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## INTRODUCTION

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Ukraine has long been regarded by Russia simultaneously as a lesser sibling, a member of the broader ‘Russian world’, as well as an important strategic asset territorially – as a buffer between Russia and NATO.

Over the last two decades, however, Moscow’s hold on Ukraine has weakened, as popular support in the country has pushed it towards the European Union and NATO.

In 2014, the Ukrainian Revolution overthrew Moscow-backed president Viktor Yanukovich. Russian troops annexed the Crimean Peninsula and invaded Ukraine’s eastern Donbas region. Since then, Ukraine has been engaged in open conflict with Russia.

This conflict has involved offensive military operations alongside a campaign to discredit, undermine and deploy information warfare against Ukraine. This Study Guide suggests that Russian disinformation does not operate according to a playbook, but is rather piecemeal and opportunist, involving a multitude of actors and methods in an only partially coordinated way.

For the purposes of analysis, the Study Guide will analyse two case studies in order to understand the dynamics of disinformation in and around Ukraine: (1) the annexation of Crimea; and (2) the downing of Malaysian Airlines flight MH17.




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## THE ANNEXATION OF CRIMEA

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The Crimean Peninsula in Ukraine was militarily annexed by Russia over February and March 2014. Since that time, the region has been administered by Moscow as a subject of the Russian Federation. The Crimea annexation is a part of the overall Russian military intervention that took place in the aftermath of the 2014 Ukrainian revolution which includes the conflict in southern and eastern Ukraine.

Putin denied existence of Russian troops in Crimea for one year. In March 2014, one month after the fall of Ukraine’s then president and Moscow ally Viktor Yanukovich, reports from the peninsula of Crimea began emerging about ‘little green men’. These were in fact Russian special forces – hundreds of members of the Russia’s Main Intelligence Directorate (GRU)’s 45th Spetsnaz Regiment, wearing uniforms without insignia who had been quietly occupying Crimea, to create a ‘popular uprising’. Within days, Russia had illegally annexed Crimea.

## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

### RUSSIA AND DISINFORMATION

Moreover, the GRU launched a covert influence operation in Crimea the aim of which was to impact key decision-makers and the broader public, paving the way for the military action, which began on 27 February 2014. Numerous fake personas were created to represent ordinary Ukrainians from across the country who were disenchanted with Kyiv's opposition protests. These 'paid trolls' targeted comment sections on online articles, as well as on social media platforms of Twitter, VKontakte, and Facebook – all weakly regulated spaces. The fact that the psyops in Ukraine appears to be GRU-led – hence separate from the Kremlin and the Russian Armed Forces – suggests that the GRU is proficient at the mixing of overt force and psyops, using technology.

The fundamental purpose Russian disinformation, is to undermine the official version of events — even the very idea that there is a true version of events — and foster a kind of policy paralysis. The disinformation launched during this campaign was not aimed to rally audiences to Russia's point of view, but to exacerbate social tensions and plant doubt about the presence of any empirical truth. The strategy is to exploit already salient issues and narratives in a society and use them to disrupt social cohesion. With the Internet and social media, the strategy becomes more rapidly and efficiently deployed, and the volume of disinformation grows exponentially.

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## MH17

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Malaysia Airlines Flight 17 (MH17) was a regularly scheduled passenger flight heading to Kuala Lumpur from Amsterdam. While flying over eastern Ukraine on 17 July 2014, the plane was shot down, killing all 283 passengers and 15 crew. The downing occurred in the open conflict in Donbas in an area controlled by pro-Russian separatists.

Details of the downing of MH17 have been established by the Joint Investigative Team (JIT), comprised of the national investigative agencies of Australia, Belgium, Malaysia, the Netherlands, and Ukraine. In October 2015 the JIT concluded that the MH17 was shot down with a BUK missile system of the 53rd Anti-Aircraft

Missile Brigade of the Russian Army. The missile system was found to have been moved from Russian to Ukrainian territory before the downing of the MH17, and afterwards, was taken back to Russia. Immediately after the downing of the MH17, the Russian government and its separatist allies in Ukraine's east obstructed access to the crash site for investigators.

The Russian disinformation deployed around the downing of Malaysian Airlines Flight MH17 consisted of a barrage of falsehoods. Russia's UN ambassador, glossing over how the MH17 was downed, said Russia 'fully blames Kyiv' for all the unrest in the region and foreign minister Sergei Lavrov, rejecting Ukrainian claims that Russia was responsible for the attack. The statements made by Russian officials in the days after the MH17 downing consist not of a single narrative but of a wide-ranging list of 'concerns': Russian grievances and misgivings about Western media and politicians' accusations as well as Kyiv's responsibility in the events. This disinformation is now in the public domain, forming fodder for a wide array of conspiracy theories.

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## CONCLUSION

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The evidence of both the annexation of Crimea and the downing of the MH17 provides several important lessons and implications for policy. The first is the understanding that Kremlin disinformation can contradict itself, and that the Russian authorities and media make little to no effort at redacting the trail of falsehoods they leave behind, even after convincing evidence of their fabrication emerges. The use of various Russian media repeating and disseminating the various narratives further serves to fill the information space with many, often contradictory versions.

Second, the lack of any single narrative in these cases of disinformation in fact fit Russia's overall goal in undermining the credibility of perceived adversaries by disrupting their own narratives. While fact-checking Russian disinformation is important, these cases show fact-checks do not stop the disinformation from continuing to be circulated, even after the time of crisis

has passed. This supports work done elsewhere about the ineffectuality of countering Russian propaganda by disproving it. Moreover, the lack of a single narrative means that more labour is required to debunk each version of events, something that may well be a deliberate feature.

Third, the ad-hoc nature of the disinformation in these cases, for example the shifting narratives after the MH17 downing, suggests that Russian disinformation is reactive and constrained by the circumstances.

Fourth, and last, the presence of conflict in Ukraine, even if war is not openly declared, is confirmation of the idea that Russia uses disinformation as a major strategic aspect of war. While this idea began emerging after Russia's conflict with Georgia in 2008, of which disinformation was a significant aspect, Ukraine's case firmly solidifies this view.

## About this project

This research was funded via the *Centre for Research and Evidence on Security Threats* as part of the **Actors and Narratives** programme.

This brief is part of a series on *Russia and Disinformation*. The full report, and the other three reports and accompanying briefs in the series ('The Case of the Caucasus', 'Maskirovka', and 'Institutions and Actors',) can be found at [www.crestresearch.ac.uk/tag/russia-disinformation/](http://www.crestresearch.ac.uk/tag/russia-disinformation/)

For more information about the project, please visit the CREST website at [www.crestresearch.ac.uk](http://www.crestresearch.ac.uk)