

# Winter is Coming. The Kremlin's disinformation strategy for winter



## THE KREMLIN'S WISH LIST

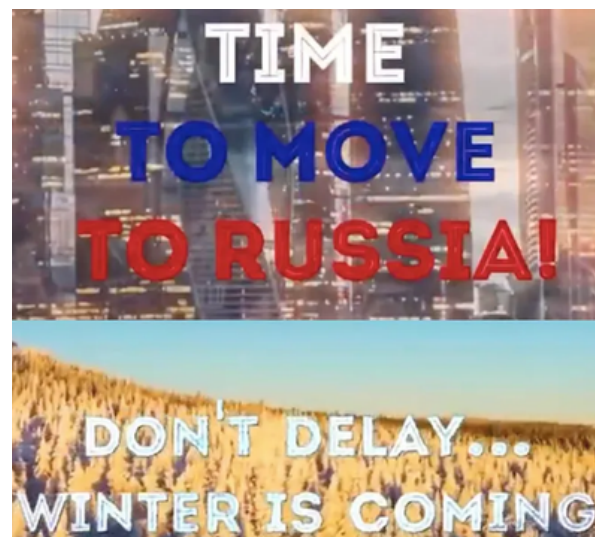
- Even as battle lines begin to stall, recent developments in Ukraine have shifted the conflict significantly in Ukraine's favour.
- Ukraine's success has been a result of its will to fight, the ineffectiveness of the Russian Armed Forces and leadership, and Western aid.
- The Kremlin views breaking or slowing Western military aid as critical to its military strategic aims and has engaged in a series of information and influence operations to discourage support for Ukraine at policy-making and civilian levels (the former for direct impact and the latter as bottom-up pressure).
- In the short-term, it has escalated its nuclear rhetoric to suggest it might escalate to the use of tactical nuclear weapons (although there remains no evidence its nuclear posture has changed). In the long-term, it has focused on linking the cost of living crisis to sanctions on Russian energy and "wasting" money on Ukrainian aid, thereby driving a wedge in public opinion. Evidence indicates this will increase over the coming winter.

## NARRATIVE AND TACTICS

- To achieve this, the Kremlin uses near-constant videos on RT and conservative social media sites to drive home the message that Europeans won't be able to heat their homes due to a lack of Russian gas and that the aid supplied to Ukraine is being wasted (both debunked).
- Recent sanctions have stymied the reach of the Kremlin's official media into the West, but it is complimented by a range of covert instruments:
  - Manned and automated fake social media profiles ("sock-puppets and bots") are a well known tool of the Kremlin. They have consistently amplified disinformation about the cost of living crisis, Russian sanctions and alleged Ukrainian crimes and corruption. Most recently, an edited clip of the German Foreign Minister indicating she would support Ukraine regardless of impact to German voters appeared on Facebook, Twitter, Instagram and YouTube – where they were shared by members of Germany's far-right Alternative for Germany (AfD) party and the socialist Left party. One day after Baerbock made her remarks, a hashtag demanding that she step down was trending on German-language Twitter.
  - More recently, the Kremlin has created doppelganger websites of legitimate news organisations to lend authenticity to its disinformation narratives. This creates further confusion and can lead to Reality Apathy.
- This covert apparatus has been in place for some time. It is almost certain to have been expanded since the invasion of Ukraine and it is almost certain there will be an increase in activity this Winter.
- The Kremlin also relies on voices in the Western media and politics who wittingly or unwittingly parrot Kremlin talking points (the Cold War KGB term for these was "useful idiots"). Clips of Fox News Host Tucker Carlson have been regularly featured in Kremlin propaganda, former Italian PM and future member of Italy's governing coalition Silvio Berlusconi said Putin was "right" to invade Ukraine (he has since retracted the comments) and Former President Donald Trump has pushed for negotiations that he would lead.

## IMPACT AND COUNTERMEASURES

- As early as September, the Guardian found in an online poll that the cost of living crisis was considered a greater priority than Ukraine. It is highly likely that it will be viewed as an even greater priority this winter, which creates the possibility of an increase in support for isolationism.
  - Multiple US politicians have already questioned aid to Ukraine in the face of mounting domestic issues, with Kevin McCarthy (Leader of the Republican Party in the House) insisting if the Republicans take back Congress, there will be "no blank cheque for Ukraine". His party now controls the House (though not the Senate).
  - Likewise, nationalist parties in Europe (some with Kremlin ties) have seized on the platform that domestic issues should take priority over aid to Ukraine. Their gains in elections suggest this narrative is not altogether unpopular, and may grow over time.
- The cost of living crisis is an issue that will require intense governmental and international cooperation and support. But to avoid the Kremlin using it for propaganda value, western governments must engage in a sustained and transparent communications program to prebunk Kremlin disinformation and ensure their citizens are informed of the state of the crisis, its cause and how it will be tackled.



A Russian tourism video boasting of cheap energy and an economy that can "withstand a thousand sanctions", it is being reused for propaganda on Telegram.