FIU DIPLOMACY LAB

BUILDING U.S. CAPACITY TO FIGHT DISINFORMATION ON THE DIGITAL BATTLEGROUND

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Summary of Work Collection

This report serves as the culmination of cataloguing instances of anti-Polish disinformation campaigns through a variety of different tradecrafts. The attached spreadsheet contains all the data collected during the cataloguing process divided into different sections. Individualized analysis of each source alongside metric collection, dates, actors, tradecraft, narrative descriptions, and tags fill most of the data sheet. The following report serves as an explanation of the key findings garnered from the insight obtained from this cataloguing.
This catalog can be found here.

Introduction

Russian politics gradually concentrate on European societies through propaganda and circumventing governments. The decline of the world's conventional media paradigm is followed by digital IT that places massive quantities of knowledge at the hands of people, often unregulated or deliberately misleading[1]. The freedom of information in open societies can make way for any actors in the space to use this to their advantage. In fact, it has been found in the Comey report[2] that Russian political technologists have used Western outlets to successfully move them forward. For years, they learned how to use contemporary 'infotainment' at home, and their skills now touch Europe and elsewhere. The most effective tactic in the Kremlin's disinformation campaign is to help fan self-doubt in ever more fractured and divided western societies.

One of the core elements of Russia's foreign policy is its information strategy and the pillar of which is Vladimir Putin's adoption of the Russian Federation's Information Security Policy on the 5th of December 2016. In Russia and in western countries, it is important to illustrate different views of cyberspace. In the case of western countries, in practice, the protection of networks is more critical than information spanning the Internet[3]. Russia primarily considers the knowledge domain as essential to its defense Strategy, Therefore, "informative protection" or "information defense" is a key issue in Russian official documents, instead of being a common topic in Europe or the United States, in "cybersecurity" or "cyber defense." In Russia, the field of intelligence is a region where its political influence is to be protected from aggressive intervention by the "western" countries. This is also an area that helps Russia to take advantage of the knowledge spaces of western societies to relay favorable news and positions[4].This dimension is of the essence since the Russian government attaches priority to the transmission of information and material. In this respect, the use of social media to disseminate information, which can used as a distortion of reality so as to exploit and achieve other political ends, is helping us to 'armament information"[5]. From the Russian perspective, this situation has led to an "information war" that is a permanent conflict that requires the use of alternative information to weakening western countries.

For Russia and the post-Soviet states, the West needs a long-term approach that takes the present threat seriously but does not only demonize Putin, rather works on an agenda that looks beyond the current Russian presidency. The EU must continue to follow its brand, build its own soft power, and improve it. Russia's propaganda currently has its freedom to play in the reform gap and economic problems of several Member States, which means the national governments and the EU commission will create more compelling arguments to combat the propaganda by the left and right populists in the Member States. They are against the EU. This means improving the EU's core principles and standards. Sanction mechanisms are needed for Member State governments seeking to undermine the EU's

fundamental rights and values and weaken EU unity. Until then, will the Union boost its reputation both domestically and abroad. The current sanctions regime against Russia must also be maintained.

The West should not establish "contra-propaganda," but instead help to regularly make Russian propaganda apparent, by encouraging responsible media and unmasking counterfeits. It is difficult to say with full clarity what the true goals of Putin and his acolytes might be, but the purpose of this campaign of misinformation seems clear - in relation to Poland- it is supposed to scold Poland, drive a wedge between Warsaw and its allies, confuse Polish politics in a particularly important period. This attack calls for a reaction based on sources, facts, authorities, and science - and above all, a clear strategic message showing the goals and conditions of the relationship between the Polish state and its Russian neighbor. Poland should not be drawn into a historical fight, but expose lies and facts into a political narrative.

Russia's primary foreign policy goals center around making their regime look better to the international community. Through their disinformation tactics, Russia aims to make western institutions and powers appear weak and unstable. One of their main goals is to turn institutions such as NATO into aggressive tools of foreign policy, in hopes of creating a wedge between these very powers. The Kremlin attempts to undermine democratic institutions in the same way. These tactics in turn make the institutions seem as they cannot successfully govern their constituents. Russia also attempts to cause general chaos and mayhem with their disinformation tactics.

Key Judgements

Foreign malign actors in the Polish media sphere maintain efforts to seriously damage the global perception of Poland through disinformation campaigns in accordance with Russian foreign policy goals. Russian foreign policy goals were found to have two main elements; either the idea of putting Europe/US/Polish interests down negatively, or of shining a positive light on Russia's own efforts. This was the overall sentiment of all data found, which was then further subdivided by the team into the following five labels: **historical revisionism, anti-U.S., anti-Europe, anti-NATO and Polish aggression, and Coronavirus.**

- We cannot confirm that all tradecraft on social media actively work for Russia; however, these narratives all serve to promote Russian disinformation campaigns.

- Russian tradecraft (e.g. Sputnik, RT) consistently overlaps these narratives with each other in order to legitimize Russian narrative spins. These narratives do not remain mutually exclusive from one another.

We assess that these disinformation narratives do not limit themselves to solely impact the Polish media sphere, but rather, that Poland is only playing a part in a larger disinformation campaign meant to promote the two main elements spoken about above. Russia propaganda aims to stoke tensions between Poland and other parties by portraying Poland and its allies as aggressors. The promotion of such material can have an effect of the victimization of Russia. Dissemination of disinformation to multiple audiences across states displays that campaign objectives seek to push anti-Polish narratives on an international scale.

- Repetition of certain narratives throughout different subsidiaries of Russian tradecraft enables disinformation campaigns to spread beyond the Polish media sphere.

- Influential Russian actors including a Russian Senator, the RT Editor in Chief, and an official Russian Embassy account continuously conduct their own campaigns to promote these anti-Polish narratives.

- Malign actors regard Poland as an important target to attack as its presence in Eastern Europe brings it within the E.U.'s, NATO's, and the U.S.'s spheres of influence. Certain narratives such as Defender Europe 20 portray Poles as either tools of imperialistic actors or active players who needlessly threaten Russian sovereignty.

- Tradecraft utilizes multiple languages (English, German, Russian, Polish, Italian, Spanish) to broaden the reach of its narratives to a wider audience. An ostracized Poland could tarnish the state's relationship with the rest of the international community, fulfilling Russian objectives.

We judge that Coronavirus (COVID-19) will impact the long-term strategy of these disinformation campaigns, potentially resulting in more impactful content due to the scope of the pandemic.

- The disinformation "infodemic" occurring on the digital media sphere provides ample opportunity for malign actors to peddle false narratives among heightened interest.

- Certain narratives such as Poland blocking Russian aid or shipments of masks to Italy necessitated official responses from Polish channels to counter this disinformation.

- Prevailing narratives shall continue over the long-term, now geared towards stringing anti-Europe sentiment into these narratives. Highlighted failures of the European Union, whether based in falsehoods or not, may be utilized to foster disunity among the European Union states. Disinformation that pits states such as Italy and Poland against each other contain the possibility of being effective in the absence of precautions.

We assess it remains difficult to determine the full-scale impact of Russian disinformation on the Polish and international media sphere. The longevity of these narratives could prompt Poles or Europeans to no longer consider each other trusted allies as the worst-case scenario. Asymmetric disinformation campaigns--both from Russian sponsored tradecraft and unrelated actors--will continue utilizing their current tactics for the foreseeable future.

- Mitigation and targeted responses remain the best tool to counter disinformation trends even as coronavirus transforms the battlefield.

- PPPs (Public-Private Partnerships) coordinated with the Bureau of European and Eurasian Affairs' objectives can provide dividends to mitigation efforts.

- Should these narratives continue to hold sway over the long-term, we assess that governments or other bodies may require gauging the pulse of Polish and European citizenry. Polling could determine how impactful disinformation campaigns have been to those who frequent social media.

Methodology

The methodology that was used throughout this research project was based on open-source (OSINT) research on a variety of social media and website platforms. Additionally, it was based on specific search strategies attempting to collect information that would be seen by the Polish population. Though it does not make the searches infallible, it nevertheless creates a more accurate picture of what viral

posts are impacting the country. The best-used methodology in order to achieve this goal was the use of a VPN which created a more accurate picture of what the audience would be seeing. Apart from this, the team collected social media posts directly from twitter, as well as from distilling from well-known disinformation platforms such as Hamilton68 and Euvsdisinfo.eu. The research collected all types of social media or online news posted between the dates of January 1st to April 10th, 2020. Specific search strategies included looking for anything locationally relevant to "Poland" or "Polish" in conjunction with what might be relevant to the "U.S." Apart from this, specific narratives were searched for to see if they were gaining traction. These narratives might have been overlooked, but with knowledge that they might specifically be relevant to the parameters of this research, they were included. Such narratives that were specifically searched for include that of narratives speaking about Defender Europe 2020 as well as WWII revisionism, as the team had prior knowledge that these narratives were popping up in the arena. Apart from this, some new narratives were discovered putting Russia in a positive light, especially in light of the coronavirus crisis, and these were discovered throughout the research process.

Narratives

Historical Revisionism

The Russian Narrative of "Historical Revisionism" seems to be one of the most prevalent narratives used in the disinformation space during the time throughout which the research was conducted, throughout a span of four months. Using events from World War II and the Cold War, Russia attempts to make the Polish people believe that the United States and other prominent western powers have been falsifying history. By utilizing sensitive topics, such as Anti-Semitism, and the Katyn Massqacre, Russia is both trying to alleviate themselves from the burden of atrocities committed during this era, and trying to make the Polish people turn on their government and institutions for Pro-Russian alternatives. By calling the government officials of Poland anti-semetic, the Jewish population and those sympathetic to their cause are more likely to turn away and criticize the government for acts that may have not been committed. As seen in the 2/13/2020 article posted on SputnikArmenia, found in the excel database linked to the first page of this report, which is also the same database that will be referred to in all subsequent examples of posts, Russia is trying to make themselves look like Poilands "savior" ignoring events like the Katyn Massacre, which was approved by Stalin during his regime. Russia is also actively trying to deny that history, as seen in the 3/5/2020 article posted on RIA Novosti, which claims Hitler approved the massacre, not Stalin. This article goes against years of Russian leaders acknowledging their misdeeds and apologizing.

Anti-United States

In recent months, there is much spread of anti-United States narratives which involve stating that the West is weak and has a 'political virus,' it cannot control its people. It can be noted, however, that Putin's Russia has limited the use of nearly all of the information war, and does not acknowledge its use. The restricted essence of warfare and its rejection can, therefore, be called hybrid warfare characteristics; therefore, the actions of the Kremlin can be interpreted as a hybrid war of intelligence against the United States.

The long-term goals of the Western hybrid intelligence war are uncertain. The question is that the Kremlin is adamant that Russia is being targeted by the West. The Kremlin will, therefore, continue to "dismantle the West," ie, seek to diminish US position in global politics, disrupt transatlantic ties,

weaken NATO and destroy the EU in the interests of protecting the regime. However, at what lengths the Kremlin is prepared to take the perceived threat to reinforce Putin's rule is not yet known.

Anti-Europe

Hand-in-hand with Russia's goal to cause distrust in the United States is its goal to cause distrust in Europe, and more specifically, the EU. Russia sees the EU as a "Russophobic" institution and aims to turn possible members away from joining it and towards working with Russia. Using similar tactics used to attack the United States, Russia depicts European states as places with aggressive, corrupt, and incompetent institutions.

One of the most prominent examples of an Anti-Europe narrative, is seen in the series of articles posted starting on 3/5/2020, which, as referenced earlier, can be found in the database linked in the first page of this report. These articles claimed that Ukraine had stolen radioactive material from Russia and snuck it into the European Union. This narrative painted the European Union as a safe-haven for criminals. The EU and its borders are well equipped to handle the smuggling of radioactive materials, further disqualifying the evidence brought forth by Russian media sites. The radioactive element in question also has a maximum "service life" of 10 years. Since this specific material was manufactured in 1991, it is also impossible that this fast neutron source was still in circulation.

Anti-NATO and Polish Aggression

NATO remains a consistent target for Russian disinformation narratives. NATO's military capabilities and deep ties to the European continent deter Russia from engaging in further territorial acquisition quests. Russia does not seek to partake in a military conflict with NATO in the foreseeable future, but rather employ asymmetric disinformation tactics instead. Russia portrays NATO's Defender Europe 20 mission foremost as a needless, if not intentional threat to Russia's security. The multinational mission serves as a threat to Russia as the exercise will be the biggest deployment of U.S. troops on the continent in 25 years. Poland alongside Belgium, the Netherlands, Germany, Lithuania, Latvia, and Estonia will house the exercise and the 37,000 troops originally meant for the mission. While coronavirus prevented Defender Europe 20 from going forward as intended, disinformation still portrays limited operations as an imperialist impediment.

Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov commented that *"it is much easier for Americans to plan and implement everything themselves than to be bound by NATO discipline, if at all symbolic. The circles that provoke this kind of absolutely unjustified exercise want response measures to follow that lead to further tensions."*[6] Russian retaliation is garnered under the pretext that the state would be defending itself from an imperialist NATO which Poland must obey. Online anti-NATO attacks make it an objective to also target Poland due to its key role in this mission.

Polish aggression goes beyond aiding military aggression campaigns. Polish aggression towards Russia seeks to become a more prevalent narrative as Russia tries to victimize itself through supposedly credible sources. Former Polish president, Lech Wałęsa, features prominently in Russian outlets including RIA News Agency, RT, and Sputnik advocating stronger ties between these states. Wałęsa insinuated in an interview with RIA that only the U.S. benefits from Poland's grudge against Russia as, "It's simply essential that relations improve in the end. I have always said that when two fight, a third profits. It's always closer …from Warsaw to Moscow than it is to Washington."[7] Further, Wałęsa stated it is paramount, "Changing those relations as soon as possible, so that Russia will take a greater part in our new construction. We won't be able to build anything big while we're so far apart."[8]

Credible documents against Wałęsa suggesting the Solidarity president potentially served as a communist secret police informer should caution readers from fully digesting these views.[9] Uncertainty behind Wałęsa's motivations warrant a certain amount of scrutiny considering the general Polish populace still widely admires Wałęsa.

Polish aggression narratives typically tie themselves to other narrative tags including historical revisionism or coronavirus as mentioned in the following sub-sections (e.g. Poland sabotaging Italy's recovery). Less prominent aggression claims include one-off narratives such as abusing workers in passport factories[10] and plotting the annexation of Kaliningrad.[11] Polish aggression rarely spreads as its own narrative, but rather works in tandem with the previously covered narratives.

Coronavirus

Much of the disinformation found in the space took a turn around the end of February, when coronavirus became a largely trending topic in all forms of social media. As such, the topic became the primary method to distribute other forms of narrative and disinformation for the Polish audience, the biggest of which was the disinformation which caused harm to the reputation of the Polish government in the eyes of other European countries, when a Russian minister first posted on his twitter account that Poland was not allowing coronavirus aid to go through to their fellow Europeans in Italy.

In the Russian government media (e.g., in the Sputnik agency), there was information about the alleged impediment by Poland of overflight of an aircraft with COVID-19 associated medical supplies transport to Italy through Poland. According to Flightradar24, Russian Ilia-76 flew not by the shortest route southwest (i.e., Belarus, Poland, the Czech Republic, and Austria), but south by the Black Sea, and then by the Mediterranean Sea and over small parts of Turkey, Greece, and Albania. Alexei Pushkov, head of the foreign commission in the Russian Senate, wrote about Twitter, about alleged difficulties, which is known for frequent attacks on various countries in this way, or for criticizing their allegedly anti-Russian actions. But the Ministry of Defense of Russia has not confirmed these revelations, or whether it has applied to NATO member states for permission to fly military (and not civil) machines through their airspace. Obtaining such consent could take longer than an "about" flight. The Polish Ministry of Foreign Affairs denied Puszków's revelations and informed that Warsaw had not issued any prohibitions regarding the transit of medical assistance for Italy by air." # Fakenews alert !! It is also used to break up European and transatlantic unity (through disinformation). No aircraft flying to the rescue of Italy has been blocked. Polish airspace for transit is open. Let's be careful! " - wrote on Twitter, the deputy head of the Polish Ministry of Foreign Affairs Marcin Przydacz. Also, spokesman of the Polish Air Navigation Services Agency Paweł Łukaszewicz denied that anyone in Poland would impede Russia from providing medical assistance to Italy. "It is a lie that we did not want to let Russian planes pass."

The Kremlin media will be creating the following combination of these two narratives, the Russian authorities are calming and successfully fighting against the virus; but governments in Europe and the USA are creating hysteria and making mistakes that criticize the public. Some western governments reject the help of the Kremlin, while others accept it. It will be emphasized. That is used as a holistic image of the superiority of Moscow and the hardship of the West by an internal audience. The narrative will move in two senses for the external audience: it will speak with a partnership proposal and Moscow's involvement in international solidarity, which can not be dismissed, but it will speak, on the other hand, to the European audiences seeking "alternatives" opinions about their governments. This audience consists of the voters of the new right, Euroskeptics as well as Populists from different countries, not only a part of the Russian speakers in Europe.

Possible Upcoming Narratives

Russia will continue to proliferate disinformation in the Polish media sphere by accentuating fears of European disunity during the pandemic. Russian disinformation narratives that involve COVID-19 associate with at least one of the narrative tags detailed throughout this report (e.g. anti-Europe, anti-U.S., etc.). Moscow's foreign policy maintains the dissolution of democratic institutions as a priority, placing European Union states in the crosshairs. Hungary offers a potential opportunity for malign actors to continue to sow division between the state and the EU. The passage of an emergency law that granted PM Viktor Orbán decree powers indefinitely falls in line with Russian narratives advocating authoritative nationalist policies regardless of EU criticisms. Promotion of competitive authoritarian tactics aligns with Russia's interests of seeing states such as Poland and Hungary indirectly delegitimize the EU. Malign actors shall continue to emphasize the absence of "European solidarity" between the EU and Italy, Poland, and Hungary.

Malign actors scored dividends with this strategy through a notable disinformation campaign involving Poland diverting Russian aid to Italy. The Polish Ministry of Foreign Affairs disavowed a story from the head of the health service in the Lazio region regarding the seizure of 23,000 FFP2 masks.[12] Russian senator Aleksey Pushkov and Sputnik among other actors propagated one narrative that Polish airspace forcibly diverted Russian aid to Italy.[13] The Deputy Minister of Foreign Affairs tweeted in response to this false narrative, "No aircraft to Italy has been blocked. Polish airspace for transit stays open. Be careful."[14] It is possible malign actors serving the Russian agenda shall continue this strategy in the long term as the coronavirus continues to impact Europe. This would especially be the case if these stories continuously have more social interactions than the corrections. The metrics on the attached spreadsheet display how these narratives leave enough of an impact on the media sphere to warrant official responses.

Recommendations

Mitigation

Policymakers in Poland and across Europe should prioritize mitigation as the tool of choice to combat Russian disinformation throughout this pandemic and long-after. The WHO declared disinformation regarding COVID-19 to be itself an "infodemic", requiring its own medicine to combat the contagious spread of lies.[15] Poland cannot be targeted in the same vein of the U.S. for starting the virus, but Poles for hampering global/European recovery efforts. Richard Stengel—Russian disinformation expert and former Under Secretary of State for Public Diplomacy and Public Affairs—recommends people remain skeptical of all questionable news. Stengel states "Maintain a social distance from disinformation and practice good information hygiene…don't even bother rebutting them as even the refutation creates an echo."[16]

PPP (Public-Private Partnerships)

Poland should consider private, international organizations, and governmental partnerships to condition Poles of being wary of disinformation. Disinformation on Poland throughout the pandemic goes beyond the Polish media sphere while still dealing critical damage. Narratives—including the false one accusing Poland of blocking aid to Italy—can originate in different states. European states and the European Union should become involved in some of these aforementioned policies such as:

- Public-- Partner with international organizations such as ECDC and WHO to develop a "Misinformation Tracking Center" where states and media can submit which actors promote false narratives. Utilize official state social media accounts to respond to grave disinformation narratives that accuses one state of intentionally hurting another one (e.g. @ItalyinPoland quote-tweeting disinformation clarification from the Polish Foreign Ministry account @MSZ_RP).[17]

- Private-- Efforts in the vein of *Hamilton68* (Russian propaganda) and *NewsGuard's* "Coronavirus Misinformation Tracking Center" (websites in the U.S., U.K., France, Italy, and Germany) serve as suitable templates.Encourage social media platforms to expand their "fake news" algorithms flagging false coronavirus posts to provide warnings on false narratives should they come from verified accounts of malign actors.

Effective Public Relations

Improving public relations in Poland and other areas affected by Russian disinformation could yield dividends as it has done in some regions. NATO Enhanced Forward Presence (EFP) forces partake in civil engagement activities in Estonia and Latvia to solidify NATO integration in the region. An analysis from the Rand Corporation studied the impacts EFPs had on states in Eastern Europe through these activities.[18] U.S. soldiers engaging in these acts with the local populace in Latvia served as an effective counterbalance to Russian social media influence in the state. EFPs acts countered the promotion of false narratives such as a story that arose involving UK soldiers harassing an elderly Estonian woman in a hospital.

Poland should publicize and advertise whatever strategies result in success, granting the general population the freedom to discover truth among the lies. Poland in tandem with NATO or allied forces can emphasize the benefits these powers have provided as opposed to Russia. This enables NATO, Poland, and the U.S. to counter disinformation with their own narratives that result in tangible impacts. Amid the coronavirus pandemic, aid efforts from Western powers can successfully serve as compelling arguments for why communities should stay aligned with their interests.

Polling for Long-Term Approach

Polling can be conducted in the future determining how Poles and Europeans perceive the responses of their own state and the European Union. Polls from non-public institutions could also determine if citizens believe certain disproven false narratives or who they classify as reliable allies (i.e. U.S., E.U., Russia favorability ratings). Success of current and proposed initiatives could be determined by the results garnered from such proposed polling. The "liar's dividend", where people known for deception receive the benefit of the doubt in a particularly polarized environment, reigns when left unchecked.[19] Results from polling provides opportunities to craft policies to ensure the liar's dividend remains uncollected.

Conclusion

To conclude, there is a large disinformation space currently being used by malign actors, and although not all, almost all of the narratives in this space can be placed into the five sections of narrative defined above. Most of these narratives have a significance with Russo-Polish relations. When looking at the "Historical Revisionism" and "Aggression and Military" topics, for example, it is clear that an overarching goal of placing Poland in a bad light and Russia in a better light is, at least, a connecting

effect of such disinformation. The Anti-European narrative even plays into these relations as well. For example, throughout posts gathered in this research, it can be seen that there is disinformation being distributed both placing other European countries in bad light for the Polish population, as well as placing Poland in bad light in other European and especially other EU countries. The new posts that are surging about the coronavirus pandemic, a narrative in its own right, is also used to echo such sentiments. The biggest connection and example that can be found in using the covid-19 narrative to permeate a more overarching narrative can easily be seen in the example of how Poland was politically estranged from its European partner, Italy, for a short while due to the disinformation on covid-19 aid. This is a narrative within coronavirus that fits easily into the sub narrative of anti-Europe. Separately from this, the anti-US narrative, navigates anti-US rhetoric in the context of the country's relations with Poland. An example of such use is the distribution of disinformation throughout Polish social media that the United States was the true cause of the Coronavirus, rather than China. This is only one example of a plethora demonstrating the narrative topics divided above, all of which seek to undermine the authority and image of Poland and/or its people.

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