



"What we're seeing looks a lot like genocide" - V. Putin

Russian disinformation narratives during the Ukraine Border Crisis, 2022

Background

Ukraine is a top concern for the Kremlin and continues to face a severe hybrid warfare (HW) campaign:

- Its large, shared border has made it a traditional route for invasion throughout Russia's history.
- Its cultural linkages, coupled with historical revisionism, make the Kremlin view it as a breakaway province and a consistent reminder of Russia's perceived humiliation and dismemberment after the Cold War.
- Its growing western-centrism is deemed by the Kremlin to threaten Russia's national security by undermining the Kremlin's domestic narrative that Western ideals of democracy do not work in "Russky Meer" (the Slavic world).
- This paranoia culminated in the illegal annexation of Crimea through hybrid means (disguising Russian soldiers as local militia, supporting proxies, cyber attacks and rampant disinformation) in 2014.

Russia continues a range of HW operations against Ukraine

- Pro-Russian separatists in the Eastern Donetsk and Luhansk regions (Ukrainian: Oblasts) with significant hardware as well as provide training and intelligence and international cover, as in the case of the airline MH17 incident (see Info ops below).
- PMCs are combined with unmarked Russian special forces (the "Little Green Men") to provide kinetic support against the Ukrainian Armed Forces.
- Russian intelligence agencies have turned Ukraine into "a cyber battle field" with continued targeting of civil infrastructure through Distributed Denial of Service (DDoS) attacks (crippling cyber information systems through information and request overload).
 - Russian hackers turned out the lights in portions of Ukraine in 2015 and 2016, and unleashed a virus called NotPetya in 2017 that disabled government websites and communications
 - 14th of January 2022, Government systems in Ukraine were hit by a massive cyber attack, which displayed an image on screen warning Ukrainians to "prepare for the worst": combining cyber attacks with psychological warfare.
- To date, the war in Ukraine's east has killed 14,000 people.

Background

Information operations are critical to these activities.
They follow a three-pronged approach:

1. Legitimise Russian involvement

- Russia's disinformation apparatus (a combination of official Kremlin-aligned media, fake online "sock-puppet" accounts and bots express an ethno-nationalist narrative that sees Ukraine as a part of a greater Slavic community that is at one with Russia before its artificial creation and that it seeks to return to the motherland.
- The Kremlin's troll farms also distribute "evidence" of Ukrainian-perpetrated atrocities – including stories of crucifixion and mass graves – and exaggerated links between the Ukrainian government and fascist organisations in order to emphasise the need to protect ethnic Russians.
- There is a concern this is laying the ground for a false-flag operation to justify a Russian invasion.

2. Deny and confuse

- Russia's disinformation apparatus were critical in creating confusion over Russia's takeover of Crimea and continued kinetic assistance to Eastern separatists.
- Disinformation is also used to provide international cover to Eastern separatists: after they shot down the commercial airline MH17 in July 2014 – killing 298 people – sock puppets and bots began producing stories disputing the narrative. Accounts varied from the Ukrainian government being responsible to the whole incident being a false-flag conducted by the CIA, loading the plane with dead people before blowing it up mid-air (a plot-line from BBC's Sherlock).

3. Undermine Kiev

- Russian propaganda depicts Ukraine as an "artificial state" created by the Russian Bolsheviks after the 1917 revolution.
- The Kremlin publicly and covertly denounces the Ukrainian government as extremist, corrupt and controlled by foreign interests; a common phrase used instead of "Kyiv" or "Ukrainian" government is "Nazi-fascist Junta" while at the same time playing on antisemitic tropes of a Jewish conspiracy controlling Kiev.
- The Kremlin's disinformation about Ukrainian-perpetrated atrocities assists in this as well as legitimising Russia's involvement.

These narratives can be outright contradictory in order to enhance confusion:

- Russia is not interfering in Ukraine, but is justified in doing so.
- Ukrainians and Russians are one people, but Ukrainians are fascists persecuting Russians.
- Ukraine is ruled by an authoritarian junta, but authoritarianism is the slavic way.

The Current Crisis

The Kremlin believes it has a unique moment to achieve its long-term strategic objective:

- It has developed substantial war chest (up to \$600 billion in cash reserves) that could soften the impact of sanctions on the security establishment.
- Believes that there is a lack of political will in Europe for confrontation after the failures in the Middle East and political changes (Britain's government and "PartyGate, a new Chancellor in Germany, France and the US's upcoming elections).
- The recent Constitutional Reform in January 2020, along with the Foreign Agent Law (requiring those receiving international funding - like civil rights and human rights NGOs - to label as foreign influence agents) and jailing of opposition leaders (such as Alexi Navalny), means there will be no challenge on the domestic front.

The Kremlin's narrative reflects its usual themes, but have gone into overdrive over the past few months to paint Ukraine as the aggressor

- Nov 18th 2021 - Dmitry Medvedev published an essay describing Ukraine as a corrupt vassal state of foreign interests, likening President Zelensky to a Sonderkommando (Jewish concentration camp inmates forced to dispose of gas-chamber victims). Asserting negotiations with such a regime would be "pointless".
- 21st Dec. 2021 – MOSCOW TIMES: "Russian Defense Minister Sergei Shoigu claimed on Tuesday that U.S. private military companies have stationed troops in the Donetsk region of eastern Ukraine and are preparing a provocation using unknown chemical components."
- DECEMBER 2021 – President Putin: "We see and know what is happening in Donbas. It certainly looks like genocide" a long-standing Russian narrative:
 - News Front (a disinformation outlet with ties to Russian security services), followed with an article on Dec. 13 that said the United States did not consider the massacres to be a genocide.
 - Russian-aligned social media accounts, such as those of RT and Sputnik, along with Twitter accounts of Russian officials, sharing posts and articles accusing some Ukrainians of being neo-Nazis have dramatically increased since early December.
 - Part of its longer campaign to undermine Kiev's image and increase internal instability to depict Russia as a "liberator" and security guarantor:
 - Local members of the Jewish community were interviewed by RT in the aftermath of the Crimea annexation and depicted their exodus from Crimea as a result of Ukrainian antisemitic retaliation, despite interviewees assertions to the contrary.
 - The above interviews were juxtaposed with stories of Jewish-Ukrainians beaten during the Maidan square protests.
 - May 3rd 2014 – Dmitry Peskov: "The Kiev regime ordered combat aircraft to fire at civilian towns and villages, launching a 'punitive operation' and effectively destroying all hope for the viability of the Geneva agreements".
- Dec. 2nd 2021 – Russia announced it had arrested three Ukrainian intelligence agents, including one accused of planning to carry out an attack using two homemade bombs.

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- Dec. 13th 2021 - Russia's Federal Security Service (FSB) announced it had arrested 106 supporters of a Ukrainian neo-Nazi youth group for planning attacks and mass murders in 37 of Russia's more than 80 regions. An FSB statement identified the alleged group as the MKU, which state television said stood for the words "Maniacs. Cult of Murder". The FSB said the group was set up by a Ukrainian under the patronage of Ukraine's intelligence services, but was unable to provide evidence.
- JAN 2022 – SPUTNIK NEWS: "Russia is confident that a place from where a missile that downed the MH17 plane was allegedly launched was controlled by Ukrainian forces, Russia's representative to the European Court of Human Rights (ECHR), Mikhail Vinogradov, said".
- 19th JAN. 2022 – RT announced Ukraine is planning several "terrorist incidents to use as a false-flag" in order to invade the Donbas (area on the self-proclaimed Donetsk and Luhansk Republics).
- JAN 26th 2022 – Kremlin spokesman Dmitry Peskov reassured previous allegations in RT: "Kiev is preparing an assault on the Donbas".
- January 30, 2022 - one Russian official took to Twitter to argue: "According to Western mass media there are up to 200 000 Ukrainian troops and 90 000 reservists in eastern part of Ukraine. According to the same sources there are 100 000 Russian troops on the Russian territory including rather far from #Ukraine. Any further questions?"

Some of these lines have been parroted – in a more subtle tone – in Western media:

- In his article "Ukraine's accelerating slide into authoritarianism" for the Cato institute (May 2021), Ted Carpenter mimicked several traditional Russian talking points: Ukraine is a pseudo democracy, the 2014 uprising was a Washington backed coup, ethnic minorities (Russians and Jews in particular) are being persecuted by government-backed VEOs and the west continued courting of Ukraine is needlessly provocative towards Russia.
- In his article "Biden's threats aren't about protecting Ukraine's Independence. They're about Extending US Hegemony" for Stop the War Coalition, Andrew Murray (former advisor to Jeremy Corbyn) makes frequent insinuations that Ukraine is a corrupt oligarchy with no will of its own that has Nazi sympathies and "if there is conflict over Ukraine, it is the West that bares the blame" while omitting any mention of Russian operations in the Eastern Oblasts.
- On Fox news Tucker Carlson (who has an estimated US viewership of 4.3 million) has repeatedly questioned the US's commitment to Ukraine, and appears to directly compare Russia to Ukraine, despite their different political systems.

Western intelligence officials have said that while Russia is unlikely to change many minds in Europe, its messaging has had traction in South America and Africa, where Russia enjoys a significant media dominance over Western outlets. Muddying the waters about which country is responsible for the Ukraine crisis. Which will give Russia leverage in international forums and provide further legitimacy for a potential invasion.

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Despite Russia announcing a withdrawal of some forces from the border on February 15th; it continues to conduct disinformation against Ukraine and information operations against the West.

- Russia Today announced that February 15 "would go down in history as the day western propaganda failed"
 - In the same article it attempted to paint Western officials as fear mongers.
 - An article released at a similar time accused Western journalists of enhancing the profiles of violent right-wing extremists and covering up their ideologies and alleged abuses.
- At the same time, Western officials have accused the recent shelling in the East that struck a kindergarten as an attempt by Russian officials to create a false flag scenario to justify invasion.
- On the 18th February, separatists in the region have released footage showing women and children being evacuated from the region due to Ukrainian shelling.
 - But open-source investigators demonstrated that the footage was in fact shot two days prior to when separatists claimed the shelling began.
- It is clear from these operations that Russia seeks to keep up the pressure on the west and keep it guessing as to its intentions while reinforcing its narrative in the developing world.

At the same time, articles have been circulating alleging Ukrainian backed "terrorist attacks" in the Donbas region: false-flags designed to provide support for the Kremlin position at home and abroad.

- Russia has a long-history of conducting false flag attacks to justify invasions; including Finland, Czechoslovakia and (allegedly) Chechnya.
- On February 14th, the BBC reported on Russian media releasing alleged footage of Ukrainian soldiers shooting migrants.
- A series of explosions in Donetsk, including a car bomb outside an administrative building and a nearby gas pipeline, have been described as sabotage operations by Kremlin media.
 - Notably, despite the incidents occurring in what can be presumed to be secure locations, the only existing video footage appears to be after the event.
- On Monday 21st Feb., Donetsk militia released footage claiming to be of a firefight against Ukrainian operatives attempting to sabotage a local chlorine plant.
 - Open-source researchers have demonstrated that the audio of the gunshots were exact duplicates and were in fact recorded over ten years ago during military exercises.
- These operations have been notable for their lack of quality; described as "dumb and lazy" by Elliot Higgins (founder of Bellingcat).
 - They are unlikely to be aimed at Western audiences, rather they are intended for Russian audiences, who are more susceptible to fake videos due to Kremlin's tight control of the media.
 - They may also gain traction in areas where Russian media is more active: Central Asia, Africa and Latin America.

Clues from Georgia, 2008

In 2008 Russia faced similar tensions with Georgia that led to an invasion

- Not long after Georgian independence, separatist republics emerged in the regions of Abkhazia and south Ossetia allegedly supported by Russia.
- Conflicts in South Ossetia in 1991-1992 and a similar conflict in the Abkhazia 1992 to 93 allowed Russia to deploy peacekeepers
- Russia was accused of assisting the breakaway separatists militarily.
- Russian media continually emphasised the dual history of Georgia and Russia
- A colour revolution in 2003 then ousted the Kremlin backed presidential candidate
- 2006, Georgia's parliament voted to seek NATO membership.
 - Military aid from Russia to the separatists increased massively
 - FSB advisors provided political support to the separatist leaders and GRU officers trained and equipped the militias.

The build-up to full-scale invasion also followed a similar pattern

- Russian spokespeople likened South Ossetia to Kosovo, citing a responsibility to protect the region that NATO had applied as a justification.
- Russian media circulated dubious reports of Georgian aggression and human rights abuses against ethnic Russians.
- The invasion was pre-empted by a large DDoS cyber-attack that slowed Georgian communications systems in July; a test-run for the real thing. Notably, Russia utilised a domestic cybercriminal group; now considered a standard Kremlin tactic.
- Russian media and intelligence officials warned of an upcoming Georgian attack on the breakaway republics and further warned that any such action would lead to Russian intervention "to protect compatriots abroad".
- At the same time, up to 10,000 Russian troops were stationed in the nearby North Caucasus region. Russia insisted they were there on exercises and stressed its prerogative to move troops within its territory.
- Meanwhile the Russian-backed separatists continued to attack Georgian positions on instruction from Moscow in order to provoke a Georgian response.
- On August 7 2008 Georgian forces initiated rocket attacks against separatist positions in response to days of mortar attacks and shootings from the separatists.
- Russian media claimed this was an unprovoked attack and sent in nearby troops "on exercises" in the North Caucasus region.

On Nov. 22nd 2021 Russia's foreign intelligence service (the SVR) released a statement suggesting the current tensions in Ukraine mirrored the buildup to the August 2008 conflict with Georgia.