

How to understand and deal with Russian strategic communication measures?

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Summary

Russia's use of communicative tools to promote the country's strategic objectives in the aftermath of the 2014 crisis in Ukraine has posed a new strategic challenge to the Western policy-making community. NATO, the EU and national authorities have become increasingly aware of this new challenge, and have taken measures to reduce the negative impacts of Russian (dis)information campaigns.

How are Russian information operations organized? What is the connection between the use of communicative measures and Russian strategic objectives? We argue that if we want to understand the effectiveness of Russia's use of communicative measures, we should first look at what the Russian strategic intentions are, and then examine to what extent these have been achieved by the use of these communicative measures. We also call for adopting a more nuanced approach to the question of Russian strategic communication aimed at Western societies: We need to look at these communicative measures in a broader context of political communication – not only from the perspective of the sender of the political message, but also from the point of view of its potential recipients. Our main conclusion is that the overwhelming majority of the various communicative measures Russia has undertaken, has been rather counter-productive from a strategic point of view: These measures have contributed to an increased level of awareness in the West, the introduction of several countermeasures and a better coordination of national and international policy aimed at limiting the negative impacts of Russian information operations.

Russian Strategic Communication: Actors, Methods and Goals

In today's political climate between Russia and the West, there is an urgent need for a more nuanced understanding of the role of political communication in Russian strategy. This policy brief summarizes the main findings of the MoD-funded research project 'Russian Strategic Communication and Political Ambitions towards Europe', and reviews the most important lessons regarding Russian strategic communication – i.e. the complex setting it operates in, its possibilities, and not least, its limitations.

We understand strategic communication as the use of various communicative measures with the purpose of influencing other actors' decisions and actions to achieve strategic objectives. The communicative measures serve to transfer knowledge for the purpose of informing, persuading, convincing, tempting etc. As within the civil and commercial spheres, creativity is inherent to good strategic communication. This means that both the form and content of communication can and should be tailored and be innovative. The list of devices that can be used for strategic communication purposes is therefore in principle endless.

An important distinction to be made is between *covert* and *overt* communication activities. Russia has a tradition of covert, active measures including activities such as forgeries, the setting up of front organizations, and the sponsoring of radical political forces (Darczewska and Żochowski 2017; Galeotti 2017). Moreover, the existence of the so-called "troll factories" appears well documented and has a legacy in the Russian domestic political landscape (Soldatov and Borogan 2015). The main focus here is, however, on *overt* communication related activities. That means mass communication channels operating in the open that aim at bolstering the standing of Russian mass media and communication tools in the global information space and

conveying Russia's perspective on international processes to a wider international community (The Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation 2016).

Actors

A first step at unpacking and improving of our understanding of overt Russian strategic communication is to map the actual institutions that participate in it. Here, two organizations are pivotal: First, there is the media group *Rossiya Segodnya*, established by government decree in 2013 as part of a major restructuring of the foreign oriented news media. This group owns the international news agency *Sputnik News*, which, as per September 2017, provides news in 31 languages, as well as the Russian language news agency *RIA Novosti*. It is owned by the Russian government, and is headed by the well-known Russian journalist and Kremlin mouthpiece Dmitry Kiselyov. As editor-in-chief he has appointed Margarita Simonyan, who, incidentally, is also the editor-in-chief of the television news network and online news provider *RT*.

RT, however, has no formal links to the media group *Rossiya Segodnya*, but is owned by the second pivotal organization: *TV-Novosti*. The latter is a rather obscure organization, officially an autonomous non-profit organization, that, in addition to *RT*, owns *Russia Beyond the Headlines (RBTH)* and the smaller-scale social media based content provider *In the Now!*. *RBTH* used to primarily provide print supplements on Russian society that were distributed in major international newspapers, but now appears to focus increasingly on providing Internet content such as, for instance, the Facebook feed *The Russian Kitchen*. *In the Now!* publishes "viral" videos on, for instance, the losses sustained by the Soviet Union in WWII.

Russian state ownership is clearly under-communicated in the case of *In The Now!*, but the two large news organizations *Sputnik News* and *RT* receive significant funding from the Russian national budget. *RT*'s parent company *TV-Novosti* is very secretive, but *RT*'s annual budget has been around 300 million USD over the past few years. To compare, this is roughly the same size as *BBC World's* budget. The whole media group *Rossiya Segodnya* receives around 100 million USD annually.

Methods

What functions are government funded international oriented media organizations supposed to have in foreign policy? The Russian expert community discusses both defensive and offensive aspects of the use of information in the political context. According to them (Ivanov 2017) the purpose of soft power instruments is to provide motivation for action and make potential opponents act in greater accordance with the interest of the influencer. In practice this suggests that large media organizations such as *RT* and *Sputnik News* act as platforms for the distribution of Russian narratives on Russia and world affairs. These narratives are meant to shape perceptions of right and wrong, as well as good and bad actors in international affairs – in a short-term as well as a long-term perspective.

Under normal circumstances the organizations owned by *TV-Novosti* are best seen as long-term soft power oriented

public diplomacy tools. Although the journalistic quality of *RT* is not very high, it does not normally present falsified news accounts as such. Rather, they present narratives that are biased against the mainstream in target countries, but may appeal to some fringe groups. The researcher Anton Shekhovtsov (2018), for instance, has observed that *RT* routinely invites radical right-wing European politicians and personalities as political commentators. The a-political, but high-quality content of *RBTH* and *Russian Kitchen* feeds must also be seen as a soft power tool meant to increase the attractiveness of and knowledge about Russian culture. *Sputnik News*, on the other hand, produces news of particularly low quality (although in high quantities), and cannot be seen as a soft power tool to the same extent.

Hence these various news and content providers have different functions within the broader Russian foreign policy strategy. At the same time, although *RT* and the other *TV-Novosti* content providers primarily serve a soft power objective, they can of course be mobilized for more tactical purposes if need be. This could for instance be to support an ongoing military operation, like we saw with the annexation of Crimea or the covert operations in Ukraine. The loss of trust and credibility this entails is however clearly counterproductive to *RT*'s stated goal of competing alongside other public diplomacy broadcasters such as *Al Jazeera*, *France 24* and *BBC World*.

Goals

Another important step towards a better understanding of Russian strategic communication is to examine how this interacts with Russian foreign policy itself. Although we treat Russian communication efforts as strategic, this does not mean that Russian policy makers craft foreign policy narratives with the sole aim of undermining the opponent. To a large extent they reflect genuine political perspectives and priorities. When discussing the use of communicative tools in Russian strategy, it is thus crucial to understand what is defined as the key national interests, and what strategic goals Russian political elites seek to achieve.

Based on a survey of literature on Russian foreign policy, we can identify the following mainstays of Russian foreign policy objectives: defense of the country and the regime; influence in the near abroad; a vision of Russia as a great power; non-interference in domestic affairs; and political and economic cooperation on equal terms with other great powers (Liik 2017; Radin and Reach 2017). According to our empirical research, *RT* and *Sputnik News*' coverage of key political events in European affairs in 2016 can be said to support these overarching objectives by portraying US, NATO and/or EU policy as the main source of instability in the region, and their policies and actions as unprecedented and aggressive. Furthermore, the portrayal of the US as dictating European policy, emphasis on public discontent and disagreements among political leaders in Europe, can be seen as attempts at undermining trust – between countries as well as between people and elite within countries. If so, this can be an attempt to weaken the European alliances vis-à-vis Russia in the global competition for influence. The use of representatives of the radical right as expert commentators on European affairs, and our finding that popular dissatisfaction with national and EU elites is

emphasized when portraying European affairs, suggest that through *RT* and *Sputnik News*, Russia is challenging the (perceived) hegemony of the Western liberal narrative in global media.

Some Conclusions and Policy Recommendations

In the above, we have discussed what we see as political objectives associated with Russian strategic communication efforts. According to the Foreign Policy Concept of the Russian Federation, Russia “seeks to ensure that the world has an objective image of the country” and “develops its own effective ways to influence foreign audiences” (The Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation 2016). However, despite our assertion that we can trace political objectives and intent behind the news coverage of *RT* and *Sputnik News* as well of other government owned media, this does *not* necessarily translate into any effect in influencing foreign audiences. There are reasons to believe that Russia has not been very successful in achieving its objectives in this sphere. That “Russian propaganda” is being so widely discussed in Western public debate is one such indicator. Countermeasures taken at European and national levels, such as the EU vs. Disinfo services or the Danish MFA’s vacancy announcement for a position that will work to counter influence operations, and not least, the current state of current Russian-Western relations, are other indicators of the poor track record overt Russian strategic communication efforts have had in realization of Russian foreign policy.

The reason might be a poor understanding of the full communication process; the way media structures operate in the Western societies that Russian strategic communicative measures are aimed at; and the overall transformation of the media environment (McQuail 1998; Hallin and Mancini 2014; Van Aelst et al. 2017). It is notoriously difficult for a message to change the political perspectives of target audiences. This may especially be the case in situations where the audience is used to being critical constructors of meaning and not only passive consumers (as in the transmission model that is closer to the Soviet media tradition). To reach and influence an audience, the audience would have to be able and willing to de-code the message conveyed by the sender in the same way as the producer of the message intends it – suggesting that in order for a message to be accepted by a target audience, it would need to resonate with political sentiments that already exist in this audience.

What does this mean in policy terms? Despite our cautioning of hyperbole when it comes to Russian strategic communication, the Russian use of active communicative measures in the aftermath of the crisis in Ukraine in 2014 has forced Western policy-makers to pay more attention to this aspect of Russian policy and its potential subversive effects on Western societies. Fringe groups that are attracted to the Russian model can accept the Russian message, but the mainstream groups will most probably be far more reluctant to internalize the Russian message and to change their political preferences. The most efficient way to counter this Russian communicative challenge is to increase the resilience of Western societies by addressing burning societal issues that could be exploited by Russia to sow discord and boost existing or potential conflicts.

Policy recommendations:

- The most efficient way to offset unwanted influence from Russian strategic communication is to improve the democratic functioning of our own societies from a whole-of-government and whole-of-society perspective. A well-functioning society with high education levels, high degree of trust and low political polarization is a resilient society.
- Even a resilient society may be vulnerable in an acute political crisis where the Russian media organizations may be mobilized for immediate tactical gains. It is therefore important for governments to focus on communications preparedness tailored for the 21st century Internet saturated society. This could include communications contingency plans, including for instance 24-hour response, cross-departmental coordination, situational awareness, pre-established trusted information channels, ability to secure photographic evidence that travels well on the Internet, ability to provide journalists with relevant information or to secure access to relevant geographical locations, and more.
- Western approaches to Russian strategic communication have been mostly reactive. To both increase resilience in acute political crises and bolster soft power, countries should develop a proactive digital and communications diplomacy. In keeping with the democratic traditions of Western countries this diplomacy must be careful to emphasize disagreement and freedom, so as not to be, or be seen as, counter-propaganda.
- Countries should recognize that Russian strategic communication to a large extent is conveying genuinely held Russian beliefs about the world and international affairs, and that disagreements in and of themselves do not represent threats.

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