

INTRODUCTION

This Executive Summary investigates the institutions and actors involved in Russian disinformation. The Summary should be read in conjunction with the CREST Report on Disinformation and Maskirovka, and the two reports which examine case studies of Disinformation.

In this Summary we outline the contemporary context in which disinformation occurs, as conceived and practised by actors in the Russian Federation.

The aim of this brief is to investigate in more depth Russia institutions and actors that contribute in various ways in the promotion of Russian disinformation. In particular, we consider, inter alia, the following themes:

- Governmental and affiliated institutions involved in disinformation activities.
- The role of state and non-state/sub-state actors and networks in disinformation.
- To what extent disinformation can be traced to specific actors or agents of influence.

There is a burgeoning Western literature on Russian policy and practice in disinformation but very little of it has detailed and reliable material about the government agencies and affiliated actors that promote it.

Many studies refer broadly to ‘the Kremlin’ or the ‘power agencies’ as the principal actors in this field, but



a wider array of actors and agents can be identified as being involved.

At the softer end of the power spectrum, agents of traditional diplomacy and cultural diplomacy, the Russian Orthodox Church, representatives of higher educational institutions, youth movements and intergovernmental foundations are active in the dissemination of Russian ‘strategic narratives’ and creating what Russian officials refer to as a ‘humanitarian product for export’.

In terms of disinformation as a set of tools to promote political influence and entrench Russian power, the field is similarly wide, with political/social activists, covert intelligence networks, the traditional media (print/visual/digital) and trolls, bots and purveyors of ‘fake news’ contributing to it.

GOVERNMENTAL INSTITUTIONS

The main agencies forming the core of the Russian intelligence community are as follows:

MINISTRY OF DEFENCE (MOD)

Among its main tasks is organising and carrying out ‘information engagement’. According to one source, Soviet information warfare theory was first taught as a separate subject in 1942 at the Military Institute of Foreign Languages, which is now known as the Military Information and Foreign Languages Department of the Military University of the Ministry of Defence of the Russian Federation; it prepares specialists in foreign information and military communications.

The MoD can spread disinformation via announcements, which are then picked up by and expanded on by Kremlin-aligned media outlets.

ARMED FORCES GENERAL STAFF (GENSHTAB)

Within the structure of the MO is the Glavnoe Razvedyvatel’noe Upravlenie (Main Intelligence Directorate, GRU) of General Staff of the Armed Forces (Genshtab), described as the foreign intelligence organ for the MO and the central intelligence organ for the Armed Forces (www.mil.ru).

The GRU provides strategic, operational, and tactical intelligence for the armed forces and has been described as the ‘bridge’ intelligence agency between the military and civilian intelligence agencies, ensuring that both the military and intelligence communities are able to carry out their mission with maximum efficiency.

The GRU appears to answer only to the Russian Defence Ministry and the presidential administration, delivering intelligence reports to senior civilian and military officials. Even though the chief of the General

Staff does not have operational jurisdiction over the GRU, he does have day-to-day control over the GRU.

The Centre for Military Strategic Studies of the General Staff provides analysis which is crucial to understanding Russian perspectives on information warfare. While primarily focused on conventional warfare, the Armed Forces General Staff is becoming increasingly oriented towards fulfilling a supporting role in disinformation campaigns.

As Sergey Chekinov, a head of department at the General Staff Academy and head of the General Staff’s Centre for Military-Strategic Research wrote in 2013, indirect actions and methods of non-military techniques and measures are needed to countercheck the adversary’s actions and exercise informational superiority.

FOREIGN INTELLIGENCE SERVICE (SLUZHBA VNESHNEI RAZVEDKI, SVR)

The organisational structure of the SVR comprises operational, analysis and functional subunits, including a bureau for links with the public and media, a foreign counter-intelligence directorate and an economic intelligence directorate.

The SVR provides the presidential and governmental structures with intelligence information to support decision-making, including in the military strategic and security spheres, using ‘both overt and covert methods and means’ in accordance with federal laws and legal-normative acts. The SVR appears to act with diplomatic cover from Russian embassies overseas.

It cooperates closely with the security and intelligence services of countries in the Commonwealth of Independent States. Out of the three intelligence organisations of Russia (SVR, GRU, and the FSB), the SVR is perhaps the least influential.

THE FEDERAL SECURITY SERVICE (FEDERALNAYA SLUZHBA BEZOPASNOSTI, FSB)

The FSB is responsible for broad counterespionage operations. One source suggests that the FSB Academy has formed a network of research institutions so that not only diplomatic courses but also the curricula at social science departments of universities include subjects such as situation analysis, network communication technology and information/network wars. The link between the FSB and Putin has in large part helped make it the most powerful intelligence agency in Russia, with the organisation spreading its activities to encompass areas traditionally considered to be the domain of the GRU and SVR. The FSB helps create plausible deniability in Russian disinformation campaigns by co-opting or coercing ‘patriotic’ Russians to act on behalf of the government.

STATE, NON-STATE AND SUB-STATE ACTORS

State agencies responsible for the control of information form the apex of a complex structure which also includes independent actors, whose views reinforce disinformation narratives. Key actors are members of the presidential administration and its associated networks of business leaders, veteran officers and former agents of the Soviet intelligence services who have links to the presidential circle. These actors constitute a ‘state within a state’ which interacts with but is distinct from formal elements of the government of the Russian Federation.

Official documents and military theorists state that, as well as the abovementioned agencies, information warfare draws on the resources of various government agencies. The service for the supervision of communications and information technologies Roskomnadzor, the Federal Protection Service, the Ministry of Internal Affairs (MVD) and the Ministry

for Foreign Affairs also play a role. Coordination of the work of government bodies is effected through the high-level Security Council.

Roskomnadzor, Russia’s federal authority, responsible for media content, has worked not just to block sites deemed ‘extremist’ within Russia in an effort to censor content critical of the Kremlin, it also assert influence externally. Moreover, recent military exercises involving Russian forces witnessed the explicit use of ‘psychological warfare and information confrontation subunits’, which are distinct from units responsible for cyber intelligence operations. Strategic cyber information campaigns appear to be conducted by other organisations to target critical infrastructure systems and conduct espionage.

One of the most difficult questions to answer is thus to what extent there is a centralised network within Russia’s ‘power vertical’ with formal control over the content and promotion of disinformation and to what extent activities which may appear to be coordinated are in fact the product of multiple, fragmented and decentralised networks.

The most recent version of Russia’s Foreign Policy Concept (Nov 2016), states that ‘soft power’ includes ‘the tools offered by civil society, as well as various methods and technologies – from information and communication, to humanitarian and other types’; one of Russia’s main objectives is ‘to bolster the standing of Russian mass media and communication tools in the global information space and convey Russia’s perspective on international process to a wider international community’. Russia ‘takes necessary steps to counter threats to its information security’, including through the use of ‘new information and communication technology’ (Ministry of Foreign Affairs web site).

Numerous organisations and networks contribute to activities related to the promotion of information and opinion-forming. These include research institutes such as the Russian Institute for Strategic Research, founded by the Russian president and playing a consultative role

to the presidential administration, government agencies and the State Duma.

The activities and content produced by patriotic networks inspired by prominent public intellectuals such as Aleksandr Dugin, and other groups such as the International Eurasian Movement, the National Bolshevik Party is disseminated via various social media platforms and discussion groups and thereby achieves widespread coverage. Another portal focuses on the topic of information warfare and is linked to numerous other pro-Kremlin internet forums including Russian diaspora portals. These networks are primarily active among Russians.

The information campaign addressed to overseas audiences, particularly Western audiences, is modified into a more sophisticated set of narratives on current affairs and disseminated through specialist media, particularly television, radio and internet media, including the Ministry of Foreign Affairs web site, which interprets political developments in a more sophisticated manner. In this case disinformation is usually more subtle and difficult to decipher (see the CREST Report - *Russia and Disinformation: Maskirovka*).

Numerous organisations promote Russian narratives in countries susceptible to them through the promotion of education and culture, the Russian language and the 'Russian world', chief among them the Russkii Mir Foundation, the Gorchakov Foundation and the Federal Agency for the Commonwealth of Independent States, Compatriots Living Abroad and International Humanitarian Cooperation (Rosstrudnichestvo), as well as other government-organised NGOs, non-profit civil society organisations, proxy groups and networks.

The Russian Orthodox Church, especially the Moscow Patriarchate, and Russian compatriot organisations and other groups which identify with official narratives, also play an important role.

These include the World Congress of Russian Compatriots, the International Union of Russian Compatriots and the Institute of Russian Compatriots, Cossack organizations, Afghan veterans, paramilitary or ultra-radical groups, and youth groups. Educational and cultural links are promoted through Russian educational institutions. A range of business and economic networks link individuals and companies in Russia and overseas countries, especially in its neighbourhood.

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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/

For more information about the project, please visit the CREST website at www.crestresearch.ac.uk