do not attempt an exhaustive catalog of Russia's malign or subversive information efforts, we focus on both the objectives and the TTPs that appear to be prominent and those that receive more researcher and media attention. Therefore, we do not address every element of the previously developed framework, instead focusing only on those components that are most pronounced in the present context. In keeping with the overall approach to the subject, we de-emphasize information efforts where attribution is particularly uncertain, as well as those that largely consist of official communications of content that is not obviously manipulated in some significant way.

Objectives

The overarching foreign policy goals noted above translate into more discrete objectives, which appear to be guiding Russia's information efforts in the region. Using the objectives that we identified at a higher level of generality earlier in this report, we look at those objectives that appear to be among the more prominent ones motivating Russia's information efforts in the Balkan region.

Strategic Objective 1. Shape Perceptions to Advance Specific Foreign Policy Aims

Russian information efforts in the Balkan region seem to focus on influencing processes in the near term when these contribute to undermining Western institutions or advancing Russia's status and power in the region.

⁹ Bechev, 2017a, p. 237.

¹⁰ Bechev, 2017a, p. 193.

Specific Objective 1.a. Influence Behavior or Decisionmaking of Other Countries or International Institutions with Regard to Specific Matters That Implicate Russia's Strategic Interests

Russia and its agents are, by all indicators, intent on influencing outcomes of specific events in the Balkans that have the potential to advance Russia's standing and interests (i.e., result in more pro-Russian policies) or undermine the cohesion of Western institutions. This objective is apparent in Russia's efforts to affect the Balkan states' choices to join or take steps toward joining NATO and the EU, and their participation in NATO activities more generally. Whether the underlying goal is to "pry" the Balkans away from the West or foment instability within countries that will be part of Western institutions, Russia and its agents have deployed information efforts to influence the decisions and developments that bear on the target countries' membership in these institutions. For example, there is evidence that Russia and its agents sought to influence outcomes in Macedonia with regard to the name change (an obstacle to NATO membership on account of Greek objections), as well as the 2016 Montenegrin election, which would determine the country's dominant position on NATO membership.¹¹ Also in Macedonia, Russia has consistently backed the conservative, anti-NATO/EU forces, deploying information efforts in their support when these forces sought to prevent an elected parliamentary majority from forming a government.¹² Evidence also suggests that Russia and its agents seek to influence decisions by NATO members pertaining to NATO deployments.¹³

¹¹ Asya Metodieva, "How Disinformation Harmed the Referendum in Macedonia," *Transitions Online*, October 3, 2018; Marc Santora and Julian E. Barnes, "In the Balkans, Russia and the West Fight a Disinformation-Age Battle," *New York Times*, September 16, 2018: "According to Western officials, Moscow's primary goal [in Macedonia] is to depress turnout. If less than half of registered voters participate in the referendum, the issue is forced back to Parliament, undermining the popular mandate for a solution"; Nick Squires, "Russia 'Orchestrating Covert Campaign to Wreck Macedonia Name Change Vote,'" *Telegraph*, September 27, 2018; Moscow

has allegedly flooded social media in Macedonia with false accounts calling for a boycott of the referendum. Thousands of fake Twitter and Facebook accounts with the hashtag #Bojkotiram, meaning 'boycott' in Macedonian, have appeared in recent weeks, according to Macedonia's Investigative Reporting Lab. . . . Some of the false accounts try to stir up friction between Macedonia's Slav majority and its ethnic Albanian minority.

On Montenegro, see Vesko Garcevic, "The Impact of Russian Interference on Germany's 2017 Elections," testimony before the U.S. Senate Select Committee on Intelligence, June 28, 2017, pp. 16–19.

¹² In the course of the coalition formation crisis, Moscow accused the EU and NATO of "attempting to install a government that would help neighboring Albania pursue expansionist policies," with Sputnik disseminating stories such as "NATO Is Willing to See Blood in the Streets of Macedonia." John Cappello, "Russia Escalates Disinformation Campaign in Western Balkans," *Foundation for Defense of Democracies*, April 5, 2017; Cappello and Sunter, 2018, p. 13; Christopher Bennett, "Backsliding in the Western Balkans," *NATO Review*, February 2, 2017.

¹³ For example, Bugajski and Assenova, 2016, pp. 228–229, describe fearmongering in Bulgaria, such as content threatening that NATO is dragging Bulgaria into a war with Russia, at the time NATO was exploring feasibility of storing weapons there, among other countries.

Combining Russia's overarching interests in undermining Western institutions and increasing its own standing, Russian information sources have backed pro-Russian, anti-Western (or at least antiestablishment) political forces. For example, in Montenegro, Russian-affiliated information sources promoted ideas of the anti-Western, pro-Russian Democratic Front in the run-up to the 2016 parliamentary election (and Russia-linked coup attempt).¹⁴ There is some indication of covert Russian information efforts in recent elections: in Bulgaria's presidential elections in 2016 in favor of the Socialist Party, which opposes EU sanctions against Russia and NATO operations around the Black Sea,¹⁵ and in the 2015 Greek election, in favor of both the far-left, antiestablishment Syriza party and the far-right Independent Greeks party, who are more favorably disposed to Russia.¹⁶ A variety of *content maligning/attacking the West* (detailed below) is deployed to influence the Balkan voters and decisionmakers in these decisions.

Specific Objective 1.c. Shape Global Perceptions of Russia in Connection with Discrete Events or Matters Implicating Russia

As is the case elsewhere in Europe, Russia seeks to control the messages and influence perceptions in cases where the Russian state is accused of wrongdoing. For example, in the Balkan region, Russia's efforts to present its version of the Ukraine conflict have been particularly prominent—with a degree of success, as some local media picked up Moscow's staple framing of the conflict, such as referring to the Maidan revolution as a “fascist takeover” and a “US-directed putsch,” perpetrated by “Banderovites.”¹⁷

¹⁴ Garcevic, 2017, p. 18: The Democratic Front is

an anti-NATO political coalition dominated by Serbian nationalist parties known for their pro-Russian affiliation, almost dying on the margin of the Montenegrin political spectrum, was resurrected by the Russian hand to become the biggest opposition formation in the Montenegrin Parliament winning 21 percent of votes at the last Parliamentary elections held in October 2016 or 18 seats out of 81 seats in the Montenegrin Parliament. Their ideas are promoted by pro-Russia's web portals: inf4s, the portal of the NGO NO to War, NO to NATO, and the web site of the Montenegrin Movement for Neutrality. In some cases, Montenegrin NGO leaders and political activists are on payroll lists of Russian institutions in Serbia. One of the leaders of the anti-NATO campaign in Montenegro, Marko Milacic, was long a correspondent of Sputnik in Montenegro.

¹⁵ Before Bulgaria's presidential election,

the country's opposition Socialist Party received a secret strategy document proposing a road map to victory at the ballot box, according to five current or former Bulgarian officials. Among its recommendations: plant fake news and promote exaggerated polling data. The source of the roughly 30-page dossier, intercepted by Bulgaria's security service, was a think tank connected to the Kremlin, according to the officials. It was delivered by a former Russian spy on a U.S. sanctions list, three of them said.

(Parkinson and Kantchev, 2017)

¹⁶ See Bugajski and Assenova, 2016, p. 264, noting “evidence of active engagement between RISS, a Russian think tank that provides ‘information support’ to the Russian government, and both Syriza and the nationalist Independent Greeks party in the months preceding their election victory”; see also David Patrikarakos, “Is Greece Becoming a New Russia Satellite State?” *Daily Beast*, April 14, 2017.

¹⁷ Bechev, 2017a, p. 81.

Russian messages appear to have taken hold in some countries, as polls show public opinion to be more consistent with these accounts rather than Western accounts.¹⁸ In another example, Russian officials and state-sponsored media vehemently denied and deflected from the charge brought by Montenegrin prosecutors that Russia's military intelligence plotted a coup d'état against the government on the eve of the 2016 election.¹⁹ *Content defending or deflecting from accusations of wrongdoing* is commonly used to advance this objective.

Strategic Objective 2. Shape Perceptions to Advance Russia's Broader Worldview and Interests

Russian information efforts also seize opportunities to advance its interest in discrediting and undercutting Western institutions and establishing Russia as a powerful actor in the region through more general messages, apart from exerting influence on particular decisions or outcomes.

Specific Objective 2.a. Shape Global Perceptions of the West and United States

As elsewhere, a major component of the continuous information effort in the Balkans seeks to push a negative image of the West and the United States. For the audiences within the Balkan region, Russian information efforts present the United States as an arrogant interventionist force that uses NATO as a tool to dominate the region. A variety of *content maligning Western actions, policies, institutions, and culture*, detailed below, is deployed to shape perceptions of the West as a malevolent force that victimizes the Balkan audience populations and brings nothing but instability to the region.²⁰

The image of the EU and core Western European states that Russia and its agents push emphasizes its ineffectiveness—for instance, when it comes to delivering on the promises of EU membership—and moral bankruptcy, as manifest in the alleged promotion of values incompatible with the conservative, Christian values of (some) Balkan peoples. *Content maligning/attacking the West* is filled with themes apparently aimed at constructing such images. The same content is instrumental to shaping perceptions about the West for audiences outside the Balkans: The 1999 Kosovo campaign, for example, is “at the core of the story about the pernicious effects of American interventions in the Middle East all the way to Ukraine and Georgia.”²¹

Specific Objective 2.b. Shape Global Perceptions of Russia Broadly

Russia and its agents display a distinct interest in portraying itself as a powerful ally, an alternative locus of power in the region, and one that is morally and militarily superior

¹⁸ See, for example, Bugajski and Assenova, 2016, p. 264.

¹⁹ See, for example, “Keep Calm and Blame Russia: ‘Was There a Coup Attempt at All’ in Montenegro?” *Sputnik International*, February 21, 2017; Garcevic, 2017, p. 24.

²⁰ Zakem, Rosenau, and Johnson, 2017, p. 14.

²¹ Bechev, 2017a, p. 237; see also *Russia in the Balkans*, 2015, pp. 2–3.

to the West.²² Shaping perceptions in this direction entails a variety of continuously disseminated messages promoting Russia, with a focus on its portrayal as a protector of the Serbs and other Slavic brethren and a mighty military power.²³ *Content promoting Russia* often appears alongside *content attacking the West* in apparent attempts to advance this objective. For example, Russia's resistance to the Western recognition of Kosovo's independence is at the core of the message, disseminated far and wide, of Russia as a champion of international legality, which is undermined by the Western alliance.²⁴

Specific Objective 2.c. Undermine the West and Western Institutions

In keeping with the foreign policy aim of exploiting the Balkans as “spoilers” or Trojan horses²⁵ within Western institutions, Russian efforts aim to use the experience of these countries to undermine the West and its institutions.²⁶ Pursuit of this objective can take various forms. In non-NATO members, Russian information efforts appear to be aimed at fueling resistance to potential membership, as in Montenegro before 2017. In member countries, Russian-sponsored content seeks to foment a backlash against membership, on the one hand, as appears to be the case in Bulgaria, and stir up divisions within Balkan countries that are members of Western institutions in order to complicate their full integration into those institutions, on the other, which appears to be the case with BiH.²⁷ This objective can also entail instigating disappointment with Western institutions, as in the case of Bulgaria, which has been dismayed about the negative consequences it suffered as a result of toeing the Euro-Atlantic line on Russian sanctions and the South Stream pipeline, the failed project to transport natural gas from Russia to Bulgaria (and other countries) while bypassing Ukraine.²⁸ *Content maligning and attacking the West*, as well as *content that fans divisive sentiments*, both described below, appears to be commonly employed in service of this objective.

²² Zakem, Rosenau, and Johnson, 2017, p. 13; Bechev, 2017a, p. 237.

²³ Salvo and De Leon, 2018, p. 2.

²⁴ See, for example, Bugajski and Assenova, 2016, p. 240: “Russia’s blockage of Kosovo’s entry into the United Nations enabled Moscow to portray itself as the defender of international legality and the promoter of state sovereignty and territorial integrity.”

²⁵ “Shortly before Bulgaria, once one of the Soviet Union’s staunchest allies, joined the EU in 2007, Russia’s ambassador to the bloc told a Sofia newspaper: ‘We are hoping that you will be our special partner, a kind of Trojan horse in the EU’” (Parkinson and Kantchev, 2017).

²⁶ See also *Russia in the Balkans*, 2015, pp. 2, 6. As one expert puts it, “Moscow exploits grievances in the international system, seeks leverage in Europe’s ‘soft underbelly,’ the Balkans, including EU member states such as SYRIZA-led Greece and Cyprus” (p. 6).

²⁷ Salvo and De Leon, 2018, p. 1.

²⁸ Maxim Samorukov, “The Balkan Cycle: Why-Russo Bulgarian Relations Are Growing Again,” *Carnegie Center Moscow*, May 25, 2018.

Specific Objective 2.d. Undermine National Cohesion of Third Countries

Fostering instability and undermining the unity of Balkan countries appears to be a distinct aim of the Russian approach to the region. Russian officials, nonstate actors, and media mouthpieces overtly and vocally support certain factions within Balkan societies against others, stoking tensions and confrontation. Support for ethnonationalists who threaten the unity of BiH is an illustrative example: In addition to historic support for Milorad Dodik, the separatist leader of the Republika Srpska, Russia has been lending support to Dragan Covic, the Croat of the BiH tripartite presidency and a leading figure of the Bosnian Croat nationalist movement for greater Croat power within BiH.²⁹ There is some evidence to suggest that Russia was using social media to influence the 2018 Bosnian election in favor of the two separatist parties.³⁰ In Bechev's assessment, what Russia seeks from its support of Dodik and Covic is "to maintain a degree of chaos that keeps the European Union concerned and stretched on multiple fronts in the Balkans."³¹ Others observe that "prolonging disputes and uncertainties" is part of Russia's bet that "shortcomings in inter-ethnic reconciliation and state-building will slow down or terminate the region's integration into NATO and the EU."³² *Content fanning divisive sentiments*, addressed below, appears abundantly used in service of this objective.

Tactics, Techniques, and Procedures

To advance those objectives in and pertaining to the Balkan region, Russia and its agents appear to use a broad array of TTPs, identified earlier in the chapter. Rather than attempt to catalog them all, here we synthesize those aspects of the TTPs that have received the most consistent expert and researcher attention.

What Content Is Produced and Disseminated by Russia and Its Agents in the Balkans?

Instances of each content category we identified earlier can be found in Russia's information efforts in the Balkans. Here we draw attention to some of the most prominent themes that Russia's information efforts communicate in the region.

Maligning/attacking Western actions, policies, institutions, culture. Attacks on the United States, Europe, and Western institutions feature prominently in Russian-

²⁹ Salvo and De Leon, 2018, p. 3.

³⁰ Dijedon Imeri, "Recent Twitter Activity Indicates Russian Plan to Destabilise Bosnia Ahead of General Election in October," *Jane's 360*, January 24, 2018.

³¹ Barbara Surk, "Bosnia's Election Exacerbates Old Divisions, to Russia's Satisfaction," *New York Times*, October 6, 2018.

³² Bugajski and Assenova, 2016, p. 245.

produced and Russian-sponsored content. The United States is portrayed as a malign hegemon, imposing its will on and victimizing Balkan societies, and is to “blame for all the ills befalling the world as a whole and Russia’s friends in Southeast Europe in particular—whether it is jihadi terrorists, asylum seekers pouring into Europe, or Albanian irredentists poised to set light to the Balkans.”³³ Overlapping with content that fans divisive sentiments, a distinct theme in Russian information efforts is linking Western support to local rivalries: alleging British support for ethnic Albanian rebels during the Kosovo war in 1999,³⁴ presenting the 2015 antigovernment protests in Macedonia as yet another Western-engineered “color revolution,”³⁵ and portraying the 2017 political crisis in Macedonia as “gross external interference” by the EU and NATO designed to force the country to accept an “Albanian platform.”³⁶ NATO is portrayed as an aggressive threat, an “occupier,” to Russia’s target audiences in the Balkans, as NATO’s bombing of Belgrade is continually resurrected and the alleged adverse consequences of NATO membership emphasized to members.³⁷ For example, in Bulgaria, Russian-sponsored material warns of a risk of being drawn into a war with Russia as a result of NATO’s alleged war preparations.³⁸ Europe and its institutions—in particular, the EU—are portrayed as incompetent and ineffective, on the one hand, and as purveying a morally bankrupt LGBT and multicultural agenda, on the other.³⁹ Both ineffectiveness and moral bankruptcy are implicated in the common messages. Furthermore, taking advantage of the hopes of Balkan countries about the economic payoffs of EU membership, Russian messages feature “[t]he false promise of market reforms,” which “are also high on the list of failures blamed on the pro-Western

³³ Bechev, 2017a, p. 237.

³⁴ Cappello and Sunter, 2018, p. 21, citing “‘Sputnjik’: Britanci su spasli OVK od raspada (VIDEO),” *Blic Online*, February 6, 2017.

³⁵ Bechev, 2017a, p. 81, citing “Moscow Expects Thorough Investigation of Reported Coup Attempt in Macedonia,” *Sputnik*, February 1, 2015; see also *Russia in the Balkans*, 2015, p. 3:

When protestors poured onto the streets in Skopje in April 2015, calling for the resignation of Nikola Gruevski’s government, Russian media accused the West of pushing for yet another colour revolution with disastrous consequences, similar to Ukraine. The argument was readily picked up by pro-government outlets in FYROM. Conspiracy theorists, both in Moscow and in the Balkans, linked demonstrations to attempts to derail Turkish Stream.

³⁶ Galeotti, 2018, p. 9, citing Andrew Rettman, “EU and Russia Step into Macedonia Crisis,” *EUobserver*, March 3, 2017.

³⁷ Salvo and De Leon, 2018; “Zaharova Zapadu o bombardovanju SRJ: Zar je moguće da ste toliki idiotic,” *SputnikNews*, March 29, 2018; Oana Popescu and Rufin Zamfir, *Progadanda Made to Measure: How Our Vulnerabilities Facilitate Russian Influence*, Bucharest, Romania: Global Focus, February 2018, p. 25.

³⁸ Bugajski and Assenova, 2016, p. 227.

³⁹ Cappello and Sunter, 2018: “The European Union is a frequent subject of disinformation campaigns. According to Sputnik Serbia, the EU is weak and incompetent, compared to the fallen Roman Empire or even with Hitler’s Reich”; Bechev, 2017a, p. 237: “The EU for its part has been promoting LGBT rights and exporting its defunct multiculturalism.”

elites.”⁴⁰ The West and its institutions, moreover, are to blame for the disastrous and destabilizing “immigrant wave” that disproportionately affects the Balkans.⁴¹

Promote Russian actions, policies, institutions, culture, successes. Alongside denigrating the West, considerable effort goes into promoting and glorifying Russia and its achievements. Russia is portrayed as a “reemerging power” in the region, with an emphasis on Russia’s military might and capabilities.⁴² Claims made include that the Russian military is superior to the West and that NATO fears Russian military might, and new Russian armaments are amply and routinely showcased, especially to Serb-speaking audiences.⁴³ Analysts of Russia’s efforts in the region, Cappello and Sunter, note that this is “a unique approach” that is “not used in Sputnik services in the German, Czech, or Polish languages.”⁴⁴ Russia’s military power, according to Russian messages, allows it to be an effective protector of Serbs throughout the region.⁴⁵ Moreover, in contrast to NATO and the United States, Russia is portrayed as a reliable ally on account of its support for territorial integrity and sovereignty in the Balkans.⁴⁶ Another aspect that makes Russia a better patron/ally (at least for the region’s Slavic or conservative publics) is its alleged moral superiority to the West: Juxtaposed with the Western abandonment of Christian values, Russian information efforts also emphasize its own Christian character—efforts for which the Russian Orthodox Church and Orthodox clergy in Balkan countries are often deployed.⁴⁷ Portrayals of Russia in the region are focused almost exclusively on these aspects, with little attention devoted to Russia’s domestic politics.⁴⁸

⁴⁰ Bechev, 2017a, p. 237; see also Galeotti, 2018, pp. 9–10, who observes that “[i]f and when hopes of early accession to the EU, and even more so of consequent rapid economic uplift, are dashed, Moscow will then be able to capitalise on this as ‘proof’ of European perfidy or lack of interest in the region.”

⁴¹ See, for example, Andrew Korybko, “Betrayal and Humiliation in the Balkans,” *Sputnik International*, February 25, 2016.

⁴² Cappello and Sunter, 2018, pp. 25–26; for example, see “Русија се војно враћа на Балкан” [“Russia’s Military Comeback in the Balkans”], *Sputnik Srbija*, December 21, 2016. See also Salvo and De Leon, 2018, citing D. Kljajić and M. Dobromirović, “SNAŽNA PORUKA RUSKOG LIDERA! Putin rekao Kolindi: KO NAPADNE SRBIJU, RATOVAĆE S RUSIJOM!” *Informer*, October 20, 2017; “VOJNI ANALITIČAR PUKOVNIK JEVTOVIĆ: Ruska vojna baza u Srbiji, jedina sigurna odbrana od pretnje vojske Kosova!” *Informer*, March 13, 2017.

⁴³ Cappello and Sunter, 2018, p. 26: “Sputnik Serbia features a special armament section and a variety of Russian-made military equipment related infographics.”

⁴⁴ Cappello and Sunter, 2018, p. 26.

⁴⁵ Salvo and De Leon, 2018, citing “PUTIN: Republiku Srpsku Ću Da Branim SVIM SILAMA! | Najnovije Vesti—Srbija Danas,” *SrbijaDanas*, September 5, 2016.

⁴⁶ For example, “Why Ex-Yugoslav Balkans Reject NATO, Preserve Sovereign Neutrality,” *Sputnik International*, February 4, 2016.

⁴⁷ See, for example, Bugajski and Assenova, 2016, p. 240.

⁴⁸ Bechev, 2017a, p. 238.

Appeal to common heritage, culture, history, interests. One way that Russia and its agents seek to build connections with their target audiences is through an emphasis on the commonalities between Russia and the audience. In the Balkan region, this predominantly takes the form of content that evokes the brotherhood between Russians and other Slavs or other Christian Orthodox people. Appeals to pan-Slavism and religious solidarity are used to elicit a sense of loyalty to and identification with Russia among Serb or other Slavic audiences. For instance, Russian-affiliated Serbian language outlets use the shared identities to “reinforc[e] the idea that Russia is their only true ally and that Serbs should not want the countries of the region (Serbia, BiH, Montenegro) to join Western institutions.”⁴⁹ Russia appears to enlist the church and local clergy in its information efforts: According to Ambassador Vesko Garcevic, in Montenegro, “[p]riests from the Church have been actively engaged in an anti-Western propaganda invented to comfort Russian sentiments,” and “[t]heir statements and accusations are broadly broadcasted by local and Russian media.”⁵⁰ The head of the Montenegrin Orthodox Church, for example, criticized the government’s decision on sanctions against Russia by cursing those “who [are] not loyal to the same language, same-blood Russia.”⁵¹ Similarly, the patriarch of All Rus appealed to the patriarch of the Bulgarian Orthodox Church with a concern about “our flock” in an effort to link the Maidan demonstrations to the influence of the Greek Catholic Church and Ukrainian “schismatic communities,” who were alleged to be “uprooting” Orthodoxy from Ukraine.⁵² Russia also uses the common identity to beat up on audiences for decisions of which it does not approve: For instance, Bulgaria’s pulling out of the South Stream project was treated in the Russian media as the “Bulgars” ungratefulness to their Slav Orthodox brothers.⁵³

Fan divisive sentiments. Russian information efforts stoke multiple divisions between and within Balkan countries. Russia and its agents appear to tap into historical grievances, aimed especially at inflating perceptions of threat among Serb and certain Slav populations.⁵⁴ Often, nefarious support of the West is alleged to support the various opponents of these populations. For example, “Kosovo Albanians are depicted

⁴⁹ Salvo and De Leon, 2018.

⁵⁰ Garcevic, 2017, p. 18.

⁵¹ Zakem, Rosenau, and Johnson, 2017, p. 14: “[T]he head of the Montenegrin Orthodox Church opposed the government’s decision to join sanctions against Russia by stating, ‘May he who is not loyal to the same language, same-blood Russia, have the living flesh fall off him, may he be cursed thrice and 3,000 times by me.’”

⁵² While the attempt to secure the condemnation of the Bulgarian Orthodox Church did not succeed fully, the manipulated information was given further publicity by the Bulgarian patriarch (Bechev, 2015, p. 10).

⁵³ Bechev, 2015, pp. 9–10, quoting a statement by the National Historical Museum director Bozhidar Dimitrov, interviewed by Nova TV on May 12, 2015.

⁵⁴ “The regional situation is portrayed as unstable and unsettled. The narrative emphasizes that old hostilities are ready to re-erupt, and these pose grave threats to the Serb and Macedonian Slav populations” (Cappello and Sunter, 2018, p. 26).

as terrorists and narco-criminals, ready to wage war, with NATO's assistance, against Kosovo Serbs.⁵⁵ In the context of Macedonian conflicts, Macedonian Albanians are portrayed as "ready to wage war with Macedonian Slavs."⁵⁶ Albania and Bulgaria, both NATO members, were accused by Russian state and local media, and eventually by Russian foreign minister Lavrov, of seeking to partition Macedonia.⁵⁷ Moreover, in Macedonia, Russian content generally "exploited and complemented rightwing nationalist-populist narratives based on notions of identity, race, and the perceived threat of an overbearing EU."⁵⁸ "Croatia's defense modernization, it is explained, is a U.S. conspiracy to threaten Serbia."⁵⁹ Some content stokes the Serbian sense of grievance over perceived inequitable treatment in the Western-brokered resolution of the Yugoslav conflicts, justifying or glorifying Serb war criminals,⁶⁰ or painting them as the "puppets" of the West.⁶¹ Some content also seeks to inflame tensions between Christians and Muslims and whip up Islamophobia.⁶² To heighten the sense of threat emanating from other ethnonational groups (often alleged to be backed by the West), Russia and its agents sustain speculation about a Russian military intervention to pro-

⁵⁵ Cappello and Sunter, 2018, p. 26; see also Salvo and De Leon, 2018, citing "Lazanski Upozorava Na OPASNOST: ALBANCI Ponovo UDARAJU Na Sever Kosova, Čekaju Znak VAŠINGTONA," *SrbijaDanas*, March 2, 2018.

⁵⁶ Cappello and Sunter, 2018, p. 26.

⁵⁷ Bechev, 2017a, p. 81; *Russia in the Balkans*, 2015, p. 3:

After the armed clashes between security forces and Albanian radicals in the city of Kumanovo (9–10 May 2015) Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov pointed the finger at NATO members Albania and Bulgaria, accusing them of plotting to partition their neighbour. The theory, originating from pro-Kremlin websites, had made its way into Balkan media before finally being voiced by Lavrov, on May 20 to Russia's State Duma. This caused a stir in relations with Sofia and Tirana, with respective Foreign Ministers Daniel Mitov and Ditmir Bushati each calling it 'irresponsible' and 'unacceptable'. Yet Lavrov continued exploiting the Kumanovo incident. On a visit to Belgrade, Lavrov accused the EU of tolerating separatism, spoke of the worrisome rise of terrorism and of alleged plans to recreate Greater Albania.

⁵⁸ "Result of Macedonia's Referendum Is Another Victory for Russia," *The Guardian*, October 1, 2018.

⁵⁹ Cappello and Sunter, 2018, p. 26, citing "Amerika naoružava Hrvatsku zbog pritiska na Srbiju" ["America Arming Croatia to Pressure Serbia"], *Sputnik Srbija*, January 9, 2016.

⁶⁰ Salvo and De Leon, 2018, citing "Руски одбор за Младићеву одбрану: Овакве патриоте су потребне Русији," *SputnikNews*, November 24, 2017. See also Conley et al., 2016, p. 62.

⁶¹ Gordana Knezevic, "Russia Sowing Doubt and Fear in Belgrade," *Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty*, July 7, 2016.

⁶² Bugajski and Assenova, 2016, p. 220, citing Markovic, "Islamists to Attack Serbia in August?!" Belgrade, *Nase Novine*, July 9, 2015, p. 257: Russia's foreign minister Lavrov exploited "a clash between police and an unidentified armed group in Kumanovo, northern Macedonia, on May 9, 2015, [which] resulted in 22 deaths," to claim that "the region faced instability from Islamic extremism, pointing the finger at Albanians and Bosniaks." See also Cappello and Sunter, 2018, p. 21, citing a Serbian-language "Sputnik piece recycled by Blic, 'Ottomans Want to Rule the Balkans Again', [where] Turkey's policy is compared to the medieval Ottoman Empire, ready to re-conquer the Balkans using political and cultural ties with the local Muslim population, including potential military intervention in Bosnia and Herzegovina."

tect Serbs and other Orthodox Slavs—as in, for example, the 2017 crisis between the governments in Belgrade and Pristina.⁶³ Russia and its agents also seek to cultivate a sense of threat to particular ethnic groups from the Ukrainian government, through claims that members of such ethnic groups, such as Bulgarians, are being victimized by the Kyiv government.⁶⁴ As a result, the Bulgarian Ataka party leader “demand[ed] the protection of Bulgarians in Ukraine, who were allegedly recruited forcefully by Kyiv to participate in a ‘fratricidal war.’”⁶⁵

One strand of divisive content is deployed in support of separatist or nationalist figures or movements. Most notably, this pertains to Russia’s support for the political aspirations of the Bosnian Serbs.⁶⁶ Milorad Dodik, president of Republika Srpska, is Russia’s closest ally in the region, whose efforts to undermine the national unity of BiH Russia supports overtly.⁶⁷ And, there are some indications that more covert information efforts to the same end have taken place. For example, in the run-up to the Bosnian elections in 2018, analysts detected a “sudden increase in activity by Twitter accounts promoting pro-Russian narratives while also advocating for separatism in Republika Srpska.”⁶⁸ There is evidence of more surreptitious information activities, such as a “controlled leak” engineered by Russians about Russian/Cossack support for Dodik ahead of the 2016 election that was likely intended to intimidate his opponents or inflate the magnitude of the threat Republika Srpska posed to Bosnian unity.⁶⁹ More recently, Moscow has also lent support to Dragan Covic, the Croat within BiH’s

⁶³ Cappello and Sunter, 2018, p. 29, citing Gordana Knezevic, “Serbia-Kosovo Train Crisis Just Latest Test of Mettle,” *Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty*, January 16, 2017; M. Dobromirović, “PUTIN U SRBIJI RAZMEŠTA RAKETNI ŠTIT! Moćan odgovor na pretnje NATO najvernijem ruskom savezniku na Balkanu!” [“PUTIN DEPLOYS MISSILE SHIELD IN SERBIA! Powerful Response to NATO’s Threat Against Russia’s Most Loyal Ally in the Balkans!”], *Informer*, January 17, 2017; “ПУТИН ЖЕСТОКО ПОРУЧИО ЗАПАДУ: Ко нападне Србе, напао је и Русе!” [“PUTIN’S POWERFUL MESSAGE to the WEST: Attack on Serbia is Attack on Russia!”] *Kremlin*, January 18, 2017.

⁶⁴ See also Bechev, 2015, p. 10.

⁶⁵ In this, Ataka echoed similar claims by the far-right Hungarian Jobbik party (Bugajski and Assenova, 2016, p. 229).

⁶⁶ Salvo and De Leon, 2018, p. 4.

⁶⁷ Salvo and De Leon, 2018, p. 4; Danijel Kovacevic, Milivoje Pantovic, and Srečko Latal, “Russia Lends Full Backing to Bosnian Serb Referendum,” *Balkan Transitional Justice*, September 20, 2016; Zakem, Rosenau, and Johnson, 2017, p. 14; Dodik

proposed to make January 9 an official holiday, implicitly celebrating the day the Bosnian Serbs declared a republic in 1992, sparking the Yugoslav wars. The referendum was widely seen as a test run for a 2018 plebiscite on independence for the RS. The international community warned against the referendum, Bosnia’s own Constitutional Court ruled against it, and even Serbia refused to support it. However, the referendum was still explicitly sanctioned by Russia.

⁶⁸ Salvo and De Leon, 2018, p. 4; Imeri, 2018.

⁶⁹ See Christo Grozev, “The Kremlin’s Balkan Gambit: Part I,” *Bellingcat*, March 4, 2017, reviewing evidence of “a controlled leak into the Polish news space of Malofeev’s secret hotel meeting with Dodik on election day.”

tripartite presidency and leader of Bosnian Croat nationalists seeking greater autonomy for the Croats within BiH.⁷⁰ Sustaining internal conflict in troubled countries like BiH serves Russia's objectives because it is likely to "preoccupy Western institutions and empower the Kremlin to inject itself as a mediator," as well as "justify Kremlin contentions that NATO cannot guarantee European security and a new structure is needed in which Russia would play a major role."⁷¹ Outside of the Western Balkans, Russian-sponsored content is deployed in support for the radical right, nationalist Ataka in Bulgaria, and the left-nationalist Syriza in Greece.⁷²

How Do Russia and Its Agents Manipulate Information in the Balkans?

Russian information efforts targeting the Balkans, particularly the Western Balkans, use the full panoply of information manipulation techniques that we identified in our framework.⁷³ As Capello and Sunter observe, "Russia's influence campaigns range from simple fabrication to creating confusion between half-truths and sophisticated arguments."⁷⁴ Here we highlight only a few of these techniques to offer a sense of the kind of information manipulation occurring in the region.

Western actors are often at the center of *conspiracy theories* surfaced or propagated by Russia and its agents. These theories commonly intimate nefarious Western designs for the region, suggesting that Western actors are secretly plotting color revolutions, fanning existing tensions, and inciting violent conflict to destabilize the region.⁷⁵ Russia and its agents also attempt to bolster the legitimacy of their conspiracies and make them appear to reflect mainstream beliefs by alleging that the truth is "suppressed" and overlooked by "Soros-influenced media outlets."⁷⁶ In Serbia, Russia and its agents also propagate conspiratorial theories about the region's history—namely, ones that blame the dissolution of Yugoslavia and the violence perpetrated at the hands of former Serbian president Slobodan Milosevic on Western actors.⁷⁷ NATO's intervention in the Yugoslav conflicts is explained by reference to tropes such as former sec-

⁷⁰ Salvo and De Leon, 2018, p. 3, referencing Bodo Weber, "Bosnian Croat Leadership on Course to Throw Bosnia and Herzegovina into Electoral Chaos," *Heinrich-Böll-Stiftung*, December 21, 2017; Petar Ivancov, "Ruski Ambasador: Treba Rijesiti Hrvatsko Pitanje u FBiH," *Vijesti*, August 24, 2017.

⁷¹ Bugajski and Assenova, 2016, pp. 220, 245.

⁷² Bechev, 2015, p. 10; Sam Jones, Kerin Hope, and Courtney Weaver, "Alarm Bells Ring over Syriza's Russian Links," *Financial Times*, January 28, 2015.

⁷³ Cappello and Sunter, 2018, p. 25.

⁷⁴ Cappello and Sunter, 2018, p. 19.

⁷⁵ For a story indicating the United States is plotting a color revolution, see Korybko, 2016. For conspiracy theories in Serbia about Western efforts to destabilize the regions, see Knezevic, 2016.

⁷⁶ Korybko, 2016; Zakem, Rosenau, and Johnson, 2017, p. 15.

⁷⁷ Knezevic, 2016.

retary of state Madeleine Albright's "pathological hatred of Slavs."⁷⁸ Conspiracy theories originated by Russia and its agents are then often picked up by media outlets and entertainment shows in the region.⁷⁹

Cases of *fabrication*, information that is entirely false or misleading, have also been reported in the Balkans. For example, in the lead-up to the 2018 referendum in Macedonia to approve the country's name change, a false story about U.S. troops using "ammunition containing depleted uranium" as part of military exercises in the country was circulated.⁸⁰ It is important to note that while Russia and its agents could be the genesis for the fabricated story, as Russia is suspected of conducting information efforts to oppose the name change, their role has not been validated.⁸¹

In other cases, Russia and its agents attempt to bolster the credibility of their messages through *misappropriation*, such as misquoting sources or deliberately mischaracterizing legitimate analyses. For instance, Cappello and Sunter cite a case in which Sputnik Serbia mischaracterized an analysis conducted by *The National Interest* that compared Russia's Su-35 and U.S. fighter jets. The Sputnik piece, which was later republished by Russian-affiliated outlets and news aggregating websites in Serbia, boasted the misleading headline "SU-35: Russian Aircraft Americans Fear."⁸² While the original analysis finds that the Su-35 is "a genuinely dangerous war machine," it does not, as the Sputnik story alleges, find that it is "significantly ahead of the fifth-generation NATO fleet."⁸³ Another Sputnik story on the outlet's Serbian-language site deliberately mischaracterized a new EU policy requiring the citizens of visa-free countries (including Serbia) to undergo a security check before entering the Schengen zone. The article claims that Serbians will once again require visas to enter the zone, and stokes fears claiming that the policy will usher in the "end of integration" into Europe for the region's countries.⁸⁴ In other related cases, Russia and its agents use article headlines to convey information that is misleading and scaremongering on its own, but not factually incorrect when read in the context of the body of the article. The headline of a 2018 Sputnik Moldova article, for instance, reads "Citizens of the

⁷⁸ Jarosław Wiśniewski, "Russia Has a Years-Long Plot to Influence Balkan Politics. The U.S. Can Learn a Lot from It," *Washington Post*, September 19, 2016.

⁷⁹ Zakem, Rosenau, and Johnson, 2017, p. 15.

⁸⁰ Squires, 2018.

⁸¹ Metodieva, 2018.

⁸² Cappello and Sunter, 2018, p. 28. The original analysis was conducted by Dave Majumdar, "Russia's Lethal Su-35 Fighter vs. America's F-35, F-15 and F-16: Who Wins?" *The National Interest*, September 19, 2016. For the Sputnik article, see "Su-35: Ruski avion kojeg se plaši američka avijacija," *Sputnik Srbija*, June 24, 2016.

⁸³ "Su-35: Ruski avion kojeg se plaši američka avijacija," 2016.

⁸⁴ Nikola Joksimović, "Shokantna vest: EU sprema nove vize Srbima—to je kraj integracija," *Sputnik Srbija*, October 20, 2017. The false story was refuted at EU vs Disinfo, "EU Is Preparing New Visas for Serbians—This Is the End of Integration," Issue 85, October 2017.

Republic of Moldova Will Be Stripped of Their Romanian Passports.”⁸⁵ The body of the article explains that because of a grammatical change in the Romanian language, official documents containing the letters subject to change will have to be reissued.⁸⁶ It is possible that the fearmongering headline is an effort to drive readers to click on the article link, though it is also possible that it was designed to appeal to the emotion of those skimming headlines.

As alluded to above, information efforts in the region also commonly use *appeals to emotion* such as fearmongering. Often, such content appears to be aimed at “amplifying threat perceptions” with regard to external threats such as NATO or immigrants and refugees, and/or internal actors such as rival ethnic groups (which are often portrayed as enjoying the support of the West).⁸⁷ Likewise, these efforts exploit the region’s deep-seated emotional memories associated with the ethnic conflicts that afflicted the region in the 1990s by stoking fears of renewed violence, often triggered by Western institutions.⁸⁸ One Sputnik story—“NATO Willing to See ‘Blood in Streets of Macedonia’ for Greater Albania Project”—capitalized on regional fears of conflict, specifically over efforts to redraw borders to unite ethnic Albanians.⁸⁹

Additionally, other examples showcase another common information manipulation technique, the *selective use of facts*. Information presented by Russia and its agents in the region is often distortive in similar ways: Russian sources often selectively report the facts by deliberately avoiding reporting on favorable actions taken by Western actors in the region.⁹⁰ Generally, experts characterize Russian content as one-sided or otherwise presenting an oversimplified version of events or actions. As Cappello and Sunter note, “No variety of views or opinions are presented, nor are any items that are deemed controversial by the Russian government,” and “even moderate critical voices related to internal and external affairs are avoided.”⁹¹

How Do Russia and Its Agents Disseminate Information to Target Audiences in the Balkans?

Russia and its agents appear to use a variety of *actors* and the full spectrum of *modes of communication* to reach their target audiences, though some appear to be more prevalent than others. For instance, our review of the relevant literature indicated that while

⁸⁵ “Operacija ‘Y’: grazhdanam Moldovy pridetsja rasstat’sja s rumynskimi pasportami,” *Sputnik Moldova*, July 7, 2018.

⁸⁶ “Citizens of the Republic of Moldova Will Be Stripped of Their Romanian Passports,” *EU vs Disinfo*, Issue 116, July 7, 2018.

⁸⁷ Cappello and Sunter, 2018, p. 28.

⁸⁸ Cappello and Sunter, 2018, p. 28.

⁸⁹ “NATO Willing to See ‘Blood in Streets of Macedonia’ for Greater Albania Project,” *Sputnik*, March 2, 2017.

⁹⁰ Zakem, Rosenau, and Johnson, 2017, p. 14.

⁹¹ Cappello and Sunter, 2018, p. 32.

there are likely actors with opaque ties to the Russian state operating in the region, many of the efforts identified by analysts, governments, and others appear to be conducted by actors with overt ties to the state. While it is more difficult to know that covert information efforts exist by their very nature, evidence of such efforts by Russia and its agents has surfaced in other areas. Below we highlight some of the dissemination techniques that have received attention by analysts and observers. It is important to note, however, that these techniques do not necessarily or equally apply to every country in the region. Where possible, the discussion highlights examples specific to particular countries in the region.

Certain features of Balkans distinguish this environment from Western Europe and shape the kinds of dissemination techniques used by Russia and its agents. The media environment (addressed further in the section on vulnerabilities) is one such factor, which facilitates the dissemination of content by *media openly affiliated with the Russian state*. As a briefing by the European Parliamentary Research Service notes, “Western Balkan media outlets lacking resources to prepare their own material are becoming increasingly reliant on stories from pro-Kremlin sources,” such as the Sputnik news agency.⁹² Sputnik also operates Romanian-, Moldovan-, and Greek-language websites as well as a radio station in Serbia. Likewise, the Russian foreign-facing state-controlled media project *Russia Beyond the Headlines* began producing a Serbian-language insert for two major Serbian newspapers, *Politik* and *Geopolitika*, and in 2018 the outlet launched a “Serbian-language version of its mobile application called RBTH Daily.”⁹³ The print insert of RBTH is also distributed in newspapers in Greece and Bulgaria.⁹⁴ Other overtly state-affiliated actors disseminating content in the Bulgarian language include media outlet *Ruski Dnevnik* (Russian Diary), part of the RBTH project, the Voice of Russia radio, and a news and information portal run by the Russian embassy.⁹⁵

Russian state actors play a significant role in information efforts targeting the Balkans. State officials’ speeches (televised or delivered in person) or official state social

⁹² “Russia in the Western Balkans,” European Parliament, July 2017. In Serbia, Cappello and Sunter note,

The Kremlin’s narrative is reinforced by local pro-Russian print and online media. These outlets tend to republish content from Russian outlets, in the Serb language, in massive quantities and produce in-house pro-Russian content. Various local/regional portals, daily tabloids and magazines distributing or producing pro-Russian content include: Fakti.rs, Srbin.info, Srpskenovinecg.com, Princip.me, Pravda.rs, Evroazija.rs, V aseljenska.com, Intermagazin.rs, Pecat magazine, and Informer.

(Cappello and Sunter, 2018, p. 20)

⁹³ Nani Klepo, *Geopolitical Influence on Media and Media Freedom in the Western Balkans*, Dava Analytic Brief No. 3, September 2017, p. 3; Salvo and De Leon, 2018; “Russian Sputnik Goes Live in Serbian,” *InSerbia*, February 3, 2015; “Да ли желите да добијате електронски билтен Russia Beyond?” *Russia Beyond*, January 17, 2018.

⁹⁴ Bechev, 2017a, p. 231.

⁹⁵ Bechev, 2015, p. 22.

media accounts are sometimes used as platforms to conduct malign or subversive information efforts in the region, though it is important to note that much of the content promulgated through these channels is an expression of Russian foreign policy perceptions/interests or more routine public diplomacy efforts. Following Montenegro's accession to NATO, for example, Lavrov claimed that membership was "imposed" by the West, stating: "[I]n exchange for Montenegro's loyalty to anti-Russian sanctions," Podgorica "was forced to accept NATO membership."⁹⁶ Likewise, Dmitry Rogozin, then deputy prime minister of Russia for defense and space industry, used fearmongering in his efforts to discourage greater Serbian integration with the West, cautioning that further Serbian-EU foreign policy alignment could lead to a "Cologne 2," a scenario in which "women will be afraid to go out on the street," referring to the sexual assaults that occurred on New Year's Eve 2015 that were allegedly perpetrated in large part by Muslim refugees.⁹⁷

Finally, some malign information efforts in the Balkans are likely conducted by actors with *opaque ties to the Russian state*, including both *media* and *nonmedia actors*. While it is suspected that some media organizations in the region maintain relationships with the Russian state, these connections are often murky and difficult to substantiate. In rare cases, evidence validating ties between media outlets and the Russian state surfaces. For instance, Macedonian counterintelligence documents obtained by the Organized Crime and Corruption Reporting Project provide evidence showing Russia and its agents have offered funding to Macedonian media outlets (including those that target Albanian audiences in the country) in exchange for efforts to propagate "information and disinformation."⁹⁸

The relationship between some other media actors, such as the swath of news websites propagating messages in line with the Kremlin's agenda that launched in Montenegro in 2017, is more opaque.⁹⁹ Content produced by overtly controlled state media outlets like Sputnik in local languages has been widely disseminated by local media outlets, which have the ability to reach a much broader audience and gain greater traction than the Russian-controlled outlets themselves can.¹⁰⁰ Many of the local outlets republishing content produced by Russian actors likely do not have a direct connection to the Russian state.¹⁰¹ The same can be said for local political figures, oligarchs, or others who "borrow the 'Russian propaganda package,' or parts of it, and use it

⁹⁶ "NATO Membership Forced upon Montenegro in Exchange for Russophobia—Lavrov," *TASS*, June 6, 2017.

⁹⁷ Cappello and Sunter, 2018, p. 31; "Rogozin: Rusiji se ne dopada militarizacija Balkana," *Politika*, January 12, 2016.

⁹⁸ Belford et al., 2017.

⁹⁹ Tomovic, 2017.

¹⁰⁰ Cappello and Sunter, 2018, p. 20; Bechev, 2017a, p. 237.

¹⁰¹ Bechev notes that in Montenegro, "local media sometimes reproduce or recycle talking points from Russia on their own initiative, rather than taking direct orders from Moscow" (Tomovic, 2017).

for their populist-political and/or specific economic purpose.”¹⁰² In other cases, local actors may themselves produce and propagate content that resembles that of Russian information efforts, using tropes common in Russian information efforts, but no connection between the actors exists. Adding additional complexity, some content propagated by Russia and its agents mirrors content originated by local actors and reflecting organic local grievances. As such, it is challenging to identify the actors and efforts in the region that are directed by the Russian state.¹⁰³ In Bulgaria, for instance, a study conducted by a team of Bulgarian social scientists found that

there is . . . a propaganda framework that is “made” in Bulgaria and that can be characterized as “pro-Russian.” Bulgarian pro-Russian propaganda occasionally becomes a source for materials in the Russian media. When these, in turn, fall into the focus of attention Bulgarian media, the information in them is “relayed back” to Bulgarian audiences and readers and its effect is amplified.¹⁰⁴

Thus, while these actors contribute to the dissemination of Russian and pro-Russian content, it is difficult to know with any certainty whether such outlets have any tangible connection to the Russian state.¹⁰⁵ Those outlets that lack any connection to Russia or its agents belong to the third category of *actors without known affiliation to the state*.

Nonmedia proxies with opaque ties to the Russian state also play a role in information efforts in the Balkans. Russian figures such as businessman Konstantin Malofeev, ideologue Aleksandr Dugin, the leadership from the Russian Orthodox Church and other “proxies, allies, and fellow travelers disseminating official Russian views of international affairs,” in Bechev’s description, conduct information efforts through a variety of on-the-ground activities.¹⁰⁶ Yet, it is difficult to know whether these actors are operating at the direction of the Russian state, are freelancing in order to curry favor with the state, or are motivated by other interests.¹⁰⁷ One such example

¹⁰² Milena Iakimova and Dimitar Vatsov, “Co-Opting Discontent: Russian Propaganda in the Bulgarian Media,” *Eurozine*, October 18, 2017.

¹⁰³ Bulgarian researchers demonstrate through a content analysis of Bulgarian media that many local actors likely borrow tropes common to Russian information efforts, but are not directly affiliated. See Iakimova and Vatsov, 2017.

¹⁰⁴ Dimitar Vatsov, Albena Hranova, Boriana Dimitrova, Boyan Znepolski, Deyan Kiuranov, Konstantin Pavlov, Martin Kanoushev, Milena Iakimova, Tom Junes, and Tsvetozar Tomov, *Anti-Democratic Propaganda in Bulgaria: Part One. News Websites and Print Media: 2013-2016 Quantitative Research*, Sofia, Bulgaria: Human and Social Studies Foundation, 2017, pp. 10–11.

¹⁰⁵ This is also the case beyond Bulgaria; for instance, as Corina Rebege writes, Romanian nativist and nationalist groups organic to the country propagate narratives similar to those used in Russian propaganda, which makes identifying the origins of content difficult (Rebege, undated).

¹⁰⁶ Bechev, 2017a, p. 232.

¹⁰⁷ Bechev, 2017a, p. 231.

lies at the intersection of a nonmedia actor without a known affiliation to the Russian state and “real-life events.” The Kremlin is suspected of using the Orthodox church as a vehicle for its influence efforts abroad.¹⁰⁸ Events or meetings hosted or attended by senior clerics of the Russian Orthodox Church offer Moscow a conduit to exert influence and communicate its messaging. Shortly after NATO granted Montenegro an invitation to the alliance in 2016, the most senior cleric of the Russian Orthodox Church, Patriarch Kirill, weighed in on the issue. Kirill expressed his concern to Serbian minister of justice Nikola Selakovic at a meeting in Moscow, noting “people are against the plans of joining” in reference to ongoing protests.¹⁰⁹ Additionally, the Montenegrin Metropolitanate, the largest diocese of the Serbian Orthodox Church in Montenegro (which has close ties to the Russian Orthodox Church), posted an announcement for an anti-NATO protest on its website.¹¹⁰ Though it is unknown whether these actions were linked, or pursued at the direction of the Russian state, this case illustrates the potential to use in-person events as part of information efforts. Orthodox churches in various European countries have also played a role in disseminating anti-Western and anti-European messages to their congregations.¹¹¹

The above actors use a variety of *modes of communication* to disseminate information. According to Cappello and Sunter, Russia and its agents have “succeeded in penetrating the mainstream media” in the Western Balkans: Indeed, they find that “the pro-Russian narrative dominates across regional print and online media.”¹¹² The same is true in Bulgaria, where mainstream local media including television and radio programming often feature individuals and programs favorably disposed to Russia.¹¹³

Several *social media* campaigns have been detected in the region, though their provenance is largely unknown. For instance, in advance of the 2018 Bosnian elections, analysts identified “a sudden increase in activity by Twitter accounts promoting pro-Russian narratives while also advocating for separatism in Republika Srpska.”¹¹⁴ However, as with other content, it is unclear whether the campaign was directed by local actors or has a connection to the Russian state. Likewise, a bot campaign was observed in Macedonia, prior to the country’s referendum on its name change. The monitoring

¹⁰⁸ Whether and to what extent the Orthodox church is affiliated with the Russian state is debatable. See Robinson et al., 2018, p. 56, who describe the church as having “independent decision making,” but funded by “state or quasi-state actors.” For a discussion of the use of the Orthodox church as a lever of influence abroad, see Higgins, 2016.

¹⁰⁹ The Russian Orthodox Church, “His Holiness Patriarch Kirill Meets with Serbian Minister of Justice Nikola Selakovic,” Department for External Church Relations, December 29, 2015.

¹¹⁰ Dusica Tomovic, “Serbian Church Urges Montenegro NATO Referendum,” *Balkan Insight*, January 5, 2016.

¹¹¹ Higgins, 2016.

¹¹² Cappello and Sunter, 2018, p. 33.

¹¹³ Bechev, 2015, p. 22.

¹¹⁴ Imeri, 2018; Salvo and De Leon, 2018.

group the Transatlantic Commission on Election Integrity identified evidence of automated social media activity on Twitter driving content encouraging Macedonians to boycott the referendum and maligning the officials supporting the move.¹¹⁵ The group identified both increased activity and the creation of new accounts in the weeks leading up to the referendum. Another group, Macedonia’s Investigative Reporting Lab, also identified seemingly orchestrated efforts on social media intended to depress voter turnout. The group identified automated Facebook accounts that propagated content using the hashtag #Bojkotiram, or “boycott” in Macedonian.¹¹⁶ These efforts were accompanied by similar activity on *online media*, with “hundreds of new websites . . . calling for a boycott.”¹¹⁷ As is the case with other efforts discussed, the origins of these campaigns remain unknown. While the messaging is in line with Russian interests, it also reflects the sentiment of Macedonian nationalists. In Serbia, websites resembling news portals that publish false information are believed to be used by Russia and its agents, though their ownership and control remain murky.¹¹⁸

What Audiences Do Russian Malign Information Efforts Target in the Balkans?

Russia’s information efforts within the Western Balkans appear to be primarily aimed at the Serbian population across borders (notably, in BiH, Montenegro, and Serbia itself) and the Slavic population in Macedonia.¹¹⁹ Elsewhere in the Balkans, likely key target audiences include constituencies on both the right and the left ends of the political spectrum that have anti-Western and/or pro-Russian tendencies. As noted above, because the Balkans are of great instrumental significance to Russia, information efforts that feature the Balkans as a target of interest—such as narratives surrounding NATO’s bombing campaigns in the 1990s and the recognition of Kosovo—are often aimed at broad audiences beyond the region, both in Europe and domestically within Russia.

What Vulnerabilities Do Russian Information Efforts Exploit in the Balkans?

To the extent Russia’s information efforts resonate and achieve effects in the Balkans, it is by exploiting the salient vulnerabilities of the countries in the region.

Vulnerable media environment. Russian information efforts exploit weaknesses in the media environment, which characterize virtually every Balkan country. Center for Naval Analyses (CNA) researchers attribute this in large part to “state con-

¹¹⁵ Transatlantic Commission on Election Integrity, “Macedonia Referendum: Twitter Bots Up Their Activity,” Alliance of Democracies, September 26, 2018.

¹¹⁶ Squires, 2018.

¹¹⁷ Santora and Barnes, 2018.

¹¹⁸ Cappello and Sunter, 2018, pp. 19–20.

¹¹⁹ Cappello and Sunter, 2018, p. 14; Salvo and De Leon, 2018; Wiśniewski, 2016.

trol of the media” and “restrictions on freedom of press and speech.”¹²⁰ In places such as Montenegro, Macedonia, Croatia, and Serbia, state control means that independent and professional journalism is not the rule, and journalistic standards are underdeveloped or unobserved.¹²¹ Thus, as multiple experts observe, “[s]tories in the Balkan press . . . contain a ‘grain of truth’ but are otherwise light on facts and heavy on speculation and conspiracy theories.”¹²² Genuine investigative reporting or news analysis is uncommon, and the quality of journalism generally tends to be low in most countries in the region.¹²³ The absence of meaningful standards means that Russia’s manipulated information can more easily slip into mainstream media outlets.

Unsurprisingly, the media are not highly trusted across most of the region.¹²⁴ This means that no media voices can authoritatively rebuke or debunk fabricated or manipulated information injected into the environment by Russia and its agents.¹²⁵ Especially in the Western Balkans, media outlets lack financial and other resources to produce their own material and must rely on material recycled from other sources.¹²⁶ Source material in the native languages is scarce, allowing Russian actors to “fill the void . . . by providing content in the local languages”—especially when it comes to Serbian-language content.¹²⁷ For instance, as the CNA researchers sum up, the “Sputnik news agency arrived in Belgrade in 2014, and since then it has become a major supplier of often highly anti-Western content to outlets in Serbia and its neighbours.”¹²⁸

While the media environment is vulnerable to Russian manipulation across the region, there are differences in degree. In the Western Balkans, CNA researchers assess Serbia, Montenegro, and Macedonia as having weaker media than in Albania,

¹²⁰ Zakem, Rosenau, and Johnson, 2017, p. 9.

¹²¹ Zakem, Rosenau, and Johnson, 2017, pp. 9–10.

¹²² Zakem, Rosenau, and Johnson, 2017, p. 14; Cappello and Sunter, 2018, p. 20.

¹²³ Cappello and Sunter, 2018, p. 20, citing Sandra Banjac, Judith Lohner, and Irene Neverla, “Mapping Structural Conditions of Journalism in Serbia,” MeCoDEM Working Paper, June 2016, p. 22.

¹²⁴ Zakem, Rosenau, and Johnson, 2017, pp. 9–10: In

Serbia, the media environment is particularly closed, due to opaque media ownership, poor regulation and legislation, and relatively low trust in media and the journalistic profession. Tabloids and television are the most popular media, but the tabloid press has been described as a form of yellow journalism while television is prone to “info-tainment” that “casts a serious shadow over serious news.”

¹²⁵ This problem is exacerbated by a lack of expertise among regional journalists on a variety of subjects, including Russia. As Cappello and Sunter (2018, p. 33) explain with regard to the Serbian case, the media have “large analytical deficiencies in the field of defense and security” and “limited expertise concerning Kremlin affairs,” all of which leads to an uncritical acceptance of content provided by Russian-controlled sources.

¹²⁶ “Russia in the Western Balkans,” 2017; Cappello and Sunter, 2018, p. 20, observing that “[m]ost news websites recycle material from traditional media outlets rather than providing original reporting.”

¹²⁷ “Russia in the Western Balkans,” 2017.

¹²⁸ “Russia in the Western Balkans,” 2017.

BiH, Croatia, and Kosovo.¹²⁹ Assessments of media freedom, which likely correlates inversely with a vulnerable media environment, suggest that outside the Western Balkans, Bulgaria is most vulnerable, followed, at some distance, by Greece, Romania, and Slovenia.¹³⁰

Internal divisions. The Balkans are a historically turbulent region, plagued by recurring intra- and interstate conflict. Most recently, the experiences attending the collapse of Yugoslavia saddled the Western Balkans with a legacy of interethnic tensions. This legacy is now present within all multiethnic Yugoslav successor states—and Russian information efforts take full and good advantage of these.¹³¹ As the discussion of content that fans divisions suggests, Russians exploit this legacy to heighten interethnic conflict across the region and elevate anxieties, especially among Serb populations across the region. Internal political divisions, including the controversies about economic integration into Europe following the economic woes such as Greece’s debt crisis and controversies surrounding the flow of refugees from the Middle East into Europe, have also presented attractive opportunities for Russian information efforts.

International divisions. Russian information efforts also capitalize on several sources of international divisions in the region. First, intrastate divisions among ethnonational groups often overlap with international divisions among states. In that respect, Russia has been able to exploit tensions between Serbia and Croatia, Serbia and Kosovo, Montenegro and Albania, Macedonia and Greece, and so on.¹³² Second, there are tensions between some Balkan countries and the West and Western institutions. On the institutional front, there are tensions between the aspiring members to the EU and the EU: A turbulent era for the EU that featured the euro crisis, Brexit, and the refugee crisis, which strongly affected some Balkan countries, has made the institution less appealing in the eyes of many publics.¹³³ Uneven progress toward fulfilling membership criteria on behalf of aspiring states, in turn, has tamped the EU’s enthusiasm for enlargement in the near future.¹³⁴ Resentment of NATO—and the West more generally—is even more acute among the Serbian populations in Serbia, BiH, and Montenegro, for whom memories of the 1995 and 1999 military interventions, and the 1999

¹²⁹ Zakem, Rosenau, and Johnson, 2017, p. v.

¹³⁰ Reporters without Borders ranks the Balkan countries as follows, with a low rank corresponding to greater press freedom: Slovenia 32, Romania 44, BiH 62, Croatia 69, Greece 74, Albania 75, Serbia 76, Kosovo 78, Montenegro 103, Macedonia 109, Bulgaria 111. Reporters without Borders, “2019 World Press Freedom Index,” undated.

¹³¹ Salvo and De Leon, 2018.

¹³² Zakem, Rosenau, and Johnson, 2017, pp. 7–8.

¹³³ “Russia in the Western Balkans,” 2017.

¹³⁴ Maja Poznatov, “Serbia Grudgingly Accepts Juncker’s Enlargement Pause,” *Euractiv.com*, September 16, 2014; “Russia in the Western Balkans,” 2017.

NATO bombings in particular, are very much alive.¹³⁵ “These bitter memories of the NATO bombings, combined with resentment over EU conditionality and pressure to recognize Kosovo’s independence, have affected the credibility of the West and have contributed to conspiracy theories about Western intentions in the Balkans.”¹³⁶

Overall, durable internal and international divisions in the region create a fertile ground for information efforts that tap into these fissures. A Russian Foreign Ministry staffer, interviewed by Galeotti, summarized the region’s vulnerabilities succinctly: The region is “full of opportunities for us to play everyone against each other—and frankly, we don’t have to do very much.”¹³⁷

Corruption and weak state institutions. Russian information efforts also thrive in parts of the Balkan region owing to considerable corruption and weakness of state institutions. Corruption enabled Russia to foster a “network of allies and clients” in countries such as Bulgaria and Serbia, which propagate Russian narratives and contribute to an environment where Russian content resonates more readily. This network of allies includes prominent individuals who control segments of the media sector, such as member of the Bulgarian parliament and businessman Delyan Peevski,¹³⁸ and member of the Russian parliament residing in Greece, Ivan Savvidis.¹³⁹ The weakness of institutions in Bulgaria and Russia’s ability to acquire influence over Bulgarian actors contributed to what Galeotti describes as a “certain vicious circle,” whereby “Bulgarian outlets generate and distribute pro-Russian stories not because of pressure or promises from Moscow, but because there is a ready local market for them.”¹⁴⁰ Weakness of state institutions and the entrenchment of Russia’s influence also tend to blunt state countermeasures against malign or subversive information efforts. While all of the Western Balkan countries have weak state institutions to an extent,¹⁴¹ the assessment of CNA researchers finds that, in the Western Balkans, vulnerabilities based on corruption and weak state institutions are most severe in Macedonia, Serbia, and Montenegro, least severe in Croatia, and in between for the rest of the region.¹⁴²

Overall, the presence of these vulnerabilities in the Balkans creates a fertile ground for Russia’s malign information efforts. The extent of these vulnerabilities appears to

¹³⁵ Cappello and Sunter, 2018, p. 15.

¹³⁶ Zakem, Rosenau, and Johnson, 2017, pp. 6–7.

¹³⁷ Galeotti, 2018, p. 11.

¹³⁸ Peevski controls a business empire that includes media (with control over large chunks of print and newspaper distribution) and telecommunications, has various ties to Russia and Russian financing, and has advocated for pro-Russian positions in and out of Parliament. See Conley et al., 2016, pp. 19–20.

¹³⁹ Savvidis has a controlling interest in the popular television network MEGA and purchased three newspapers in 2017. See Polyakova et al., 2016, p. 8.

¹⁴⁰ Galeotti, 2017a, p. 7.

¹⁴¹ Galeotti, 2018, p. 8.

¹⁴² Zakem, Rosenau, and Johnson, 2017, p. 12.

influence the degree of ambition of Russia's objectives across the countries of the region (as well as the impact of the information efforts, addressed below). At the more ambitious end of the spectrum, Russia's aims in Serbia and Bulgaria, which appear to suffer from deeper vulnerabilities than most others in the region, have been described by experts as "state capture," or achieving a degree of influence over the country's decisions and the perceptions of its population so as to effectively determine its course.¹⁴³ At the opposite end, in Kosovo and Albania, where vulnerabilities are assessed as less pronounced (compared with the rest of the Western Balkans), Russia's aims appear to be more modest, focused on using these countries instrumentally as targets for other target audiences.¹⁴⁴ For the remaining Western Balkan countries, Russia and its agents seek to influence specific decisions and affect perceptions to a more modest degree, "edg[ing] it [the state] into a more favourable position vis-à-vis Russia."¹⁴⁵

Possible Impact of Russia's Malign/Subversive Information Efforts in the Balkans

The considerable vulnerabilities plaguing many Balkan societies have facilitated Russian information efforts, which appear to have been successfully disseminating a wide range of content and reaching many audiences. The breadth of dissemination of Russian content appears to have grown in recent years: A nongovernmental study of Bulgarian blogs and news sites found that pro-Russian and anti-Western propaganda (i.e., content with signature Russian concepts and terms) has dramatically increased since 2013, peaking in 2016 during the presidential elections.¹⁴⁶ The extent of the *impact* of the disseminated content on perceptions or behaviors of target audiences is quite difficult to assess, as we noted earlier with regard to such impact generally.

Area experts with ample exposure to the region, such as Cappello and Sunter, qualitatively assess Russia's information efforts to be "fairly successful," at least when it comes to topics related to international security and the role of Russia and the West in Serbia and some of its neighbors.¹⁴⁷ However, Russia's information efforts are just one tool in Russia's broader influence toolbox, and it would be a challenge to disen-

¹⁴³ See Galeotti, 2018, p. 8; Galeotti, 2017a; Bugajski and Assenova, 2016, p. 227; Conley et al., 2016, p. xi; Naydenov, 2018, pp. 1–20.

¹⁴⁴ See Galeotti, 2018, p. 9:

Russian options for Albania and Kosovo are more limited. Kosovo is used instrumentally, whether as a lure for closer cooperation by other nations or a chance to create mischief. In particular, Belgrade's reliance on Moscow for support on the issue of Kosovo's status gives the Russians leverage. . . . Conversely, Albania is largely regarded as offering few opportunities for Moscow.

See also Zakem, Rosenau, and Johnson, 2017, p. 20, assessing the influence of Russian disinformation to be least pronounced in Croatia and Albania, and slightly more so in Kosovo.

¹⁴⁵ Galeotti, 2018, p. 9.

¹⁴⁶ Vatsov et al., 2017.

¹⁴⁷ Cappello and Sunter, 2018, p. 21.

tangle the impact of that single tool in isolation from others. What can be said is that public opinion in Balkan countries where Russian information efforts have been most entrenched is indeed favorably disposed toward Russia and tends to support certain common Russian messages.¹⁴⁸ This is not the case in countries where information efforts have been more anemic, such as Albania, Croatia, or Kosovo.¹⁴⁹ These observations, however, cannot shed light on whether information efforts (alongside other tools of influence) significantly affect public opinion, or whether Russian information efforts simply cannot get much traction or spread in societies that were not already favorably disposed to Russia. Moreover, as is the case with other European countries where public or elite opinion aligns with Russian messages, local political forces adopt positions in line with the Kremlin's, but may well be doing so to further their own purposes.

¹⁴⁸ For example, in Serbia, “a poll carried out in mid-2016 by NSPM magazine showed that 72 % were in favour of an alliance with Russia, compared to just 8 % for NATO” (“Russia in the Western Balkans,” 2017, p. 2); Dimitar Bechev, “Russia’s Foray into the Balkans: Who Is Really to Blame?” *Foreign Policy Research Institute*, October 12, 2017b:

Russia is also celebrated as generous: a survey in Serbia from 2015 found that 47% of respondents believed that Russia provides more financial aid than EU. In truth, it lags far, far behind. Whereas the EU contributed €3.5 billion in grants between 2000 and 2013 alone, Russia has only committed to extend a loan of \$338 million to the Serbian railways. Even distant Japan has given more.

¹⁴⁹ In the Western Balkans, Zakem, Rosenau, and Johnson, 2017, p. v, assess Russian influence to be strongest in Serbia, BiH, Macedonia, and Montenegro, and weakest in Croatia and Albania. Albania’s foreign minister described Albania as a “bastion against Russia’s influence’ in the Western Balkans” (quoted in “Russia in the Western Balkans,” 2017).

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The increasing frequency and intensity of information aggression targeting the United States and its European allies demands more thorough consideration of concepts and practices for protecting against, resisting, and mitigating the effects of psychological manipulation and influence.

Russia, in particular, often appears to use messaging and intimidation as part of its efforts to influence multiple actors and countries, including the United States and its European allies. Unfortunately, however, concepts and practices for understanding and resisting the potential effects of efforts conducted by Russia and its agents are few. To address this, United States European Command (USEUCOM) asked the RAND Corporation to identify strategies for defending against the effects of Russia's efforts to manipulate and inappropriately influence troops, government decisionmaking, and civilians. In this report, RAND researchers describe apparent efforts conducted by Russia and its agents involving the use of information to shape Russia's operating environment, focusing on the European context; review and apply existing research on influence and manipulation to these efforts; and draw from existing practice to describe possible defensive approaches that USEUCOM and its various partners can consider using when defending against these actions. The framework they use offers a way to conceptualize the objectives, tactics, and tools of Russian information efforts in Europe.

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