THE LONDON SCHOOL OF ECONOMICS AND POLITICAL SCIENCE

SUMMARY REPORT
October 2017

Soviet Subversion, Disinformation and Propaganda: How the West Fought Against it

An Analytic History, with Lessons for the Present

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Abstract

What were Soviet influence and disinformation campaigns? What did the West do about them? This study answers these questions, explaining the Cold War strategies followed by the USSR, as well as the Western response. Eleven case studies follow, each one examining a counter-disinformation tactic in depth, with comments on the relevance of that tactic today. The first seven case studies focus on defensive tactics aimed at stopping Soviet propaganda in the West, while the latter four focus on offensive tactics used to promote accurate information and democratic messages to the USSR and beyond. The conclusion features a deeper examination of the difference between modern Russian propaganda and its Soviet antecedents.

Executive Summary

What were Soviet influence and disinformation campaigns? What did the West do about them? This study answers these questions, explaining the Cold War strategies followed by the USSR, as well as the Western response. The full report contains eleven case studies, each one examining a counter-disinformation and counter-propaganda tactic in depth, with comments on the relevance of that tactic today. Here is a brief precis of each one of them.

What Were Soviet Active Measures?

The term "Active Measures' came into use in the USSR in the 1950s to describe overt and covert techniques for influencing events and behaviour in foreign countries. Disinformation – the intentional dissemination of false information – is just one of many elements that made up active measures operations. Others included:

Front Organisations: These were nominally independent groups which supported Soviet policies or policies conducive to the USSR, such as unilateral nuclear disarmament. Examples included: the World Peace Council, the World Federation of Free Trade Unions, and the International Organisation of Journalists.

Agents of Influence: These came in three forms: full-fledged spies infiltrated into foreign organisations in order to spread messages; local recruits who were cultivated; and unwitting accomplices who had no idea that an enemy state was discreetly helping them along.

Fake Stories in non-Soviet Media: The KGB always preferred to place disinformation in non-Soviet media. Sometimes they used openly communist, pro-Soviet publications, but great effort was made to influence more mainstream media too.

Forgeries: The range of Soviet forgeries spanned the globe. Examples included a fake Embassy report about US plans to overthrow the government in Ghana, and forgeries of Embassy cables showing US involvement in attempt to murder the Pope.

Case Studies of Cold War Counter-Propaganda

I. The Active Measures Working Group

In the first decades of the Cold War, the CIA tracked Soviet disinformation but the White House chose not to confront it directly. The Reagan administration changed tactics and established the Active Measures Working Group, an interagency group containing members of the USIA, CIA, FBI and State Department. The Group produced major reports to Congress and briefed the press. This was the first American attempt to respond comprehensively to disinformation, to define it, to create institutions to tackle it and to draw attention to it at the highest level.

> **Relevance Today**
> The Active Measures Working Group set an interesting "interagency" precedent, bringing together a wide range of people, from the CIA to the USIA. Today's equivalent might be a consultative body with a similarly broad range, perhaps including tech companies, academic institutions, media, civil society and policy makers. Together they could once again define the disinformation agenda, create tools and bodies able to track it empirically and transparently, and push back strategically.

II. Debunk and Discredit

The Working Group put most of its efforts into debunking Soviet disinformation, with the aim of discrediting it. They made a point of making sure that any public or official complaints about Soviet disinformation were backed up with evidence – that is, that there was probable cause to believe something was actually "disinformation," and that the Soviets were behind it.

The Working Group's 'expose and discredit' tactic was not merely a defensive attempt to rebut disinformation but a positive, strategic move which sought to establish the Soviets as liars and the US as truth-tellers. This fed into the broader narrative of a cultural clash between two values systems.

> *“The term “Active Measures’ came into use in the USSR in the 1950s to describe overt and covert techniques for influencing events and behaviour in foreign countries.”*

Relevance Today
Debunking as a tactic faces qualitatively new challenges. Attribution has become far more difficult, since the Kremlin (and others) can outsource fakes through third parties. Because contemporary Russia does not seek to present itself as “truthful” in any case, catching it out does little to undermine its credibility.

More importantly, many readers now choose to self-select news that confirms existing biases. Debunking needs to start with begin with a better understanding of the audiences that consume disinformation and how they receive it.

III. Sanctions

The threat of sanctions can be a powerful way to retaliate against and curb disinformation. During the Cold War the US used the threat of sanctions to help stop the USSR from spreading the false story that the CIA had created the AIDS virus as a weapon.

Relevance Today
Disinformation is now financially as well as politically rewarding, and new thinking about sanctions could reflect this reality. Sanctions, or boycotts, could target (Western) companies advertising or providing content to channels or websites which propagate hate speech and hoaxes, in order to eliminate financial incentives to spread disinformation.

Sanctions can also be focused on things that matter to Kremlin elites. This might include their assets in the West, or restriction on companies or individuals who purvey disinformation and hate speech, or limiting access to software products and TV production hardware. Technology companies could also take responsibility for their role in the spread of disinformation. Google, for example, could stop facilitating advertisements for companies which are shown to be either corrupt or linked to disinformation.

IV. Work with International Media

The Active Measures Working Group provided reports and information in the form of press packets, books, films, TV broadcasts, Voice of America radio broadcasts and more. Its “Soviet Propaganda Trends” service sought to identify themes that the USSR would promote, in order to better prepare responses. Local USIA officers also worked hard to develop personal relationships with media across the world.

Relevance Today
Any reincarnation of USIA would be far less trusted in much of the world today; in any case, the ‘mainstream press’ doesn’t really exist anymore in most countries, or else it reaches only a small part of the public. But technology companies could consider replicating this tactic: They have far more knowledge of disinformation on their platforms than they make public. If they began to share some of this information with the media and the general public, they might help change the disinformation dynamic.

V. Defectors

Soviet defectors to the West were an important tool in the propaganda battles of the Cold War. Their testimonies made for powerful, emotional, narratives which helped undermine Soviet propaganda. Defectors sometimes also provided critical insights into how active measures worked and how to fight back. But defectors often found life in the West difficult, which undermined their effectiveness – especially when they returned to the USSR - and dissuaded new ones. The Jamestown Foundation was created to support them. It sponsored conferences and assisted ‘clients’ with housing, job placement, language training, driving permits and moral support. It also acted as a literary agent.

Relevance Today

Whistle-blowers are today's defectors. The confessions of people who have worked in Kremlin troll factories, or who have told the truth about working in Kremlin controlled media, or who have taken part in Kremlin hacking operations, are the single most powerful source of insight on 21st century active measures.

Many whistle-blowers can never work easily in Russian media again; their safety may be threatened as well. They may also have legal problems. A legal fund to support whistle-blowers, and structured support to help them find work is something to be considered.

VI. BBC Monitoring: The Original Open-Source Collection

Founded in 1939, the BBC Monitoring (BBCM) section was an early form of open source monitoring. During the Cold War, 60 to 70 people at BBCM followed Soviet radio broadcasts, TV and wire agency reports every day, including Radio Moscow's international output, which went out in approximately 80 languages and was available to anyone who wanted it. The 'Russia Team' monitored Russian media 24 hours a day. Monitoring helped the BBC and the government both to understand Soviet messages and framing and to craft their own information and messages accordingly.

Relevance Today

In 2010 BBCM's government funding was cut and it came under direct control of the BBC. Its priorities changed from monitoring details important for defence to following a news agenda which included pop music charts and pet stories. A Parliamentary committee has recommended that the UK government take over funding of BBCM once again, though there has been no action in this regard.

To fill some of the gaps, smaller, independent organisations are now experimenting with various new forms of monitoring. Such projects are unfortunately fragmented: there are no common standards and it is impossible for journalists and public diplomacy specialists to build up a full picture. A contemporary equivalent of Cold War BBC Monitoring would have to include data researchers as well as monitors, and would be closely linked with journalists, broadcasters and government officials.

VII. The UK's Information Research Department – Covert Research

The bland-sounding Information Research Department (IRD) was a crucial but little-known element of Britain's Cold War response to Soviet propaganda. The centre studied Soviet tactics in the West and then circulated information covertly through a wide range of British institutions, including embassies, political parties, journalists and the BBC. Its goal was to reach Western and developing world audiences that were influenced by Soviet tactics. Throughout the 1950s and 1960s, the IRD researched and distributed a steady stream of facts about the reality of life in the Soviet Union in order to undermine propaganda about Soviet success.

Relevance Today

Background research is even more necessary today than it was in the 1950s. Today's media have even fewer resources to pursue long-term research projects, and there is an urgent need for institutions which can provide free, accurate research on the spread of disinformation and thematic content.

VIII. RFE/RL: Using 'natives' to come closer to the audience

Radio Free Europe and Radio Liberty were Cold War attempts to engage Soviet Bloc populations with issues and information that often contradicted Soviet bloc propaganda. To get their message across, the US-funded stations used refugees. Often political dissidents and well-known intellectuals who had escaped their countries, the RFE/RL refugee radio personalities not only spoke the native language of the target audience, they intuitively understood their politics as well.

Relevance Today

The RFE/RL experience shows the importance of putting the audience's world-view first, and of choosing communicators who understand the audience. Most fact-checking and debunking today focuses on correcting erroneous content, the 'supply' side of the fake news equation. It does not consider why and how audiences consume disinformation in the first place and how one should adapt one's own output so that they are open to consuming more accurate information. Today's data analysis tools give ample opportunity to understand why audiences choose to hear misinformation, how they consume information, through what forms are they open to listening to new ideas. This kind of research could help identity which authority figures (or "micro-influencers") alienated audiences might be willing to engage with.

IX. Chronicle of Current Events: A Home-Grown, Bottom-Up Source of Information

The "Chronicle of Current Events" was a response to Soviet propaganda that was designed by Russian human rights activists. It sought to undermine state propaganda by offering authentic information from verified sources about arrests in the USSR. The information was gathered through networks of trusted people, and then transmitted in the form of illegal bulletins, passed through chains of trusted people. The material it provided was then amplified by Radio Liberty and other Western radio stations. The Chronicle also created a "community of trust," a group of people who were dedicated, as a group, to the cause of accurate information.

> **Relevance Today**
> In some senses, Alexei Navalny's anti-corruption movement serves the same purpose in Russia as the old Chronicle: It too exposes "secret" information and embarrasses people in power, and it also creates a community of trust. Perhaps a more targeted effort, for example one which gathered more personal financial information about the Russian leadership and put it very quickly online would have the same impact.
>
> Another "lesson" from the Chronicle is how it was amplified by media and NGOs in the West. Perhaps Western agencies should think about amplifying dissenting voices from within Russia today as well.

X. Humour as Cold War "Meme Warfare"

During the later Cold War jokes became a key element in the Reagan administration's strategy to counter Soviet propaganda. In 1982, USIA Public Affairs Officers based at posts in the Communist bloc systematically collected political jokes from their local contacts and forwarded them to Washington, where the agency created a grand anthology. These were then distributed around the world as evidence both of popular opposition to Communist rule and of the widespread scepticism about Communism's claims to be economically effective.

> **Relevance Today**
> There has been a fundamental shift since the Cold War. During that period Communist regimes were stiff, and there was a great divide between their official statements and the Soviet reality, a gap which could be exploited through humour. Today the Kremlin is less focused on promoting itself, and more on undermining others. It is the West and 'liberal elites' who have a gap between rhetoric and reality: their stated beliefs do not match everyday life. In today's environment, it is the alt-right and pro-Kremlin actors who use humour in a highly weaponised way. Still, the example of the past should provide food for thought; if nothing else, it might be worth once again collecting jokes from inside Russia to amplify abroad.

XI. Coherence of Policy, Values, Culture and Leadership

During the Cold War, Western powers sought not just to produce accurate information, but to place it within a much broader set of cultural values and policies. 'Truth' was intimately connected to other things: 'democracy', 'political freedom', 'human rights', 'prosperity', as well as the freedom to experiment in the arts. These values were promoted together, a careful coordination of all action, from policies to culture, into a coherent whole.

> **Relevance Today**
> In the Cold War, the West had a comparatively simple – and compelling - message. That message was based fundamentally around freedoms; freedom of speech, artistic (and individual) expression and democracy all went hand-in-hand. This package of rights was easy to articulate not least because it appeared to be in direct contrast with the Communist system of government which emphasised the collective over the individual, state planning over individual artistic expression, and autocracy over democracy.

At the moment, there is no comparably compelling narrative which can encompass all anti-propaganda efforts together. A new strategy is needed. Perhaps the unifying principle should be transparency, or anti-corruption, maybe with a focus on the money-laundering and hidden beneficial ownership structures that link 21st century authoritarian regimes, financial inequality, tax-evasion and the seamier sides of Western capitalism.

In a more limited way, there could be a parallel to the past in the strategic communications of tech companies, some of which could learn from the past. Social media and IT companies often promote themselves as forces for the strengthening of democracy, knowledge and transparency. Their leaders profess noble ideals. But there is a split between their PR and impact, between stated policies and reality, as well.

How is Soviet propaganda different from modern Russian propaganda?

End of Bipolarity

The Cold War was a struggle between two starkly different systems. These systems were also physically divided. In 2017, there is no Iron Curtain – the information flow between countries is relatively unrestricted. Russia does not represent a different socio-economic system with a powerful ideology. There is no unified front in the West which is organized to defeat Russia, not even within the United States.

This lack of clarity makes it difficult for Western powers even to define why exactly they oppose the contemporary Kremlin's active measures. There is a broad disagreement about what is 'legitimate' Kremlin influence and what constitutes 'meddling' or 'interference'. In the US and the UK, for example, the charge that the Kremlin spreads 'fake news' lacks force, given how much fake news domestic media produce by themselves.

Instead of a clear-cut, bipolar information war there are shifting discourses in different parts of the West. At present, it doesn't seem likely that a single strategic narrative will emerge.

A Diffuse, Unregulated Network of Propagandists

Modern Russia is a loose, networked state with multiple actors allowed to conduct domestic and foreign policy, usually to benefit corrupt political groups around (and including) Putin. As a result, Russian information warfare is not consistent and strategic; its fundamental quality is tactical opportunism. The Kremlin is just one of myriad actors pumping out disinformation, alongside domestic media as well as the teenagers in Macedonia who produced anti-Clinton fake news for personal profit.

Online Distribution

The most dramatic shift in the information environment is the move to digital and on-line media. Disinformation can circulate much more swiftly than was possible in the Cold War. If the Kremlin once crafted disinformation stories and forgeries with care, now cheap conspiracy theories and totally implausible fakes are thrown online constantly. Debunking them is easy, but the sheer quantity can risk making this a fruitless exercise, and indeed the aim might well be to force the West to waste time and resources on debunking

"Post-Factuality"

During the Cold War the USSR needed to keep up the appearance that its lies were actually true. Both the US and USSR were committed to winning a rational debate about which system — democratic capitalism or communism — would deliver a rosier future, and each side wanted 'proof', that is facts, to prove that it was winning. Thus Western broadcasters could undermine the Soviet Union by broadcasting the real facts about the Soviet Union into the country. It was possible to discredit the USSR by pointing out the gap between their propaganda and reality.

Today's Russia is not trying to prove that it is on a path to a greater future, and so it can dispense with facts too. This doesn't mean 'facts' have become irrelevant in every type of discourse. Facts still matter to debates about health, social welfare, economics, corruption and money-laundering, especially if they empower action. Twenty-first century counter-messaging needs to focus on those areas where facts still make a difference.

Conclusions

In the past, the greatest informational and conventional battles were won not through an outright victory of one side, but by orienting all antagonists towards a shared greater goal. The collective embrace of the internationalism of the League of Nations by combatants following the Great War; the creation of the United Nations after the Second World War; the submergence of Franco-German hostility beneath a shared goal of European integration; these were all examples of attempts to reorient conflicts. At the end of the Cold War, Reagan and Thatcher – and the Bush and Major – along with the leaders of the European Union did sketch out a vision of an integrated Russia, a partner of Europe, which was meant to fulfil the same role. Unfortunately, that vision failed, and there is no common project today.

But this absence offers a way forward. It may be that a joint project, a link between the Russian opposition and anti-corruption activists in the West, for example, could show the way in the future. For anyone willing to think creatively, the possibilities are endless.

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This research was conducted by members of the LSE Institute of Global Affairs and external partners. The work was commissioned via LSE Consulting which was set up by the London School of Economics and Political Science to enable and facilitate the application of its academic expertise and intellectual resources.

Design: LSE Design Unit (lse.ac.uk/designunit). Photography: iStock