
RUSSIA HAS MADE FAKE NEWS INTO A WEAPON THAT THREATENS DEMOCRACY IN EUROPE

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Vladimir Putin at a press conference holding up a finger and looking as if he is giving a warning Russia is deliberately disseminating fake news for political gains CREDIT: SERGEI ILNITSKY/AP POOL In the early days of the new year, a little-known news outlet linked to the self-proclaimed Donetsk Peoples Republic published an article on their website claiming that the US was dispatching 3,600 tanks to Eastern Europe as part of the NATO war preparation against Russia.

It was a classic example of so-called fake news whereby a grain of truth was first taken out of context and then turned into a mountain of exaggeration and hysteria to serve a political end.

The US had previously announced the reinforcement of its armoured units in Europe, including 87 tanks, 18 Paladins, 419 multi-purpose Humvees, and 144 Bradley fighting vehicles. 668 armoured vehicles of various kinds, had suddenly become forty per cent of all US tanks being deployed to Eastern Europe.

But regardless of facts, the story caught imaginations online and within days had been republished, unchallenged, by dozens of outlets in the US and Europe and especially across the Russian-speaking world.

This was just one example of many fabricated news items that, over recent months, have been clicked, liked, and shared by tens of thousands of people nurtured by fear, anger, and resentment.

It is important to see fake news used this way for what it really is: a threat to national security. Fake news is more than a fancy buzzword to describe political disagreements. It is weaponised information, a military operation utilising psychological warfare to lever public opinion for strategic advantage.

Russia is playing a dangerous zero-sum game. The Kremlin is aggressively pursuing its territorial and geopolitical ambitions at the expense of Western countries and the spread of fake news has become an integral and indispensable part of that strategy.

Russia has long perfected the art of deception and is now marrying this knowledge with modern technology and directing it at populations in ways which bypass our usual critical thinking faculties. By pouring hundreds of millions into state-owned media outlets and troll factories, Moscow has skilfully spread myths, lies, and distortions across the Western world in order to influence and shape the political landscape in our countries.

We have already seen the Russian propaganda machinery in full swing during the US presidential

election. In the coming months the focus of the Kremlin is likely to shift to European countries where key elections are being held in 2017, among them Germany, France and the Netherlands.

The Kremlins fake news strategy is sinister but effective. By peddling believable falsehoods, normally based on a kernel of truth, Moscow has sown mistrust between citizens and their governments, undermining the social contract that underpins the basic principles of democracy. This is a pernicious and deadly threat to the legitimacy of the Western world order.

In order to combat this insidious and cynical tactic, we must first recognise fake news as a threat and treat it with the gravity it requires. For too long, European governments have naively allowed their citizens to be subjected to Russias blatant propagandising while resting on their laurels.

Russian tanks roll through Moscow on parade

Conventional weapons are not the only tools Russia can use on the West CREDIT: GRIGORY DUKOR/REUTERS

In September 2014, at NATOs summit in Wales, General Philip Breedlove warned that Vladimir Putin was waging the most amazing information warfare blitzkrieg we have ever seen. This should have been Europes wake-up call, but instead the entire continent hit the snooze button.

Russias interference in the election of the American President seems to have finally shaken Europe from its stupor, and authorities are now trying to correct the spread of disinformation.

The European External Action Service (EEAS) is reportedly reallocating funds to East StratCom, set up by the European Union in 2015 to counter Russian propaganda. According to their experts, the unit has already collected more than 2,500 examples of stories directly contradicting public facts, published in 18 different languages over a period of 15 months.

A spread of British newspapers

The established press cannot ignore fake news. It must challenge it CREDIT: DAN KITWOOD/GETTY IMAGES

However, the role of governments is, and must remain, limited. As democracies, state institutions cannot crown themselves arbiters of truth. For societies to be truly open and inclusive, they need to be able to articulate, challenge, and discuss a broad range of competing ideas and opinions, as freely as possible from government interference.

Because democracies rightly hold themselves to higher standards and impose limits on the role and power of government, the West is fighting this information war with both arms tied behind its back.

But what makes democracies vulnerable to fake news can also be its strongest defence. The West needs to take advantage of the uniquely robust civil societies they foster to take part in the strike back. With the stability provided by governments and strong institutions, think tanks, NGOs, charities, community groups, businesses, and the free press all need to offer rigorous critiques and fact-checking, based on the principles of rationalism and scientific investigation, to demolish the politically charged, false narratives that Russia is cobbling together to pull the wool over our eyes.