

MH17: Stratcom and Accountability



MH17

- On the 18th July 2014, a Malaysian passenger Jet was shot down over Russian-backed separatist territory in Eastern Ukraine; killing all 298 passengers on board.
- Suspicion fell on the Russian-backed separatists, who were militarily active in the region and know to have been supplied with anti-aircraft equipment by Russian Security Services. Rather than joining the International Community's calls for an International Enquiry, the Kremlin engaged in a disinformation blitz to cover its proxy's crimes.
- The campaign contained all the themes of Kremlin disinformation; offering contradictory narratives, reframing itself and its proxy as the victim and denigrating the relatives of victims and investigators.
- The Kremlin continues its campaign; to date, there have been over 320 documented cases of Kremlin-backed disinformation.
- However, the campaign has been unsuccessful; the majority of the international Community continues to hold the separatists and the Kremlin responsible for MH17; see how this was achieved below.

HELP FOR VICTIMS OF MH17

Australia - MH17 Family Support Package

toll-free help line -- 877-227-6435

Access - Aircraft Casualty Emotional Support Services



SOURCE: ANP

Image source: StopFake

FIGHTING THE KREMLIN'S DISINFORMATION NARRATIVES

- Wim van der Weegen (Director of Communications of the Dutch Safety Board) and head of the investigation, suggested a critical component of the investigation was establishing credibility. This was done in the following ways:
 - a. **Focus on the facts** - MH17 was an emotive issue, but it was important for the Board not to engage in emotive language or 'sweeping statements' in order to avoid allegations of 'russophobia.' Effectively letting the facts speak for themselves.
 - b. **Engage and disprove counter narratives in a scientific manner** - This could be described as 'showing your working,' why the evidence disproves the disinformation; helping build transparency and credibility.
 - c. **Graphics can go a long way to communicate a narrative** - The Dutch Safety Board hired a Graphic Artist to reconstruct the plane (see left), complimenting the Report's delivery and dominate the information zone. At the same time, the Board 'translated' technical aspects into accessible summaries, visuals and an animation in multiple languages.

- Independent open-source investigators like Bellingcat also played a critical role in fact-checking the Kremlin's disinformation narratives. As they were also able to effectively 'show their working' in order to persuasively demonstrate how their conclusion was reached. At the same time they were free of government association, so could not be labeled as biased.
- The Board's communication strategy proved effective; the international community agreed to an array of sanctions against individuals involved and the Kremlin, who were proven to have assisted in the attempted cover-up.

ACCOUNTABILITY IN THE CURRENT WAR

- The Kremlin has now entered an open conflict with Ukraine, and once again has employed disinformation to obscure and cover up crimes committed by its forces.
- The case of MH17 is a prime example of how to communicate facts in an area targeted by disinformation, but it is equally important to ensure that it reaches the right audiences. The Kremlin has tightened its control over the domestic information environment, and, with the help of the Chinese Communist Party, is actively attempting to change perceptions of the conflict in the Global South; falsify reasons for its invasion and the way it is waging war.
- Reaching these audiences will be critical to hold the Kremlin accountable.