



The Kremlin's Developing Disinformation Narratives



Abstract

State-sponsored disinformation is never static, it almost certainly covers multiple topics at once in multiple regions in order to maximise confusion and undermine the concept of an objective truth, especially in the case of the Kremlin. The purpose of this report is not just to track the Kremlin's developing narratives, but also to estimate how likely they are to gain traction based on our "[Likelihood of Traction Scale](#)"; a qualitative estimation of how likely a narrative is to become considered as a legitimate or widely held viewpoint based on analyses of prior disinformation campaigns and the regions it is targeting.

As previous analyses has highlighted, the Kremlin is reported to be banking on "Ukraine Fatigue" and knock on effects of the conflict creating an environment in which its narratives will be received more sympathetically. Likewise, Pre-bunking has proved to be an effective tool for disrupting the Kremlin's strategies, while the divisions in perceptions between the West and the Global South have demonstrated the need for the West to reinvigorate its strategic narrative. Therefore, ascertaining what narratives are being pushed and how likely they are to resonate is a critical first step to developing Stratcom counter strategies.

Defining and determining traction

Defining Traction

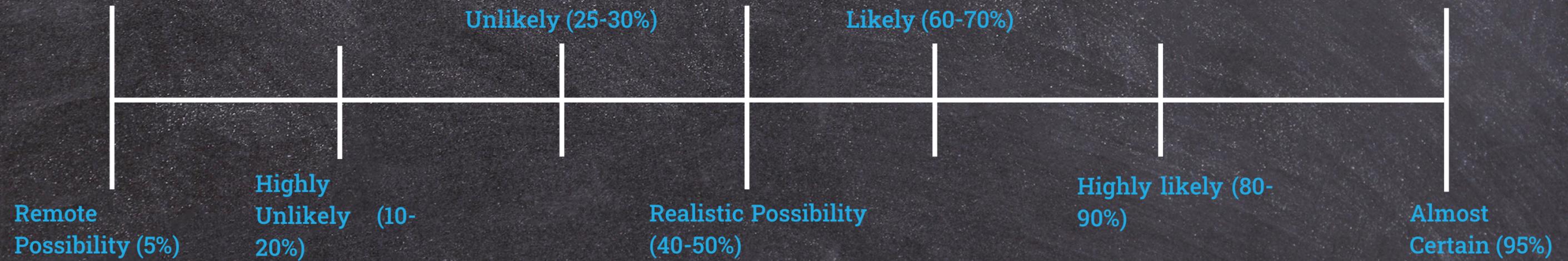
While even videos/articles/tweets that gain a few shares can be deemed as "gaining traction", for the purposes of the scale, traction is defined as when a story can be deemed as becoming part of the societal common narrative (in effect, becoming a part of everyday conversations and being perceived as a widely held viewpoint). The scale begins at 5% (Remote Possibility) and rises to 95% (Almost Certain), as it cannot be claimed that something will definitely happen or definitely not happen.

Determining Likelihood of Traction (LoT)

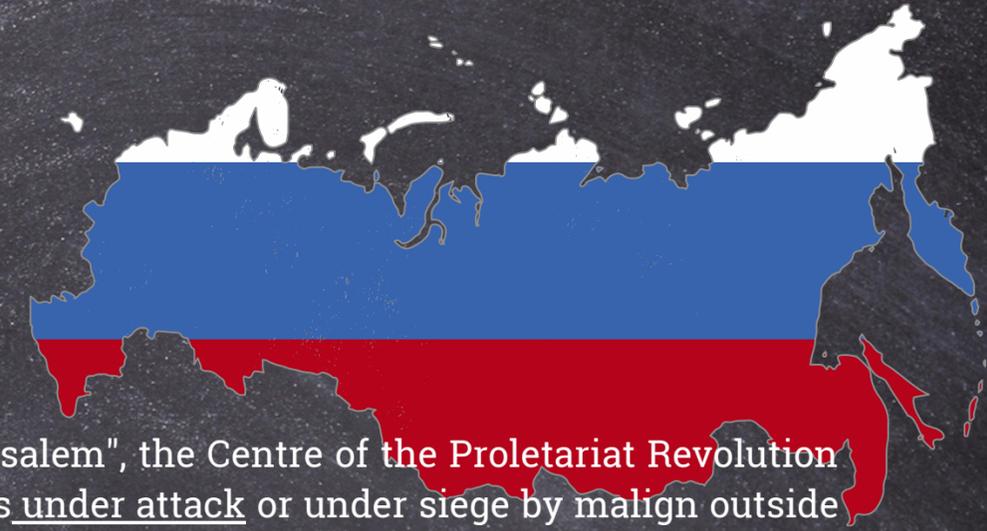
The basis of where a narrative lands on the LoT scale is based on the following analyses:

1. Traction of prior disinformation campaigns with similar themes (rate of engagement and appearance in public debate).
2. Media literacy rates in target regions.
3. Russian/Russian-allied media penetration in target regions.
4. Current perspectives on target topics based on independent polling.
5. How compelling is the factual alternative narrative? Or, to what extent can a disinformation narrative stand up in the face of a prevailing and powerful and well-articulated factual one? This is based on current perceptions of the narrative's topic and authors.

Likelihood of Traction Scale



Russia/domestic narrative



Russia besieged - Victimhood and the need for authoritarianism

- Successive Russian leaders have traditionally seen Russia as an exceptional state ("the Third Rome"; "the new Jerusalem", the Centre of the Proletariat Revolution etc) and thus not bound by the same norms as other states. At the same time, it has been traditional to see Russia as under attack or under siege by malign outside forces.
- The Kremlin has made use of this narrative to justify its oppressive policies in the past, while also using it as a source of pride in "resisting" the West's economic war (sanctions) and to garner support for its Hybrid War (Active Measures) campaign. Since the Invasion of Ukraine, this narrative has gone into overdrive to depict Russia as the victim.
- This narrative often veers into conspiracy:
 - Vladimir Putin has made continued references to "the Golden Billion" as being responsible for the current state of affairs. The phrase refers to the idea of an elite cabal of plutocrats who control international affairs to their interests. The phrase originates in a Russian conspiracy book from the 1990s.
 - Dmitry Medvedev (former Russian president) has parroted Putin's assertions while ramping up his own rhetoric; declaring "I hate them, they are b*****ds and degenerates. They want us, Russia, to die. And while I'm still alive, I will do everything to make them disappear." (the "them" was left ambiguous).
 - Nikolai Patrushev (Chair of the Security Council and former head of the FSB) likewise has mentioned the Golden Bullion as well as a host of other anti-Western conspiracies in a diatribe given to Russian newspaper "Arguments and Facts".

The language in these narratives is deliberately vague, and therefore directly appeals to conspiracy theorists and antisemitism across a broad spectrum of political ideologies.

- The Kremlin's narratives also follow Machiavelli's own advice on narratives on sieges:
 1. First, remind your people that the current destitution will not last long.
 2. Second, remind your people that you are suffering as they are.
 3. Lastly, remind your people of the barbarous nature of the enemy at the gates.

LoT:

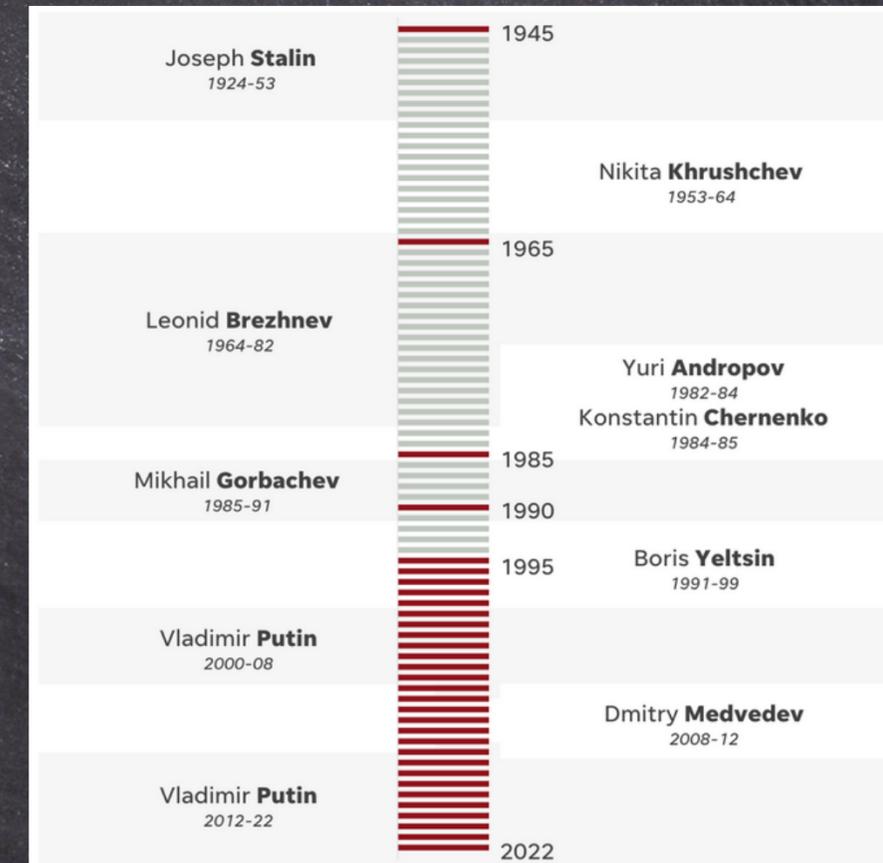
- **Russia: Almost Certain**
- **West: Highly unlikely**
- **Global South: Realistic Possibility**

Russia/domestic narrative



"Dancing on Bones" - Continuing to build the "Cult of Victory" and the battle against "fascism"

- Throughout Putin's tenure, the Kremlin has sought to link itself to the legacy of the Soviet Union's battle against Nazism in the "Great Patriotic War"; increasing the rate of parades to an annual tradition (see right), orientating May 9th to be about the state and whitewashing the Stalinist era's crimes. At the same time, independent remembrance groups were infiltrated, copied and subverted. Officially this has been labelled by academics as the "Cult of Victory", but one interviewed Russian likened the whole exercise to "dancing on bones".
- The core theme of the parade is Russia's victory over fascism through strength and sacrifice, but also how close the motherland (Rodinah) came to being destroyed by a monstrous enemy. The Kremlin has now continually uses the term fascist to describe its enemies in order to evoke powerful emotional feelings and frame its policies as part of a life or death struggle.
- The themes of battling fascism are already in the Kremlin's propaganda surrounding its invasion of Ukraine, and is increasingly being tied to the Second World War. When interviewed by the Economist, one young Russian remarked: "I am a glorious successor to this tradition. Now my time has come and I will not disgrace my great-grandfather-and I will go all the way", while the ubiquitous "Z" symbol is now in the colours of the St George's Ribbon, an award for those who fought fascism.
- As the Ukraine War drags on and the Kremlin is denied a quick victory, it is highly likely that it will continue to draw upon its historical struggle in order to boost the morale of its population, while silencing those who disagree.
- At the same time, Russia will attempt to export its notion of its invasion of Ukraine a war against Fascism and colonialism, which may gain traction in the Global South.

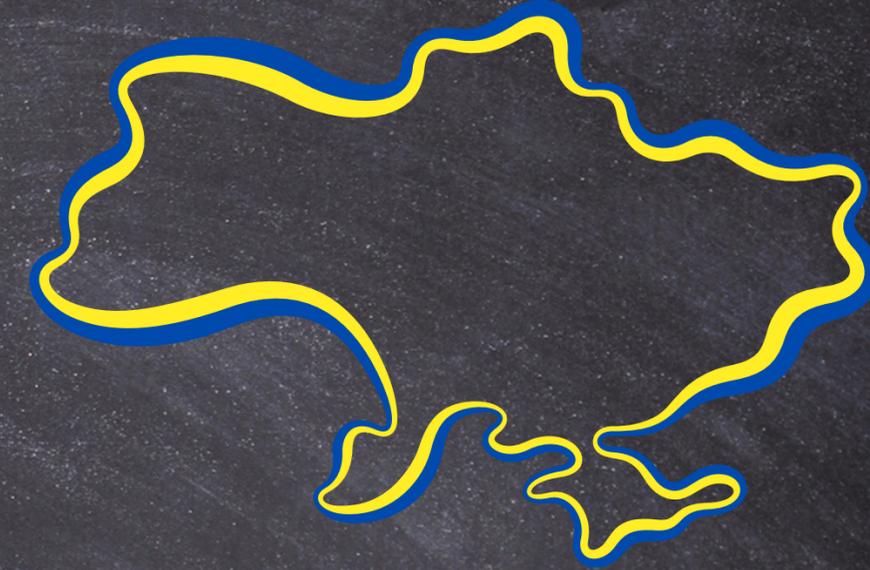


LoT:
Russia - Almost Certain
The West - Highly Unlikely
The Global South - Realistic possibility

Ukraine

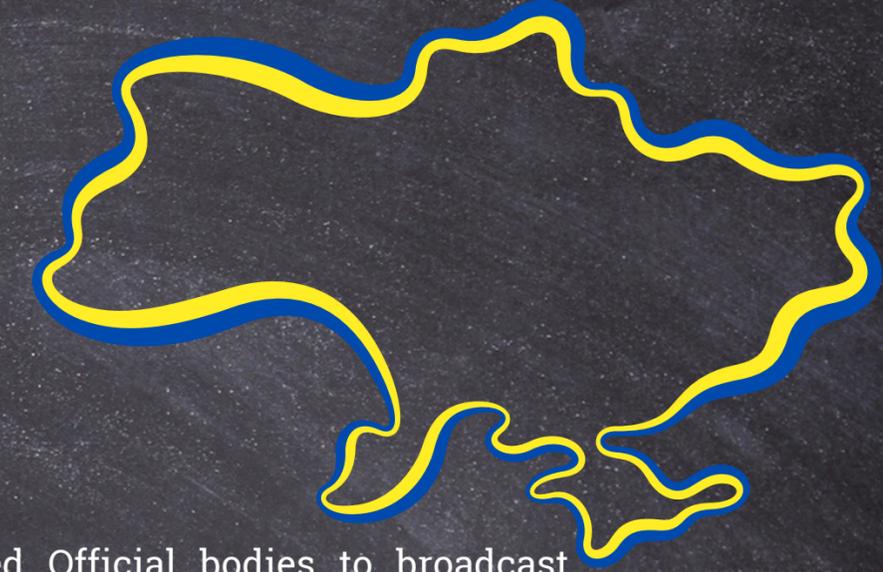
Smear Aid Workers

- Aid workers act as witnesses to Russian aggression and war crimes with established international links to ensure the information is circulated. Consequently, they are a threat to the Kremlin's narrative.
- The easiest way to discredit these organisations' messages is to discredit the organisations themselves. Already, rumors in Ukraine are circulating that the Red Cross is kidnapping Ukrainian children to harvest their organs.
- There is a precedent for this. During the Russian campaigns in Syria (2015 to present), its Intelligence Services made a significant effort to smear the Syria Civil Defense Units (a.k.a the White Helmets) as terrorists to undermine their reports on war crimes by the Assad regime. These narratives found some traction. Based on this campaign, it is likely that the Kremlin will seek to blame Aid Workers for the Russian Armed Forces' war crimes or abetting the Ukrainian Armed Forces in committing them; thereby making them legitimate targets.
- This creates an obvious threat to aid workers, who may be targeted and attacked based on this disinformation, but also to Ukrainians themselves, who may avoid legitimate aid groups out of fear and rely on informal groups for medical help and transport as refugees; putting them at risk of actual trafficking.



LoT:

- Within Ukraine: Realistic Possibility
- The West: Realistic Possibility
- The Global South: Likely



Information laundering through Official Reports

- In the build up to and during the conflict, the Kremlin has utilised Official bodies to broadcast disinformation to give it the veneer of legitimacy in foreign media. The UN has been the preferred venue for this, with Russia's ambassador, Vasily Alekseevich Nebenzya (left), as the main broadcaster. But as Russia's credibility begins to decline, it is likely that it will seek alternate legitimate platforms to hijack.
- Amnesty International's recent Report expressed concern that Ukraine's stationing of troops in built-up areas could endanger civilians, receiving widespread backlash as it appeared to fail to consult its Ukraine office and failed to distinguish between the purposeful use of civilians as human shields, and the risk posed to civilians by the stationing of troops in built up areas to defend those areas that is part and parcel of urban warfare.

- It is almost certain that the Kremlin will seek to hijack this report and make it a central plank of their international disinformation operations.
- While the more scurrilous disinformation (like US-backed bioweapons labs) may only find traction on the fringes of the West and in international areas of poor media literacy, more nuanced narratives masquerading behind reports such as these may find purchase in the West and it is likely will have a significant impact in the Global South. This creates a two-pronged problem; the Kremlin's narratives gain a veneer of legitimacy while the reputation of NGOs such as Amnesty International will suffer, allowing their findings to be dismissed by hostile actors.



- LoT:
- In the West: Realistic Possibility
 - In the Global South: Likely