



# Understanding Russian Information - Psychological Warfare

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## Abstract

This article deals with the problem of Russia's information – psychological warfare on the strategic level. While the attention of the West in general is focused on tactics used by Russian side to foment so called "disinformation" and attempts to counteract it by correcting or denying Russian lies, Western experts and commentators frequently lose strategic and ultimate goals of all these actions, which are to to destroy the West or at least to deny Western influence on the World's matters, and in this way ultimately prevail in the second Cold War.



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The subject of ‘information/psychological warfare’ in general, and Russia’s case in particular, has become a matter of intensive studies, at least since Russia’s invasion of Ukraine in 2014 and the alleged interference by Russia’s secret services in the US elections in 2016. Since then, public knowledge has been supplemented with many exciting publications: scientific articles, think tank reports, and even analyses by Western state institutions<sup>1</sup>. We now know pretty well what Russia is doing (Weiss & Pomerantsev, 2015) and how it is doing it (Lucas & Nimmo, 2015), and we have deep analyses of specific cases (e.g. DiResta et al., 2019; ISD, 2019; Kragh & Åsberg, 2017; Lucas et al., 2021). Moreover, we should even know how to win this war (Lucas & Pomerantsev, 2016). Considering the quantity and quality of this knowledge, it is time to pose a question: do we really understand all the implications of the carefully analysed Russian actions? Furthermore, are we wise enough to deal effectively with Russian ‘psyops’ supposedly designed to ‘subvert the West’? As almost everything has already been said and even counted (see e.g.; Nimmo, B., & Torrey, M., 2022, pp. 14, 26 - 51) on Russia’s ‘non-kinetic’ actions, it seems clear that Western attention is focused on the tactical level. However, Russia’s strategic objectives are rarely dealt with extensively. As a result, these objectives are not met with sufficient resistance and response at the strategic level. The Western approach is decisively reactive – Russia provides virulent content, and Western institutions passively attempt to cope with it. Despite the vast body of knowledge on Russian ‘information warfare’ (Giles, 2016), the West still has not found an adequate active and offensive response to Russian actions.

It is worth observing that many divergent terms and concepts are applied to describe Russian actions which frequently blur the lines between the content hidden behind them. General Valery Gerasimov’s alleged concept of a ‘New Generation War’ is confused with so-called hybrid warfare (Balasevicius, 2017; Kramer & Speranza, 2017). Spreading tacit *dezinformatsia* is frequently equalled with Russia’s open propaganda activities (Helmus & Keep, 2021), and its alleged ‘active measures’ (Bergmann & Kenney, 2017) are conflated with influence operations in cyberspace (Martin et al., 2023). Historically, these concepts emerged at different stages of Russia’s hostile actions, and various state institutions performed them using different means and resources. It is frequently noted that the Okhrana had already used various measures to destabilise the West in Tsarist Russia. While this is true, it is important to stress that it was Soviet Russia which mastered and intensified thousandfold these ‘non-kinetic’ but still destructive actions. They stem directly from the content of Lenin’s revolutionary political doctrine: the Bolsheviks were the Russian ruling party which cohesively perceived ‘the West’ as the enemy (and not merely a competitor) and overtly aimed at weakening and ultimately destroying and conquering Western lands. When this ceased to be possible through the use of military force (as a consequence of the war with Poland in 1920–1921), the young Soviet state wilfully increased its efforts to subvert the Western political order, confuse Western elites, and ‘colonise’ Western minds with

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1 For a comprehensive list of publications, see, for example, <https://euvsdisinfo.eu/pl/badania-i-raporty/>

virulent ideas and fraudulent images. Marxist-Leninist ideological doctrine, which seemed perfect for this purpose, was supported by *mokryje dieta* (i.e. targeted killings, “direct actions”) to add brute physical force to more subtle ideological action. Deception was their weapon of choice – Soviet intelligence was more than happy to fool the West with the establishment of the ‘Monarchist Union of Central Russia’ (MUJR) (Монархическое объединение Центральной России, МОЦР)<sup>2</sup>. This fully fledged game of deception proved successful and confirmed the naivety of Western politicians and intelligence personnel, providing breeding grounds for consecutive sophisticated psyops operations. Lenin *et consortes* hoped the West would ultimately enter a path of self-delusion that would end with its self-destruction.

The official early Soviet revolutionary doctrine of conquering the world was undoubtedly modified over time as the coercive means of its implementation were superseded with more subtle ones, and it was even softened (e.g. introducing the concept of ‘peaceful coexistence’ with the capitalist West). Nevertheless, this was due not to a lack of high hopes among members of the Politburo but rather to the lack of adequate resources to achieve the desired goal of finishing off the West. In this respect, consecutive *Genseks* became ‘political realists’ (even when Khrushchev declared publicly ‘we will bury you!’ (Мы вас похороним!), he probably did not fully believe it). However, this political ‘realism’ has never affected the leadership and activities of two crucial Russian executive institutions – the KGB and the army. The former always acted as if it was constantly at war with the West, and the latter, up to the fall of the Soviet Union and the Eastern bloc, trained to attack and invade Western Europe and ‘neutralise’ the United States with devastating nuclear strikes. When the members of these two institutions – *siloviki* – ultimately captured complete political control over Russia in March 2000 with the election of Vladimir Putin as president, they were eager to revive the century-old idea of defeating the West and started actively revising the post-Cold War order. Their entire mindset – values, perceptions of the world, attitudes, expectations – was shaped almost 50 years earlier by the institutions in which they were apprentices during the first Cold War.

It is worth noting that they were open and frank in informing the West of what would soon happen, but nobody was willing to give proper attention to these warnings. The first early warning addressed to the West – Putin’s Munich speech – openly described this ‘new’ Russian vision of the incoming new ‘multipolar international order’ (Putin, 2007). These declarations were quickly supplemented with clear actions, including the war in Georgia. When President Putin declared that the fall of the Soviet Union was the greatest geopolitical catastrophe of the twentieth century, he meant it.<sup>3</sup> When he declared many years later that the Ukrainian nation, in fact, does not exist, he meant it (Putin, 2021). For the few who were paying attention early on, it was obvious that he would aim to take all possible actions against the West to revert this alleged ‘catastrophe’ and restore Russia’s influence, starting with the so-called near abroad. What was perceived (at least till the early morning of 24 February 2022) as just a rhetorical statement was

2 <https://www.cia.gov/readingroom/docs/CIA-RDP78-03362A002200040004-7.pdf>

3 <http://kremlin.ru/events/president/transcripts/22931>

actually a declaration of Kremlin elites' beliefs and intentions. The plan's minimum goal has always been to destabilise the social order and create conditions for provoking political unrest in the West. The plan's maximum aim is to disintegrate the West and deny it any influence over the world's issues. To achieve this, Russia and its allies (primarily China, but also Iran and North Korea – the real twenty-first-century 'Axis of Evil') are acting on many levels and using many different tools and means, including information-psychological operations. Russia uses its coercive and non-coercive powers, conducting both clandestine and overt psyops actions against Western countries and societies, using the poisonous mixture of its vast financial and human assets. If we want to truly understand Russia's actions, we must never lose sight of this broader perspective and the ambitions of Russia's power elite.

We should also bear in mind that many of Russia's actions in the realm of information-psychological warfare are not primarily directed against the West but are aimed at its own society. The primary objective of the rulers in the Kremlin is to stay in power, possibly endlessly. To achieve this, they need to exert and keep absolute control of their population and make it immune to any Western ideological influence. Limiting or eliminating external ideological options for the Russian population was a starting point for many of Putin's homeland activities. That is why it was necessary to regain complete rule over the minds of the Russian population through control of the internal Russian 'infosphere', purging crucial external and internal ('independent') actors and labelling them 'foreign agents'. As a result, the Kremlin gained complete control over the media, messages, and interpretations. This goal was achieved during Putin's first tenure as president and continued under President Dmitri Medvedev.

Thus, Russian 'state propaganda' (which is overt and should be made clearly distinct from much less overt or even clandestine 'info ops') is directed primarily at its homeland audience, which partly explains the alleged sheer 'absurdity' of a large number of its claims and arguments. Internally, the arguments made repeatedly by prominent members of the Russian propaganda apparatus sound plausible. For those who remember the elements of the old communist propaganda in the Soviet Union and the Eastern bloc, including the author of this article, they sound familiar and 'make sense' despite the fact that they might sound outrageous or inconceivable to the Western ear. Their 'rhythms' were coined during the first Cold War by Soviet propaganda and resonate well among the Russian public. As a result, the Russian power elite has already achieved the social cohesion that is necessary in a time of open war – public support for warfare against Ukraine remains very high considering the level of battle losses among the Russian population.

The second point here is that much of Russia's external propaganda effort is directed not at the West but towards, using the currently fashionable buzzword, the 'Global South' (known as 'Third World Countries' during the first Cold War). The cognitive perspective of populations living there is still vastly different from that of Western citizens. Hence, the decades-old 'anti-colonial' discourse is more accessible for them and easier to digest and adapt. Today, this Russian

propaganda impact can easily be seen also in the West, as increasing numbers of these 'Global Southerners' emigrate, primarily to Europe, and become members of Western societies. They are more susceptible to Russian propaganda efforts directed at subverting Western ideas, values, and perceptions of the world. In this way, the Kremlin quickly gains increasing leverage in their countries of origin and their final destination countries. Nevertheless, the West does not seem to be paying any attention to this 'propaganda war' taking place far away from the Western world, where sadly, today, it is already lost.

The third point is that Russia's anti-Western propaganda activities are not limited to the performances of its media spin doctors but are also delivered by the highest-ranking state officials, including President Putin. They aim not only at forwarding overt pro-Russian propaganda but also at spreading disinformation (e.g. countless fake news items on Putin's sitting positions and his twisted hands and legs, as well as endless 'news' of his alleged death). Particularly interesting in this respect is the case of the social media activity of former president Medvedev, previously widely perceived by Western commentators as a 'young pro-Western Russian liberal' (*sic!*). Today, his function has been reduced to being a prominent Internet troll, and his seemingly outrageous utterances aim at making the Western public extremely scared. However, again and again, they are broadcast and commented on by Western media. In this way, his inflammatory messages reach and impact large sections of the Western audience instantly and for free instead of being muted. It is often better to remain silent and not respond to the inflammatory tirades of Russian spin doctors so as not to provide public attention that they do not deserve.

It is also crucial not to confuse the various means used by the Russians. Some of them are overt, and their aim and source are publicly known (this is 'propaganda'). In contrast, others are clandestine and performed with covert assets. 'Disinformation' is just one, and not even the most important, tool in this arsenal, and the West should not focus solely on it. Counteracting '*Ruska dieza*' (i.e. Russian disinformation) cannot be limited to contradicting and denying it, as this kind of activity only spreads and props up the fabricated (Belton & Menn, 2024) content through the Western 'infosphere'. We should also remember that the majority of Russia's psyops are designed and executed by its 'special services' with the use of their craftsmanship and assets (e.g. secret 'agents of influence'), so they can only be fully detected and neutralised by their professional counterparts in the West. Russia's 'information operations' have a long tradition and lineage going back to the early actions of the 'mother of all Russian security and intelligence', the Cheka (All-Russian Extraordinary Commission for Combating Counter-Revolution and Sabotage under the Council of People's Commissars of the RSFSR; Russian: Всероссийская чрезвычайная комиссия по борьбе с контрреволюцией и саботажем при Совете народных комиссаров (РСФСР), and they are performed by highly skilled and motivated staff (Barron, 1979). They are frequently long-term, multi-faceted, and use vast covert assets of many different types (Walter, 2023). We do not know the details of the most recent Russian actions, but we still know quite a lot about similar activities carried out by the Soviets during the first Cold War and shortly after (Rid, 2020). We may assume

that some conceptual schemes are still in use today and are supported by new media.

Completely new factors today include the Internet, social media, and the unique capabilities created using artificial intelligence (e.g. deep fake materials). Cyberspace has become a true novelty in this respect, providing vast new opportunities to carry out psychological operations there. Hence, the importance of technologically sophisticated Russian 'influence operations' will grow exponentially. The overall aim is to affect the general social perception of the external world, to change the assessment of available information (frequently supplemented by utter lies), and to alter the attitudes and behaviour of specific individuals or social groups in the West. Influence operations are usually complex clandestine activities by Russian special services using covert means, sometimes supported by outsourced assets. They ensure the possibility of 'plausible denial' of 'official' Russian involvement in venomous anti-Western actions.

Russia uses overt Russian propaganda and covert information operations, supported by kinetic 'direct actions', to exert influence and gain a strategic advantage over the West. If we rightly apply the term 'information warfare' to Russia's actions, we should be fully aware of what it means. The goal of any warfare is to be the winning side, and this 'victory' is achieved by inflicting severe damage on the critical strategic resources of the enemy. In the case of 'information and psychological warfare', these critical resources are the social perceptions of the external world, affecting human attitudes and mass behaviour. These have an impact on social cohesion and peaceful coexistence within and between nation-states, which is what is at stake here. The ultimate goal of Russian actions is the final fragmentation of Western societies by destroying their core value systems, as this should, according to Russian spymasters, inevitably provoke severe internal and external conflicts, thus creating serious social unrest and political disorder. Ultimately, Russian state institutions cannot create processes to achieve these goals, so they focus on examining the most destructive trends in the West and executing actions to reinforce them.<sup>4</sup> They intend to reduce Western societies' resilience and amplify processes which inflict severe damage on them. The West should keep these destructive Russian strategic objectives in its sight and not just focus on the tactics used to achieve them. This destructive strategy can only be met effectively with reciprocal action at the strategic level. To succeed, the West should possess adequate recognition of Russia's rules of engagement and employ appropriate resources in response. Otherwise, its institutions will continue to play defence while fighting minor battles with no view to winning the overall war.

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4 Tsarist Russia did not 'invent' antisemitism but fomented it with publications of *The Protocols of the Elders of Zion*; today, it repeats this action with, for example, the Star of David painted on European houses (<https://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-67360768>).

## General recommendations to alter this state of events:

- Do not concentrate solely on Russian 'tactics', which are already widely recognised, but instead focus careful attention and studies on Russia's strategic objectives in the realm of 'information and psychological operations'.
- Do not concentrate on 'disinformation' and do not become involved in futile efforts to correct or refute allegedly 'false' statements coming from (overt and covert) Russian sources, as these activities only serve to increase their impact and coverage; ignore most of them.
- Consider carrying out carefully crafted, considerably offensive psyops against Russia instead of relying on a reactive approach.
- Do not broadcast for free inflammatory 'tweets' from prominent Russian trolls, and do not start public polemics with them, as this only extends their audience.
- One needs an organisation to combat an organisation; hence, one needs skilled and well-equipped counterintelligence services to neutralise operations carried out by Russia's intelligence services; do not 'outsource' this struggle to civilian institutions which lack relevant knowledge, capabilities, and methodology.
- One needs wisdom to beat ignorance, which is a cause for accepting obscure 'explanations of the world'; to increase the resilience of Western societies, put more effort into providing them with factual education, starting at the primary school level.
- Pay more attention to fighting 'propaganda wars' in the 'Global South'.
- Last but not least, respect yourself and protect your core values if you want others to do the same.

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