

EWG Unconventional Warfare

Webinar 20th February 2025 – points arising

Summary

- Disinformation is part of Russia's 'Hybrid Warfare' playbook. It enables Russian state actors and proxies to engage in deniable activities.
- Disinformation is intended to divide opinion in western society, allowing a Russian narrative to gain traction.
- Recent developments in IT and cyber enabled social media have super-charged the information space.
- Disinformation can be spread via actors sympathetic to Russian policy objectives – and is also used by other autocracies, such as China.
- Western governments and national security agencies need to remain vigilant to false narratives, and rebut false information swiftly.
- The general public needs to be made more aware of malicious actors spreading disinformation; fact checking websites and 'watermarked' material should be used as counters to disinformation.
- Legal measures can be used to compel social media platforms to remove false information.

Main points arising

Three speakers presented this webinar:

- **Keir Giles** – Senior Consulting Fellow with the Russia and Eurasia Programme of the Royal Institute of International Affairs (Chatham House) in London UK.
- **Victor Breiner** – Executive Director of the Institute for Resilience Building, based in Bratislava Slovakia.
- **Natia Seskuria** – Executive Director of the Regional Institute for Security Studies (RISS) based in Tbilisi Georgia.

Keir Giles gave an opening '*tour d'horizon*' on this topic. He pointed out that this was not a new phenomenon, and Moscow treated 'Hybrid Warfare' as a whole government effort. It was noted that Moscow tends to play the long game, where western society is often distracted by short term horizons and frequent election campaigns.

Victor Breiner spoke about recent developments in Slovakia, where the government of Robert Fico has been using false narratives to promote his pro-Moscow policies. Fico managed to concentrate on the undecided voters, and succeeded in securing their support.

He also referenced a case where an investigative journalist, Jan Kuziak (?) was murdered with suspicion that this was organized by elements supportive of Fico.

Natia Seskuria spoke of recent developments in Georgia, where a recent legislative election led to a new pro-Moscow government being elected. Until this election Georgia had adopted a pro NATO policy and was a candidate for EU membership.

It was noted that during the election campaign, the new government had emphasised the proximity of Georgia to the war in Ukraine and was able to play on the genuine fears of the population, that the war would spread to their country. This narrative advocated a policy of neutrality & against NATO membership. Also that the EU would undermine traditional orthodox values.

Comment

Russian efforts at Hybrid warfare include extensive use of 'disinformation' campaigns to sow discord within western society. For an effective response to Russian aggression NATO relies on unanimity within its members. One element of Russian statecraft is to undermine this unity.

There is now a serious debate going on throughout European civil society about how resilient our societies are in the face of fake news amplified through social media. Many European states have coalition governments comprised of three or four parties, each of which will want its share of ministries and policy leads.

Russian calculations about western resolve have been borne out by the response by European governments to the invasion of Ukraine. There was initially reluctance by many governments to commit to supply the weapons needed to repel the invader. Subsequently there was reluctance to subscribe to a list of comprehensive sanctions against individuals and companies. The reason was easily understood, many countries have developed deep trading relations with Russia and are reliant on a supply of Russian gas to heat their homes and offices.

In particular there is a need for vigilance with regard to those countries who seek to join the European Union or NATO. Russia has been active in the Balkans region and in Moldova, seeking to destabilise pro-western regimes. Bosnia Herzegovina and Georgia have expressed their desire to join NATO as has Ukraine. Destabilising a pro-western government could be the ambition of the Kremlin. The delay in ratifying Swedish membership of the NATO Alliance shows the effect one blocking vote can have. This matters because the implementation of Article 5 of the Washington Treaty in a time of crisis requires

unanimity. Imagine how a delay to this process might advantage Russia if it undertook an incursion into NATO territory.

European countries need to look into the ownership of media outlets more closely. Legislation needs to be introduced to reduce the opportunity for 'ambiguity' regarding the ownership of companies that are involved in generating media content. These measures require a 'whole of government' approach, so that relevant ministries such as culture and education are included. One benefit of such an exercise is that it will energise the debate on 'disinformation' within civil society.

Take aways:

- Western societies must make the effort to counter false narratives, so that they do not gain traction and credibility.
- The public needs to be better informed about malign actors who seek to promote false stories via social media. This is not just a matter of good cyber hygiene, but a case of people being more discerning about what news feeds they pay attention to.
- Counter narratives and rebuttals must be promoted by sources that the public will trust. This will be a continuing effort, involving mainstream media and fact checking websites.
- National governments and EU agencies need to review existing legislation, to see where there are opportunities to legally block false narratives on social media platforms.
- National governments and EU agencies need to work closely with the IT sector and social media platforms, to ensure that false narratives are identified swiftly and taken down where possible.

Next action

- This matter, along with other elements of 'Hybrid' / unconventional warfare will be studied & up-dated as events develop.
- Recommendations for policy action will be suggested for consideration by the EuroDefense presidents council.