

One Year After Minsk II – Reviewing Options of Countering Russian Disinformation Efforts

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The migrant crisis and the subsequent political turmoil have banished from our minds a conflict that has been fairly present in Europe for the past two years: the war in Eastern Ukraine. Initially a domestic conflict originating in severe problems of corruption, lawlessness and democracy, for Ukraine it culminated in the critical question of whether to keep orienting towards Russia or take a European path by signing the 2013 association agreement. The subsequent civil-war-like conflict between a pro-European government and separatists seeking greater independence for the Eastern regions of Ukraine not only entailed a heavy burden for EU-Russia relations, but also resulted in heavy losses of human lives.

Fortunately, this decrease of public awareness for the conflict is not only due to a readjustment of European leaders' political priorities, but also due to a calming of the situation on-site. Although the ceasefire put in place in September 2015 is still fragile and repeatedly being violated on either side, no major border changes have occurred since then, and the two warring parties finally have restarted the implementation process of crucial points of the Minsk II agreement such as the complete withdrawal of heavy weapons on both sides.

However, at the beginning of 2015, the situation still had looked quite differently: with the conflict being at its height, European leaders were ardent in vying with one another on how to appropriately react to Russian support for the separatist side. At the end of 2014 during the NATO Wales summit, member states had announced to commit to the alliance's 2% GDP military spending pledge and hence underpinned both the seriousness of the conflict and their readiness to take action should any although unlikely aggression occur from the Russian side. Yet EU and NATO paved the way for de-escalation as not all member states were convinced of the purposefulness of far-reaching economic sanctions imposed on Russia earlier on: a possible easing of the sanctions was linked to progress made regarding the implementation of the Minsk II agreement in order to provide an incentive for Russian cooperation.

The media campaign as 'new form of warfare'?

The economic and political dimensions of this newly-arisen conflict were quite clear since the outbreak of the conflict. Yet as media coverage sharply increased, it became obvious that just like in any other major conflict between nations, the struggle for narrative control of developments would become the crucial battlefield for both Europeans and Russians. In other words, whose media outlets are more credible/trustworthy when it comes to coverage and assessment of the situation in Ukraine? A 2014 NATO report examining non-military aspects of the first months of the crisis from a strategic communications perspective describes the Russian course of action as follows: 'The information campaign and related military action by Russia corresponds to the characteristics of a new form of warfare where [...] the main battle space has moved from physical ground to the minds and hearts of the people in question.'¹ According to the report, in the period examined, the Russian government was actively steering the state dominated media landscape in order to control the collective narrative in Russia and beyond. Deviant reporting of independent media outlets was minimal and hence noticeable by a dwindling share of the population. Admittedly, in the course of the crisis, Western media outlets have not really covered themselves with glory either by committing serious flaws in their reporting, but reproaching Western media

¹NATO Strategic Communications Centre of Excellence (2014): Analysis of Russia's information campaign against Ukraine. Page 4.

outlets of steered coverage goes too far. Just as any other conflict, for political leaders such as Putin, the confrontation with the West bears huge potential for power consolidation and extension. The feelings of patriotism evoked and reinforced by targeted media coverage potentially rally a country's population behind the dominating political figure.

In opposition to solely controlling the media, controlling the narrative is an even better resource for political communication as it strengthens collective identity and determines whether news is being approved or rejected by an audience. Both approaches go hand in hand and are mutually dependent, but whereas controlling the media only requires resolute enforcement of questionable laws, the control of a narrative cannot be achieved overnight and is thus a complex long-term endeavour.

Therefore, one year ago in March 2015, the European Council invited the High Representative of the Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy Federica Mogherini to prepare an action plan on strategic communication in order to 'challenge Russia's ongoing disinformation campaigns'². This allegation openly put forward against Russia thus reproaches its government of actively sowing mistrust of EU politics both within Russia and beyond, which also means within the European Union and particularly in the Eastern Partnership countries. Especially what has been labelled the *Compatriots Abroad Policy* and its possible security implications give reason for concern. Ever since the collapse of the Soviet Union, Russia has aimed at maintaining a close relationship with the ethnic Russians who had become citizens of the many resulting newly independent states at the time. Now, more than ever, a message is sent to those Russian-language minorities or other Russophile groups in eastern EU Member States or European Partnership countries that Russia is the only actor worth trusting. This extension of influence over Russian minorities serves the purpose of control and possible pretence for involvement at a later point of time. Therefore, despite an extremely low probability of Russian aggression due to NATO-membership, in the follow-up of the Crimea annexation, notably the Baltic countries were worried that some of their eastern regions possibly might have to expect a similar fate. One clearly has to differentiate between the two target groups outside of Russia: the first one being the ethnic Russians mentioned above, the second one being everyone else in EU Member States or countries of the Eastern Partnership with no particular attachment to Russia. The second group mostly feels alienated from Russian disinformation efforts as the Russian perspective in media coverage is not met by the groups' narrative, yet specific often radical factions from both left and right representing political attitudes from anti-Americanism to Euroscepticism become captivated by Russian disinformation efforts or financial support as for the French right-wing Front National, for instance. The first group, the ethnic Russians, however, is probably of bigger importance as despite European citizenship; their process of socialisation is still quite often primarily coined by Russian culture. Those minorities usually aren't well integrated and their estrangement from society could further increase the ethnical fragmentation of society. In extreme cases, such developments could even threaten a country's territorial integrity due to separatist insurgencies and consequent appeals to Russia to protect its 'compatriots abroad', thus largely foreign citizens, against the use of the respective country's government power against them.

The 'Eastern StratCom Task Force': too prudent or counter-productive?

Although the latter does not directly affect the majority of EU Member States, most heads of state were anxious about the influence of Russian media outlets on Russian-language minorities in eastern EU Member States and in countries of the Eastern Partnership. The message conveyed of EU accession being a non-desirable ideal to follow actively

²Conclusions adopted by the European Council on 19 and 20 March 2015. Page 5. Available online at (retrieved 15.1.2016): http://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/meetings/european-council/2015/03/european-council-conclusions-march-2015-en_pdf/

challenges the European soft power stance and thus the strong appeal Europeanisation has always had on its immediate and sometimes even more distant spheres of influence. Worried about partisan reporting by Russian media outlets and the resulting distorted image of the European Union, a strategic communications team, the EEAS' *Eastern StratCom Task Force*, was set up by the Council as a first step and is completely staffed and fully operational as of September 2015. Its objectives are to effectively communicate and promote EU policies and values in the Eastern European Partnership countries, to strengthen and support local independent media in order to raise awareness when it comes to third party disinformation campaigns, and finally to increase European reactivity to such disinformation efforts.³ But much has changed since March 2015 and one major serious deficit of the approach now seems to be the increasing lack of support by EU Member States. The initiative is, varying from Member State to Member State, either considered as being too weak and therefore ineffective, as being counter-productive to current political interests or as being dangerously close to counter-propaganda and therefore not supportable for normative reasons. Once more, the EU displays its recurring problem of disagreement in the common foreign and security policy. Interviewed on this subject, Amanda Paul, foreign policy analyst at the European Policy Centre, points out that the EU tries to act for the sake of doing something, but without clearly knowing what the approach would have to look like and whether it would be effective. Furthermore, in her opinion, a joint European approach could never show a sufficiently differentiated interest in the target groups and effectively attract their attention. Any attempt should therefore take place at Member State level.

A legitimate question that arises from the recent rapprochement with Russia on Middle East affairs and from positive developments in Ukraine and the Middle East is whether such an approach to countering Russian disinformation, whatever its form may be like, does actually have any prospects for impact, whether the course of action and the outcome would be desirable and finally whether the current objectives would advance Europe's interests at all. Although Russian President Vladimir Putin still is a difficult partner to eastern EU Member States, for western EU Member States on the contrary, he has increasingly become presentable again after constructive collaboration that led to a long-awaited nuclear deal with Iran. In the follow-up of the Paris attacks, French President Francois Hollande paid a visit to his Russian counterpart in order to discuss common interests in the fight on terrorism and more and more voices have recently argued for a progressive suspension of economic sanctions from 2016 onwards in case of ongoing expedient collaboration with Russia in Syria. It is, inter alia, for those reasons that the *Eastern StratCom Task Force* has received a very narrow mandate, has been told to keep a low profile and that its activities remain classified in order not to openly engage in measures possibly antagonising Russia. By now, the only known activity of the 10 head strong team lead by the Brit Giles Portman has been the publishing of publicly available weekly 'disinformation reviews'⁴ and the establishment of relations with independent actors in Eastern Partnership countries. The *Eastern StratCom Task Force* seems to limit itself to monitoring activities for the moment, but may engage in more sophisticated forms of strategic communications should the assessment of the situation change. Although a small team, when acting as an intermediary, the use of its network in order to route financial support from EU Member States to independent media outlets could have a not negligible impact.

³ Hunko, Andrej (2015): Kleine Anfrage an die Bundesregierung bezüglich Einrichtung einer Arbeitsgruppe der Europäischen Union 'Russland Taskforce' für die Strategische Kommunikation in Osteuropa. Available online at (retrieved 30.1.2016): http://www.andrej-hunko.de/start/download/doc_download/689-einrichtung-einer-arbeitsgruppe-der-europaeischen-union-russland-taskforce-fuer-die-strategische-kommunikation-in-osteuropa

⁴ In those reviews, the East StratCom Task Force only compiles reports written by its partners: <http://eeas.europa.eu/euvsdisinfo/>

Some initiatives, however, go way further than the EEAS' East StratCom Task Force and are backed by EU Member States being dissatisfied with the rather prudent European approach. A proposal brought forward by the European Endowment for Democracy (EED) aims at establishing a pan-European Russian language news agency which could unite and professionalise uncoordinated national initiatives which have been put in place in several European countries, such as for example by the UK's BBC. Currently there are a few websites which refute false reports by Russian media⁵, but their role is rather passive as they primarily reveal lies and do not proactively serve as media outlets publishing regular, well-researched and truthful news. The reach of the few remaining Russian media being considered independent is limited.

The EED's approach however actively plans to counter the hitherto relatively unchallenged Russian disinformation efforts by advocating a coordinated large-scale response, both within and beyond Europe. This is a crucial point in trying to win over public opinion in the targeted countries. Independently from the exact form of the approach chosen, be it the rather prudent EEAS approach or the more provocative EED proposal, any attempt that actively challenges current Russian news coverage and not only monitors Russian activities will most certainly entail the bitter aftertaste of counter-propaganda. The one question that needs to be asked is whether the EU can afford not to become active on this subject matter. The line between information campaigns and propaganda is not as thin as it may seem; it is primarily a question of perspective and whether the underlying intention is truthful in the eyes of the one acting.

Interviewed on possible European countermeasures in April 2015, Estonian MEP and member of the EP's budgets committee Indrek Tarand stated that he would oppose the allocation of European funds to an initiative actively aiming at countering Russian disinformation campaigns as the prospects for success were so little and a European response to Russian campaigns shouldn't make use of the tools the EU criticises itself. In his opinion, particularly Russian-language minorities should be approached on a local level by pointing out the advantages of EU rapprochement, and not by initiating large scale European media campaigns. Furthermore, at least concerning Russian-language minorities in the Baltic countries, more emphasis should be put on highlighting the benefits of life within the EU.

His argument is based on the concept of an intrinsic value of the European idea and the continuing normative appeal the EU has with its neighbours. Russian efforts may have made it unrealistic to stick to the fantasy of European achievements speaking for themselves, but whether engaging in a battle for credibility will portray Europe in a better light is highly unlikely. Instead of costly measures to convince the European Partnership countries' populations of Europe's advantages as compared to Russian disinformation, the EU should/could just ignore those disinformation efforts and not lower itself to the standards of Russian media coverage. Instead of actively facing it, the EU would thus demonstrate that all the noise made is not worth wasting too much time and energy on.

A truly European reaction would be signalling that the EU and its Member States, despite all internal differences, seek to improve the relationship with Russia by providing the Russian government with more incentives for cooperation, but by simultaneously linking a lift of sanctions to better collaboration on Syria and, at best, a stop of Russia's targeted media campaigns. Admittedly, the effectiveness of such a course of action is limited as long as the EU is depending on Russian support for the resolution of conflicts in Ukraine and Syria. The low oil prices however might play into the cards of Europe – the current Russian

⁵ Such as the reputable website <http://www.stopfake.org> set up by Ukrainian activists.

dependency on oil exports might force the country to cooperate with the EU in order for its economy to get back on track again.

Regional media Initiatives

At best, no counter measures would be necessary at all as European achievements could speak for themselves and restore the attractiveness of Europeanisation. Unfortunately, there has not been an abundance of success stories of people living in harmony and close collaboration in Europe recently. On a regional level, however, the approach of the Estonian government seems to be promising in this regard. Through the establishment of the Russian language TV-station ETV3, integration of the Russian minority could be improved. Instead of countering Russian disinformation, the channel will exclusively focus on regional issues and therefore be of interest to the ethnic Russians living in the border regions with Russia. Through its cultural focus and the highlighting of success stories of ethnic Russians prospering in Estonia, the TV station aims at emphasising the advantages and opportunities of life in Estonia (as part of the EU) provides and thereby strengthens the Russian minority's attachment to the country. The approach ('we're not as bad as you are being told') is not comparative, but self-confident and in line with European values and high standards of media coverage. Other EU Member States such as Finland have already set up similar media outlets a long time ago.

As for the Eastern Partnership countries, the way is much longer. The 2014 NATO report cited above concludes that aggressive reporting as exercised by Russia either persuades or alienates people, depending on their cultural background and a prior view on a particular issue. A very clear example for this process of alienation is the non-Russian population in Georgia for instance, where there is a deep-rooted mistrust, if not even disgust against Russian media since the Russia-Georgia war in 2008 at the latest. Tatia Dolidze, herself a Georgian national and former expert at the Centre for European Policy Studies, a Brussels-based think tank, sees little prospect for success in ensnaring the Russian population by establishing classical Russian-language media offers beyond European borders. People being used to watching their favourite shows on the channels they're accustomed to would hardly switch channels when the EU-backed alternative has been labelled as 'Western' by their traditional channel. That, admittedly, could also be the case for ETV3.

At the end, for minorities in the Baltic countries or whole populations in countries of the Eastern Partnership, it comes down to the ever-repeated mantra of making the EU and European values attractive again, not only by repeatedly referring to their attractiveness, but by actually contributing to an improvement of people's lives through deeper involvement with the EU. Notably countries of the European Partnership must be given better incentives for a rapprochement to the EU, and the benefits of Europeanisation must become tangible for populations, not remain a promise for a distant future. The prospect of an improved socio-economic status has always triumphed over any form of intentionally manipulative misinformation, nowadays as well as hundred years ago. But in order to embark on this long-term approach, the EU would first have to sort out the numerous internal problems which paralyse its abilities to act effectively and to advance the EU as a whole.

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