



UNIVERSIDADE
CATÓLICA
PORTUGUESA

INSTITUTE OF POLITICAL STUDIES

**Assessing Russia's Information Warfare in Ukraine
(2013-2015)**

The role of RT/Russia Today and Sputnik in Disinformation
campaigns targeting international audiences

Master's degree in Political Science and International Relations: Security and Defence

Specialization in International Relations

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Institute of Political Studies

December 2023

Lisbon, Portugal

Acknowledgements

There are several people without whom this dissertation would not have been possible. First, I want to extend my gratitude to my trusted supervisor, Professor Raquel Duque. Thank you for providing me with the opportunity to combine International Relations and disinformation in my research problem, thus celebrating my academic background in Journalism and professional experience in the field of Communications. It was enriching to see how these two subjects intertwine in this research project. Thank you for bringing my attention to the importance of having a strong theoretical foundation and for helping me perfect my elected methodology so that the extensive media monitorization and analysis performed would be given the credit it deserved. I appreciate your continuous guidance and kind words during this process.

Second, I would like to express my appreciation to the Institute of Political Studies (IEP) and all of IEP's professors who made my academic journey possible and provided me with invaluable knowledge. I owe special gratitude to Professor Ivone Moreira for the time invested in helping me refine the topic my of research and for the precious advice and words of caution shared in the last few months.

Third, I thank my support system, my parents and Marcelo, for standing by my side even when I was 2, 000 km away from home. You gave me the strength to continue and honour your values of determination, hard work, and integrity. I dedicate this dissertation to you.

Lastly, I want to thank all the amazing people I have met or reconnected with while working in Brussels. Even without knowing, you were significant drivers in this process. You gave me the peace of mind and motivation I needed to get going in times when I did not seem to make progress or when I was doubting myself and my research.

Thank you for making my time abroad and sharing such an enriching professional adventure. You made Belgium my second home.

Abstract

The annexation of Crimea and the Pro-Russian insurgency that took place in the Donbass between 2013 and 2015 have generated academic debate around the concepts of information warfare and disinformation. Aware of Russia's status as a materially declining power struggling to compete with Western military, and conscious about the significant impact information could have in shaping the outcome of a conflict, Putin developed a strong disinformation apparatus capable of deceiving states, politicians and societies at large.

This dissertation proposes to study the contribution of Russia Today (RT hereafter) and Sputnik, two outward-looking, English-language news website which are known to be under the influence of the Kremlin, in the dissemination of falsehoods. The goal is to understand whether the news coverage of these outlets intentionally followed the Russian official recount of events, even when it was evidently untrue. The application of the content analysis methodology in this dissertation, in which over 200 news pieces were monitored and analysed, revealed that RT and Sputnik disseminated a total of 13 false narratives which had been created by Putin and Russian officials.

This dissertation makes use of Barry Buzan, Ole Wæver and Jaap de Wilde's Securitization theory to explain how information entered the military doctrine of the Russian Federation and how it, ultimately, became a conflict domain.

Keywords: information warfare, disinformation, Sputnik, RT, Russia Today, Securitization theory.

Resumo

A anexação da Crimeia e a subsequente insurgência pró-Russa que decorreu no Donbass entre 2013 e 2015 geraram debate académico em torno dos conceitos de guerra de informação e desinformação. Ciente da condição da Rússia enquanto potência decadente incapaz de competir militarmente com o Ocidente, e consciente do impacto que a informação possui na determinação do resultado de um conflito, Putin desenvolveu um forte aparato de desinformação capaz de manipular Estados, políticos e sociedades.

A presente dissertação propõe-se a estudar o contributo da Russia Today (RT doravante) e do Sputnik – dois websites de notícias internacionais conhecidos por estarem sob a influência do Kremlin – na disseminação de notícias falsas. O objetivo desta investigação passa por compreender se a cobertura noticiosa destes meios de comunicação reproduziu a narrativa oficial do Estado russo em torno do conflito e dos seus diferentes eventos, mesmo quando esta era evidentemente falsa. A aplicação da metodologia de análise de conteúdo na presente dissertação, na qual foram monitoradas e analisadas mais de 200 notícias, revelou que RT e Sputnik disseminaram um total de 13 narrativas falsas criadas por Putin e pela elite governativa russa.

Esta dissertação emprega a teoria da Securitização de Barry Buzan, Ole Wæver e Jaap de Wilde para explicar como a informação integrou na doutrina militar da Federação Russa e como esta se tornou um domínio de conflito.

Palavras-chave: Guerra de informação, desinformação, Sputnik, RT, Russia Today, teoria de securitização.

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Introduction

The military operations of the Russian Federation during the conflict in Crimea and in the Donbass relied heavily on hostile information operations. Disinformation, which can be understood as the creation or dissemination of false information with the intention to cause harm and influence the perception and behaviors of adversaries (Kumar, West, & Leskovec, 2016, pp. 11), played a significant part in the evolution of the conflict and it can be identified in the Russian journalistic coverage of events.

Vladimir Putin has been actively working toward improving the information capabilities of the Russian Federation since the early 2000s, as attested by the numerous references to the information domain in strategic military documents (e.g. “Strategy for the national security of the Russian Federation up to 2020” (2009) and “Conceptual views on the activities of the Armed Forces of the Russian Federation in the information space” (2011)). The driver behind this change in approach, which can be best understood using the Securitisation theory of Buzan, Weaver and de Wilde, traces back to the pro-democratic revolutions that took place in Serbia (2000), Georgia (2003), Ukraine (2004), and Kyrgyzstan (2005) that threatened Russia’s influence in the post-Soviet region. Putin claimed that these three states had been victims of “Western information warfare” and that, with the intent of expanding its sphere of influence, the West had brainwashed its citizens into overthrowing duly elected regimes and implementing illegitimate North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) and European Union (EU) leaning alternatives (Sohl, 2022. P. 99). In the aftermath of these events, the Russian President understood the need to address information with the same determination as another security threat and implemented a strict media governance policy. Heavily based on censorship and ownership controls, this policy was a double-edged sword. Not only it ensured that the Russian hearts and minds were safe from any kind of information interference from

foreign powers, but it also aimed at projecting the Kremlin's carefully crafted messages to the outside world using both Kremlin-owned and influenced media.

RT (RT.com) and Sputnik (SpuntikNews.com) are two examples of outward-looking, English news websites with ties to the Russian leadership (see, for example, Herpen, 2016; McCauley, 2016; and US Department of State Global Engagement Centre, 2022). They present themselves as direct competitors of reputed international news outlets like CNN and BBC, despite being accused of performing biased journalistic coverage and often portraying Western countries and organizations, such as the EU and NATO in a negative light. Some authors suggest that both news websites are part of the Russian disinformation apparatus, whose main goal is to undermine societal trust in media, democratic institutions and world leaders through the dissemination of falsehoods (see, for example, Christopher and Matthews, 2016, p. 1; US Department of State Global Engagement Centre, 2022; Missiroli, Antonio, et al, 2016).

This dissertation proposes to study the role of RT and Sputnik in the propagation of the Russian Federation's disinformation narratives during the Ukrainian conflict. It will be guided by the research question "Were RT/Russia Today and Sputnik, two outside-looking Russian news websites that produce news in the English language, involved in the Russian information warfare in Ukraine (2013-2015)?" and sub-question "In which way did these outlets contribute to the Russian war of information?". The methodological choice will rest in content analysis of the multiple articles published by the two English-speaking online publications between 2013 and 2015, as well as speeches of Kremlin officials and those of the Russian President. The goal will be to assess whether there is convergence between RT and Sputnik's media coverage and the Russian Federation's recount of events, spanning from the Euromaidan protests to the annexation

of Crimea, the pro-Russian insurgency in southeastern Ukraine and the MH17 flight downing.

The academic value of this dissertation lies in providing an understanding of Russia's tactics, goals, and *modus operandi* when implementing information operations in a time of heightened tensions with the West. Ukraine, particularly, is an intriguing case study of modern disinformation because it was a turning point in Russia's conceptualization of information in strategic documents. Since then, the information domain of Western democracies has been increasingly targeted to sow confusion and polarize societies. The 2016 United States (US) presidential elections, the Brexit referendum and, more recently, Russia's illegal and illegitimate invasion of Ukraine are a few examples of events influenced by Russian disinformation efforts. Likewise, the last decades have been characterised by multiple technological innovations that made it possible for messages to be spread across millions of people using the Internet and social media. These tools, allied with artificial intelligence and algorithms, have increased the speed of communication and the ability to successfully target audiences with false information. Only once a baseline of understanding of Russia's hostile information operations and of the multiple communications tools is established, can governments and organizations develop mechanisms to better protect themselves.

As far as the structure is concerned, this dissertation will develop as follows. In the first chapter, the theoretical basis will be laid out through a brief description of the Securitization theory of Buzan, Wæver, and de Wilde. It will facilitate the understanding of how information can become a security threat and outline the process in which information was featured in the Russian military doctrine. Next, a definition of information warfare and disinformation will be provided to contextualize the greater phenomenon of information weaponisation. In the second chapter, this dissertation will

describe the disinformation techniques and apparatus of the Russian Federation, while zooming in on their Soviet origins, resemblances and differences. In the third chapter, the findings on deceiving news coverage from RT and Sputnik will be laid out. Similarities between the Kremlin's official stance on the conflict and the news production of both channels will be pointed out with the goal of assessing whether RT and Sputnik actually contributed to the dissemination of falsehoods targeting international audiences. The fourth chapter wraps up the dissertation. It answers the research question and outlines the limitations of this study while providing suggestions for future research.

Chapter I. Foundational Theory

The subject of this dissertation concerns International Relations (IR), a field of social sciences that emerged in the early 20th century, and that studies the relations between states, international organisations and non-state actors.

IR theories and schools of thought provide framings to understand international events and they can be used to shed light on the motivations of actors. While the Realist and Neorealist theories may provide a basic framework to understand some of the foreign policy choices of the Russian Federation, the persistence of Soviet discourse in Russian identity and the Kremlin's efforts to weaponize information in and out of the battlefield may be better grasped using other schools of thought, such as Constructivism and Critical Security Studies.

In the present chapter, a brief explanation of the aforementioned IR theories, with an in-depth focus on the Copenhagen school's Securitisation theory, will be provided. Next, there will be a conceptual analysis of the term information warfare.

I.I. The Realist, Neorealist and Constructivist Theories

The foreign policy of the Russian Federation can be partly explained using Realist and Neorealist theories of foreign affairs. The Realist and Neorealist paradigm argues that states are engaged in an ever-present struggle for power because they exist in an anarchic order with no formal authority (Aron, 2003; Hobbes, 1996; Morgenthau, 1967; Waltz, 2002; Mearsheimer, 2001). This school of thought places great importance on a state's ability to survive by seeking security from foreign threats and egotistically pursuing its national interests. A state either ensures territorial security by its own means or has to align itself with powerful counterparts for that goal.

Realist nuances can be observed in the aggressive foreign policy of the Russian Federation. Russia perceives the international arena in a zero-sum approach in which a state's gain means the loss of the other. This antagonism often pits Russia against the US and the EU, which widely represent the 'Western' world. Scholars have expanded on how the power redistribution that followed the Soviet Union's collapse and subsequent NATO and EU eastern enlargements led Russia to feel insecure and engage in a form of revisionist expansionism (Kamp, 1995; Mearsheimer, 2014). A few examples of when the Russian Federation attempted to change the material reality of the international system include its aggression on Georgia (2008), Crimea and the Donbass (2014) and, more recently, Ukraine (2022).

Still, the merits of Realism in explaining the foreign policy of Russia are limited. To accomplish a deeper understanding of the Russian positioning, it is important to consider other IR theories as is the case of Constructivism. Constructivism emerged in the 1980s after the main theoretical frameworks failed to predict the end of the Cold War. It denied the materialistic and individualistic view of world politics by stating that interstate relations are constructed socially instead of structurally predetermined (Wendt, 1994). According to constructivists, through socialization, states develop identities that shape their interests and motivate their actions (Katzenstein, 1997; Eriksson & Noreen, 2002). Moreover, states can have multiple identities as their self-image is defined by opposition with others (Wendt, 1992).

To understand the foreign policy of the Russian Federation, constructivists argue that one should first study the country's national identity. With the collapse of the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (USSR), the Kremlin — and, particularly, Vladimir Putin — worked hard to develop a new Russian identity founded on Soviet nostalgia. This

identity framing aimed at keeping the waning state relevant in the international system while promoting internal cohesiveness in the former USSR satellites.

After the disintegration of the Soviet empire, the former Warsaw Pact members remained the home of many ethnic Russians. The Russian Federation did not want to lose that powerful human capital, so it implemented multiple nationalist policies to maintain some sort of influence over the region. While these pretended to promote the remembrance of the Soviet memory and a common culture, they were actually designed as power-projecting tools aimed at building productive relationships between the Russian Federation and the recently established states (Radin & Reach, 2017, pp. 12 and 13). Also coherent with Soviet discourse, the relationship of the Russian Federation with the ‘West’ continued to be characterised as one of ideological antagonism and competition.

I.II Critical Security Studies and Securitisation Theory

In IR and its sub-group of Security studies, security means a state’s ability to survive. To the Realist or Neo-realist schools of IR, state insecurity has been associated with the physical dimension and, particularly, the threat or use of military force (Walt, 1991 p. 212). According to these schools of thought, threats can be objectively quantified and compared by, for example, measuring and comparing the military capability and weapons arsenals of rival states (Morgenthau, 1967; Waltz, 1979; Walt, 1987; and Mearsheimer, 2001).

The military-state centrism of security was questioned when, in the wake of the end of the Cold War, a critical approach to security studies emerged. Inspired by the post-structuralist premise that “knowledge claims are always unstable and contingent”, Critical Security studies rejected one of the grand narratives associated with security by arguing

that nonmilitary threats can also have a direct effect on state security (Collins, 2013, p. 79).

In Europe, Critical Security studies were developed by the Aberystwyth school, the Copenhagen school and the Paris Institute of Political Studies (Barrinha, 2013, p. 4). While these three schools defended the broadening of the security agenda beyond the military dimension, they differed regarding the nature and modes of analysis. On the one hand, the Aberystwyth school was characterized by its normative approach to the study of security, elevating it to a phenomenon affecting the individual (Both, 1991; Jones, 2005). On the other hand, inspired by the work of the sociologists Pierre Bourdieu and Michel Foucault, the Paris school¹ specialized in the study of the negotiation process that takes place between different actors in the field of security (Bigo, 2020). Lastly, there is the Copenhagen school, whose theory will be at the center of this dissertation.

The Securitisation theory was originally developed by the Copenhagen school's academics Barry Buzan, Ole Wæver and Jaap de Wilde in the 1990s. It argued that security could integrate various affairs from ordinary life as they could be as much of a risk to the state's survival as a military threat (Buzan, Wæver, & de Wilde, 1998, pp. 21-23).

According to the Copenhagen school's authors, any low politics issue can be converted into a high politics subject following a two-step process. In the first step, an issue not traditionally dealt with by the state becomes a topic of public debate and it is discussed whether it is deserving of special policies and resource allocation (Buzan, Wæver, & de Wilde, 1998, p. 24). In the second step, the issue is *de facto* inserted into the political agenda as citizens generally agree that it presents an existential threat to state security (Buzan, Wæver, & de Wilde, 1998, p. 24). From that point onwards, the issue

¹ Named after the Sciences Po institute.

requires extraordinary measures that would never be accepted by citizens in normal circumstances (Buzan, Wæver, & de Wilde, 1998, p. 24).

Operationally, for the securitisation process to occur, three actors ought to be involved in a phenomenon that Buzan, Wæver, & de Wilde called a “speech act” (Buzan, Wæver, & de Wilde 1998, pp. 21-47). Summarily, the speech act refers to a communication moment when a person with a certain degree of authority (the securitising actor) declares a matter of state affairs as an existential threat (the referent objects) and attempts to convince its citizens (audience) that appropriate measures should be taken in response. On the one hand, the securitising actor has the opportunity to pitch security measures that aim to counteract an emerging threat. On the other hand, the audience is invited to judge the validity of the rhetorical discourse employed by the securitising actor. Even though the audience is a subjective actor capable of thinking by itself, it can also be influenced by external entities, such as the media, academia, and think tanks, among others (the functional actors).

Drawing inspiration from Constructivist thinking, the theory of Securitisation argues that issues can be securitised due to their presentation and assimilation “rather than because of any innate threatening qualities per se” (Buzan, Wæver, & de Wilde, 1998, p. 95). Like in Constructivism, threats are socially constructed through discursive practices, in which the securitising actor attempts to persuade an audience about the urgency of an issue (Balzacq, 2005, p. 192). The act of “depicting and representing an issue (...) in such a way that others listen or are convinced” is defined as a framing (Eriksson & Noreen, 2002, p. 10)”. If citizens accept the securitising actor’s framing, the securitisation attempt will succeed. If the audience contests the declarations of the securitising actor, the securitising attempt fails.

In their most well-known book “Security: A New Framework for Analysis”, Buzan, Wæver and de Wilde (1998) provided a framework² that enables us to think of security as a phenomenon affecting five sectors of human life: the military, political, economic, environmental and societal sectors.

	Military Sector	Political Sector	Economic Sector	Environmental Sector	Societal Sector
Threats	Military threats to state sovereignty and international security (e.g., military aggression)	Non-military threats to state sovereignty (e.g., <i>coups d'état</i> , or attempts to change governments and institutions)	Threats to national and international market freedom (e.g., inflated prices, or import restrictions)	Threats to the environment (e.g., disruption of ecosystems, or energy problems)	Threats to the survival of a community (e.g., migration, or competition)
Referent objects	The state, international subsystems (e.g., NATO and EU) and the society	The state and international subsystems (e.g., NATO and EU)	The state, firms or economic classes	The environment and, at the extreme, the human enterprise	Larger groups of individuals, such as a nation and an ethnic minority, among others
Securitising actors	The national ruling elite or international policymakers	The national ruling elite or international policymakers	The national ruling elite, firms or International Governmental Organizations (IGOs)	The national ruling elite, international policymakers or scientists	The national ruling elite and other official leaders (e.g., ethnic, or religious leaders)

Table 1. The five sectors of security as explained by Buzan, Wæver and de Wilde.

² The framework was first introduced by Buzan in the book “People, states and fear: the national security problem in international relations” (1983). The academic argued that security could impact multiple sectors of everyday life, ranging from the political, economic and environmental sectors, among others. Buzan’s ideas were later developed by the three Copenhagen authors in “Security: A New Framework for Analysis” (1998).

The present dissertation will focus on political and societal security, the two areas that are mostly impacted by the information policy of the President of the Russian Federation. In the view of Buzan, Wæver and de Wilde political security is endangered by non-military threats to state sovereignty, which can include but are not limited to *coups d'état*, and attempts to change governments or institutions (Buzan, Wæver, & Wilde, 1998, pp. 141). The referent object of political security is in most cases the state, even though other political organizations of a hybrid nature, such as international organizations, can fit this mold and the securitization actor is often the ruling elite or international institutions. On the other hand, societal security concerns the stability of a community's identity. In the societal sector, insecurity can be observed when an external threat (e.g., migration or competition) arises and puts into question the survival of that community (Buzan, Wæver, & de Wilde, 1998, pp. 110-121). Usually, societal referent objects are larger groups of individuals "that carry the loyalties and devotion of subjects in a form and to a degree that can create a socially powerful argument that this 'we' is threatened" (Buzan, Wæver, & de Wilde, 1998, p. 123). These communities can express themselves in the form of a nation, a minority, or an ethnic grouping, among others. The securitising actors of the social sector are usually official leaders (e.g., ethnic, political, religious) and the media.

Because Buzan, Wæver and de Wilde's conceptualisation of security was daring for its time, it was challenged by multiple schools of thought. On the one hand, traditional Realists argued that the Securitisation theory strayed too far from the state and its original functions, and they accused the Copenhagen school of eroding the separation between a high and low politics issue. In response, Buzan said that the speech act could not be understood as the mere securitisation of any and all topics because of two reasons. First, the academic argued that the security environment would always make it possible to

prioritise issues based on their urgency and, as a consequence, not all issues would be considered vital threats. Second, the IR author emphasised that a rhetorical act would depend on a nation-state's identity, its "history, its geographical and structural position and the (discursive) reactions it generates from others, internationally and domestically" (Buzan & Hansen, 2009, p. 34). Therefore, securitisation would be restricted to a series of conditions and would not be a universal phenomenon.

On the other hand, the Aberystwyth school's authors Richard Whyn Jones and Ken Booth accused Buzan, Wæver and de Wilde of being too stuck to the idea of state security. In their publications titled "On Emancipation" (2005) and "Critical Security Studies and World Politics" (2005), the Aberystwyth scholars defended that the individual should be the focus of any security policy since the state has little that is worth securing other than its population. Moreover, the Aberystwyth school criticises the Copenhagen school for sectoralizing and objectifying threats by calling them referent objects and placing them in one of five assorted sectors. In defence of the Securitisation theory, Wæver argues that in the same way that restricting security to a state-related issue reduces the concept to a single dimension, extending it to the holistic experience of human existence can produce the same effect by excess (Wæver, 1995, p. 48). In Wæver's words, the conceptualisation of security as an inherently negative phenomenon means "a failure to deal with issues of normal politics". Therefore, the author argues that instead of aiming for the overall securitization of low politics' issues, the Securitisation theory strives to move themes away from the field of security, making them no longer a security threat – a phenomenon called de-securitisation (Wæver, 1995, p. 75).

The Securitisation theory of the Copenhagen school offers a strong framework to understand how contemporary Russia securitised information and introduced it as a key component in new modern warfare. The theory sheds light on "the social processes by

which groups of people construct something as a threat” (Buzan & Hansen, 2009, p. 36), and therefore, it can help explain why Putin vied for a stronger, more centralized role in digital and media governance in the last two decades. By applying the Securitisation theory to the information threat, one can see how information is a tool capable of producing effects in both the political and societal sectors. Not only can the malicious use of information directly impact a state’s sense of sovereignty, but it is also able to undermine societal cohesion.

Wary of the terrible effects cyber-enabled information operations could have in the longevity of his stay in power, Putin not only implemented policies that limited access to Western information through the Internet and social media but the Russian President also created and exerted influence on multiple outward-looking media companies targeting international audiences, such as RT and Sputnik. Behind this decision, there were two goals. First, to prevent any form of revolutionary thinking that could lead to a *coup d’état* in Moscow. With the colour revolutions, Putin witnessed the fall of political regimes in Serbia (2000), Georgia (2003), Kyrgyzstan (2005) and Ukraine (2004) and their replacement with democratic, EU and NATO-leaning alternatives. The Russian President became particularly alarmed following the 2011 demonstrations in which Russians contested the results of the legislative elections because he was afraid a similar *coup d’état* could take place in his country. Second, Putin’s media protectionism policy aimed at projecting regime legitimacy. Putin’s influence over Russian media ensures that a view of events that is beneficial to the Kremlin is disseminated to international audiences.

The ultimate expression of information weaponization is information warfare, which will be described in the following subchapter.

I.III. Information Warfare and Disinformation

Accounts of information manipulation on the battlefield are ancient and largely predate the Information Age (1970s/-). Sun Tzu's saying: "the clever combatant imposes his will on the enemy, but does not allow the enemy's will to be imposed on him" (Tzu, 2004, p. 53); Niccolò Machiavelli's excerpt: "who overcomes the enemy with fraud is praised as much as the one who overcomes it with force" (Machiavelli, 1996, p. 405); and Clausewitz's statement: "more a killing of the enemy's courage than of the enemy's soldiers" (Clausewitz, 1976, p. 299) all suggest that warfare is as much about deception and manipulation as it is about arms and strategy. According to these authors, the malicious use of information is not an action to feel ashamed of, but instead an astute move to derail the enemy's troops and advance the national will.

While attempting to revive the lessons of Tzu, Machiavelli and Clausewitz, military strategists in the 90s argued that competition over information flows was crucial to the conduct of warfare, resulting in the development of the concept of information warfare.

Winn Schwartau was one of the first to provide a formal definition of the term. According to this cyber security analyst, who has written extensively about Internet security, information warfare refers to "an electronic conflict in which information is a strategic asset worthy of conquest or destruction" (Schwartau, 1994, p. 13). Schwartau placed considerable emphasis on the electronic space as the preferred battlefield of information warfare, but not all theorists agreed. Martin Libick (1995), for instance, contributed considerably to the broadening of the term by arguing that electronic warfare was only one of seven expressions of information warfare. From the perspective of the Frederick S. Pardee RAND school's professor, information warfare can be applied in six domains: command and control warfare (the use of information to disrupt command and

control capabilities), intelligence-based warfare (the creation of systems to collect information on the battlespace), psychological warfare (the use of information to change the mind of the enemy through tactics such as propaganda and disinformation), economic information warfare (the stealing or blocking of information for economic gain), cyber warfare (the use of information in the digital environment) and hacker warfare (the stealing of information by a hacker) (Libick, 1995, pp. 0-9). More broadly, information warfare was recently described as “the manipulation of information trusted by a target without the target’s awareness, so that the target will make decisions against their interest but in the interest of the one conducting information warfare” (Di Pietro, Raponi, Caprolu, Cresci 2021, p. 3).

When describing information warfare’s goals, Brian Nichiporuk, a political scientist at Rand University, highlights its dual defensive-offensive character. In Nichiporuk’s words, information operations protect “one’s own sources of battlefield information” while aiming to “deny, degrade, corrupt or destroy the enemy’s sources of battlefield information” (Nichiporuk, 2002, p. 180). At the defensive level, a state may wish to protect sensitive information equipment by warding off espionage and by continuously monitoring information systems intrusions (Paul, 2008, p. 28). At the offensive level, an enemy may attempt to damage its competitor’s communication systems and communication flows with the goal of undermining decision-making (Paul, 2008, p. 28). One might go as far as manipulate the adversary’s perceptions of reality by targeting their military forces, political class or civil society with false or misleading information (Paul, 2008, p. 28). According to this framework, information is an “element of power” that can be used to protect but also to attack (Armistead, 2004, p. 8; Ventre, 2008),

The emergence of the Internet and social media channels allied with the development of mobile devices (such as the computer or the mobile phone) have paved the way for greater foreign influence to take place. Authoritarian states have recognized the strategic importance of information and developed complex and strict information strategies targeting both their domestic audiences and the international community. The goal is to shut off “their citizens from global information flows while weaponizing information to attack and destabilize democracies” (Rosenbach and Manstead, 2019, p. 1). A few examples of modern-day information operations conducted by the Russian Federation to extend its power in the information domain are the 2016 US presidential elections, the Brexit referendum, the annexation of Crimea and conflict in the Donbass and, more recently, Russia’s 2022 illegal and illegitimate invasion of Ukraine.

Disinformation

Unlike information, which is held to be true (Stahl, 2006, p. 84), disinformation refers to “false information that is deliberately created or disseminated with the express purpose to cause harm” (Kumar, West, & Leskovec, 2016, p. 11). It should not be mistaken, however, with misinformation – a similar term that refers to “the honest but mistaken belief that the relayed incorrect facts are true” – (Kumar, West, & Leskovec, 2016, p. 1); or the historical concept of propaganda – which includes true or misleading information produced by governments (Wardle et al, 2018, p. 6).

To trace the chronological development of the term disinformation, one must start with the definition put forward by Luciano Floridi. The Oxford’s professor of Philosophy and Ethics of Information first defined disinformation as a phenomenon that “arises whenever the process of information is defective” (Floridi, 1996, p. 509). Floridi’s definition was not well received by the academic community, who thought his proposal

was too broad and could lead to incorrect classifications, such as considering accidental falsehoods or unintentional lies as disinformation. Therefore, in 2004, James H. Fetzer, professor of the Philosophy of Science at the University of Minnesota, proposed an alternative definition. The emeritus professor described disinformation as “a par with acts of lying”, thus highlighting the importance of intention in the act of spreading false information (Fetzer, 2004, p. 231). While Fetzer’s definition further developed the discussion around disinformation, it was not taken without resistance. Critics mentioned the case where an individual may wish to spread false claims but fails to do it by, for example, disseminating an accidental truth. To respond to the wave of criticism, Floridi introduced the concept of misinformation in the hope of providing further clarification about the true meaning of disinformation. According to the Oxford professor, one is faced with misinformation when he or she is presented false information, but the information source did not intent any harm; while disinformation occurs when the communicator intentionally shares falsehoods, knowing that they could negatively impact the receiver (2005, §3.2.). In line with Floridi’s contribution, more recent definitions characterised disinformation as the dissemination of falsehoods with the intent of misleading or sowing confusion (Cambridge Dictionary, 2021) (Merriam Webster, 2021) (Oxford’s Lexico).

In terms of conceptual ramifications, disinformation is a practice of psychological warfare, one of the seven expressions of information warfare identified by Libicki. According to the author, psychological warfare refers to “the use of information against the human mind (rather than against computer support)” (Libick, 1995, p. 35), with the goal of influencing citizens and government policy.

When it comes to the structure and agents of disinformation, a Council of Europe report with the title “Information Disorder: Toward an interdisciplinary framework for research and policy making” highlights three elements of the information disorder:

agents, messages and receivers. First, the agents of disinformation refer to the creators, producers and distributors of false information, which can either be official (such as security and intelligence services, political parties and media) or unofficial in their nature (such as “groups of citizens that have become evangelized about an issue”) (Wardle, 2017, pp. 24-26). The agents of disinformation can work autonomously or be embedded in organisations of common interests and their motivations can range from financial to political, social, or psychological reasons (Wardle, 2017, pp. 24-26). In recent years, the nature of disinformation agents has changed considerably following the development of the Internet and social media. Today, individuals can anonymously disseminate information hidden by a cover of anonymity that makes attribution difficult to ensure.

The second element mentioned in the Council of Europe’s report points out that the message refers to false, or inaccurate information being spread in a communication environment. The act of communicating takes place between a sender and a receiver either via an in-person interaction (via gossip, speeches, etc.), through text (via newspaper articles or pamphlets) or audiovisual material (via images, radio broadcasts, videos, memes, etc.) (Wardle, 2017, p 26). The message that is exchanged during the interaction is often strategically designed by the disinformation agent with the aim of fulfilling particular objectives. According to the report, the disinformation messages that are most likely to be shared widely and mislead audiences have four characteristics: they tend to provoke an emotional response, they have a powerful visual component, they convey a strong narrative, and they are frequently repeated (Wardle, 2017, pp. 38 and 39).

The third element consists of the interpreter or the recipient of information, commonly known as the audience. For audience, we mean a group of “many individuals, each of which interprets information according to his or her own socio-cultural status, political positions and personal experiences” (Wardle, 2017, p. 27). As Stuart Hall

explained in the book “Encoding and Decoding in the Television Discourse” (1973), an audience can respond to a message in one out of three ways. On the one hand, the audience may follow the hegemonic approach and accept the message as it was encoded by its producer. On the other, the receiver can decline the message totally, or, lastly, it can try to find a middle ground by accepting parts of the message but not its whole. In modern disinformation campaigns, disinformation creators dedicate themselves to the study of audiences to produce targeted content that is more likely to be accepted by the receiver.

This chapter has provided the foundational theory necessary to reflect on the role of Russian media in disinformation campaigns targeting international audiences. Not only did it provide a lens to understand Russian foreign policy and the reasoning behind Putin’s decision to securitise information, but it also outlined the origins and development of the disinformation phenomenon. In today’s unique media ecosystem, digital networks have substantially broadened the scale, scope and reach of information warfare. The emergence of the Internet and social media, the primacy of sensationalism over newsworthiness, and the increasingly difficult task of deleting false information and punishing malicious actors have bolstered the diffusion capacity of falsehoods. If information operations were previously highly skilled and time-consuming, today they have become faster, more reactive and less resource demanding, and pose significant threats to the security environment.

Chapter II. Russian Information Warfare: Origins, Military Doctrine and Disinformation Use

Russia is well-known for employing information warfare and, particularly, disinformation operations to pursue political and military gains since the Soviet era. While references to these asymmetrical threats declined for over two decades following the end of the Cold War, they have re-emerged in academic discussion on the occasion of the conflict in Ukraine.

In this chapter, Russian information deception and manipulation will be described in two moments. First, the Soviet origins of information warfare will be outlined. Second, this dissertation will zoom on contemporary practices, by summarizing the military doctrine around the information threat and surveying the Russian disinformation apparatus and its techniques.

II.I The Roots of Information Warfare and Disinformation

Contemporary Russia is engaging in informational and psychological operations that benefit from the 21st century information environment and its sophisticated communication channels. These operations present opportunities for political gains and are portrayed by several academics as a Soviet legacy (McCauley, 2016; Galeotti, 2016, 2017; Giles, 2016; Pomerantsev & Weiss, 2014; Darczewska & Zochowski, 2017; Fedchenko, 2016; Snegovaya, 2015).

As a totalitarian state aiming to establish an international climate favourable to its foreign policy goals, the USSR used clandestine influence activities to preserve the status of the ruling elite and extend Soviet influence around the world (McCauley, 2016, p. 3) (Bittman, 1985, pp. 43-44). These Cold War information operations were referred to as

active measures (or *aktivnyye meropriyatiya*) and would include overt and covert activities such as *dezinformatsiya* (“non-attributed or falsely attributed communication, written or oral, containing intentionally false, incomplete, or misleading information frequently combined with true information, which seeks to deceive, misinform, and/or mislead the target”), propaganda (“written or oral information from an unconcealed government source which deliberately seeks to influence and/or manipulate the opinions and attitudes of other persons”), forgery (“the use of authentic-looking but false document and communiques”), agents of influence (“a person who uses his or her position, influence, power, and credibility to promote the objectives of a foreign power in ways unattributed to that power”) and front groups (groups “purporting to be independent non-governmental organizations”, which are “established and directed by the CPSU [Communist Party of the Soviet Union] to promote its foreign policy objectives”) (Shultz & Godson, 1984, pp. 193-194).

Active measures campaigns were coordinated at a strategic level by the CPSU, whose responsibilities were to oversee the planning, implementation and evaluation of active measures as well as to control a solid intelligence apparatus composed of three intelligence bodies (McCauley, 2016, p. 30). The first Soviet intelligence organization was the International Department of the Central Committee of the CPSU (1943). Its mandate consisted in the development of a network of partners willing to carry out actions in support of the USSR, which would often include Communist parties and non-governmental international organizations across the globe (Shultz & Godson, 1984, pp. 23). The second Soviet intelligence body was the International Information Department of the Central Committee of the CPSU (1978). Its responsibility was to administer the state-controlled media system, which communicated the communist regime to the outside world. It had direct control over the Soviet print news agencies Tass and Novosti Press,

the international radio broadcasting channel Radio Moscow, and multiple periodicals and books (Shultz & Godson, 1984, p. 20). Lastly, the third Soviet instrument used in the implementation of active measures was the Committee for State Security (*Komitet Gosudarstvennoy Bezopastnosti*), or shortly the KGB. The KGB's mandate covered both internal security and counterintelligence clandestine operations that ranged from disinformation to propaganda forgeries and agents-of-influence operations (Shultz & Godson, 1984, p. 20).

Soviet *dezinformatsiya*

Disinformation, or *dezinformatsiya* in Russian, was a specially refined and effective weapon in the armoury of active measures. It was first defined in the early 1950s by the closely supervised Great Soviet Encyclopaedia as the “dissemination (in the press, on the radio, etc) of false reports intended to mislead public opinion” (Taylor, 2016).

Decades later, the former Czechoslovak Intelligence officer, Ladislav Bittman, shared the most in-depth and comprehensive account of Soviet *dezinformatsiya*, leading him to become an essential reference for any endeavour to understand the phenomenon. According to that author, “Disinformation is a carefully constructed false message leaked into an opponent's communication system to deceive the decision-making elite or the public.” (Bittman, 1985, p. 49). It applies the public relations theory in reverse and intentionally shares malicious information with the goal of undermining a state's reputation (Bittman, 1988, p. 21). Similarly to active measures, the goals of disinformation are to influence foreign decision-making, undermine the confidence of populations in their leaders and institutions and disrupt relations among other nations (Baron, 1974, p. 166). In its essence, disinformation is an imminent threat to the health of a liberal democracy. It erodes the democratic principles of transparency, freedom of

the press and the right to information through outright manipulation, deception, and influence.

As Bittman explains, information campaigns would often be started by an unwitting agent: an actor who is manipulated, bribed, or blackmailed by the Soviet regime to participate in the information game, often unknowingly (Bittman, 1985, pp. 50). The USSR's preferred unwitting agents were journalists or other types of media professionals who could share falsehoods in far-reaching papers. Ideally, the Soviet regime would aim at publishing in the international press (Holland, 2010, p. 3). However, reputable Western newspapers were difficult to bend, so the USSR would go for emerging foreign newspapers established in developing countries (Kux, 1985, pp. 23). Once published, the USSR would cite the articles back home (Kux, 1985, pp. 23). With some luck, the article would fall under the radar of a European or American newspaper and be reproduced widely.

To maximize the chances of having a disinformation message circulate around international media, the Soviet regime attempted to make its deceiving narratives as plausible as possible. One of the techniques used to achieve this result was to employ covert disinformation together with factual and truthful information, as the latter would create an impression of authenticity for news stories (Holland, 2010, p. 4). The goal was to develop a message that would partially correspond to reality or the societal views of the world because, otherwise, the reader would immediately disregard it as a fake.

The most common Soviet disinformation targets were the state's enemies or those who were perceived as threats to the attainment of the USSR's foreign policy goals (Bittman, 1985, p. 50). During the Cold War, this role was often occupied by the United States, NATO or developing countries, even though the disinformation's goals differed depending on the recipient of disinformation. Information warfare directed at the US, for

instance, aimed at tarnishing the state's reputation, isolating it from its allies, and convincing the international public opinion of the threat of American militarism and capitalist imperialism (Holland, 2010, p. 3). The operations targeting NATO Allies attempted to sow distrust between Allies and portray the Alliance as an anti-peace organization (Holland, 2010, p. 3). Lastly, the lies that targeted the developing countries were designed to hamper the US's influence while promoting the USSR's image as a loyal and considerate partner (Holland, 2010, p. 3).

Operation Denver

Claimed to be one of the most notorious cases of Soviet active measures, Operation Denver illustrates the nature of Soviet disinformation as well as its potential mid to long-term effects. This was a highly complex campaign, which extended over a large period of time and targeted different audiences and geographies. In short, it claimed that HIV (the Acquired Immune Deficiency Syndrome [AIDS] causative virus) had been genetically engineered by the Pentagon during a series of biological warfare experiments that were taking place in the Army Medical Research Institute of Infectious Diseases at Fort Detrick, US.

To carry out this disinformation operation, the KGB convinced an unwitting agent to covertly insert the falsehood into an Indian-based newspaper titled *the Patriot*, in the early 1960s (Boghardt, 2009, p. 6). In the first paragraph of the article — which was published as a letter to the editor and not a news piece — it could be read that “AIDS, the deadly mysterious disease which has caused havoc in the US, is believed to be the result of the Pentagon's experiments to develop new and dangerous biological weapons” (The Patriot, 1983).

AIDS may invade India

Mystery disease caused by US experiments

NEW YORK:

AIDS, the deadly mysterious disease which has caused havoc in the US, is believed to be the result of the Pentagon's experiments to develop new and dangerous biological weapons.

Now that these menacing experiments seem to have gone out of control, plans are being hatched to hastily transfer them from the US to other countries, primarily developing nations where governments are pliable to Washington's pressures and persuasion.

Some American experts believe that Pakistan may become the best proving ground for these experiments. If this happens, there will be a real danger that AIDS may rapidly spread to India with the grave consequences to the people of the country.

WHO representatives point out that AIDS may soon become a problem number one, since as far there are no effective cures to fight it.

The British mass media has pointed to the blood plasma imported from the US as the cause of AIDS, which is spreading in the British Isles, where more than 15 patients have been hospitalized, with half of them now dead.

As a result, France and Holland, which use large quantities of American blood donations, have stopped importing such blood. Britain, the Federal Republic of Germany and Denmark are now considering similar measures.

In recent months, there has been a marked increase in the incidence of this hitherto unknown disease, the so-called Acquired Immune Deficiency Syndrome (AIDS). It is caused, as scientists suspect, by a new highly pathogenic virus which ravages the immune system of a human being, making him practically defenceless against any infection. Once the AIDS virus penetrates the human organism, it does not become the "killer" but rather acts like a time bomb. The immune system deteriorates by it can no longer resist diseases even such as the virus flu. As

A well-known American scientist and anthropologist, in a letter to Editor, Patriot, analyses the history and background of the deadly AIDS which started in the US and has now spread to Europe. The writer, who wants to remain anonymous, has expressed the fear that India may face a danger from this disease in the near future.

forms and in most cases leads to death.

AIDS has recently been registered in many as 16 countries, primarily in those which import American blood donations. For some of the countries the disease has already become extremely dangerous.

The first signs of AIDS appeared in 1976 with an outbreak of this disease, in New York

among immigrants from Haiti. At that time, however, no one seemed to bother to pay any serious attention, both on the part of the local authorities and the US public at large. In 1980 there was another sign of AIDS and again in New York. This time in addition to Haitian immigrants the disease struck local Americans, primarily drug addicts and homosexuals. By February 1983, AIDS had affected large sections of the American population and had been registered in 33 states. New York accounted for 40 per cent of all the cases that had been officially registered in the US by that time.

Concerned American citizens and organizations began to wonder why does AIDS, just like some other previously unknown diseases such as bizarre pneumonia or the so-called Legionnaires disease, appear in New York

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SUNDAY, JULY 17

Guerrillas And Gorillas

Understanding the reasons why even after a century of political independence the Latin American countries have both their politics deformed and their economy distorted will help to have a better idea of the problems which any post-colonial society faces, writes M. P. Kavalam.

Ramdan In Dubai

Perhaps at no time of the year does Dubai come to the fore as a Muslim city than at Ramdan. For the Arabs, the months of fasting apart from being a deeply religious occasion assumes almost a festive air, writes Rashmi Taneja.

OTHER FEATURES: Public View, Nostalgia, Encounters, Thinking One-dimensionally, Short Story by Bandana Majumdar, Education, Mirros/Windows, Film-focus, Culture Watch, Sports...

Figure 1. A copy of the news piece “AIDS may invade India: Mystery disease caused by the US experiments”, was published in the Indian newspaper *The Patriot* in July 1983. Source: (The Patriot, 1983).

Months later, the story resurfaced after Professor Jacob Segal, a retired East German biophysicist researcher, wrote a report titled “AIDS—its nature and origin” (“A Report on Active Measures and Propaganda, 1986-87,” 1987, pp. 34). In the publication, Segal argued that the virus had been developed by the US government through the combination of “two existing, naturally occurring viruses, VISNA and HTLV-I” (“A Report on Active Measures and Propaganda, 1986-87,” 1987, p. 33) and propagated among a community of homosexual incarcerated individuals who subsequently infected more men in New York City and San Francisco. (Boghardt, 2009, p. 9).

Another tentative to revive this false story took place in 1989 when the participants of the Non-Aligned Movement’s conference in Zimbabwe received the short booklet “AIDS: USA Homemade Evil” that made new use of the accusation (Bittman,

1988, pp. 24-25). Major newspapers started to publish about the topic and to reprint an article from the London conservative paper *Sunday Express*. Once these more reputable sources started to disseminate the story, Soviet media “began recycling its original allegations, no longer relying on obscure Third World pro-Soviet newspaper as sources” (Godson, 1988, p. 223).

The USSR mobilized hundreds of KGB agents, Soviet media bodies and Central Committee personnel during Operation Denver (Godson, 1988, p. 222). Media in developing countries shared the narrative widely, but so did well-established newspapers such as the *Sunday Express* and the *Daily Telegraph*. As Boghart revealed, “By late 1987, the story had circulated in the media of 80 countries, appearing in over 200 periodicals in 25 languages” (Boghardt, 2009, p. 14). Even today, this falsehood shows on Internet searches all over the world, causing it to become one the most notorious cases of Soviet active measures.

II.II Information Warfare in Putin’s Russia

“Above all, we should acknowledge that the collapse of the Soviet Union was the major geopolitical disaster of the century. As for the Russian nation, it became a genuine drama. Tens of millions of our co-citizens and compatriots found themselves outside Russian territory. Moreover, the epidemic of disintegration infected Russia itself.” (Putin, 2005).

After the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989, Communist regimes from Central and Eastern Europe to the Baltic states began collapsing in the aftermath of a series of internal revolutions and rebellions. The Soviet empire was being dismantled and the Communist ideology was slowly vanishing.

In 1991, the Soviet flag came down and was replaced by the Russian Federation’s white, blue and red colours in the Kremlin (Trenin, 2011, p. 6). In this new era when the US acquired the status of the world’s superpower, Russia sought integration into Western

institutions under the leadership of President Boris Yeltsin, such as the North Atlantic Cooperation Council (1991), the World Bank (1992), the Council of Europe (1996) or the Group of Eight/G8 (1997). The West had expectations regarding the democratization and economic liberalization of the Russian Federation, and Russia itself hoped for economic recovery and modernization. However, the effort to establish amicable relations was unsuccessful (Radin & Reach, 2017, ix). As soon as the country's economic performance started to improve, Russia became increasingly assertive toward the West and the multilateral world order institutions (Simes, 1999, p. 16). Likewise, hopes for Russian democratization were challenged when the old Soviet elites reasserted power over the state and restored autocracy (Snegovaya, 2023).

The disintegration of the USSR disheartened many, among them Vladimir Putin. In 1996, only a few years after the establishment of the Russian Federation, Vladimir Putin resigned from a 15-year career as a KGB foreign intelligence officer – where he had reached the rank of Lieutenant Colonel – to join the Kremlin as President Yeltsin's Chief Administrator. Two years later, Putin returned to the Russian security services to become the Federal Security Service Director and was subsequently appointed Secretary of the Security Council. Finally, when Yeltsin announced his resignation in 1999, Putin became the acting President, only to be elected months later. What followed was more than twenty uninterrupted years in power, either as President or as Prime Minister, which turned Putin into “the dominant personality of the post-Soviet era” (Lo, 2018, p. 1).

Over the course of two decades, Putin served four presidential mandates (2000-2004; 2004-2008; 2012-2018; and 2018-2024), and one term as a Prime Minister (2008-2012) (Wilson Center, 2020). In 2008, Putin was forced to step down from the presidency due to a constitutional provision that limited the number of presidential terms to two and he became the Prime Minister of Dmitry Medvedev, who had been carefully chosen by

Putin himself (Encyclopedia Britannica, 2023). To avoid more legal constraints to his stay in power, Putin signed into law constitutional amendments in 2021 that would allow him to run for the presidency for two additional tenures – hypothetically extending his rule until 2036.

From 2000 to today, Putin pursued a nationalist and authoritarian governance model. To the untrained eye, modern Russia may even project the appearance of a democracy, but any impression of multipartyism, fair elections, political tolerance, freedom of speech and free media is only a mirage. The power is centralized in the executive branch and particularly in the figure of the President, who has ultimate control over domestic and foreign policy (Constitution of the Russian Federation, 1993 § 80.3³). Putin, himself, has developed an ideational narrative for Russia's past, present and future, that serves as the state's identity and the vision behind the Russian Federation's policy goals.

Putin's foreign policy agenda is driven by the desire to restore Russia's great power status and reclaim its influence in the global arena (Freire, 2020, p. 449). Since as early as 1999, Putin has been striving to reestablish Russia as an actor capable of influencing international relations. In a speech from that year, the Russian President argued: "Russia was and will remain a great power. It is preconditioned by the inseparable characteristics of its geopolitical, economic and cultural existence. They determined the mentality of Russians and the policy of the government throughout the history of Russia and they cannot but do so at present» (Putin, 1999).

In the eyes of Putin, the current world order is not representative of world power dynamics because of the predominant role it attributes to the US compared with other

³ Article 3, line 3. Of the Russian Constitution (1993). "The President of the Russian Federation shall, in accordance with the Constitution of the Russian Federation and federal laws, determine the basic objectives of the internal and foreign policy of the State."

state actors. According to the Russian President, as the world is moving toward multipolarity, it is not reasonable to follow a hegemonic order in which the US is able to preserve its decaying influence and establish spheres of interest abroad. Striking a satirical tone, in his 2007 speech at the Munique Security Conference, Putin underlined the limits of unipolarity by defining these orders as “pernicious” and self-destroying structures that are dangerous for “those within this system, but also for the sovereigns” (Putin, 2007). Moreover, the Russian President believed that the US-led order and the Western institutions actively challenged his country’s interests, particularly when it concerned the post-Soviet area – often citing as examples of threats the NATO 1999 and 2004 enlargement rounds into the former Warsaw Pact countries; the NATO accession talks for Ukraine and Georgia; and the discussion around the European Union-Ukraine Association (de Haas, 2010, pp. 52-53).

Equally as important in Putin’s foreign policy is the attempt to reestablish influence in the former Warsaw Pact countries, which are perceived as vital space of strategic importance to Russia (Freire, 2022, p. 28). The Russian Federation’s President saw modern Russia as “the primary successor state to the USSR” and developed a narrative around the idea of reuniting a divided nation (De Haas, 2010, 4). That same narrative justified the implementation of a geopolitical policy whose prerogative was to celebrate the common history and culture of the Eurasian states, the *Russkiy Mir* (the Russian World). The *Russkiy Mir* aimed at looking as inoffensive as the British Council, the French Francophonie, or other cultural institutes and to become commonplace for the 25 million ethnic Russians who live in the fourteen former Soviet republics (Ratsiborynska, 2016, p. 9). Nevertheless, the Kremlin’s true intentions with this organization were to instrumentalise Moscow’s relationships with the post-soviet

communities for economic, cultural and political gains (Radin & Reach, 2017, pp. 12 and 13).

Apart from being absorbed into the Russian sphere of influence, the *Russkiy Mir* and other partner countries were cajoled into adhering to multiple alternative institutions, which competed with the US-led order's institutional structure. A few examples are the military Alliance Collective Security Treaty Organization (1992), whose article 4⁴ competes directly with NATO; the 2014-established Eurasian Economic Union, which was modeled after the EU as a regional economic integration project; and the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (2001), a regional organization of political, military and economic cooperation that comprises China, Russia, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan and Uzbekistan and the following observers: Mongolia, Iran, Pakistan and India.

Putin's second and third presidential terms coincided with the 'colour revolutions', a series of pro-democratic, non-violent social uprisings that took place in the post-communist countries in the early 2000s, and which included the Bulldozer Revolution in Serbia (2000), the Rose Revolution in Georgia (2003), the Tulip Revolution in Kyrgyzstan (2005) and the Orange Revolution in Ukraine (2004). While these non-violent revolutions were perceived by the West "as the result of individuals living under oppression standing up for their political rights", for Russians they "were seen as the result of Western information warfare being used to influence populations to overthrow targeted regimes" (Sohl, 2022. P. 99). In the eyes of Putin, under the veneer of democratic promotion, the West was fuelling *coups d'état* to replace duly-elected regimes with illegitimate pro-Western alternatives, which threaten Russia's vital space (Sohl, 2022, p.

⁴ Article 4 of the Collective Security Treaty. "If one of the State Parties is subjected to aggression by any state or group of states, then this will be considered as aggression against all States Parties to this Treaty. In the event of an act of aggression against any of the participating States, all other participating States will provide him with the necessary assistance, including military, and will also provide support at their disposal in exercising the right to collective defense in accordance with Article 51 of the UN Charter".

100). In the worst-case scenario, that same *modus operandi* could be used to foster revolution in Moscow and put an end to Putin's regime (Thornton, 2015, p. 41; Tsygankov, 2016, p. 170).

Faced with these possibilities, the Russian President felt the urgency to securitise information and address it with the same determination as a military or political threat. During a 2014 advisory meeting of the Security Council on combating extremism, Putin shared how the colour revolutions had been “a lesson and a warning”, urging the government to “do everything necessary” to prevent a similar event from happening in Russia (Korsunskaya, 2014). The President of the Russian Federation recognised that Russia needed to learn from its unpreparedness in the field of information warfare and centralize the control of information to exert influence at the domestic and international levels — a thought that was echoed in military thinking and the official policy of the Russian Federation.

Information warfare in Russian military thought and doctrine

Due to the usual opacity shrouding the Russian Federation's military practices, knowledge production on Russian information warfare prior to 2014 is mostly the work of Western thinkers, who are trying to make sense of Russian nonconventional threats. Nevertheless, there are three Russian military personalities who have contributed to the development of the term and who have shared their works with the world: General Valery Gerasimov, retired General Lieutenant Bogdavov and Reserve Colonel Chekinov.

In a 2013 article published in the Russian military journal *Military Industrial Courier*, General Valery Gerasimov argued that a new generation of warfare, which is based on the use of non-conventional threats and particularly information operations, emerged in the aftermath of the Colour Revolutions and the Arab Spring. As the Chief of

Russian General Staff, one of Gerasimov's many duties in the Russian military is to foresee new trends in warfare and prepare Russia to face them (Bartles, 2016, p. 31).

Gerasimov's article "The Value of Science Is in the Foresight: New Challenges Demand Rethinking the Forms and Methods of Carrying out Combat Operations" (2013) was originally published in the Russian language. However, a high demand for the document motivated two Russian Security Issues experts, Charles Bartles and Mark Galeotti, to provide a translation and analysis of the original text. Among other arguments, Gerasimov starts his article by asserting that "the lines between the state of war and peace" are being blurred (Galeotti, 2014, p. 2). Behind this phenomenon is the growth of asymmetrical, nonmilitary means of waging war (e.g., political, economic, informational and humanitarian actions) which are difficult to identify and, therefore, to distinguish as expressions of warfare. According to Gerasimov, nonmilitary threats are more effective in achieving political and strategic goals in the sense that they prevent "frontal engagements of large formations of forces at the strategic and operational level", and imply fewer financial and human costs (Galeotti, 2014, pp. 3 e 4). Hard military power is becoming a last resort tool, used in a 1:4 ratio between military threats and non-military threats (Bartles, 2016).

Building on Gerasimov's thesis around new conceptions of warfare, retired General Lieutenant Bogdavov and Reserve Colonel Chekinov — two Russian military officers affiliated with the Military Strategic Studies of the General Staff — delved into the role of informational confrontation in new-generation warfare:

"A new-generation war will be dominated by information and psychological warfare that will seek to achieve superiority in troops and weapons control and depress the opponent's armed forces personnel and population morally and psychologically. In the ongoing revolution in information technologies, information and psychological warfare will largely lay the groundwork for victory" (Chekinov and Bogdanov, 2013, p. 16).

According to Chekinov and Bogdanov, information confrontation was seen both in anticipation of a conflict as well as during its occurrence. On the one hand, in the run-up to war, “large-scale reconnaissance and subversive missions” that comprised “special operations forces, space, radio engineering, electronic, diplomatic and secret service intelligence, and industrial espionage” would aim at detecting key military objectives and hamper the decision-making process (Chekinov and Bogdanov, 2013, p. 16). On the other hand, during the conflict, special operations to mislead the adversary’s government, military and society would be carried out, through the dissemination of disinformation and propaganda (Chekinov and Bogdanov, 2013, p. 16).

The contributions of Gerasimov, Chekinov and Bogdanov teach us that while both the Western world and Russia perceive information warfare as the ability to defend one’s own information, the Russian concept should not be measured against Western definitions (presented in chapter I.III. Information warfare and Disinformation) as there are many points of divergence. First, the Russian Federation’s concept of information warfare is more holistic, and it targets not only the enemy’s state and armed forces but also the society at large. When it comes to their goals, information operations aim at influencing decision-making processes in a way that benefits the Kremlin, its interests and goals, and, ultimately, weaken adversary societies to increase “Russia’s relative strength in a classic zero-sum approach” (Giles, 2016, p. 24; Tashev et al., 2019, p. 139). Also contrary to the Western perspective is the premise that information warfare is not limited to wartime. It is waged continuously in times of war and peace alike, albeit in pursuance of different goals and targets. According to Thomas, during peacetime, information operations target the psychological, scientific, cultural and production aspects of the information security of society and the government, while in wartime the operations are overt, target the military and seek information superiority on the battlefield by protecting national systems

and suppressing those of the enemies. (Thomas, 1998, p. 44). Third is the idea that nonmilitary threats are employed to achieve political and strategic goals before direct military action takes place, to aid Russia in obtaining the upper hand in situations of military inferiority. As Snegovaya comprehensively puts it, the information operations of Russia “do not attempt to contain the conflict and pursue its resolution in its early stages” (Snegovaya, 2015, p. 12). Instead, they “aim to prolong the conflict by supporting one of the warring parties in a way that gives Russia the ability to influence the conflict more decisively at a time of its choosing” (Snegovaya, 2015, p. 12).

In the Russian Federation’s strategic military documents prior to 2014, the growing importance of information confrontation in contemporary warfare is also observed. Nevertheless, these doctrines and concepts mostly focus on the Western use of information confrontation and how Russia should defend itself from these threats. By providing little insight into the strategy and techniques employed by the Russian Federation, these documents reflect Russia’s overall lack of openness regarding its own security and defence (Tashev et al., 2019, p. 138).

Arguably the most important security document which lays out the strategic priorities and goals of the Russian Federation, the “Strategy for the national security of the Russian Federation up to 2020” (2009) defines information as a threat to the country’s national interest: “Global information warfare [*informatsionnoe protivoborstvo*] is intensifying and the threats to the industrialised and developing world, their socio-economic development and their democratic institutions are growing” (§ 10).

The strategy details how information has been employed by foreign states against Russia to “collect, formulate, process, transmit or receive information on the status of national security and measures for its reinforcement” (§ 6). One particular risk that was mentioned in the document was the impact of information warfare on societal stability,

and its ability to undermine “the interpretation of the history of Russia, her role and place in world history, and lifestyle propaganda based on anything-goes attitudes and violence, and racial, national and religious intolerance” (§ 81). Based on the strategy, information warfare threatened not only the conservative values of Putin’s regime, but it could also promote social uprising and contestation. In this sense, due action was needed to protect the Russian “security functions of information and telecommunications systems in critical infrastructure and high-risk facilities in the Russian Federation” (§ 109).

A more in-depth analysis of information warfare is provided by the issue-specific report “Conceptual views on the activities of the Armed Forces of the Russian Federation in the information space” (2011), by the Russian Ministry of Defence. For the first time in the context of a strategic document, information warfare was provided a formal definition, being understood as “a struggle between two or more states in the information space with the goal to damage information systems, processes or resources, critical or other infrastructure, to undermine political, economic and social systems, to destabilize society and a state by massive psychological influence on the population, and also putting pressure on a state to make decisions that are in the interest of the opponent“ (§ 1). The report offered a more defensive approach to information warfare characterized by the aim to ensure the Russian Federation’s control and sovereignty over domestic information flows. Nevertheless, it also suggested how Russia’s reactive attitude to information could be, therefore defining the contours of information confrontation in a new generation of warfare.

Apart from these two official documents, the conceptualization of information as an emerging security threat has been highlighted since the “2000 Foreign Policy Concept of the Russian Federation”, and steadily reinforced in subsequent official documents (see, for example, the “2000 Military Doctrine of the Russian Federation”, “Russian Foreign

Policy of 2007”, “2008 Information Security Doctrine” and the “Foreign Policy Concept of 2013”).

The development of information warfare thinking and strategy was observed in the context of the Second Chechen War (1999-2009), in Estonia (2007), in Georgia (2008) and, ultimately, during the annexation of Crimea and the pro-Russian insurgency that followed in southeastern Ukraine (2014). Information operations were a crucial element to these warfare case studies where Russia sought to expand Moscow’s influence in the near abroad.

Contemporary Russia’s disinformation

As a deceptive information operation, *dezinformatsia* has been preserved from the Soviet era, with slight changes that reflect the digitalization and overall evolution of the contemporary media sector. If during the Cold War Soviet agents planted disinformation stories in foreign print media, today the Kremlin is using digital networks — the so-called new media (Logan, 2010) — to penetrate the minds of individuals. Beyond controlling newspapers, TV, or radio channels, Russia is moving toward 24-hour news websites and social media channels⁵ to develop tailored messages to specific audiences (McCauley, 2016, p. 383). This has caused the Russian Federation’s information operations to grow “in sophistication, intensity, reach and impact” while benefiting from a poorly regulated digital environment (Lucas & Pomeranzev, 2016, p. 3).

⁵ The Information Age has offered the Russian Federation the opportunity to engage in disinformation dissemination using social media platforms and trolls. In 2013, the Internet Research Agency (IRA) was founded by a Russian oligarch with close connections to the Kremlin. The IRA is composed of multiple trolls, online personas who disseminate Kremlin-developed narratives while criticizing Russian Federation’s opponents and fueling heated discussions on social media (Galeotti, 2017, p. 6). In the disinformation game, trolls are crucial to the manipulation of public opinion and are often referred to as “online foot soldiers” (Bergmann & Kenney, 2017, p. 12).

Compared to the Soviet intelligence apparatus, which was strongly centralized and overseen by the Communist Party of the Soviet Union (see chapter II.I The roots of information warfare and disinformation), Russia's modern counterpart is decentralized and follows a bottom-up approach to active measures design and implementation. The Presidential Executive Office has considerable control over this structure, but the mix of overt and covert actors involved in the disinformation ecosystem provides Putin with plausible deniability that allows him not to recognize his responsibility in the coordination of the whole apparatus and in the implementation of disinformation campaigns (McCauley, 2016, p. 319). The wide network of overt and covert actors that partner with the Kremlin in the dissemination of fake news includes three Russian intelligence services — the Federal Security Service (FSB), the Foreign Intelligence Service (SVR) and the General Staff of the Armed Forces of the Russian Federation (GRU) — and Russian media outlets.

With the collapse of the Soviet Union, three intelligence services emerged: the FSB, the SVR and the GRU. According to Cunningham, the FSB is responsible for domestic surveillance and oversight at the domestic and international levels (Cunningham, 2020). The SVR, on the other hand, operationalises foreign intelligence, thus recruiting influential figures who can be sympathetic to Putin's regimes, ranging from witting to unwitting agents, politicians and extremist political parties (such as the French party National Rally and the Greek Syriza) (Watts, 2018; McCauley, 2016, p. 355). Lastly, the GRU is the intelligence service of the Russian Armed Forces whose mandate covers high-profile cyber operations, of which the 2016 US presidential election is an example. While these Russian intelligence services are independent of the executive power, Putin maintains indirect control over them through the Presidential Executive Office (the case of the FSB and SVR) and the Security Council (the case of GRU).

The last agent involved in the implementation of active measures is the Russian media. The rise of Putin has coincided with the modernization of the media sector and its centralization in the hands of *siloviki* — the President’s long-date friends from his security services era (Abrams, 2016, p. 17). In addition to strong ownership and influence, the Kremlin exerts power on the media sector through legislation. In October 2014, Putin introduced a law that limits the level of foreign ownership of Russian media to less than 20% (Samadashvili, 2015, p. 25). Because of these two policies, the major Russian news outlets are either government-owned or strongly influenced, in a way that they have become loyal information launderers of the Kremlin both domestically and internationally. While there are many media companies that would fit this description, this dissertation will focus on the two most popular internationally-oriented Russian outlets that actively covered the annexation of Crimea and the conflict in the Donbas: RT and Sputnik.

RT is a 24-hour English-language channel that was established in 2005, one year after the Orange Revolution in Ukraine. It was designed to compete with the international channels CNN, BBC World and Al Jazeera, and it offers multilingual news in English, Spanish, German and Arabic (Herpen, 2016, p. 71). During its initial stage, Russia Today was mostly a tool of soft power that “aimed at improving Russia’s image abroad and concentrate on information programs about Russia”, its culture and diversity (Herpen, 2016, p. 71). With the 2008 Russo-Georgian war, the channel changed its editorial line to cover “stories overlooked by mainstream media”, with the goal of providing “alternative perspectives on current affairs”, and acquainting “internal audiences with a Russian viewpoint” (Herpen, 2016, p. 71). Under the new motto “question more”, Russia Today rebranded itself with the less political title RT and started to disseminate conspiracy theories as well as anti-American and anti-Western pieces of disinformation. The news

outlet covered not only Russian events, but also worldwide stories and it soon attracted citizens with extremist political views who felt represented in the Russian network as opposed to the traditional Western mass media channels (Pomerantsev & Weiss, 2014 p. 16). According to Herpen, RT is highly subsidized by the Kremlin. In 2011 alone, at least 380 million dollars were assigned to it (Herpen, 2016, p. 71). Nevertheless, the connection between the government and the channel goes beyond financing as RT is operated by TV-Novosti, a state-owned company founded by the Russian news agency RIA Novosti, and its Editor-in-Chief, Margarita Simoyan, shared a secure line to the Kremlin via a yellow phone and a personal relation with the First Deputy Chief of Staff of the Russian Presidential Administration, Aleksey Gromov (McCauley, 2016, p. 356) (US Department of State Global Engagement Center, 2022, p. 7).

Sputnik, on the other hand, is a state-owned radio broadcasting agency and online news outlet that was created in 2014 during the Euromaidan demonstrations in Ukraine. Like RT, Sputnik is a title of the media agency Rossiya Segodnya, which was also founded by the Russia-owned company RIA Novosti and is under the leadership of Margarita Simoyan (Missiroli, Antonio, et al, 2016, p. 8). Since its inception, Sputnik has been trying to establish itself as an alternative to the west-centric view on world media and, according to its website, it has the mission to “offer guidance in a multipolar world, while respecting every country’s national interests, culture, history and traditions” (Sputnik News LinkedIn). Sputnik performs radio broadcasts, website and social media reporting in more than 30 languages, including all the languages of the former Soviet Union and English (US Department of State Global Engagement Center, 2022, p. 4).

Russia’s contemporary disinformation messages fall into three recurring themes. First, there is the narrative that the US is acting unilaterally in ways that favour its own foreign policy goals and that the rules-based order’s organizations NATO and the EU are

tools to implement its expansionist policies. This has impelled Russia to refer to the US-led order as unfair while arguing that “the United States is engaged in a selfish, ruthless bid for world domination” (Lucas & Pomeranzev, 2016, p. 5). Second, is the theme of moral antagonism between the West and the East. As during the Cold War, contemporary Russia thinks of itself as being in ideological competition with the ‘West’. Putin believes the Orthodox civilization is in conflict with the decadent ‘West’ because of their contrasting values and culture (McCauley, 2016, p. 402). The Russian President argues that ‘Western’ societies are divided and that their supranational institutions, such as the EU, are crumbling over heated debates over gender, race, migration, and terrorism. Third, Russia believes it is within its rights to enjoy a “privileged sphere of influence in the post-Soviet space” due to the common history, culture and language (Cooley, 2017). It often communicates that the West is destabilizing that relationship by promoting illegitimate democratic regimes across the former Warsaw Pact countries and that the Kremlin has the authority to contest any kind of foreign invasion with military force, if necessary. The targets of these narrative themes are many, ranging from the Russian domestic audience, the former Soviet satellites, and the European and North American audiences.

To spread disinformation messages, RT and Sputnik engage in a three-pronged *modus operandi*. First, in order to create a veneer of credibility, they opt for a balanced ratio between legitimate and illegitimate content in an attempt to “make it harder for viewers and readers to weed out stories that are either completely fabricated or pure propaganda” (Bergmann & Kenney, 2017, p. 18). They combine regular news coverage of relevant international events with biased articles featuring anti-Western or anti-NATO narratives. Second, both channels tend to craft full-blown lies when generating false stories as the Kremlin is no longer worried about making its forgeries look as realistic as the Soviets did. Their goal is not to convince audiences of certain ideas but to make them

doubt their leaders and the news coverage (Lucas & Pomeranzev, 2016). Third, Russian disinformation channels reach out to Western commentators in an attempt to have their content validated and circulated among foreign audiences (McCauley, 2026, p. 358).

This chapter has provided information about how the securitisation of information was born in the face of weakness. With the collapse of the USSR, Russia lost a significant part of its material power and struggled to match the modern warfare practices of the West, leading it to search for nonmilitary and asymmetrical avenues of confrontation. Russian information warfare should not be, however, understood according to the Western definition of the phenomenon. The Russian practice is continuous (it is employed in times of conflict and peace), holistic (it targets the institutions, armed forces, and society of foreign states) and it has the goal of influencing decision-making in a way that is beneficial to the Kremlin. Moreover, Russian disinformation has caught the attention of the academic community in the last decade. Nevertheless, recent concerns are misleading because this practice can be traced back to the Cold War period, during which it was employed extensively by the USSR. With Putin's rise to power, the Russian media was monopolized and given a new face. The Kremlin either acquired major newsgroups or linked them to trusted friends of the regime. RT and Sputnik, particularly, are two outward-looking biased news websites that portray themselves as competitors of reputed and trustworthy international papers with the intent of deceiving international audiences.

Chapter III. Case study: Russian Disinformation Operations in Ukraine (2013-2015)

To attempt to answer this dissertation's driving question about the contribution of RT and Sputnik in the Russian war of information in Ukraine, this chapter will look at the media coverage of events between 2013 and 2015.

First, there will be a short introduction of Putin's perception of the special relationship between Russia and Ukraine, followed by an outline of the main events that took place in Crimea and the Donbass. Once a general overview of the conflict and its origins has been laid out, this chapter will delve into an in-depth analysis of the news pieces produced by RT and Sputnik with the goal of identifying similarities between the Kremlin's talking points and the angles of news production of these two news websites.

III. I. Putin's Perception of Ukraine and Recount of Events in Crimea and the Donbas

Even though Ukraine has been attempting to define itself as a sovereign country with its own national identity since it declared independence from the USSR in 1991, Putin has continuously questioned Ukraine's historic right to independent statehood. Throughout his presidency, Putin described Ukraine as an artificial state, deprived of real sovereignty and national identity (Kuzio, 2017, p. 211). One example is the President's address to his then-US counterpart, George Bush, at the NATO-Russia Council of the 2008 NATO Summit in Bucharest: "You have to understand, George, that Ukraine is not even a country. Part of its territory is in Eastern Europe and the greater part was given to us." (Putin, 2008).

In defending his perspective, Putin makes use of numerous arguments that, in his view, attest to a special relationship between the Russian and Ukrainian people. First, the President of the Russian Federation manipulates the Primary Chronicle of Kievan Rus to identify Kyiv as the birthplace of Orthodox Russians and the Russian Empire (Free, 2023). According to the Chronical, in 988, Vladimir the Great seized the city of Chersonesus (current Kyiv) to prompt a Christian marital union between himself and the Byzantine princess Anna Porphyrogenita and convert his people to Christianity (Free, 2023). Putin often mentions this Chronicle in his nationalist rhetoric to reduce Ukraine to a historical part of Russia (e.g., when, in 2014, Putin said that Kyiv was “the mother of all Russian cities” or, when in 2013, the President argued that modern Ukrainian language and culture were “part of our greater Russian or Russian-Ukrainian world”) (Putin, 2014) (Putin, 2013) (Düben, 2020). However, while Ukraine and Russia’s culture, history and political affairs intertwine, Ukraine also shares common traits with other nations and empires it was subjugated to during its complex history, as is the case of the Mongol Empire, the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth, the Austro-Hungarian Empire, and the Russian Empire (Knispel, 2023).

Second, Putin emphasizes the size and extent of the Russian diaspora in Ukraine, which is a territory with pronounced regionalism, ethnical divisions and contesting national identities. According to the 2001 Ukrainian census, ethnic Russians make up 17% of Ukrainian nationalities and ethnic groups, and the percentage rises in the case of Crimea (39%), Lugansk (40%) and Donetsk (56%) (State Statistics Committee of Ukraine, 2001 Census). Putin has referred to these high numbers to justify an alleged duty of the Russian Federation to protect ethnic Russians living abroad — using violent means, if necessary.

From a pragmatic standpoint, a special Russian-Ukrainian relationship would be highly beneficial to the Kremlin. First, Ukraine is a strong political and trade partner that could either align with the East and the Eurasian Customs Union or with the West and the European Union, thus accentuating the East-West divide that populates Putin's political thought. Second, Ukraine offers points of geopolitical importance, such as Crimea's location on the Black Sea and its agricultural power (Masters, 2023). Third, Ukraine is a transit country and a substantial consumer of Russian gas, which Putin wouldn't want to let go of.

Crimea and the Donbas have always held a particular place in the Russian psyche. The two regions are said to have been part of *Novorossiya* (New Russia) — a concept created by Catherine the Great after she conquered eastern and southern Ukraine from the Ottoman Empire and annexed it to Russia in 1781 — and which is currently being used by the Kremlin to refer to a civilisational community that shares the Orthodox faith, the Russian language, and other aspects of the Russian culture and common history (Menon & Rumer, 2015, p. 9). Putin brought this concept back in his information campaign in Crimea and the Donbas to appeal to the two regions (Kofman et al., 2017, 51). In the eyes of the President of the Russian Federation, Russian-speaking eastern and southern Ukraine had always been an internal part of Russia and both regions were wrongly incorporated into Ukraine after the dissolution of the Soviet Union (Kuzio, 2017, p. 212).

The two regions themselves share a high level of attachment to their Soviet past and identity, especially compared with the other Ukrainian geographies. A 2013 survey from the Razumkov Centre revealed support for the Eurasian Customs Union was superior in South and Eastern Ukraine where 58,8% and 53% of respondents expressed their preference for the Russian-designed organisation, compared with the Western and

Central regions, which leaned more strongly toward the European Union (76,3% and 57,9%, respectively) (Peisakhin, 2013).

The arguments laid in the previous paragraphs have been used by Putin as justifications for his aspirations regarding the Crimean Peninsula and Donbas and his desire to assert direct control over them. Putin exploited distorted historical, cultural and religious arguments to legitimise the annexation of Crimea and Russia's brazen actions in the Donbas.

Recount of events: the Annexation of Crimea

On the 21st of November 2013, Ukrainian President Viktor Yanukovich turned down an association agreement with the European Union (EU) at the Eastern Partnership Summit in Vilnius, and opted, in its place, for an economic agreement with Moscow. (Grytsenko, 2013). Yanukovich's goal was straightforward: he did not want to hamper Ukrainian-Russian relations.

Within hours, thousands of pro-European Ukrainians gathered on Kyiv's Independence Square to protest this decision, initiating a three-month-long demonstration referred to as Euromaidan (Revolution of Dignity) (BBC News, 2013). Faced with increasing contestation of his regime, Yanukovich was ousted from office and fled to Russia (Yugas, 2017). Consequently, the Rada (the Ukrainian Parliament) appointed an acting President, Oleksandr Turchynov, and a Prime Minister, Serhiy Arbusov, who both shared positive attitudes toward the signing of the EU-Ukraine Association agreement.

Between January and March, pro-Russian protests emerged to further destabilize Ukraine. Demonstrators argued that the Euromaidan protests were fundamentally anti-Russian. The violence started to rise as protests became more radicalized, culminating in

the killing of 100 protesters and the wounding of many more by police units on the 19th and 20th of February (Traynor, 2017).

In the chaos and confusion that resulted from the intense demonstrations, the Russo-Ukrainian war broke out. On the morning of the 27th of February, unidentified troops occupied the Crimean peninsula and seized the buildings of the Verkhovna Rada and the government of the Autonomous Republic of Crimea (Administratior, 2023). The armed men bore no insignia and, consequently, were referred to as “little green men” or “polite people” by international media outlets that thought these were separatists from Crimea (Shevchenko, 2014). Nevertheless, the troops spoke in Russian, carried similar guns to the Russian Army and moved vehicles with Russian plates, generating suspicion about their potential Russian nationality (Shevchenko, 2014).

When confronted with such an accusation, Vladimir Putin initially denied his country’s involvement. During his first public speech about the Crimean crisis, the President of the Russian Federation argued that the armed men “were local self-defence units” (Putin, 2014).

The mobilisation of troops in Crimea was followed by a referendum on the inclusion of Crimea into the Russian Federation and the restoration of the 1992 Crimean Constitution. According to RT, over 95,5% of the inquired Crimean citizens voted in favour of the annexation (BBC News, 2014). Nevertheless, the handling of the referendum was denounced by Ukraine, the US and the EU (Yuhas, 2017).

The Crimean annexation was deemed completed by the Russian Federation when, on the 18th of March, the Supreme Council of Crimea declared Independence from Ukraine and signed the Treaty of Accession of the Republic of Crimea to Russia (Pifer, 2002). In his speech to the Crimean people, Vladimir Putin promised to protect all ethnic

groups from Western aggression and joyfully declared the region's alleged return home, "Crimea has always been and remains an inseparable part of Russia" (Siddique, 2017).

Recount of events: the Conflict in the Donbas

As chaos was taking place in Crimea, Russia launched a full-scale invasion in the southeastern regions of Ukraine, characterized by "regular fighting between separatists (supported by Moscow with forces, training, and advanced weapons) and the Ukrainian army." (Studzińska, 2015, p. 32).

What started as anti-Euromaidan protests in Donetsk and Lugansk soon escalated into the seizing of government buildings and, ultimately, declarations of independence from both republics. Such an event prompted a response by the government of Ukraine, which set up an anti-terrorist operation in April 2014. The operation was run with "limited armed forces and volunteer battalions, many of which were composed of veterans of the Euromaidan" (Kuzio, 2017, p. 252). Nevertheless, Ukraine was able to move fast and take control of key areas around the Donbas cities (Kofman et al., 2017, p. 42).

Ukraine's strong pushback compelled Russia to send more soldiers and weapons to the front in order to avoid defeat. On 11 April, the Daily Mail reported images of 40 000 troops, tanks and fighter jets reaching close to the Ukrainian border in what looked like an attempt to intervene in the conflict (Bloom, 2014). But besides the presence of more Russian troops, the Russian Federation ensured that "separatists were supplied with weapons to shoot down Ukrainian aircraft and helicopters, first man pads (shoulder-fired anti-aircraft missiles) and later more sophisticated surface to air missile systems" (Kuzio, 2017, p. 252).

That was the case of the Malaysia Airlines incident, in which the airline company's flight MH17 which was travelling from Amsterdam to Kuala Lumpur was

shot down in rebel-held territory on the 17th of July 2014 (BBC News, 2020). Ukrainian elected President Petro Poroshenko called for the creation of a commission to investigate the incident (Walker et al., 2014). A Dutch safety board took on the task and in October of the following year, it found that the crash was caused by a “missile launched from separatist-controlled territory, possibly by a Buk⁶ brought across the border from Russia” (Walker & Borger, 2017). Putin and the manufacturer of the Buk anti-aircraft system denied that Buk fragments were found at the crash site (Walker & Borger, 2017) and the Russian Federation answered the allegations with several false narratives.

In September 2014 both sides signed the Minsk I Peace Agreement. Nevertheless, the ceasefire lasted until Russia launched a second offensive in January (Kofman et al., 2017, p. 45). Ukraine, responded badly to the increase in force coming from Russia, following the US, Canada and EU’s decision not to supply defensive military equipment due to the recently signed peace agreement (Kuzio, 2017, p. 252). Consequently, Russia managed to take control of the People’s Republic of Donetsk and Lugansk in this period.

A new ceasefire, foreseen in the Minsk II Agreement, entered into force in February 2015. It aimed at suspending the conflict in Eastern Ukraine and required Ukraine to concede a special constitutional status to the occupied regions (Mankoff, 2022, p. 9).

While the Russian-Ukrainian conflict evolved after the signing of Minsk II, the present dissertation will only cover up to this point in time due to length constraints. After February, the conflict entered a low-intensity phase and became more sporadic, until the 24th of February 2022 when Russia invaded Ukraine and started a full-scale war.

⁶ A self-propelled, medium-range surface-to-air missile system developed by the Soviet Union.

III. II. Methodology: Dissemination of Disinformation Narratives in RT and Sputnik

With the goal of answering the question about the contribution of RT and Sputnik in the Russian war of information in Ukraine, this dissertation will use a qualitative research approach and a content analysis methodology to monitor and study the articles published by the two English-speaking online publications during the coverage of the Ukrainian conflict between 2013 and 2015.

Commonly used in social sciences and in media studies, content analysis is a robust methodology that determines the presence of concepts from large quantities of qualitative data and derives significance from them (Berg & Lune, 2012, pp. 182-184) (Krippendorff, 2014, p. 11). Content analysis can be used to decipher the meaning of artifacts such as written content (e.g., books, interviews, news, speeches, historical documents, ads) and audio-visual content (e.g., images and videos) (Quivy & Campenhoudt, 1982, p. 226). It recognises that text or other content forms will have no objective qualities or single meanings *per se* and that their significance will emerge from the process of someone engaging with them conceptually.

News pieces, which have been studied in content analysis since the 20th century and that are the object of this research, are complex, nuanced and descriptive text artifacts written by people for people. On the one hand, news are produced by journalists (professionals who follow the newsroom's editorial line and, more implicitly, the company's vendetta despite their own subjectivity). On the other hand, news are consumed by audiences who may accept or deny the article's framing depending on how it fits their own perceptions of the world. Unlike other methodologies, one of the biggest strengths of content analysis can be found in the importance it attributes to the researcher

and his/her subjectivity and critical thinking. A researcher questions what a message means, but also who wrote it, in which context and why, not forgetting the effects it can have on the target audience. A researcher will be able to study explicit and implicit meaning and understand the ulterior motives of the message sender (Bardin, 1997, p. 9).

Nevertheless, like other methodologies, content analysis has its weaknesses, as it is the case of reliability and confirmability. Reliability refers to the researcher's ability to consistently analyse the same data in a similar way over time. It can become a challenge when content analysis is performed by a team of various researchers or during an extensive period. Confirmability occurs when researchers intentionally look for data that supports their arguments. Any honest researcher should be aware of his/her bias and strive to neutrally exercise empirical research based on the application of defined rules (Quivy & Campenhoudt, 1982, pp. 230 and 231).

The use of the content analysis methodology in this dissertation can be described as follows. Using a VPN service to access geo-restricted content⁷, the news production of RT (RT.com) and Sputnik (SputnikNews.com) was surveyed on four specific events: i) the Euromaidan protests, ii) the annexation of Crimea, iii) the military engagements in the Donbass and iv) the MH17 flight downing. In practice, this meant searching for specific keywords related to each of the events (e.g., Euromaidan, protests, demonstrators, Right Sector, Pravyi Sektor, violence, coup d'état and Yanukovich for the first event) and collecting the articles that appeared in the search results. Once all articles were collected, their content was reviewed and summarized. By this stage, it was possible to identify prevailing narratives and discourses (categorical analysis) in the surveyed news pieces (Quivy & Campenhoudt, 1982, p. 227).

⁷ In response to Russia's illegal invasion of Ukraine, the European Council (EC) suspended the broadcasting activities of RT and Sputnik in the EU in March 2022, making their websites unavailable to EU citizens. The EC recognized that these outlets conducted disinformation actions against the European Union and its member states.

It should be noted that RT and Sputnik operate under Russia’s “firehose of falsehoods” disinformation model (Christopher and Matthews, 2016, p. 1). They disseminate large volumes of news, mostly comprising conspiracy theories that aim to pollute the information environment with an overwhelming amount of information and blur the line between truth and lies. During the conflict in Ukraine, both news websites produced hundreds of news pieces on each of the four aforementioned events. Some of them were repetitions of the same content and offered nothing new. Therefore, despite having reviewed over 210 articles published between November 2013 and July 2015 (Appendix 1), only 85 pieces are directly quoted in the in-depth qualitative analysis. Through this methodology, it was found that 13 disinformation themes, which originated in Russia’s rhetoric, were reproduced in the news coverage of RT and Sputnik (Table 2.). The repetition of false narratives, which will be presented and debunked in the next pages, revealed some level of coordination with the Kremlin.

Event	Period analysed (including)	Disinformation Narratives
Event 1. The Euromaidan protests	11/13 to 03/14	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Disinformation narrative 1: The Euromaidan demonstrations were backed by the US and the EU, and they ultimately led to a <i>coup d'état</i> in Ukraine. - Disinformation narrative 2: Neo-nazi, extremist forces took over the Euromaidan protests, causing them to become increasingly violent.
Event 2. The Crimean annexation	02/14 to 04/14	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Disinformation narrative 3: The Crimean annexation was conducted by local self-defence troops and Russia was not involved in its planning. - Disinformation narrative 4: Russia had the right to protect Ukraine because of their special historical relationship. - Disinformation narrative 5: The will of the Crimean people was to join Russia. - Disinformation narrative 6: What Russia is doing in Crimea is no worse than what was done in Western-led operations (whataboutism).
Event 3. The Conflict in the Donbass	03/14 to 09/14	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Disinformation narrative 7: Russia was not involved in the events that took place in Donetsk and Lugansk. - Disinformation narrative 8: The residents of Donetsk and Lugansk wanted to follow Crimea’s steps and organize a referendum to secede from Ukraine. - Disinformation narrative 9: Kyiv is committing many crimes and human rights violations through its anti-terrorist operation.

Event 4. The MH17 flight downing	07/14 to 07/15	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Disinformation narrative 10: The local militias were not involved in the downing of the MH17 plane nor were the Russians. - Disinformation narrative 11: The attack was conducted by the Ukrainian government which employed a Buk surface-to-air missile in the city of Donetsk. - Disinformation narrative 12: Ukrainian fighter jets caused the crash of the MH17 flight. - Disinformation narrative 13: Russia supported the international investigation, but other countries undermined its successful conduction.
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Table 2. Disinformation narratives per event

Event 1. The Euromaidan Protests

Disinformation narrative 1: the Euromaidan demonstrations were backed by the US and the EU, and they ultimately led to a *coup d'état* in Ukraine.

The rise of organized protests in Kyiv’s Independence Square in November 2013 quickly became the object of commentary by the Kremlin and a topic of distorted news coverage by the Russian media. As soon as the demonstrations started, Putin came forward to accuse the EU of pressuring Ukraine into signing the Association Agreement and of triggering the Euromaidan movement (BBC, 2013). In a December resolution, the Russian State Duma expressed its concerns over foreign interference in Ukraine and accused Western politicians of making “explicit calls for revolting” against the “legitimately elected authority of the country” (Itar Tass, 2013). Four months later, the Kremlin’s concerns over foreign interference and alleged human rights violations were documented in the report “White Book on Violations of Human Rights and the Rule of Law (November 2013 – March 2014). Out of the many claims the report made, it started by arguing that the US and the EU had weaponized the protests with the goal of implementing a pro-Western government in Ukraine (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation, 2014, p. 63).

To sustain this accusation, the White Book cited a study by Steve Wiseman, an alleged “American political scientist”, who argued that the US Agency for International

Development provided funds to Ukrainian organisations, and that it was involved in the planning of events in Ukraine well “in advance” (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation, 2014, pp. 32 and 33). The report scrutinized the actions of American and European public figures, whose gestures toward the Euromaidan protesters were seen as flagrant involvement and meddling.



Figure 2. Victoria Nuland, the US Department of State Assistant Secretary for European and Eurasian Affairs, offered food to protesters in December 2013. Source: (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation, 2014).

According to the Kremlin, actions like those of Nuland when the US Assistant Secretary visited the Ukrainian protesters and offered them food, or when the EU-Ukraine association was signed during the European Council meeting on March 21, 2014, showcased the West’s recognition of the so-called “illegitimate government of Ukraine” that bypassed “the legally elected Viktor Yanukovich” (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation, 2014, pp. 31-33).

In their news coverage, RT and Sputnik characterized the Euromaidan protests as a *coup d'état*, often referring to the Ukrainian Prime Minister and its government as “couped appointed” (RT, 2013aa; RT, 2014aa; RT, 2014ab). These intentional references suggested that an illegitimate seizure of power had taken place, which forced Yanukovich to flee the country. Likewise, the alleged interference of the EU and the US in the Euromaidan was a recurrent topic in the news coverage of both news websites. There were multiple references to “unprecedented meddling” (RT, 2013ab; RT, 2014ac) by foreign diplomats, who visited the protesters to express their support (RT, 2014ad). Several RT articles published in March 2014 claimed that the US donated over 5 billion dollars to the funding of the Euromaidan protests (see, for example, RT, 2014ae; RT, 2014af). Most mischaracterized a statement made by Victoria Nuland to the U.S-Ukraine Foundation in 2013, in which the then-US Assistant Secretary of State for European and Eurasian Affairs shared the following words:

“Since Ukraine’s independence in 1991, the United States has supported Ukrainians as they build democratic skills and institutions, as they promote civic participation and good governance, all of which are preconditions for Ukraine to achieve its European aspirations.” (U.S. Department of State, 2013).

Nevertheless, these articles used the aforementioned excerpt without mentioning the goal behind the American capital injection, which was to promote democracy-building in the region (RT, 2014ae). One example of quoting Nuland’s words out of context is an RT interview with the title “US foreign aid agencies paid for Kiev treat violence – ex-US agent Scott Rickard”, in which the interviewee argued that the US had been involved in foreign government overthrown since the color revolutions and that Ukraine was no exception:

“Well, it is public information. You have the folks at the National Endowment for Democracy who have been doing this since the [Rose Revolution]” (...).“Most of the money is coming from USAID and NGOs, and NGOs are actually funded by the government”. “If you are inciting violence and the money is basically going to organizations that may incite violence against the

standing government. That is inciting the revolution and I think that it's illegal by international laws, by far – the US has done it in half a dozen nations in the last 10 years” (RT, 2014af).

Parallel to its news coverage, RT published multiple opinion pieces which downplayed the Ukrainian perceptions of the EU and the US and painted the West in a negative light. One example is the commentary of alleged “political commentator” Aleksander Nebrasov, who makes the argument that Ukraine needs more support than the EU can provide while lobbying for the idea that EU citizens discriminate against Ukrainians (RT, 2013ac):

“I don’t think there’s much support (for the deal with the EU). I think there is a lot of confusion, a lot of people don’t understand what is going on. The most important thing for the Ukrainians to know is that there won’t be a free visa area. They won’t be able to travel to the West; they will encounter a lot of opposition from the West. The feeling across the EU is that immigrants steal their jobs, that they use their benefits and that they are a burden to their economies. I don’t understand why Ukrainians would want to go to countries which are basically hostile to them” (RT, 2013ac).

In its information debunking work, EUvsDisinfo, a project of the European External Action Service’s East StratCom Task Force, covered this disinformation narrative in detail and provided clarification to help differentiate fact from fiction. The organisation explained that the demonstrations that started in Kyiv in November 2013 resulted from the frustration of Ukrainians toward President Yanukovich (*Disinfo*, 2022). Yanukovich had been negotiating a trade agreement with the European Union for over seven years but put an end to it when the Russian President pressured Ukraine not to move any closer to the West, which halted the signing of the European Union-Ukraine Association Agreement and the Deep and Comprehensive Trade Agreement. Most Ukrainians supported this agreement and felt that their views were being disregarded by Yanukovich⁸. The decision to demonstrate in the Euromaidan highlighted Ukraine’s

⁸ A 2013 survey by IFAK, the Office of the Ukrainian research institute, revealed that 59% of Ukrainians supported a future EU-accession of their country. More than one thousand people were interviewed for this study.

European choice and it was fuelled by hope that there could be a change in the direction of the country's foreign policy (Dickinson, 2021).

As noted by Yevhen Fedchenko — the co-founder of the fact-checking website StopFake.org and Director of the Mohyla School of Journalism, Kyiv — the portrayal of the Euromaidan demonstrations as the upshot of EU and US involvement and the resurrection of the Cold-war reminiscent rhetoric of 'West' vs 'East', was designed to sow suspicion around international audiences, radicalize their views of events in Ukraine and mobilize the Russian domestic audience (Fedchenko , 2016, p. 161).

Disinformation narrative 2: neo-Nazi, extremist forces took over the Euromaidan protests, causing them to become increasingly violent.

Another strategic narrative that emerged during the Euromaidan protests concerned the alleged antisemitic, racist and xenophobic nature of the demonstrators. Beyond discussing the Euromaidan's attribution, Russia's White Book argued that the protests escalated to a "coercive rebellion" after fascist groups, known as *Pravyi Sektor* (Right Sector in English), joined the demonstrations (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation, 2014, p. 39). In the Kremlin's report, it is discussed that this violent extreme-right group made up a big part of the protesters and that it was constituted by the neo-Nazi movement *Stepan Bandera All-Ukrainian Organisation Trizub* (Trident); the *SocioNational Assembly/Patriot of Ukraine* (SNA/PU); the political party *Ukrainian National Assembly* (UNA); the *Bilyi Molot* (White Hammer) group, and violent football fans.

The *Pravyi Sektor* was described in the report as a highly organized and professionally equipped extremist faction, which committed a series of human rights

abuses, such as violations of the right to live, violations of public order and safety, violations of the use of torture, among others (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation, 2014, p. 40).



Figure 3. A photo of a clash between Euromaidan protesters and the Ukrainian authorities represents the violence brought by the *Pravyi Sektor* to the Euromaidan. Source: (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation, 2014).

In their news coverage of the Euromaidan events, RT and Sputnik provided multiple descriptions of the *Pravyi Sektor* using brute force against the police, which included beatings, the throwing of Molotov cocktails, and acts of torture (Sputnik, 2013aa; RT, 2013ad; RT, 2014ag; Sputnik, 2014ab; RT, 2014ah; Sputnik, 2014ab). Those depictions can often be described as sensationalist, as they share sordid details of the violent acts and clash with objective news coverage principles:

“Armored personnel carriers (APC) are now seen roaming central Kyiv. Some scenes of violent riots in the Ukrainian capital are reminiscent of big-budget Hollywood blockbusters, where in an odd collision of genres a WWII epic drama, *Enemy at the gates*, meets a post-apocalyptic video game, *Fallout*” (...) “Daredevil anti-government protesters, who have been out in the street for several weeks, have built up barricades from burnt police buses and heavy trucks. They

have been using overturned vehicles as shields against officers. A number of smashed vehicles were set on fire. Stun grenades, tear gas, gas canisters and, reportedly, rubber bullets were aimed at the demonstrators as they tried to reach parliament. Hundreds have been injured in recent days” (RT, 2014ai).



Figure 4. A photo showcasing violence between the Euromaidan protesters and the police forces. Source: (RT, 2014ai).

However, as the 2014 Ukrainian Elections came to demonstrate, Ukrainian support for radical groups was low and the presence of the radical right in the demonstrations “never amounted to more than a few hundred to a maximum of a thousand people” (Eitze & Gleichmann, 2014, p. 3). In the May 2014 Parliamentary Elections, the Right Sector’s candidate received 0,7% of the vote and that number only increased to 1.8% in the October 2014 parliamentary elections (Eitze & Gleichmann, 2014, p. 3). This statement was corroborated by BBC’s Kyiv correspondent David Stern who informed that the ultranationalists were “a small part of the overall campaign”, to which most protesters didn’t want to get associated. There was a common concern among demonstrators that Russia could generalize the participation of these forces to “tar the entire movement, which in fact happened” (US News & World Report, 2014).

Source	Title	Date	Summary	Related narrative(s)
RT	Thousands of protesters keep vigil at barricades in central Kiev	02.12.13	“But the Ukrainian authorities see “ <i>signs of a coup</i> ” in the attempts to block the government agencies by the protesters, Prime Minister Nikolay Azarov said on Monday during a meeting with ambassadors from EU states and the US in Kiev”.	The Euromaidan demonstrations were backed by the US and the EU, and they ultimately led to a <i>coup d'état</i> in Ukraine
RT	Gazprom won't extend discount gas prices for Ukraine	04.03.14	“The 33 percent discount was meant to help Naftogaz, Ukraine's nearly bankrupt national oil and gas company. Ukraine's coup-appointed Prime Minister, Aresny Yatsenuk, has suggested privatizing portions of Ukraine's energy sector, blaming Naftogaz for eating away profits”.	The Euromaidan demonstrations were backed by the US and the EU, and they ultimately led to a <i>coup d'état</i> in Ukraine
RT	Human rights violated by Ukraine's coup-appointed government	12.03.14	Reference to “coup-appointed government”.	The Euromaidan demonstrations were backed by the US and the EU, and they ultimately led to a <i>coup d'état</i> in Ukraine
RT	Muddling and meddling? US, EU politicians plunge deeper into Kiev protest	11.12.13	“US Assistant Secretary of State, Victoria Nuland, handed out snacks on Wednesday to protesters on Kiev's Independence Square (or ‘Maidan’ as it's nicknamed), making those who witnessed the scene wonder if a reciprocal gesture would be imaginable during something like an Occupy Wall Street protest in New York”.	The Euromaidan demonstrations were backed by the US and the EU, and they ultimately led to a <i>coup d'état</i> in Ukraine
RT	No EU country would tolerate Ukraine protest violence at home - Lavrov	21.01.14	“In December, European Union foreign policy chief Catherine Ashton and Guido Westerwelle, at the time Germany's foreign minister, visited the protesters. Although Lavrov made no direct mention of US involvement on Tuesday, US Assistant Secretary of State Victoria Nuland along with US senators Christopher Murphy and John McCain also visited the protest camp that month”.	The Euromaidan demonstrations were backed by the US and the EU, and they ultimately led to a <i>coup d'état</i> in Ukraine
RT	Ukraine Justice Ministry seized by rioters	27.01.14	“Several foreign diplomats - including European, US, and Canadian ambassadors - “ <i>inspected</i> ” Kiev's Independence Square on Sunday and spoke to representatives of the radical Right Sector group, the press service of the opposition Batkivshchyna (Fatherland) party said in a statement”.	The Euromaidan demonstrations were backed by the US and the EU, and they ultimately led to a <i>coup d'état</i> in Ukraine

RT	Coups for export: US has a history of supporting anti-govt upheavals	22.03.14	“The US has been selective in supporting the self-determination of nations. It continues to dismiss Crimea's choice to reunite with Russia, while at the same time backs the coup in Kiev. ”	The Euromaidan demonstrations were backed by the US and the EU, and they ultimately led to a <i>coup d'état</i> in Ukraine
RT	US foreign aid agencies paid for Kiev street violence - ex-US agent Scott Rickard	17.03.14	“Well, its public information. You have the folks at the National Endowment for Democracy who have been doing this since the [Rose Revolution]”. “Most of the money is coming from USAID and NGOs, and NGOs are actually funded by the government”. “If you are inciting violence and the money is basically going to organizations that may incite violence against the standing government. That is inciting the revolution and I think that it's illegal by international laws, by far – the US has done it in half a dozen nations in the last 10 years”	The Euromaidan demonstrations were backed by the US and the EU, and they ultimately led to a <i>coup d'état</i> in Ukraine
RT	Ukrainian leader “outraged”, slams violence in Kiev as police disperse protesters	30.11.13	“Meanwhile a petition has been posted on the US White House website asking the US government to help “peacefully overthrow the current Government and President” of Ukraine and to hold “democratic elections for a new parliament and bring to justice all present perpetrators of state power”.”	The Euromaidan demonstrations were backed by the US and the EU, and they ultimately led to a <i>coup d'état</i> in Ukraine
RT	Clashes in Kiev amid massive pro-EU protests: LIVE UPDATES (Part 1)	1.12.13	“On Sunday, dozens of young officers from the Interior Troops were injured by violent protesters from ultra-right groups, who attempted to break through a cordon with flares, stones, chains and even a tractor to storm the presidential administration. Some reports mistakenly referred to the young cadets as members of the Berkut special police forces, who carried out the brutal dispersal of Maidan protesters on Saturday morning.”	Neo-Nazi, extremist forces took over the Euromaidan protests, causing them to become increasingly violent
Sputnik	Police Break Up Protesters' Barricades in Kiev.	10.12.13	“Police used shields and batons to dislodge the demonstrators from the sites while some protesters threw gas canisters at the troops. About ten people were injured in the operation. Two of the injured were police.”	Neo-Nazi, extremist forces took over the Euromaidan protests, causing them to become increasingly violent
RT	Teargas, fire, smoke as clashes erupt between police and	19.01.14	“Protesters wearing orange helmets and wielding sticks and flares clashed with cordons of security forces surrounding government buildings and attempted to turn over a police bus. According to police, radical activists were also throwing smoke grenades.”	Neo-Nazi, extremist forces took over the Euromaidan protests, causing them to become increasingly violent

	protesters in Kiev			
Sputnik	Police Battle Protesters in Kiev as Crisis in Ukraine Deepens	22.01.14	“Demonstrators in helmets, many of them wielding sticks and shields, some of them throwing Molotov cocktails engaged in pitched battles with lines of advancing lines of riot police for much of the day on Ulitsa Grushevskogo, a street flanking the Cabinet office and parliament.”	Neo-Nazi, extremist forces took over the Euromaidan protests, causing them to become increasingly violent
RT	Ukrainian opposition rejects government proposal, talks to continue	23.01.14	“Anti-government unrest in Ukraine spilled beyond the capital of Kiev on Thursday as the government held talks with opposition leaders. Rioters began violently attacking local administration buildings in other regions of the country, mostly in the west, attempting to force local governments out of office. Around 2,000 protesters took over the local administration building in the western city of Lvov, telling the region’s governor that they are taking power into their own hands”	Neo-Nazi, extremist forces took over the Euromaidan protests, causing them to become increasingly violent
RT	“Fallout” Kiev: Surreal scenes from rioting Ukrainian capital (PHOTOS).	22.01.14	“Armored personnel carriers (APC) are now seen roaming central Kiev. Some scenes of violent riots in the Ukrainian capital are reminiscent of big-budget Hollywood blockbusters, where in an odd collision of genres a WWII epic drama, Enemy At The Gates, meets a post-apocalyptic video game, Fallout.”	Neo-Nazi, extremist forces took over the Euromaidan protests, causing them to become increasingly violent
Sputnik	Police Claims Kiev Blast Suggests Opposition Terror Plot	07.02.14	“Police in Ukraine said Friday that a blast at the headquarters of anti-government demonstrators in the capital may have been caused by the accidental detonation of a bomb being primed for a terrorist attack. Right-wing radical groups are responsible.”	Neo-Nazi, extremist forces took over the Euromaidan protests, causing them to become increasingly violent

Table 3. Event 1 – The Euromaidan protests: Disinformation narratives per news article

Event 2. The Annexation of Crimea

Disinformation narrative 3: The Crimean annexation was conducted by local self-defence troops and Russia was not involved in its planning

On February 27, 2014, troops wearing balaclavas and Russian-style uniforms without insignia took over the Crimean Parliament and other strategic locations across the Ukrainian Peninsula.

Out of all the disinformation narratives conducted by Russia in Ukraine, the claim of non-Russian intervention was the most popular and far-reaching. From Putin's first press conference onwards, there was a continuous assertion that the troops present in Crimea were "local defence units" acting without any third-party support (*Washington Post*, 2014a). As evidence arose supporting the opposite, Putin did not break character and kept defending the innocence of Russia. Even when confronted with the overwhelming similarities between the uniforms worn by the squads and the Russian military, the Russian President maintained that all post-Soviet states shared similar attire, which could easily be bought by civilians in any store (*Washington Post*, 2014a). More blatant lying from Russian officials was noticed when Russian Defence Minister Sergei Shoigu accused videos of military vehicles with Russian license plates in Crimea of being a "provocation" and "complete nonsense"; or when Russian Foreign Minister Lavrov argued that he could not call the "self-defense forces" back to base because they were not Russian (Brennan, 2014).

In their news coverage, RT and Sputnik ignored or gave little screen time to international concerns about Russian involvement in the Ukrainian peninsula. On February 27, when the Russian military arrived in Crimea to seize strategic locations, RT quoted Russia's Defence Minister Anatoly Antonov when he said that the fleet presence in Crimea did not pose a threat to Ukraine, alleging that it was "in compliance with

standing agreements between the two countries” (Sputnik, 2014ac) (RT, 2014aj). Antonov’s goal with this statement was to divert attention from Russia’s increasing deployments in the Black Sea naval base and reassure the international community.

Additionally, while covering the annexation, both RT and Sputnik made the conscious choice of referring to the invaders as “unidentified armed men” “self-defense squads” and “pro-Russian militias” thus suggesting that the troops present in Ukraine were local militias not related to Russia nor the Kremlin (Sputnik, 2014ac) (RT, 2014aj) (Sputnik, 2014ad). To support their claims, both papers often cited Putin who, for as long as he could, stuck to his statement that Russia had no plans to annex the Peninsula (Sputnik, 2014ae) (Sputnik, 2014af). RT even went as far as to interview Crimea’s Prime Minister Sergey Aksyonov, who argued that the self-defence forces were, for the most part, “local volunteers, Russian servicemen, paratroopers and Afghan veterans” (RT, 2014ak).

An equally sensationalist article was published by RT with the title “Tea, sandwiches, music, photos with self-defence forces mark peaceful Sunday in Simferopol” (RT, 2014am). The piece described how habitants of Simferopol had friendly interactions with Crimea’s self-defence forces - who had “taken the role of celebrities” and posed for many photos (RT, 2014am).



Figure 5. Crimeans pose with anonymous military men in Simferopol. Source: (RT, 2014am)

The claim that the Crimean annexation was conducted by local self-defence troops started to fall apart on March 6, when former American RT anchor, Liz Wahl quit her job on air, while confessing that she could not “be part of a network funded by the Russian government that whitewashes the actions of Putin” (Carroll, 2014). Likewise, later in March, Putin implied his country’s involvement in Ukraine when he praised the Russian military for “helping to ensure peaceful conditions” for holding the referendum and for “preventing bloodshed” in Crimea (Sputnik, 2014an).

A direct confession was only made by Putin on April 17, when the Russian President admitted that Russian forces were present in Crimea before the referendum. In a special livestream that was broadcasted by Channel One, Rossiya-1 and Rossiya-24 TV, as well as the Mayak, Vesti FM and Radio Rossy radio stations, Putin gave an unexpected answer to the question “Who were these young men? The little green men”:

“I have already spoken about this publicly on several occasions, perhaps not loud enough. However, in my conversations with my foreign colleagues I did not hide the fact that our goal was to ensure proper conditions for the people of Crimea to be able to freely express their will. And so we had to take the necessary measures in order to prevent the situation in Crimea from unfolding the way it is now unfolding in southeastern Ukraine. We didn’t want any tanks, any nationalist combat units or people with extreme views armed with automatic weapons. Of course, the Russian

servicemen did back the Crimean self-defence forces. They acted in a civil but a decisive and professional manner, as I've already said", (Putin, 2014a).

Disinformation narrative 4: Russia had the right to protect Ukraine because of their special historical relationship

Putin's next disinformation narrative maintained that Russia had to exercise the United Nations's (UN) Right to Protect (R2P) to ensure the security of the Russian-speaking population residing in the Crimean peninsula. According to the Russian President, the "almost 1.5 million" ethnic Russians who lived in Crimea in 2014 were under a grave threat to their security following the wrongful rise of Kyiv's fascist government (*Washington Post*, 2014b). In the view of Putin, the Ukrainian political leadership was comprised of "nationalists, neo-Nazis, Russophobes and anti-Semites" who attempted "to deprive Russians of their historical memory, of their language and subject them to forced assimilation" (*Washington Post*, 2014b) — a narrative that only grew in strength following the Ukrainian Parliament's decision to change the status of Russian as a regional language before it was vetoed by interim President Oleksandr Turchynov.

Crimea is particularly relevant to Putin because of the role the region plays in Russia's imperialist identity, and which the President described in the following way:

"Everything in Crimea speaks of our shared history and pride. This is the location of ancient Khersones, where Prince Vladimir was baptised. His spiritual feat of adopting Orthodoxy predetermined the overall basis of the culture, civilisation and human values that unite the peoples of Russia, Ukraine and Belarus." - Vladimir Putin, 17th March 2014 (*Washington Post*, 2014b).

The lack of response from international organisations and the alleged inability of Crimeans to ensure their own security during March 2014, led Putin to claim Russia's special right to defend his fraternal link with Crimeans through the UN's R2P.

On March 1st, Sputnik reported a telephone conversation between US President Barack Obama and Putin, in which the Russian President asserted that “Moscow reserved the right to protect its own interests and those of Russian speakers in the event of violence breaking out in eastern Ukraine and Crimea” (Sputnik, 2014ag). At the time, Putin drew attention “to the provocative, criminal acts of ultranationalist” forces in Kyiv’s government, which threatened the lives of the Russians who resided in Ukraine (Sputnik, 2014ag). This argument was repeated on the occasion of the UN’s Council of Human Rights that took place in March 2014 when Lavrov claimed that Russia’s decision to dispatch troops to Ukraine was not an act of aggression, but a measure to protect the human rights of Russian citizens (Sputnik, 2014ah). This speech took place after the Russian parliament granted Putin with formal authority to start a military engagement in Crimea, which was already being conducted in secret. The Foreign Minister defended that the Russian operations would aim at “protecting the most fundamental human right” of Russian compatriots: “the right to live” (Sputnik, 2014ah).

The narrative of the need to protect ethnic Russians from the Ukrainian Russophobe government is questionable and a recurring framing the Russian Federation has used to argue for interference in the affairs of other states. In fact, 2014, was not the first time that Putin made use of the UN principle to justify illegal military actions. Already in 2008, Putin had stated that ethnic Russians were vulnerable in Georgia in an attempt to legitimise his own actions in the country (Ashby, 2014). In the case of Ukraine, Putin claimed that the threat originated from Kyiv’s alleged neo-fascist government, which, according to him, was committing genocide against Russian Ukrainians (Ashby, 2014). Nevertheless, as the preliminary ruling of the International Court of Justice came to prove, Russia’s use of the UN’s principle of R2P was inadequate. As Russia never presented convincing evidence of ethnic Russians being systematically targeted by the

Right Sector, the ICJ indicated that Russia had no grounds to attack Ukraine and ultimately condemned “the decision of the Russian Federation to increase the readiness” (International Court of Justice, 2022). This allegation that Russia’s R2P use was inadequate is corroborated by Russia’s attempts to prevent human right monitors from entering Crimea, as was observed when UN representatives were withheld from visiting the Ukrainian peninsula (Charbonneau, 2014).

Disinformation narrative 5: The will of the Crimean people was to join Russia.

To justify the claim that Crimeans need to be protected from the Right Sector, Putin argued that the Crimean people wanted to reunify with Russia. The Russian President maintained that the Crimeans’ request for help after the rise of Kyiv's anti-constitutional government demonstrated that Ukraine found comfort in reuniting with its neighboring country (*Washington Post*, 2014a). And if that argument wasn’t enough, Putin defended that the habitants of the Ukrainian Peninsula “clearly and convincingly” expressed their will to join Russia on the occasion of the March referendum, when the large majority voted in favour of reunification (*Washington Post*, 2014b). According to the President of the Russian Federation, it was important to respect the will of Crimea in defining its own future and give them the tools necessary to exercise self-determination, as it was the case of the regional referendum.

Sputnik reproduced this disinformation narrative when it covered Crimea’s refusal to recognise Kyiv’s interim government. (see, for example, Sputnik, 2014ai) The same argument was amplified when Sputnik published multiple stories on Crimea’s internationally unrecognized referendum by claiming that 93% of Crimeans supported the reunification of the Peninsula with Russia (Sputnik, 2014aj; Sputnik, 2014 ak). The

way both news outlets proceeded with the journalistic coverage of the referendum while avoiding discussing the concerns of the International Community regarding pressure, harassment and propaganda in the election process, portrayed it as fair and democratic. More sensationalist takes on the narrative emerged when Sputnik published an article on referendum celebrations — in which alleged groups of locals took the streets singing “Soviet-era songs” and holding “Russian flags” — ; or when it reported on a spike in applications for Russian passports from residents of Crimea (Sputnik, 2014a; Sputnik, 2014a).

This narrative was proved false when a report from the UN’s High Commissioner for Human Rights demonstrated that the referendum was illegal and rigged. In the report, it is explained that the voting procedure did not follow international rules and that it was held under conditions of intimidation, harassment, and torture – making it “unlawful” (United Nations, 2014, p. 8). The referendum was planned and organized by a self-proclaimed authority, which is not recognized by Ukraine and multiple members of the international community. Additionally, it did not follow the Ukrainian constitution, the international law, or was it observed by Organisation for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE, 2014).

Disinformation narrative 6: What Russia is doing in Crimea is no worse than what was done in Western-led operations.

To deflect attention from Russia’s own making in Crimea, Putin and other high-end political figures resorted to whataboutism, a phenomenon where instead of addressing criticism, the Kremlin turns the tables against the West and makes multiple unfounded accusations. In various instances, Putin argued that US and EU leaders did not comply with international law, showing little respect for the international community and the

rules-based order. Like this, the Russian President questions the West's authority to comment on the Russian military engagement in Ukraine. In a speech from March 2014, the Russian President said:

“I have to recall the actions of the United States in Afghanistan, Iraq and Libya, where they either acted without any UN sanctions or completely distorted the content of such resolutions, as was the case with Libya. (...)

Our partners, especially in the United States, always clearly formulate their own geopolitical and state interests and follow them with persistence. Then, using the principle “You're either with us or against us” they draw the whole world in. And those who do not join in get ‘beaten’ until they do.” (Washington Post, 2014a).

RT echoed Putin's narrative that the Crimean annexation was not as bad as other military operations conducted by the EU and the US. In an article titled “Art of drills: 10 NATO war games that almost started armed conflicts”, RT claimed that both NATO and the US lacked transparency during their military drills on foreign soil. South Korea, Poland, Latvia, Bulgaria, the Persian Gulf, Japan and Jordan were a few of the cases pointed out by the Russian paper, which argued for Western hypocrisy and plotting against Russia (RT, 2014am). Likewise, RT wrote a story about the then-US Secretary of State's statement that it was unacceptable to invade a sovereign country in the 21st century. RT opted to spin the Secretary of State's comment and proceeded to accuse the United States of violating sovereignty and territorial integrity in Syria, Libya, Iraq and Serbia. In a flagrant comment, the news website wrote: “The United States government merely pays lip service to sovereignty and territorial integrity, it picks and chooses” (RT, 2014an).

Source	Title	Date	Summary	Related narrative(s)
Sputnik	Russian Fleet Poses No Threat to Ukraine – Senior Official	27.02.14	“Deputy defence Minister Anatoly Antonov states that the presence of the Russian fleet in Crimea does not pose a threat to Ukraine and that it is within the framework of a 1997 agreement regulating the use of Black Sea naval bases on the peninsula”.	The Crimean annexation was conducted by local self-defence troops and Russia was not involved in the planning of the event
Sputnik	Armed Men Seize Crimea Parliament	27.02.14	“Unidentified armed men seized the parliament in the Crimean Peninsula in southern Ukraine. A Russian flag was hoisted by the self-defence flags”.	The Crimean annexation was conducted by local self-defence troops and Russia was not involved in the planning of the event
RT	Armed ‘self-defence squads’ partially withdraw from Simferopol airport	28.02.14	“Self-defence squads” driving trucks without license plates took control of the Simferopol airport, Crimea. Are described as “nice guys” by witnesses”.	The Crimean annexation was conducted by local self-defence troops and Russia was not involved in the planning of the event
Sputnik	Russian Parliament Approves Military Action in Ukraine	01.03.14	“Russia’s upper house of parliament approved a request from President Vladimir Putin to deploy forces in Ukraine if necessary as the lives of Russian citizens are under threat”.	The Crimean annexation was conducted by local self-defence troops and Russia was not involved in the planning of the event
Sputnik	Ukrainian Troops in Crimea Side with Pro-Russia Forces	02.03.14	“Ukrainian servicemen stationed in Crimea are leaving in masse their military units and handing over weaponry and arsenals to local pro-Russia authorities and militia, an RIA Novosti correspondent reported Sunday”.	The Crimean annexation was conducted by local self-defence troops and Russia was not involved in the planning of the event
Sputnik	Putin Denies Sending Russian Troops to Crimea	04.03.14	Putin says that Russia has not deployed any troops to Crimea and that it has no plans to annex the Peninsula. According to the Russian President, the troops were local militias despite resemblance to Russian troops.	The Crimean annexation was conducted by local self-defence troops and Russia was not involved in the planning of the event
Sputnik	5,500 Ukrainian Soldiers Defect to Serve an Independent Crimea	04.03.14	Ukrainian troops stationed in Crimea are leaving the Ukraine army to join the pro-Russia militia.	The Crimean annexation was conducted by local self-defence troops and Russia was not involved in the planning of the event
RT	Tea, sandwiches, music, photos with self-defence forces mark peaceful Sunday in Simferopol	02.03.14	Habitants of Simferopol have friendly interactions with the “self-defence forces”.	The Crimean annexation was conducted by local self-defence troops and Russia was not involved in the planning of the event

RT	Crimea won't work with illegitimate Kiev govt – PM Akseyonov	07.03.14	Crimea's Prime Minister Sergey Akseyonov says that the self-defence forces are, for the most part, local volunteers, Russian servicemen, paratroopers and Afghan veterans and that the PM is in charge of them.	The Crimean annexation was conducted by local self-defence troops and Russia was not involved in the planning of the event
Sputnik	Russian Military's Professionalism Prevented Bloodshed in Crimea	28.03.14	Putin praised the military for their actions in Crimea which helped ensure peaceful conditions for the holding of the referendum and prevented bloodshed.	The Crimean annexation was fuelled by local self-defence troops and Russia was not involved
Sputnik	Putin Denies Planning Crimean Reunification in Advance	10.04.14	Putin denied involvement in the preparation of the annexation but admits that Russia became involved when he learned about the Crimean residents' expectations for the March 16 referendum	The Crimean annexation was fuelled by local self-defence troops and Russia was not involved
RT	Putin acknowledges Russian military servicemen were in Crimea	17.04.14	In a Kremlin's Q&A session, Putin said the armed men without insignia, were Russian troops. The President said he never concealed the fact from his foreign counterparts and that they aimed to ensure the referendum. However, nothing was prepared in advance.	The Crimean annexation was fuelled by local self-defence troops and Russia was not involved
Sputnik	Ukraine's Loss of Territorial Integrity Resulted from Internal Processes	01.04.14	"Ukraine's loss of territorial integrity was a result of internal processes, not interference from Russia, which never violated its obligations under a 1994 agreement on respecting Ukrainian borders, the Russian Foreign Ministry said Tuesday." The fault is from Kiev's government which came to power in the wake of an unconstitutional coup."	The Crimean annexation was fuelled by local self-defence troops and Russia was not involved
Sputnik	Putin tells Obama Russia Will Act in Case of Ukraine Violence	01.03.14	In a telephone conversation with US President Barack Obama, Putin said that Russia has the right to protect Russian speakers in Ukraine as the government has been taken by a nationalistic government.	Russia had the right to protect Ukraine because of their special historical relationship
Sputnik	Russia Says Ukraine Action Aimed at Protecting Human Rights	03.03.14	Russia's Foreign Minister said in a speech to the UN Council on Human Rights that the decision to dispatch troops to Ukraine is not an act of aggression, but a measure aimed at protecting human rights and Russian citizens.	Russia had the right to protect Ukraine because of their special historical relationship
Sputnik	Moscow Reaffirms Right to Defend Russians in Ukraine	14.03.14	In a statement following clashes between demonstrators in Ukraine's Donetsk region, Russia's Foreign Minister said that Russia reserves the right to ensure the safety of all Russians in Ukraine.	Russia had the right to protect Ukraine because of their special relationship
Sputnik	Putin Tells UN Chief That Crimea Referendum Legal	15.03.14	Putin told UN Secretary General Ban Ki-moon that the upcoming referendum in Crimea was in line with the UN Charter.	The will of the Crimean people was to join Russia
Sputnik	93 Percent of Crimeans Vote for Joining Russia	16.03.14	"Exit polls showed that some 93 percent of residents of Ukraine's autonomous republic of <u>Crimea</u> voted on Sunday for seceding from Ukraine and joining Russia.	The will of the Crimean people was to join Russia

			They were asked if they wanted to secede from Ukraine and request annexation by Russia or to remain part of Ukraine with expanded autonomy for the regions”	
Sputnik	Crimeans celebrate landslide vote to join Russia	17.03.14	Thousands of Crimeans celebrated the outcome of the referendum. They were waving Russian flags and signing Soviet-era songs	The will of the Crimean people was to join Russia
Sputnik	Russia, Crimea Sign Historic Reunification Treaty	18.03.14	Putin justified Moscow’s decision to protect Crimea, saying Russia’s inaction would have been regarded as treason.	The will of the Crimean people was to join Russia
RT	Ron Paul: US shouldn’t meddle in Ukraine	05.03.14	“Former congressman says US has no business in Crimea. He argues that this is Ukrainians civil strike, and no one should get involved.”	The will of the Crimean people was to join Russia
Sputnik	Crimea Ignores President’s Order to Stop Secession Vote	07.03.14	“The parliament of Crimea doesn’t recognize the interim government in Kiev and has decided Thursday to secede from the country and become part of Russia.”	The will of the Crimean people was to join Russia
RT	Art of drills: 10 NATO war games that almost started armed conflicts	28.02.14	RT highlights a series of NATO and US drills that were conducted on foreign soil (South Korea, Israel, Poland and Latvia, Bulgaria, Persian Gulf, Japan and Jordan) to justify that the West was not transparent in the past.	What Russia is doing in Crimea is no worse than what was done in Western-led operations (Whataboutism)
RT	Seriously, what?! Kerry tells Russia 'you don't invade a country on completely phony pretexts'	02.03.14	US Secretary of State says it is unacceptable to invade a foreign country in the 21st century motivated by one’s own interests. RT accuses the US of paying lip service to sovereignty and territorial integrity and violating both concepts in Syria, Libya, Iraq and Serbia.	What Russia is doing in Crimea is no worse than what was done in Western-led operations (Whataboutism)

Table 4. Event 2 – Crimean annexation: Disinformation narratives per news article

Event 3. Conflict in the Donbass

Disinformation narrative 7: Russia was not involved in the events that took place in Donetsk and Lugansk

Similar to what was observed during the Crimean illegal and illegitimate annexation, the Kremlin worked hard to push the narrative that Russia did not take action in the unrest taking place in eastern Ukraine. Putin insisted that local freedom fighters arose because of their discontent with the government of Kyiv, which had been imposed by the Euromaidan activists. To sustain this clause, Putin argued that the local militias were not trying to conceal their identity as they had “removed their masks” (Putin, 2014). Even when the Kremlin was confronted with drone images revealing the movement of thousands of Russian troops toward Ukraine (NATO, 2014), the Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov said that the allegation was “built on a foundation of sand”, claiming that the images were “from computer games” (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation, 2014). The same sensationalist discourse was repeated by other Russian officials. In November 2014, Russian Defence Minister General Igor Konashenkov dismissed the accusations of NATO’s Supreme Allied Commander who stated that Russia was providing equipment to the rebels by saying that these were “unsubstantiated statements” for which “there was no evidence” (Baczynska, 2014). Likewise, a year after his initial statement, Putin continued to say that Russia was not supporting the two Ukrainian regions, “I can tell you outright and unequivocally that there are no Russian troops in Ukraine” (Putin, 2015).

In their news coverage, RT and Sputnik supported the Kremlin’s claim that Russia did not engage in the conflict taking place in Ukraine’s southeastern regions. Both channels referred to the invaders as “locals” (Sputnik, 2014a), “self-defense forces”

(Sputnik, 2014ap), and “activists” (Sputnik, 2014aq). The channels portrayed the protesters in a positive light, by describing them as inoffensive groups of organized citizens supporting independence from Kyiv’s government. In Sputnik’s article “Pro-Federalization Supporters Gather for Rally in Ukraine’s Donetsk”, a photo of elderly Ukrainians was used to visually represent the protesters followed by the description “Members of the people’s militia have gathered near a tent camp across from the building, drinking coffee and talking to one another while listening to Russian songs” (Sputnik, 2014ar).



Figure 6. A photo of alleged pro-secession protesters peacefully demonstrating in the Ukrainian region of Donetsk. Source: (Sputnik, 2014d).

Nevertheless, when it was beneficial to describe the protesters as courageous and reactive, the two Russian news outlets would drop the passivist approach. In an RT article featuring multiple testimonies from alleged members of the rebellion, the following quote can be read: “I am a Ukrainian. I am from the Donetsk region. (...) In Kiev they are snakes.

Corruption is everywhere. But we want justice” (RT, 2014ao). A more extreme case of protesters’ aggressiveness can be observed in Sputnik’s coverage of the alleged moment when Kramatorsk’s protesters chased members of the Ukrainian Army, forcing them to evacuate the region:

“Defiant of the armed vehicles and sniper rifles pointed at them, residents were filmed approaching the troops to have their say. “*Fascists! Fascists!*” the locals chanted, casting insults on the troops and the Kiev government. Kiev authorities are commonly referred to as the “*fascist junta*” in the east of the country, because of their takeover of power in February and the government’s alliance with nationalists – including the notorious Right Sector radical group.” (RT, 2014ap).



Figure 7. A photo of Kramatorsk’s protesters allegedly forcing the Ukrainian Army to walk out of the region. Source: (RT, 2014ap).

By describing the invaders as locals, this disinformation narrative perpetuated the idea that Russia was not involved in the conflict. On April 11, RT published Lavrov’s quote that Russia had no plans to take over Ukraine’s southeastern regions because it respected its neighbor’s territorial integrity (RT, 2014aq). To support his claim, Lavrov said that Russian individuals might have been involved in the conflict, but they were not linked to the government (RT, 2014aq). This discourse was repeated by Putin a week later when he called Western accusations of Russian involvement “nonsense” and stated that

“the best proof [that there were no Russian units in eastern Ukraine] is that the people have literally removed their masks” (RT, 2014ar). When confronted with accusations that Russia was supplying the local militias with weapons and military equipment, Antonov claimed “it was wrong to say that Russia is supplying weapons to self-defense forces”, which most likely had attacked and ceased Soviet-era warehouses in Ukraine (Sputnik, 2014as).

Despite Putin’s efforts to frame the crisis in Ukraine’s southeastern regions as a civil war between pro-government forces and local separatists, evidence of Russian involvement in the conflict is indisputable (Czuperski et al., 2015, foreword). First, there were signs that the Russian leadership made its way into the provisional government of the regions. Donetsk’s appointed officials Aleksander Borodai and Igor Strelkov were both Russian nationals who had served together in Chechnya and Transdnistria and who were linked to the Kremlin (Vasovic, 2014). Igor Strelkov, particularly, is believed to have been a Colonel in Russia’s Federal Security Service under the surname Girkin (Vasovic, 2014).

Second, there was proof that Russia supplied the conflict with volunteers and military equipment. Many Russian soldiers were being pressured to “deploy to Ukraine unofficially” (Luhn, 2017). In March 2015, US Army Europe Commander Ben Hodges estimated that 12 000 Russian soldiers were active in eastern Ukraine, including “military advisers, weapons operators and combat troops” (Reuters, 2015). Further attention was brought to the presence of Russian troops in Donetsk and Lugansk when it was revealed that the families who lost their breadwinners while fighting in Ukraine were offered compensations by Moscow, “If a soldier dies in action, his family is entitled to compensation of 3m roubles (£30,000), an insurance payment of 2m roubles, and a monthly stipend” (Luhn, 2017). Likewise, there are multiple records of the Russian

Federation providing weapons – ranging from small arms, to tanks, BUK rockets and missile systems – to the Donbas (Grove & Strobel, 2014; Żochowski et al., 2014; Radio Free Europe, 2019). Still, Moscow rejects any allegations of supplying separatists in eastern Ukraine.

Disinformation narrative 8: The residents of Donetsk and Lugansk wanted to follow Crimea's steps and organize a referendum to secede from Ukraine.

To justify the public unrest in the Donbas, Putin argued that the residents of southeastern Ukraine supported reunification with Russia and that they wanted to organize a referendum, similar to the one that had taken place in Crimea. In the show *Moscow's Direct Line*, the President of the Russian Federation claimed that the residents of Donetsk and Lugansk “were worried about their future (...) because they saw a rapid growth of nationalist sentiments, heard threats and saw that [the new authorities] wanted to invalidate some of the ethnic minorities' rights (...)” (Putin, 2014).

As the conflict escalated and the pressure coming from the international community increased, the Russian President asked for the regional referendums to be postponed. Like this, conditions would be created to foster dialogue between the authorities of Kyiv and the representatives of southeastern Ukraine before Donetsk and Lugansk came to exercise their right to vote by the end of May. The separatists, on the other hand, did not respect Moscow's request and held the referendums on May 12. According to the election commissions, 89% of the Donetsk population and 96% of the Lugansk voters supported independence from Ukraine's central government. While Putin did not publicly comment on the referendums, Moscow acknowledged their results in a statement: “In Moscow, we respect the will of the people of the Donetsk and Lugansk regions and are counting on practical implementation of the outcome of the referendum

in a civilized manner, without any repeat of violence and through dialogue” (Walker & Grytsenko, 2014). The apparent clash between Putin’s orders and the actions of the local militias implied that Russia was not behind Donetsk and Lugansk’s decision to seek independence from Kyiv, however, one cannot be sure if that was the case.

Sputnik reported on the will of southeastern Ukrainians to host “referendums to allow individual regions to determine their own status” (RT, 2014as), and it gave great attention to Lugansk’s request for Russian peacekeeping troops to prevent “aggressive actions by the illegitimate Kyiv authorities” during the voting procedures (Sputnik, 2014at). Additionally, when Putin allegedly asked the pro-Russia separatists to postpone the referendum and to engage in direct talks with Kyiv to settle the escalating crisis, RT published two articles in which the pro-reunification forces demonstrated their intention to move forward despite Moscow’s words of caution (RT, 2014at) (RT, 2014au). In a quote, the self-proclaimed leader of the Donetsk People’s Republic (DPR) Andrey Purgin, said that the decision to hold a referendum concerned the “people of Donbass” and not the politicians, who could not “deprive them from this chance” (RT, 2014av).

As expected, the coverage of concerns of the international community was rare and superficial. When RT published an article that briefly described France and Germany’s stance on the legality of the referendum, it went to great lengths to describe how the election commission granted hundreds of press accreditations to journalists from abroad. Quoting the self-proclaimed leader of the Donetsk election commission, RT allegedly revealed that no single country had registered observers for Donetsk’s plebiscite (RT, 2014ax). Once the referendum’s results were announced, Sputnik published an opinion article by the controversial Director of the Washington-based Democracy Institute, Patrick Basham, in which the author wrote that it was an “undeniable fact” that the majority of voters wanted to change their status (Sputnik, 2014au). In his text, Basham

wrote about the “double standard” of Western leaders, which prevented them from understanding that “the pressure to break up Ukraine is not an economic one (...) but of cultural and nationalistic mindset” (Sputnik, 2014au).

Since Putin was not publicly commenting on the results of the referendum, Sputnik reported on the statement of Russian State Duma speaker, Sergei Naryshkin’s, who conceded that millions of Ukrainians and Lugansk had supported reunification with Russia (Sputnik, 2014au). Naryshkin argued that, even if the referendum was perceived as illegitimate by many, it showed how the rights of eastern Ukrainians were being “massively violated” and that their “freedom” had to be protected (Sputnik, 2014av).

As publicly acknowledged, there are various points that attest to the illegitimacy of the referendums that took place in Ukraine’s southeastern regions (Wierzbowska-Miazga, Iwański and Żochowski, 2023) (Amos, Grytsenko and Walker). First, they were incompatible with Article 73 of the 1996 Constitution of Ukraine and Article 3 of the 2012 law on referendums, making them against Ukrainian law. Both articles state that territorial changes put in place by a referendum are only legitimate if all citizens of Ukraine are allowed to vote, including those who do not reside in the area.

Second, the referendum was conducted based on an outdated list of voters and with few operating polling stations (CNN, 2014) (Wierzbowska-Miazga, Iwański and Żochowski, 2023). In the region of Donetsk, there were 1 540 open polling stations working in May 2014, while in the parliamentary elections of 2012, more than 2 444 polling stations were active (Wierzbowska-Miazga, Iwański and Żochowski, 2023). This inconsistency facilitated cases of voting fraud (CNN, 2014). Third, multiple human rights violations were observed by Human Rights Watch during the voting process, which included intimidation, beating and hostage of activists. The organisation said that at least

24 people were being held by insurgents in Donetsk at the time of the referendum (Butcher, 2010).

Disinformation narrative 9: Kyiv is committing many crimes and human rights violations through its anti-terrorism operation

When the Ukrainian government publicly launched its ‘anti-terrorist’ operation in southeastern Ukraine, Putin vocally condemned Kyiv’s decision to use the army to quell unrest in the east of the country. In a phone call with the German Chancellor Angela Merkel, the Russian President said that Ukraine’s escalation of the conflict put the country “on the verge of a civil war” (BBC News, 2014). Putin accused Kyiv of committing multiple human rights violations and condemned its use of “tanks, fighter jets and rockets against protesters” (De Carbonnel Alexei Anishchuk, A., 2014). In a conversation with UN Secretary Ban Ki-moon, the Russian President even expressed frustration with the international community’s refusal to equally condemn the actions of the Ukrainian government (President of Russia, 2014).

When the Ukrainian special operation was launched, RT reported on the official announcement by calling the Ukrainian President “coup-imposed” and heavily criticising the operations (RT, 2014ay). A day later, Kyiv published a statement where it said that Russia was prepared “for international cooperation to stabilize the situation in Ukraine”, referring to the upcoming Geneva Talks. Nevertheless, access to the Talks would depend on Kyiv and the decisions it was taking “under the auspices of Washington” (Sputnik, 2014aw).

As the anti-terrorist operation was taking place, Putin and other Kremlin officials made various statements condemning the actions of the Ukrainian government. On April 17, Putin accused Kyiv of not engaging in dialogue and instead choosing to use “tanks

and aviation against civilians” against its own civilians (Sputnik, 2014ax). On April 21, Lavrov said that Kyiv failed to follow through with the Geneva Accords on amnesty and that Ukraine did not free the politically detained or allow international journalists into the regions (Sputnik, 2014ay). On July 5, RT went as far as to publish a sensationalist article exposing the story of Yevgevy Yezekyanhad, a month-old baby who, because of bomb shelling, was forced to remain in a Ukrainian ICU covered by mattresses that saved him from the shell fragments. The story argued that Ukraine had been engaging in indiscriminate bombing that severely affected the region’s locals and that his actions had to be punished by the international community.

This kind of article contrasted with hopeful narrations of Russian humanitarian in Ukraine. As an example, in August 2014, RT reported over 300 Russian trucks carrying medication, food and power generators was sent toward the border with Ukraine to support the local populations (RT, 2014az).



Figure 8. A photo of an alleged Russian humanitarian convoy to Ukraine. Source: (RT, 2014az).

A UN Human Rights Office of the High Commissioner report with the title “Accountability for killings in Ukraine from January 2014 and May 2016” concluded that between those two dates, more than 9 000 people had been killed in the country. A big

emphasis was placed on Russia who supplied the secessionist supporters with troops and military equipment. In the report, it can be read that: “The armed conflict in certain districts of Donetsk and Lugansk regions, (...) which is fuelled by the inflow of foreign fighters and weapons from the Russian Federation (...) accounts for the majority of violations of the right to life in Ukraine over the last two years.” (United Nations Human Rights Office of the High Commissioner, 2016, p. 3). Another UN report with the title “Arbitrary detention, torture and ill-treatment in the context of armed conflict in eastern Ukraine (2014-2021)” revealed that during the conflict in the Donbass, pro-Russia forces committed “secret and uncommunicated detention, torture and ill-treatment, including conflict-related sexual violence” (United Nations Human Rights Office of the High Commissioner, 2021).

Source	Title	Date	Summary	Related narrative(s)
Sputnik	Supporters of Federalization Storm Government Buildings in Eastern Ukraine	07.03.14	“Protesters in Donetsk and Lugansk seize the offices of the national security service. Activists call for constitutional reform to create a federal government and propose to hold a Crimea-style referendum.”	Russia was not involved in the events that took place in Donetsk and Lugansk
RT	Donetsk activists proclaim region's independence from Ukraine	07.03.14	“Today at 12:20 local time, a session of the people's Council of Donbass (Donetsk region) took place in the main hall of the Regional Council and unanimously voted on a declaration to form a new independent state: the People’s Republic of Donetsk.”	Russia was not involved in the events that took place in Donetsk and Lugansk
Sputnik	Lavrov Denies Russian Role in East Ukraine Unrest	11.04.14	“Russia has not been involved in recent protests in southeastern Ukraine and always respects its neighbor’s territorial integrity, Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov said Friday.”	Russia was not involved in the events that took place in Donetsk and Lugansk
RT	Protesters in East Ukraine: Authorities in Kiev don’t listen to us	15.04.14	Features quotes of alleged Pro-Russia protests.	Russia was not involved in the events that took place in Donetsk and Lugansk
Sputnik	Putin Says Presence of Russian Troops, Instructors in Ukraine ‘Nonsense’	17.04.14	“Putin called the statement by the West and Kiev of Russian troops involvement in eastern Ukraine “nonsense” during a live Q&A session. “	Russia was not involved in the events that took place in Donetsk and Lugansk
Sputnik	Pro-Federalization Supporters Gather for Rally in Ukraine’s Donetsk	23.04.14	“Pro-federalization protesters have gathered for a daily rally in Donetsk. Members of the people’s militia have gathered near a tent camp across from the building, drinking coffee and talking to one another while listening to Russian songs.”	Russia was not involved in the events that took place in Donetsk and Lugansk
Sputnik	Protesters Declare Independent People’s Republic in Ukraine’s Luhansk	28.04.14	“Protesters declared the creation of the people’s republic in the eastern Ukrainian city of Luhansk. Protesters said they plan to hold a referendum simultaneously with similar referendums in Kharkiv and Donetsk on May 11. “ “The Luhansk People’s Republic plans to ask Russia to send peacekeeping troops “in the event of aggressive actions by the illegitimate Kiev authorities,” demonstrators said.”	Russia was not involved in the events that took place in Donetsk and Lugansk
Sputnik	Self-Defense Forces Seize Government Building in Ukraine’s Luhansk	29.04.14	“Self-defense forces in the eastern Ukrainian city of Luhansk have taken control of a government building”	Russia was not involved in the events that took place in Donetsk and Lugansk
Sputnik	Deputy Defense Minister: ‘Russia Can Only Invade With Tourists’.	30.08.14	“The area where the combat activity is happening today, where Kiev is leading its punitive operation, is no exception — there were caches of	Russia was not involved in the events that took place in Donetsk and Lugansk

			weapons which the self-defense forces seized. So, it is wrong to say that Russia is supplying weapons to the self-defense forces“	
RT	‘Go back to Kiev, fascists!’: Outraged locals chase off Ukrainian troop	03.05.14	“Residents of the eastern Ukrainian city of Kramatorsk have lashed out at troops entering the city’s streets with outrage and insults.”	Russia was not involved in the events that took place in Donetsk and Lugansk
Sputnik	Supporters of Federalization Storm Government Buildings in Eastern Ukraine	07.03.14	“Residents have called for constitutional reform to create a federal style of government and others have proposed holding Crimea-style referendums to allow individual regions to determine their own status.”	Donetsk and Lugansk residents wanted to follow Crimea’s steps and organize a referendum
RT	2 southeast Ukrainian regions to hold referendum May 11 as planned	08.05.14	The councils of the People’s Republics of two southeastern cities of Donetsk and Lugansk will hold referendums as planned on May, 11. “This is not our decision [of the politicians] , this is the decision of people of Donbas region,” said Andrey Purgin, one of the leaders of the self-proclaimed Donetsk People’s Republic, “People of Donbas [Region] got their chance to make a heroic deed and we can’t deprive them from this chance.”	Donetsk and Lugansk residents wanted to follow Crimea’s steps and organize a referendum
RT	E. Ukraine’s regions gear up for independence referendums	10.05.14	“Ukraine’s self-proclaimed people’s republics of Donetsk and Lugansk are making last preparations for May 11 referendums on the status of the regions, despite Russia calling for a delay of the votes and France and Germany labeling them “illegal”.”	Donetsk and Lugansk residents wanted to follow Crimea’s steps and organize a referendum
Sputnik	Referendums in Ukraine Show Desire for Freedom – Russian Official	12.05.14	“Russian State Duma Speaker Sergei Naryshkin says that referendums in Ukraine’s Donetsk and Luhansk regions have demonstrated their residents desire for freedom. In the Luhansk region, voter turnout was over 79 percent, with the turnout in the regional capital exceeding 76 percent. According to preliminary data, about 90 per cent of people in both regions voted for independence.”	Donetsk and Lugansk residents wanted to follow Crimea’s steps and organize a referendum
Sputnik	OPINION: West Has to Accept Southeast Ukraine Desires For Independence	16.05.14	“The West argues about the manner and standards in which the referendums in Ukraine's eastern regions of Luhansk and Donetsk were held, but misses the larger point, the reality of the situation, Patrick Basham, Director of the Washington-based Democracy Institute.”	Donetsk and Lugansk residents wanted to follow Crimea’s steps and organize a referendum
Sputnik	Holding Geneva Talks Depends on Kiev, Russia Ready to Participate – Foreign Ministry	14.04.14	“Moscow plans to take part in this week’s four-party negotiations on the situation in Ukraine, but holding the talks will depend on the actions of the new Kiev authorities.”	Kyiv is committing many crimes and human rights violations with its anti-terrorism operation

RT	Kiev to launch 'full-scale' military op as massive protests grip eastern Ukraine	13.04.1 4	"Ukraine's Security Council convened for an urgent session following the events and took the decision to launch " <i>a large scale</i> " operation, " <i>with the involvement of the military</i> ," Ukraine's coup-imposed president, Aleksandr Turchinov, said in a televised address. "	Kyiv is committing many crimes and human rights violations with its anti-terrorism operation
Sputnik	Putin Condemns Kiev's Criminal Use of Tanks Against Civilians in Eastern Ukraine	17.04.1 4	Putin condemns Kiev's criminal use of tanks and abietino against civilians.	Kyiv is committing many crimes and human rights violations with its anti-terrorism operation
Sputnik	Russia Says Kiev Fails to Follow Through on Geneva Accords	21.04.1 4	"Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov says authorities in Kiev continue to arrest activists in Ukraine's southeastern regions and violate the rights of journalists instead of implementing the amnesty agreed upon in the Geneva Agreement."	Kyiv is committing many crimes and human rights violations with its anti-terrorism operation
RT	Caught in conflict: Critically ill baby stuck in Ukraine's Slavyansk amid bloody fighting	05.07.1 4	"8-month-old baby awaits evacuation from a children's hospital in Slavyansk, eastern Ukraine, which has repeatedly been shelled by Kiev's military jets."	Kyiv is committing many crimes and human rights violations with its anti-terrorism operation
RT	Ukraine civil war death toll 1,100, over 3,500 wounded	28.07.1 4	"Some 1,129 people have been killed and nearly 3,500 wounded in eastern Ukraine since the start of the Kiev's military operation in April, according to UN estimates. that Kiev is using indiscriminate missiles to attack densely populated areas in Donetsk, which violates international humanitarian law, and also blames the militia for taking cover in the same areas."	Kyiv is committing many crimes and human rights violations with its anti-terrorism operation
RT	HRW: Civilian death toll in E. Ukraine rising due to 'indiscriminate and unlawful' shelling	02.09.1 4	"Human Rights Watch has condemned the illegality of Ukrainian actions in east Ukraine, ascribing direct blame to Kiev for the rising death toll in the Lugansk Region, which by local estimates has reached 300 since May. Evidence of the indiscriminate nature of these attacks could be seen in the use of weaponry not meant for areas where precision is required."	Kyiv is committing many crimes and human rights violations with its anti-terrorism operation
RT	<i>Russian humanitarian convoy departs to E. Ukraine</i>	12.08.1 4	"Moscow has delivered almost 300 trucks carrying 2,000 tons of humanitarian aid have been sent towards the border with Ukraine."	Kyiv is committing many crimes and human rights violations with its anti-terrorism operation

Table 5. Event 3 – Conflict in the Donbass: Disinformation narratives per news article

Chapter III.II.IV The downing of the MH17 flight

Disinformation narrative 10: The local militias were not involved in the downing of the MH17 plane nor were the Russians.

On July 17, 2014, a Malaysian Airlines commercial plane that was operating on the Amsterdam – Kuala Lumpur route crashed in eastern Ukraine, causing all 298 passengers to lose their life (Golovchenko & Adler-Nissen, 2018). The first Russian official to comment on the plane crash was Putin’s Spokesman Dmitry Peskov, who rushed to give his condolences to the families of the dead passengers. The Spokesman said accusations of Russian involvement were mere “stupidity”, and contended that the Kremlin had no intention to issue a public statement because, at the time, it was impossible to determine who was responsible for the tragedy (Walker et al., 2014b). Putin, however, went against Peskov’s advice and, on July 18, pointed fingers at Ukraine. The Russian President said the flight downing would not have happened “if there was peace” in southeast Ukraine, where hostilities “had not resumed” (Putin, 2014b).

RT and Sputnik published multiple stories alleging that accusations of Russian participation in the incident were “unfounded” and nothing but “rhetoric” (Sputnik, 2014ba; Sputnik, 2014bb). Both papers followed the Kremlin’s official stance by reporting that the Donetsk People’s Republic (DPR) did not own the necessary technology to successfully bring down the civilian plane.

On July 17, Sputnik quoted the DPR’s leader, Alexander Borodai, who informed that the local defence forces only had access to “Manpads and missile systems” — a type of surface-to-air missiles that have a limited reach of “8 000 or 10 000 meters” (Sputnik, 2014bc) To support the statement that the DPR did not own technology capable of bringing down the Boeing-777, an opinion article by an alleged experienced UK Air

Accidents Investigator, Tony Cable, was published the following day (Sputnik, 2014bd). In this piece, Cable argued that it was unlikely that the militia's Manpad missile had caused the crash of a civilian airplane. "Manpads don't have a very good guidance system and there is no way one of them could get to 33 000 feet (the height MH17 was flying when it came down)", Cable explained (Sputnik, 2014bd).

To sustain the argument Russia was not involved in the downing of the MH17 flight, the Kremlin developed two disinformation narratives that will be described next, and which attributed guilt to Ukraine.

Disinformation narratives 11 and 12: The attack was conducted by the Ukrainian government which employed a Buk surface-to-air missile and/or used fighter jets to crash the MH17 flight

Between 2014 and 2015, Russia's disinformation messages on the MH17 flight downing vacillated between two major conspiracy theories: first that a Ukrainian missile targeting the Boeing 777 was launched into the skies; second that Ukrainian fighter jets caused the downing of the MH17 plane. Curiously, both theories were introduced on July 21, 2015, on the occasion of a press conference by the Russian Ministry of Defence (Ministry of Defence of the Russian Federation, 2014). The Deputy Chief of the General Staff of the Russian Armed Forces, Lieutenant-General Kartapolov, presented a number of satellite images purporting to show Ukraine's surface-to-air missile launchers in position to shoot the Malaysian Airlines plane (Ministry of Defence of the Russian Federation, 2014). Kartapolov claimed that, on the day of the incident, some Ukrainian Buk systems had been deployed from their assigned location to a military fortification near Zaroschinsko and that they could have been used by Ukraine to bring down the plane (Ministry of Defence of the Russian Federation, 2014). This was the most popular fake

news developed by the Kremlin to back up the idea that MH17 had been shot down by the Ukrainian forces, but it was not the only one. In parallel, Lieutenant-General Kartapolov defended a second disinformation narrative, which stated that a Ukrainian Air Force aircraft SU-25 had been flying in the vicinity of the MH17 (Ministry of Defence of the Russian Federation, 2014). According to Kartapolov, the SU-25 plane could carry air-to-air missiles that could have caused the accident (Ministerie van Justitie en Veiligheid, 2020).

To support the conspiracy theory that Ukraine targeted the MH17 flight with a missile, Sputnik published multiple articles between July 17 and 18 where it described how Ukrainian Buk missiles and missile launchers had been suspiciously moved the day before the incident (RTbb, 2014). According to the Russian Defence Ministry, the Ukrainian military had available multiple batteries of Buk surface-to-air-missile systems and over 25 launchers which Kyiv could have used to shoot the airplane (RT, 2014bc). In an RT opinion article, Yury Karash, an alleged pilot and aviation expert, claimed that it was likely that “the Malaysian plane was really downed by the Ukrainian anti-aircraft defense” because this type of air-to-air missiles could only be handled by experienced members of the military, who had a good understanding this technology (RT, 2014bc). On the occasion of the press conference with the Russian Defence Ministry that took place on July 21, RT published the drone images that allegedly tied up the whole conspiracy theory. In the photos, Kartapolov stated it was possible to see how a Ukrainian Buk Missile launch system went missing from its assigned position close to the city of Lugansk (image 1), and how it was moved to the area of Zaroschinsko, 50km from Donetsk (image 2) (RT, 2014bd). According to the Russian Defence Ministry, the move took place the day before the incident.



Figure 9. The satellite images the Russian Ministry of Defence used to claim that Kyiv launched BUK missiles to target the MH17 flight. Source: (RT, 2014bd).

To support the conspiracy theory that Ukraine had used fighter jets to crash the MH17 flight, RT reported that Ukraine was targeting a plane where Putin was traveling to attend a BRICS conference in Brazil. According to an anonymous source, both the aircraft of the Russian President and the Malaysian Airlines planes both flew over Ukraine at a similar time. Because of their colors and dimensions, the two planes were “almost identical”, and could be easily mistaken if somebody was trying to target Putin’s plane (RT, 2014be).



Figure 10. A mock-up of Russia’s presidential plane and the Malaysian Airlines plane side by side. Source: (RT, 2014be).

This disinformation narrative was reinforced by the press conference of the Russian Ministry of Defence. When covering the conference, RT revealed that the Russian military detected a Ukrainian SU-25 fighter jet approaching the Boeing-777 in the air on the day of the catastrophe (RT, 2014bd). The Russian Ministry of Defence argued that it was in the possession of videos by the Rostov monitoring center proving the presence of this type of aircraft in the vicinity of the MH17 plane. Kartopolov urged Ukraine to explain “as to why the military jet was flying along a civil aviation corridor at almost the same time and at the same level as a passenger plane” (RT, 2014bd).

New elements were added to this conspiracy on December 23 when an alleged witness was brought forward to increase the credibility of the story (RT, 2014bf). According to the Russian Defence Ministry, there was a Ukrainian man who testified at the moment of the crash and claimed to have seen a pilot exiting the aircraft. He said the jet departed from the Aviatorskoye air base with two air-to-air missiles but that it returned without them (RT, 2014bf) (RT, 2014bg). Based on the source’s description, the pilot — who was identified as Ukrainian citizen Vladislav Voloshin — was visibly disconcerted and muttered the words: “the plane happened to be in the wrong place at the wrong time” (RT, 2014bf). A few days later, RT and Sputnik published news pieces reporting that the unnamed source had taken a polygraph test conducted by the Russian Investigative Committee, which proved that their statement was true (Sputnik, 2014bf; RT 2014bh). Ultimately, a year later, Almaz-Antey, the BUK’s manufacturer, came forward and argued that the missile used in the attack was not in Russia’s arsenal. In a statement, Almaz-Antey assured that the production of BUK-M1 missiles “was discontinued in 1999” and passed to international clients, such as post-Soviet states like Ukraine (RT, 2015aa). The BUK manufacturer is a Russian state-owned enterprise and the veracity of Antey’s statement was not taken without a grain of salt.

Despite the efforts of the Kremlin to pollute the information environment with conspiracy theories on the flight downing accident, today the truth about what happened has been revealed following the communication of the International Joint Investigation's (JIT) findings. In September 2016, the Dutch-led Joint Investigation Team (JIT) concluded that the MH17 flight was shot down by a 9M38 missile series using a BUK TELAR missile system (EUvsDisinfo, 2019). The JIT revealed that Russia had transported the missile to separatist-controlled territory in Eastern Ukraine, where it was launched with the support of local militias (EUvsDisinfo, 2019). The missile system in question originated from the 53rd Anti-Aircraft Missile Brigade, a unit of the Russian Armed Forces (EUvsDisinfo, 2019).

Four years later, the Dutch Public Prosecution Service began prosecuting the four men suspected of involvement in the plane crash: Igor Girkin, the Minister of Defence and Commander of the DPR's army; Sergey Dubinskiy, one of Girkin's Deputies and Head of the Intelligence Service of DPR; Oleg Pulatov, Deputy Head of DPR's Intelligence Service and former Military Officer of the Russia Spetznaz-GRU; and Leonid Kharchenko, a Ukrainian Commander of a combat unit in Donetsk (Ministerie van Justitie en Veiligheid, 2022). In November 2022, when the District Court of the Hague delivered the verdict on the investigation, all suspects accused of bringing down MH17 were found guilty and sentenced to life imprisonment, with the exception of Pulatov, who was acquitted (Ministerie van Justitie en Veiligheid, 2022).

Disinformation narrative 13: Russia supported the international investigation, but other countries undermined its successful conduction.

The third goal of the Kremlin's disinformation campaign on the MH17 incident was to portray Russia as a responsible and collaborative actor in the conduction of the

international investigation. Putin wanted to avoid further damage to the Russian reputation and make the international community think that his country was going above and beyond to provide evidence and support to the investigation, as a form of self-exoneration.

Therefore, when Putin learned that almost 200 Dutch citizens had passed in the tragic incident, the Russian President conveyed his condolences to the Dutch Prime Minister and appealed for a careful and objective investigation (Putin, 2014c). Following his lead, various Kremlin officials scrutinized the investigation and publicly condemned other nations who, in their view, were not cooperating and risked delaying the investigation. That was the case of Vitaly Churkin, the Russian Ambassador to the United Nations, who, on July 30, said that the authorities of Kyiv were “motivated to destroy evidence” that would implicate their participation in the flight downing (Sputnik, 2014ba). According to Churkin, Russia was “offering all kinds of assistance to the investigation”, while other countries were spreading “unsubstantiated accusations and insinuations” (Sputnik, 2014ba). On the same note, Putin’s Spokesperson Dmitry Peskov accused the international community of ignoring evidence provided by Russia and expressed the country’s “disappointment over the lack of proper level of cooperation and engagement of the Russian experts into the investigation” (Walker et al., 2014).

Between 2014 and 2015, RT and Sputnik published multiple news pieces commenting on the legitimacy of the international investigations. Five days after the incident took place, Sputnik reported that Kyiv had been “trying to influence air traffic controllers and tamper with Boeing crash data” (Sputnik, 2014bf). These covert activities, as framed by Sputnik, “sought to spin every fact to make Russia a target for criticism” and harm the international investigation (Sputnik, 2014bf).

Multiple cases of inadequate conduct were reported by the two papers such as Western countries refusing to share evidence related to the jet crash (RT, 2015ab), Ukraine engaging in shelling and heavy fighting to impede access to the crash site (Sputnik, 2014bg; Sputnik, 2014az), Kyiv confiscating tapes of conversations between the air traffic control officers and the crew of the Malaysian Airline's plane (Sputnik, 2014bh), the disappearance of the pilot who was allegedly involved in bringing down the MH17 flight (Sputnik, 2014be), and accusations that one of the forensic experts of the international investigation had exposed photos of MH17 victims (RT, 2015ac)

Like the other disinformation narratives, Russia's set of lies attacking the legitimacy of the JIT and the criminal trial are also easily contested. The investigation was thoroughly conducted by the Dutch Public Prosecution Service and the police and criminal justice authorities of Australia, Belgium, Malaysia and Ukraine. Experts investigated and compared "human remains, personal belongings and wreckage of the aircraft" (EUvsDisinfo, 2020); they heard witnesses, analysed satellite and radar images as well as Telecom data, before making informed decisions in 2016 and 2020 (EUvsDisinfo, 2020).

As time revealed, it was the Kremlin that manipulated satellite images and other pieces of evidence to make the downing of the MH17 flight look like it was Ukraine's responsibility (Makortoff, 2015), (ABC News, 2015). Bellingcat, an investigative journalism site concluded that Russia, and more specifically the Russian Ministry of Defence on the occasion of the press conference, pretended that photos from June were in fact from the month of the accident to support their claim that Ukrainian Buk surface-to-air missile launchers were located close to the route of the MH17 plane and active the day it was downed (Bellingcat, 2015). Bellingcat believes the photos exhibit signs of being photoshopped to conceal objects that would expose their date. The Kremlin's

attempt to frame the JIT investigation as illegitimate was a means to deflect attention from the responsibility of Russia and the DPR in the making of the accident. The findings of Bellingcat's study have been acknowledged by many international organisations such as the Council of Europe (Council of Europe, 2022), Wilson Center (Behrends, 2018), EUvsDisinfo (EUvsDisinfo, 2018) and RadioFree Europe (RadioFreeEurope/RadioLiberty, 2018).

Source	Title	Date	Summary	Related narrative(s)
Sputnik	Donetsk Militia Leader Blames Ukraine for Downing Malaysia Boeing	17.07.14	“The leader of the self-proclaimed Donetsk People’s Republic in eastern Ukraine has traded accusations with Kiev saying it was responsible for downing the Malaysian airliner since local militia doesn’t have the required technologies”.	The local militias were not involved in the downing nor were the Russians
Sputnik	Opinion: Too early to Jump to Conclusions About Malaysian Plane Crash in Ukraine	18.07.14	“Former air accident investigator said there is evidence pointing toward a fairly sophisticated ground-to-air missile being used in the air crash of the Malaysian flight MH17”.	The local militias were not involved in the downing nor were the Russians
Sputnik	US Claims of Flight MH17 Downing by Militia Remain Unfounded – Russia’s Defense Ministry	24.07.14	“The United States has not yet provided any documented evidence to prove that the rocker that brought down the Malaysia Airlines Boeing 777 was launched from militia-controlled territory”.	The local militias were not involved in the downing nor were the Russians
Sputnik	NATO Has No Evidence of Militia’s Responsibility for MH17 Crash – Russian Official	03.08.14	“Secretary General of NATO Anders Fogh Rasmussen would have submitted evidence of Ukrainian independence supporter’s fault for the Malaysian plane crash if he had any, Alexei Pushkov, the head of the committee for international relations in the State Duma, Russia’s lower house parliament, said”.	The local militias were not involved in the downing nor were the Russians
RT	Report that Putin flew similar route as MH17, presidential airport says ‘hasn’t overflowed Ukraine for long time’	17.07.14	“Vladimir Putin was travelling in a jet which was close to the Malaysian Boeing. The MH17 flight was downed by mistake”.	The local militias were not involved in the downing nor were the Russians
Sputnik	Ukrainian Army Buk Missile Likely Downed Malaysian Plane	17.07.14	“A Ukrainian army battalion of Buk air defense system was deployed near the city of Donetsk a day before the crash of a Malaysian passenger plane on Thursday, making the downing of the aircraft by one of the missiles highly probable, an expert source said”.	The attack was conducted by the Ukrainian government which employed a Buk surface-to-air missile to the city of Donetsk
RT	Kiev deployed powerful anti-air systems to E. Ukraine ahead of the Malaysian plane crash	17.07.14	“The Ukrainian military has several batteries of Buk surface-to-air missile systems with at least 27 launchers, capable of bringing down high-flying jets, in the Donetsk region where the Malaysian passenger plane crashed”.	The attack was conducted by the Ukrainian government which employed a Buk surface-to-air missile to the city of Donetsk
RT	Ukrainian Su-25 fighter detected in close approach to MH17 before crash – Moscow.	21.07.14	“MH17 crashed within the operating zone of the Ukrainian army’s self-propelled, medium-range surface-to-air ‘Buk’ missile systems. With images”.	The attack was conducted by the Ukrainian government which employed a Buk surface-to-air missile to the city of Donetsk

RT	MH17 likely downed by Buk-M1 missile system not used by Russia – manufacturer	03.06.15	“After analyzing the nature of damage dealt to the aircraft, BUK manufacturer Almaz-Antey came to the conclusion it could only have been caused by one of the missiles from BUK’s older line of defense systems, namely the BUK-M1. The missiles in question are widely deployed by a number of post-Soviet states, including Ukraine, but have been replaced by a newer make in Russia”.	The attack was conducted by the Ukrainian government which employed a Buk surface-to-air missile to the city of Donetsk
RT	Reports that Putin flew similar route as MH17, presidential airport says 'hasn't overflowed Ukraine for long time	17.07.14	“Malaysian Airlines MH17 plane was travelling almost the same route as Russia’s President Vladimir Putin’s jet shortly before the crash that killed 298”.	Ukrainian fighter jets were caused the crash of the MH17 flight
RT	Ukrainian Su-25 fighter detected in close approach to MH17 before crash – Moscow.	21.07.14	“The Russian military detected a Ukrainian SU-25 fighter jet gaining height toward the MH17 Boeing on the day of the catastrophe. The presence of the Ukrainian military jet can be confirmed by video shots made by the Rostov monitoring center”.	Ukrainian fighter jets were caused the crash of the MH17 flight
RT	Russia to probe media reports that Ukraine military shot down MH17	23.12.14	“Russia’s Investigative Committee is investigating a Russian newspaper report alleging that a Ukrainian military jet shot down Malaysian Airlines passenger plane MH17 over the rebel-held eastern part of the country last summer”.	Ukrainian fighter jets were caused the crash of the MH17 flight
Sputnik	Colossal cover up? Searching for Truth Amid MH17 Tragedy	26.12.14	“An unnamed source said that a SU-25 fighter was flown by Ukrainian Cpt. Voloshin and that departed from Aviatorskoeye air base carrying two air-to-air missiles but returned without them”.	Ukrainian fighter jets were caused the crash of the MH17 flight
RT	Documentary: MH-17: the untold story	22.10.14	“In a documentary, an alleged witness says: “I lifted my head and saw a small military aircraft in the sky. So I’m 100% sure there was a second aircraft” (0:45-0:55).	Ukrainian fighter jets were caused the crash of the MH17 flight
RT	Witness account of Ukraine MH17 takedown confirmed by lie detector – investigators	24.12.14	“Russia’s Investigative Committee has confirmed the claims by a Ukrainian, who said he witnessed the deployment of a Ukrainian warplane armed with air-to-air missiles on the day the Malaysian Airlines flight MH17 was shot down”.	Ukrainian fighter jets were caused the crash of the MH17 flight
Sputnik	Russia Suspects Kiev of Tampering with MH17 Crash Data	23.07.14	“The Russian Foreign Ministry has accused Kiev of trying to influence air traffic controllers and tamper with Boeing crash data”.	Russia supported the international investigation, but other countries undermined its successful conduction
Sputnik	Ukraine Militia Denies Tampering with Evidence at MH17 Crash Site	23.07.14	“Kiev accuses militias of tampering with evidence at the MH17 crash site, but they are the ones undermining the investigation into the crash”.	Russia supported the international investigation, but other countries undermined its successful conduction
Sputnik	Lavrov says MH17 crash investigation raises suspicion	28.07.14	“The Ukrainian Security Service (SBU) confiscated tapes of conversations between Ukrainian air traffic control officers and the crew of the Malaysia Airlines plane”.	Russia supported the international investigation, but other countries undermined its successful conduction

Sputnik	Russia Concerned About Ukraine Trying to Hide Evidence of MH17 Crash	30.07.14	“Russia is concerned about Kiev authorities trying to destroy evidence of the tragedy that happened to Malaysian plane downed in eastern Ukraine on July 17, Russian Ambassador to the United Nations Vitaly Churkin said Wednesday”.	Russia supported the international investigation, but other countries undermined its successful conduction
Sputnik	Colossal cover up? Searching for Truth Amid MH17 Tragedy	26.12.14	“Captain Voloshin, the Ukrainian pilot implicated in bringing down flight MH17, may have gone missing. An unnamed source earlier identified him as the perpetrator behind the plane’s tragic crash last July, and according to Russia’s Investigative Committee, the individual even passed a polygraph”.	Russia supported the international investigation, but other countries undermined its successful conduction
RT	Dutch forensic expert fired for exposing photos of MH17 victims	24.04.15	“A senior Dutch forensic expert involved into the investigation of the MH17 plane crash has been dismissed, with further sanctions against him considered after he showed images of plane crash victims to his students”.	Russia supported the international investigation, but other countries undermined its successful conduction
RT	MH17 couldn’t be shot from rebel areas, West pressuring investigators – Russian Air Agency	16.06.15	“Russia has sent international investigators <i>“all the data which was asked from us,”</i> including that from radars in Rostov. No other country has published the data it had on Malaysian jet crash, said Storchevoy”.	Russia supported the international investigation, but other countries undermined its successful conduction

Table 6. Event 4 – MH17 flight downing: Disinformation narratives per news article

Main Findings

Information warfare was a central component of Russia's annexation of Crimea and engagements in southeastern Ukraine. The Kremlin created a series of pro-Russian disinformation narratives which spilled over to domestic and international media.

The decentralized information structure, in which the Kremlin influences the media agenda without being an official stakeholder, makes it possible to deny any influence. Still, as seen in the empirical analysis, a total of 13 Russian disinformation narratives made their way to RT and Sputnik with the intent to steer public opinion in ways that were beneficial to the Kremlin and its goals. During 2013 and 2015, both news websites polluted the information space with various, alternative conspiracy theories about real-life events.

Through the conduction of non-traditional warfare, founded on covert action and information operations, the Kremlin attempted to gain plausible deniability and hide its criminal actions in annexing Crimea, triggering social uprisings in Donetsk and Lugansk, and bringing down the MH17 plane. That is why Putin and Russian officials continuously denied their involvement in Ukraine and claimed that the pro-Russian forces were local militias who were unhappy with Kyiv's government and who felt threatened by its alleged fascist stance. Without a clear understanding of the nature and extent of the Russian involvement or a formal declaration of war, it was more difficult for Ukraine to defend itself or for the international community to condemn and penalize the Russian Federation. It was the element of surprise and deception that allowed Russian-disguised soldiers to invade Crimea quickly and successfully. However, following that event, Kyiv became more assertive in its response to Russia in southeastern Ukraine. The establishment of the large-scale military operation, the so-called anti-terrorist operation, made it harder for Russian-disguised soldiers to move in the two Ukrainian regions and public opinion

appeared to be more aware of the Russian framing of events. In the case of the flight incident, the double speaks of the Kremlin, and the many different theories that were disseminated to make the case of Ukrainian involvement also seemed to make the disinformation campaign less credible. The international media was quicker to uncover the flagrant falsehoods and to shed light on the truth.

The effects of Russia's disinformation efforts are difficult to determine. Unlike other news websites, it is not possible to see how many web users read RT and Sputnik's articles or if they interacted with them. RT alleges to have reached 630 million people worldwide in 2013, through its English, Arabic and Spanish language broadcasts. However, there is proof that these numbers are inflated despite the channel having a strong Arab readership (Zavadski, 2017; U.S. Department of State Global Engagement Center, 2022, p. 3). Likewise, one cannot be certain of how RT and Sputnik's articles are interpreted. But more than knowing if the readers take Russia's conspiracy theories at face value, it is relevant to acknowledge that the major goal of the disinformation approach of the Kremlin is to sow confusion and divide societies. The dangers that hide in the Russian malign information influence consist of weaponizing the principles of freedom of information and expression, undermining trust in journalism and media standards, eroding the concepts of fact and fiction and, ultimately, attacking the liberal democracy and its founding values.

Arguably the most important takeaway from this chapter is the premise that both RT and Sputnik contributed to the amplification of Russia's disinformation narratives by publishing false news and conspiracy theories. The Russian-influenced media outlets repeated the talking points of Putin and the Kremlin in their news reporting without performing a balanced and accurate coverage of events and perspectives. Therefore, they proved to be critical actors in the disinformation ecosystem of the Russian Federation.

Conclusion

This dissertation studied the contribution of RT and Sputnik in the information warfare conducted by Russia during the annexation of Crimea and the conflict in the Donbass. It compared the news production of the two news websites between 2013 and 2015 with the official stance of the Russian Federation, with the goal of assessing whether these channels were being used as the Kremlin's disinformation launderers in the propagation of falsehoods. Before going through the findings, this conclusion will briefly describe the main takeaways of each of the chapters and how they contributed to answering the research question⁹ and sub-question¹⁰.

The first chapter laid out the theoretical framework necessary to the understanding of this topic. It described information warfare as an emerging conflict domain that takes place at the cognitive level, and whose goal is to manipulate the enemy into making decisions against its own interests (Di Pietro, Raponi, Caprolu and Cresci's, 2021, p. 3). One of information warfare's preferred operations, disinformation, concerns the malign dissemination of false information and it is at the centre of this research project (Floridi, 2005; Stahl, 2006; Cambridge Dictionary, 2021 and Merriam Webster, 2021).

Also discussed in this chapter was the premise that information warfare became part of the Russian military doctrine after a successful securitization attempt. According to Buzan, Wæver and Wilde (1998), securitization is a process through which a leader frames a low politics topic as an emerging threat that requires extraordinary security measures (Buzan, Wæver and Wilde, 1998). Putin brought public attention to the threat of information in the aftermath of the colour revolutions. During this series of social upheavals, political regimes in former Soviet satellite states were overthrown and

⁹ Were RT/Russia Today and Sputnik, two outside-looking Russian news websites that produce news in the English-language, involved in the Russian information warfare in Ukraine (2013-2015)?

¹⁰ In which way did these outlets contribute to the Russian war of information?

replaced with liberal-style democracies. As the ultimate authority of an autocratic regime, Putin felt threatened by the new information environment which allowed for the dissemination of non-controlled narratives. The Russian President was afraid that popular discontent could rise in Russia and, ultimately, lead to the end of its stay in power. Therefore, he implemented a strict media policy with the goal of controlling information flows and started to reflect, together with the Russian military, on how disinformation could be utilised in foreign affairs for the pursuit of national interests.

The second chapter discussed the Russian use of information warfare. It started by zooming in on the concept *aktivnyye meropriyatiya* (active measures) — the Soviet foundation for Russian deception operations — and the employment of *dezinformatsiya* (disinformation). By drawing this historical outline, it was possible to understand the legacy contribution of intelligence services and the media in the Russian disinformation apparatus from the Cold War era up to today. Also in this chapter, the two English-language news websites RT and Sputnik were examined in greater depth.

Targeted to global audiences, RT and Sputnik position themselves as competitors of reputable, international news outlets such as CNN and BBC, even though they don't follow the Western principles of objective and unbiased coverage. By claiming to provide an alternative view of events, RT and Sputnik often favour Russia's official stance and criticise the West and its institutions.

The third chapter of this dissertation consisted of the case study of Russia's illegitimate military engagement in Ukraine between 2013 and 2015, with a particular focus on the annexation of Crimea and the conflict in Donetsk and Lugansk. The chapter started with a brief description of Putin's perceptions of the Russian-Ukrainian relationship followed by an objective description of the events that took place in the affected regions. Once that contextualization had been provided, this chapter employed a

content analysis methodology to study the news production of RT and Sputnik during the aforementioned period. Over 230 articles written on four different events were surveyed. As a result, 13 narratives were identified in both the Kremlin’s discourse and the news pieces of the two English-language channels. These were:

Event	Period analysed (including)	Disinformation Narratives
The Euromaidan protests	11/13 to 03/14	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - The Euromaidan demonstrations were backed by the US and the EU, and they ultimately led to a <i>coup d'état</i> in Ukraine. - Neo-Nazi, extremist forces took over the Euromaidan protests, causing them to become increasingly violent.
The Crimean annexation	02/14 to 04/14	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - The Crimean annexation was conducted by local self-defense troops and Russia was not involved in the planning of the event. - Russia had the right to protect Ukraine because of their special historical relationship. - The will of the Crimean people was to join Russia. - What Russia is doing in Crimea is no worse than what was done in Western-led operations (Whataboutism).
The Conflict in the Donbass	03/14 to 09/14	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Russia was not involved in the events that took place in Donetsk and Lugansk. - The residents of Donetsk and Lugansk wanted to follow Crimea’s steps and organize a referendum to secede from Ukraine. - Kyiv is committing many crimes and human rights violations through its anti-terrorist operation.
The MH17 flight downing	07/14 to 07/15	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - The local militias were not involved in the downing of the MH17 plane nor were the Russians. - The attack was conducted by the Ukrainian government which employed a Buk surface-to-air missile to the city of Donetsk. - Ukrainian fighter jets caused the crash of the MH17 flight. - Russia supported the international investigation, but other countries undermined its successful conduction.

Table 2. Disinformation narratives per event

Calling to mind the research question and sub-question (*Were RT/Russia Today and Sputnik, two outside-looking Russian news websites that produce news in the English-language, involved in the Russian information warfare in Ukraine (2013-2015)? In which way did these outlets contribute to the Russian war of information?*), the findings of this dissertation tend to suggest that RT and Sputnik contributed to Russia's information warfare in Ukraine and, particularly to its disinformation operations, by intentionally disseminating false narratives that coincided with the Kremlin's recount of events. The Kremlin's strategic narratives aimed at masking Russia's military engagement, making it difficult for the international community to determine if the country was involved in the events that took place in Ukraine or if they were the responsibility of separatist militias. The lack of a war declaration or open communication from the Russian Federation also made it harder for Ukraine to properly address the offensive from the first moment, leading to the relatively fast seizing of the Crimean Peninsula.

Limitations and avenues for further research

Like other research projects, this dissertation has a number of limitations that should be taken into account. On the one hand, the research's materials (e.g., news, speeches from Putin and Russian officials and documents from the Kremlin) were either originally written in English or official English translations. While this did not present a challenge to the dissertation's methodology, which concerns the study of the news production of outward-looking Russian media that is communicated in English, it also meant that important Russian information was invariably left out, particularly when it came to the literature on nonconventional threats, information warfare and disinformation. On the other hand, the absence of article metrics — such as number of views, shares, or even comments — made it impossible to determine the size and composition RT and Sputnik's audiences, or if their news

shaped public opinion. The knowledge of such statistics would be advantageous to measure the reach of these channels in Russia's disinformation machine.

Considering the strict policies around media ownership in Russia and Putin's desire to control information flows in his country, an interesting avenue for further research would be to monitor and analyse the news production of national channels, particularly the highly popular Russia Channel One and Rossiya. A parallel could then be drawn with the narratives disseminated by international news channels, to investigate whether events are told differently to Russian citizens and Western audiences. A similar and equally interesting comparison could take place between the Russian coverage of events and that which was performed by Ukrainian media with the goal of understanding how the two states portrayed the same conflict.

Another intriguing research proposal would be to analyse how the phenomenon of Russian information warfare has evolved since the Cold War with the emergence of new technologies and changes in the information environment. With the goal of performing a historical outline of the disinformation phenomenon, it would be relevant to compare Soviet disinformation with cases of contemporary disinformation (e.g., the 2016 US Presidential elections, the Covid-19 pandemic and the 2022 illegal and illegitimate war on Ukraine) and delve into the rising role of social media, troll farms and Artificial Intelligence in Russia's modern information warfare.

In short, this dissertation attempted to fill a knowledge gap. While the study of the Russian disinformation phenomenon has become more popular in the last few years, there has been a lack of research in wartime situations and, particularly, in outward-looking communication.

The elected case study, which consists of the Crimean annexation and the conflict in the Donbass, coincided with the comeback of modernized Soviet-era disinformation operations and it became a turning point in Russia's conceptualization of information in military doctrine.

Since then, the information domain of Western democracies has been increasingly targeted, thus hurting Western citizens' ability to obtain objective information. The goal of these operations is not to convince or persuade audiences of a falsehood (D. Weiss & P. Pomerantsev, 2014, p. 14), but to lead citizens to lose their trust in institutions and to start questioning their media, leaders and, ultimately, democratic regimes. To add to this problem, the last decades have been characterised by multiple technological innovations that made it possible for messages to be spread across millions of people using the Internet and social media.

Only once a baseline of understanding of Russia's hostile information operations and of the multiple communications tools is established, can governments and organizations develop mechanisms to better protect their citizens against the informational threat.

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Appendix: List of articles surveyed in this dissertation

Event number 1: The Euromaidan protests

RT	Scuffles with police as thousands of Ukrainians protest shelving of EU trade deal	22.07.13	RT	Ukrainian opposition vacate seized offices to comply with amnesty deadline	16.02.14
RT	Ukrainian leader “outraged”, slams violence in Kiev as police disperse protesters	30.11.13	RT	Talks between Ukrainian govt, opposition fail as Kiev gripped by unrest	18.02.14
RT	Clashes in Kiev amid massive pro-EU protests: LIVE UPDATES (Part 1)	01.12.13	RT	Kiev: Masks of revolution	19.02.14
RT	Thousands of protesters keep vigil at barricades in central Kiev	02.12.13	RT	US foreign aid agencies paid for Kiev street violence - ex-US agent Scott Rickard	17.03.14
Sputnik	Police Break Up Protesters' Barricades in Kiev.	10.12.13	RT	Talks between Ukrainian govt, opposition fail as Kiev gripped by unrest	18.02.14
RT	Muddling and meddling? US, EU politicians plunge deeper into Kiev protest	11.12.13	RT	Kiev: Masks of revolution	19.02.14
RT	Teargas, fire, smoke as clashes erupt between police and protesters in Kiev	19.01.14	RT	Ukraine truce fails, rioters renew offensive in Kiev, death toll rises to 35	20.02.14
RT	No EU country would tolerate Ukraine protest violence at home - Lavrov	21.01.14	RT	RT crews under fire, armed rioters take over hotel, fire from windows in Kiev	20.02.14
Sputnik	Police Battle Protesters in Kiev as Crisis in Ukraine Deepens	22.01.14	RT	Apocalyptic Maidan: Torn by deadly clashes, Kiev plunges deeper into chaos	20.02.14
RT	“Fallout” Kiev: Surreal scenes from rioting Ukrainian capital (PHOTOS).	22.01.14	RT	12 most dramatic Kiev videos showing true scale of Ukraine mayhem	20.02.14
RT	Ukrainian opposition rejects government proposal, talks to continue	23.01.14	RT	From a sea of flags to rivers of blood: How Kiev’s peaceful protests turned into Maidan mayhem	21.02.14
RT	Ukraine Justice Ministry seized by rioters	27.01.14	RT	Masks off: Voices from both sides of the Kiev barricades	21.02.14
Sputnik	Police Claims Kiev Blast Suggests Opposition Terror Plot	07.02.14	RT	Coups for export: US has history of supporting anti-govt upheavals	22.03.14
RT	Ukrainian opposition vacate seized offices to comply with amnesty deadline	16.02.14	RT	Freed Ukraine ex-OM Tymoshenko tells Maidan to carry on the flight	23.02.14
			RT	Venezuelan opposition takes cues from Euromaidan?	24.02.14

RT	Maidan protesters announce line-up of Ukrainian Cabinet, propose Yatsenyuk	26.02.14
Sputnik	Embattled Liberal Russian TV Channel Faces Closure	04.03.14
RT	Gazprom won't extend discount gas prize for Ukraine - Putin	04.03.14
RT	Estonian Foreign Ministry confirms authenticity of leaked call on Kiev snipers	05.03.14
RT	Ukraine far-right leader demands govt open arsenals for radical groups	07.03.14
Sputnik	Ukrainian Police Break Up Pro-EU Rally	09.03.13
RT	Human rights violated by Ukraine's coup appointed government	12.03.14
RT	Kiev snipers shooting from bldg. controlled by Maidan forces – Ex-Ukraine security chief	13.03.14
RT	EU, US 'ideological sowing' behind current Ukrainian crisis – Russian officials	13.03.14

RT	'Maidan troops' enforce ownership change of Ukrainian liquor plant	20.03.14
RT	Post-Cold War West poked Russian bear with a stick until it finally swiped back – David Speedie, Carnegie Council Senior Fellow	24.03.14
RT	Ukraine security officials mull banning Right Sector radical movement - report	28.03.14
RT	Intellectuals standing ground on Ukrainian issue	28.03.14
RT	Seeds of protest: Maidan activists plant vegetable patch in Kiev square	28.03.14
RT	'EU more worried about its reputation, not extremism in Ukraine'	31.03.14
RT	Ukraine urges Right Sector to vacate its Kiev HQ after downtown shoutout injures 3	31.03.14

Event number 2: Crimean annexation

Source	Title	Date
Sputnik	EU Condemns Russian 'Aggression' in Crimea	09.02.14
Sputnik	Russian Parliament Welcomes Crimea to Leave Ukraine for Russia	09.02.14
Sputnik	Russian Navy Boosting Security in Crimea – Defense Minister	26.02.14
Sputnik	Tensions Rise in Ukraine's Crimea as Russians, Tatars Clash	26.02.14
Sputnik	US Mulls Loan to Ukraine, Warns Against Russian Intervention	27.02.14

Sputnik	Clashes in Ukraine's Crimea	27.02.14
Sputnik	Russian Fleet Poses No Threat to Ukraine – Senior Official	27.02.14
Sputnik	Defiant Yanukovich Requests Russia Protection	27.02.14
Sputnik	Armed Men Seize Crimea Parliament	27.02.14
Sputnik	Ukraine Warns Russia on Troop Movements	27.02.14

RT	Armed Men Seize Crimea Parliament	28.02.14
Sputnik	Crimean Parliament Forms New Cabinet	28.02.14
Sputnik	Russian Lawmakers Push to Simplify Annexing New Territories	28.02.14
Sputnik	Ukraine Accuses Russian Soldiers in Crimea of 'Invasion'	28.02.14
Sputnik	Yanukovich Escorted to Russia By Fighter Jets – Report	28.02.14
RT	Art of drills: 10 NATO war games that almost started armed conflicts	28.02.14
RT	Armed 'self-defense squads' partially withdraw from Simferopol airport	28.02.14
Sputnik	Obama Warns Russia Against Crimea Incursion	01.03.14
Sputnik	Amid Escalation Fears, Russia Says Kiev Sent Fighters to Crimea	01.03.14
Sputnik	Crimean Leader Appeals to Putin, Confirms Russian Troop Presence	01.03.14
Sputnik	Putin Asks Parliament to Approve Military Action in Ukraine	01.03.14
Sputnik	Putin tells Obama Russia Will Act in Case of Ukraine Violence	01.03.14
Sputnik	Russian Parliamentarians Call on Putin to Act in Crimea	01.03.14
Sputnik	Russian Parliament Approves Military Action in Ukraine	01.03.14

Sputnik	Ukrainian Troops in Crimea Side with Pro-Russia Forces	02.03.14
Sputnik	Crimean Authorities Confirm Takeover of Military Units	02.03.14
RT	Seriously, what?! Kerry tells Russia 'you don't invade a country on completely phony pretexts'	02.03.14
RT	Tea, sandwiches, music, photos with self-defence forces mark peaceful Sunday in Simferopol	02.03.14
Sputnik	Ukraine Urges Putin to Abandon Military Intervention Plans	03.03.14
Sputnik	Russian Parliament Speaker Plays Down Talk of War in Ukraine	03.03.14
Sputnik	Russian, Ukrainian TV Chiefs Trade Demands for Unbiased Coverage of Crisis	03.03.14
Sputnik	Russia Says Ukraine Action Aimed at Protecting Human Rights	03.03.14
Sputnik	Thousands of Russians Join Rallies in Support of Crimea	04.03.14
Sputnik	Putin Denies Sending Russian Troops to Crimea	04.03.14
Sputnik	5,500 Ukrainian Soldiers Defect to Serve an Independent Crimea	04.03.14
Sputnik	Crimea Rejects Talks with Ukraine Leadership	05.03.14
Sputnik	Russia's Defense Minister Denies Reports of Troops in Ukraine	05.03.14
RT	Ron Paul: US shouldn't meddle in Ukraine	05.03.14
Sputnik	Russia Slams US Over Inadequate	06.03.14

	Perception of Ukraine Events	
Sputnik	Crimea's Parliament Decides to Secede to Russia	06.03.14
Sputnik	Ukraine PM Says Crimea Breakaway Referendum is 'Illegitimate'	06.03.14
Sputnik	Crimean Tatar Minority to Boycott Secession Vote	07.03.14
Sputnik	Thousands Rally in Moscow in Support of Crimea's Secession	07.03.14
Sputnik	Crimea Ignores President's Order to Stop Secession Vote	07.03.14
RT	Crimea won't work with illegitimate Kiev govt – PM Aksyonov	07.03.14
Sputnik	Putin Tells Merkel, Cameron That Crimea Referendum Legal	09.03.14
Sputnik	Crimea Bans Nationalist, Neo-Nazi Groups	11.03.14
Sputnik	Moscow Reaffirms Right to Defend Russians in Ukraine	14.03.14
Sputnik	Putin Tells UN Chief That Crimea Referendum Legal	15.03.14
Sputnik	93 Percent of Crimeans Vote for Joining Russia - Exit Polls	16.03.14
Sputnik	Crimeans Celebrate Landslide Vote to Join Russia	17.03.14

Sputnik	Putin to Address Russian Parliament on Crimea Accession	17.03.14
Sputnik	Kiev Refuses to Recognize Crimea's Reunification With Russia	18.03.14
Sputnik	Russia, Crimea Sign Historic Reunification Treaty	18.03.14
Sputnik	Putin Signs Final Crimea Reunification Decree	21.03.14
Sputnik	European Union Says Not Ready to Embrace Ukraine	27.03.14
Sputnik	UN Assembly Declares Crimean Referendum Invalid - Resolution	27.03.14
Sputnik	UN Vote on Crimea Proves Russia is Not Isolated - Envoy Churkin	27.03.14
Sputnik	Russian Military's Professionalism Prevented Bloodshed in Crimea	28.03.14
Sputnik	Ukraine's Loss of Territorial Integrity Resulted from Internal Processes	01.04.14
Sputnik	Putin Denies Planning Crimean Reunification in Advance	10.04.14
RT	Putin acknowledges Russian military servicemen were in Crimea	17.04.14
RT	Ukrainian recipe for tackling dissent: More mini-armies, bounty payouts	17.04.14

Event number 3: Conflict in the Donbass

Source	Title	Date
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Sputnik	Deputy Defense Minister: 'Russia Can Only Invade With Tourists'	30.08.14
Sputnik	Supporters of Federalization Storm Government Buildings in Eastern Ukraine	07.03.14
RT	Donetsk activists proclaim region's independence from Ukraine	07.03.14
Sputnik	Pro-federalization protests started in eastern	06.04.14
Sputnik	FACTBOX: Timeline of Crisis in East Ukraine, February-April 2014	25.04.14
Sputnik	Clash Breaks Out at Pro-Russian Rally in East Ukraine	01.03.14
Sputnik	Supporters of Federalization Storm Government Buildings in Eastern Ukraine	07.03.14
RT	Donetsk activists proclaim region's independence from Ukraine	07.03.14
Sputnik	Supporters of Federalization Storm Government Buildings in Eastern Ukraine	07.03.14
Sputnik	East Ukraine's Donetsk Mourns Deadly Clash Victims	14.03.14
Sputnik	Ukraine's Interim Leader Vows Tougher Anti-Separatism Measures Amid Dissent in East	07.04.14

Sputnik	Donetsk People's Council Set to Hold Referendum to Join Russia	07.04.14
Sputnik	OPINION: Violent Crackdown on Ukrainian Protesters Would End in Civil War	07.04.14
Sputnik	Special Forces Blockade Regional Administration Building in Eastern Ukraine	08.04.14
Sputnik	Protestors Gather in Front of Regional Administration in Eastern Ukraine	08.04.14
RT	Kiev cracks down on eastern Ukraine after 2 regions proclaim Independence	08.04.14
Sputnik	Lavrov Denies Russian Role in East Ukraine Unrest	11.04.14
RT	Massive anti-Maidan rallies grip eastern Ukraine as residents demand referendum	13.04.14
RT	Kiev to launch 'full-scale' military op as massive protests grip eastern Ukraine	13.04.14
Sputnik	Holding Geneva Talks Depends on Kiev, Russia Ready to Participate – Foreign Ministry	14.04.14

Sputnik	Lavrov Slams 'Unacceptable' Use of Force in Southeastern Ukraine	15.04.14
Sputnik	Ukraine Massing Troops in East for Protest Crackdown – Self-Defense Leader	15.04.14
RT	Protesters in East Ukraine: Authorities in Kiev don't listen to us	15.04.14
RT	Protesters in East Ukraine: Authorities in Kiev don't listen to us	15.04.14
Sputnik	Local 'Anti-Maidan' Movement Declares Establishment of Odessa People's Republic	16.04.14
Sputnik	OPINION: Provocation in Ukraine Could Result in Large-Scale Armed Conflict	16.04.14
Sputnik	Over 50 Ukrainian Armored Vehicles Rolling Toward Donetsk – Activists	16.04.14

Sputnik	Six Ukrainian Army Vehicles Join Pro-Federalist Protesters	16.04.14
RT	Anti-govt protesters seize Ukrainian APCs, army units 'switch sides'	16.04.14
Sputnik	Putin Condemns Kiev's Criminal Use of Tanks Against Civilians in Eastern Ukraine	17.04.14
Sputnik	Putin Says Presence of Russian Troops, Instructors in Ukraine 'Nonsense'	17.04.14
Sputnik	Several Dozen Federalist Supporters Peacefully Assembled in Ukraine's Donetsk	18.04.14
Sputnik	Russia Says Kiev Fails to Follow Through on Geneva Accords	21.04.14
Sputnik	Pro-Federalization Supporters Gather for Rally in Ukraine's Donetsk	23.04.14
Sputnik	Putin Condemns Kiev's Use of Force Against Civilians	25.04.14
Sputnik	Protesters Declare Independent People's Republic in	28.04.14

	Ukraine's Luhansk	
Sputnik	Pro-Peace History Professors Blame US for Provoking Russia Over Ukraine	28.04.14
RT	Anti-Kiev protesters barricade City Hall in eastern Ukraine	28.04.14
Sputnik	Protesters Declare Independent People's Republic in Ukraine's Luhansk	28.04.14
Sputnik	Self-Defense Forces Seize Government Building in Ukraine's Luhansk	29.04.14
RT	'Go back to Kiev, fascists!': Outraged locals chase off Ukrainian troop	03.05.14
RT	Ukrainian parliament votes against autonomy referendum	06.05.14
RT	2 southeast Ukrainian regions to hold referendum May 11 as planned	08.05.14

RT	E. Ukraine's regions gear up for independence referendums	10.05.14
Sputnik	Referendums in Ukraine Show Desire for Freedom – Russian Official	12.05.14
Sputnik	OPINION: West Has to Accept Southeast Ukraine Desires For Independence	16.05.14
RT	Kiev proclaims post-referendum Donetsk, Lugansk regions 'terrorist organizations'	18.05.14
Sputnik	FACTBOX: Restrictions Against Russian Media in Ukraine in 2014	19.05.14
RT	3 civilians killed in shelling of Slavyansk residential area	26.05.14
RT	Kiev ready for 'final stage' of military op in E. Ukraine	21.05.14
Sputnik	Donetsk People's Republic Announces Switch to Russian Law	27.05.14
Sputnik	Luhansk People's Republic to Base New Legislation on Russian Law	28.05.14
RT	181 people killed, 293 injured in Kiev military op in eastern Ukraine	03.07.14

RT	Caught in conflict: Critically ill baby stuck in Ukraine's Slavyansk amid bloody fighting	05.07.14
RT	250 civilians killed in Ukraine's Lugansk during last two months – OSCE	19.07.14
RT	No power, water and food shortages: E. Ukrainian city survives amid army shelling	19.07.14
RT	Ukraine civil war death toll 1,100, over 3,500 wounded – UM	28.07.14
RT	'We just want the war to end': Refugees flee E. Ukraine turmoil	02.08.14
RT	"Churkin to UN: Don't children in E. Ukraine deserve safety?"	08.08.14
RT	<i>Russian humanitarian convoy departs to E. Ukraine (VIDEO)</i>	12.08.14
RT	<i>Lavrov: Russia to send another humanitarian convoy to Ukraine</i>	25.08.14
RT	Russian humanitarian aid distribution begins in E. Ukraine	25.08.14

RT	Over 60 Ukrainian troops cross into Russia seeking refuge	28.08.14
RT	Deputy Defense Minister: 'Russia Can Only Invade With Tourists'.	30.08.14
Sputnik	Deputy Defense Minister: 'Russia Can Only Invade With Tourists'.	30.08.14
RT	HRW: Civilian death toll in E. Ukraine rising due to 'indiscriminate and unlawful' shelling	02.09.14

Event number 4: The MH17 flight downing

Source	Title	Date
Sputnik	Almost 300 Dead in Malaysia Airlines Plana Crash – Ukrainian Interior Ministry Official	17.07.14
Sputnik	Russia Says Ukraine Responsible for Flight Safety in Boing Crash Air Space	17.07.14
Sputnik	Putin, Medvedev Express Condolences to Malaysia over Boing Crash	17.07.14
Sputnik	Donetsk Militia Leader Blames Ukraine for Downing Malaysia Boeing	17.07.14
Sputnik	Ukrainian Army Buk Missile Likely Downed Malaysian Plane	17.07.14
RT	Reports that Putin flew similar route as MH17, presidential airport says 'hasn't overflowed Ukraine for long time	17.07.14
RT	Report that Putin flew similar route as MH17, presidential airport says 'hasn't overflowed Ukraine for long time'	17.07.14
RT	Kiev deployed powerful anti-air systems to E. Ukraine ahead of the Malaysian plane crash	17.07.14
RT	Ukrainian Buk battery radar was operational when Malaysian plane downed – Moscow	18.07.14
Sputnik	Opinion: Too early to Jump to Conclusions About Malaysian Plane Crash in Ukraine	18.07.14
RT	Ukrainian Su-25 fighter detected in close approach to MH17 before crash – Moscow	21.07.14
RT	Ukrainian Su-25 fighter detected in close approach to MH17 before crash – Moscow	21.07.14

Sputnik	Russia, Holland Discuss UN Security Council Resolution on Malaysian Boing Crash	22.07.14
RT	Russia Suspects Kiev of Tampering with MH17 Crash Data	23.07.14
Sputnik	Ukraine Militia Denies Tampering with Evidence at MH17 Crash Site	23.07.14
Sputnik	US Claims of Flight MH17 Downing by Militia Remain Unfounded – Russia's Defense Ministry	24.07.14
Sputnik	Flight MH17 Crash Resulted From Ukraine's Diregard of ICAO Regulations	24.07.14
Sputnik	Oliver Stone Questions Theories on MH17 Crash Circulating in US Media	
Sputnik	Russia's Upper House Calls US Accusations over MH17 Crash Outset of New Cold	26.07.14
Sputnik	Lavrov says MH17 crash investigation raises suspicion	28.07.14
Sputnik	Media Try to Blame Russian President for Downing Malaysian Jet Without Any Proof	30.07.14
Sputnik	Russia Concerned About Ukraine Trying to Hide Evidence of MH17 Crash	30.07.14
Sputnik	NATO Has No Evidence of Militia's Responsibility for MH17 Crash – Russian Official	03.08.14
Sputnik	MH-17 Brought Down by Air-to-Air Missile, Finised Off by 30-mm Cannon, Experts Allege	06.08.14
RT	Documentary: MH-17: the untold story	22.10.14
RT	Malaysia excluded from MH17 probe – for 'not pointing fingers at Russia'?	28.11.14
RT	Russia to probe media reports that Ukraine	23.12.14

	military shot down MH17	
RT	Witness account of Ukraine MH17 takedown confirmed by lie detector – investigators	24.12.14
Sputnik	Colossal cover up? Searching for Truth Amid MH17 Tragedy	26.12.14
Sputnik	International Team Completes Investigation Meeting into MH17 Crash	20.02.15
RT	Dutch forensic expert fired for exposing photos of MH17 victims	24.04.15
RT	MH17 likely downed by Buk-M1 missile system not used by Russia – manufacturer	03.06.15
RT	MH17 couldn't be shot from rebel areas, West pressuring investigators – Russian Air Agency	16.06.15

Table 7. All RT and Sputnik news pieces surveyed in this dissertation