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# Western Intelligence and Counter-intelligence in a Time of Russian Disinformation

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Intelligence operations are as old as politics itself. After all, states gather intelligence to understand the capabilities and intentions of others, to inform policy decisions and diplomatic initiatives, and to identify threats before they can attack. States do not restrict intelligence collection to enemies, potential or actual. They also spy on their allies. For one, states need to understand whether their security partners are willing and able to fulfil their commitments in case a crisis with their common adversary breaks out. For another, they need to watch for signs that their allies might be planning risky adventures. Members of the North Atlantic Treaty Organisation (NATO) engage in intelligence collection for all of these reasons. Though they watch each other, they cooperate so as to improve deterrence of shared threats and to strengthen political ties. States also do counter-intelligence – operations that protect against espionage and other intelligence activities undertaken by friends and foes alike. States often do not want to show their hand and so they try to misrepresent their capabilities, interests, and vulnerabilities.<sup>2</sup>

The Russian disinformation campaign makes it harder for NATO to achieve such ends by complicating intelligence and counter-intelligence missions.<sup>3</sup> Aiming to confuse and to sow distrust among Western governments, the Kremlin's disinformation campaign has consisted of disseminating its preferred narratives through media outlets, Internet trolling, cultivating friendly populists in Western Europe, and manipulating complex ethnic grievances. Such activities increase the burden on agencies engaged in intelligence and counterintelligence. To be sure, the Kremlin did not discover the value of mounting disinformation campaigns just recently—the Soviet Union had engaged in similar activities over its lifespan.<sup>4</sup> What perhaps distinguishes current efforts

Western European countries rely on intelligence to collect information on the capabilities and intentions of friends and foes alike. They also perform counter-intelligence missions in order to hinder the intelligence operations of others. This policy brief highlights how the Russian disinformation campaign strives to enhance Russian deterrence of unfavourable policy responses to its foreign policy actions. It also illustrates how it affects intelligence and counter-intelligence missions undertaken by Western European countries in at least two ways. The first involves increasing the so-called noise-to-signal ratio via the dissemination of preferred narratives through media outlets, Internet trolling on social media, the cultivation of friendly populists in Western Europe, and the manipulation of complex ethnic grievances in Eastern Europe. The second involves creating potential, and exploiting existing, barriers to cooperation between national intelligence agencies via the use of Edward Snowden, WikiLeaks, and its potential violations of the Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces (INF) Treaty. Western European countries must deepen their cooperation in order to prevent Russia from being successful in its divisiveness.

from past disinformation campaigns is the underlying technology. The Internet and other advances in telecommunications have made it easier and quicker to spread bad information in the public sphere.

I argue that the Russian disinformation campaign largely serves to deter an unfavourable policy response from NATO members. Because it is militarily and politically weak relative to the combined strength of NATO, Russia resorts to such means in order to create ambiguity over its true capabilities and intentions. Such is partly how Russia practices deterrence.<sup>5</sup> It relies on this form of information warfare to keep adversaries both off-balance and self-deterred from responding to Russian actions.<sup>6</sup> In so doing, the Russian disinformation campaign adversely affects intelligence and counter-intelligence among Western European countries in at least two ways. The first is that Russia is creating more noise that drowns out clean signals that could indicate its intentions and capabilities. The second is that Russia is striving to generate distrust between western intelligence communities. Thus, the Russian disinformation campaign is an offensive form of counter-intelligence insofar as entails operations outside of Russia.

### Increasing the Noise-to-Signal Ratio

The first pathway through which Russian disinformation complicates intelligence and counter-intelligence operations is by polluting the information environment with too much noise. The task of intelligence is to separate signal from noise—that is, relevant pieces of information from irrelevant ones. Although organisational pathologies and human frailties can compound such problems, an adversary could engage in a programme of deception to obscure signals so that they would have multiple, even conflicting meanings.<sup>7</sup> Deception can take different forms that include the issuing of deliberately false public statements, the use of military and political decoys, and the dissemination of those narratives that reflect certain prejudices.

The last of these forms of deception is where Russia has shown much visible effort. Using diverse platforms like state-sponsored news outlets (e.g. RT and Sputnik International) and social media like Twitter, the Russian disinformation campaign has promoted a particular interpretation of connected events alongside a set of beliefs about existing political institutions that suits its interests. For example, Russia has accordingly sought to shape public opinion in Sweden over that country's relationship with NATO.<sup>8</sup> The resulting narrative asserts the legitimacy of Russian actions in Ukraine and Syria

while undermining that of western policies and politicians.

Of course, western intelligence agencies do not depend on RT, Sputnik, and Facebook to gather intelligence. Nevertheless, what confounds observers is how the substance of this disinformation campaign often overlaps with the platforms and policy proposals of certain Western European political parties. Consider the growth of populism in the region. Partly because of rising economic inequality, many voters in Western democracies have come to distrust those politicians whom they perceive as careerist, corrupt, and aloof from their concerns. Such disaffected voters gravitate to those politicians who promise to satisfy majoritarian needs at the expense of economic elites and the so-called political establishment. As the Brexit vote in Britain indicates, this sort of populism has already influenced public policy even if mainstream political parties remain in power. Such populism might reflect genuine and perhaps justifiable political dissatisfaction. Nevertheless, Western European populists often call for economic protectionism and disengagement from NATO, while expressing sympathy for authoritarian leaders like Russian President Vladimir Putin. Some political parties like Front National in France have even benefited from Kremlin support, whether financially, diplomatically, or both.<sup>9</sup> Briefly put, it has become unclear whether pro-Kremlin narratives and expressions of interests in Western Europe have genuine indigenous roots or reflect adversarial counter-intelligence operations.

This aspect of the disinformation campaign is arguably the most direct and intrusive, but Russia has also used subtler means to increase the noise-to-signal ratio. When Russia was still asserting political control over Crimea, the Kremlin claimed that local forces were driving the annexation effort. For example, the so-called 'little green men' obstructed efforts to identify their provenance and connection to the Russian military. Indeed, Russia could claim with some credibility that Russian-language populations in Crimea and other parts of Ukraine needed protection against the depredations of the new government in Kiev. Given the cultural affinity that those populations might have with Russia, it was difficult to determine the extent to which events were driven by local or by external forces.<sup>10</sup> Similarly, Moscow undertook a major deception programme following the shooting-down of MH17 over eastern Ukraine. It claimed that Ukrainian forces were responsible in

prosecuting its war against rebel groups—an accusation later refuted by studies commissioned by the Dutch government.<sup>11</sup>

The result is that intelligence agencies and other state authorities must devote a share of their resources to debunk false narratives, to identify trolling trends, and to expose information manipulation. The Swedish Security Service had to deal with such a matter when social media users circulated letters sent from the Swedish Ministry of Defense about armed exports to Ukraine that later turned out to be forgeries. Norwegian intelligence agencies have similarly flagged Russian disinformation as a major issue of concern.<sup>12</sup>

### **Creating and Exploiting Barriers to Cooperation**

The second pathway through which Russian disinformation complicates intelligence and counter-intelligence operations involves creating potential barriers to cooperation between national agencies. Western European governments coordinate some of their intelligence efforts, sharing pieces of intelligence in order to exploit economies of scale and to understand the intentions and capabilities of shared adversaries to the best extent possible. Such is the purpose of Five Eyes (FVEY)—of which the United Kingdom is the only European member—and NATO's Joint Intelligence, Surveillance, and Reconnaissance. By monitoring communications of potential sources of threat, these organisations complement national capabilities in espionage and intelligence processing in addition to providing a formal structure for how member governments share secrets and intelligence amongst themselves.

Russia has stepped up activities designed to sow discord between (and within) national intelligence communities. The most commonly known tactic involves the use of individuals such as Edward Snowden. In order to collect information on adversaries, intelligence agencies recruit contacts who will obtain for them classified documents from within a target organisation. In the case of Snowden, whether he was a naïve idealist campaigning for transparent governance or a spy knowingly working on behalf of Moscow is moot. Snowden performed this role for the Russian intelligence, intentionally or not.<sup>13</sup> His theft and disclosure of a massive trove of documents exposed global surveillance programmes operated by the National Security Administration (NSA) in the United States with the support of telecommunication companies and

other western governments. Not only did these documents reveal intelligence capabilities, but they also embarrassed Western European governments when secret domestic surveillance programmes came to light. The embarrassment intensified once media outlets began reporting on how allied governments were spying on each other.<sup>14</sup> Though the substance of Snowden's revelations was not disinformation per se, they similarly served to deepen distrust in political institutions and to provide further ammunition for populists to criticise mainstream political parties.<sup>15</sup>

How did these revelations affect Western intelligence organisations? It is hard to say because powerful incentives for them to cooperate still exist. Nevertheless, Western European governments had to admit their complicity following pressure to dismantle those surveillance programmes. The outrage was palpable in France and Germany that the NSA was collecting extensive information on French and German citizens, particularly because the security benefits of such surveillance efforts were unclear. Moreover, contacts or sources who relied on their anonymity were suddenly put at risk when their names appeared in documents leaked by Snowden and even WikiLeaks, an international organisation that specialises in procuring and spreading classified or secret information.<sup>16</sup> Existing practices needed changing, for better or for worse, because the political pressure was too much for business to continue as usual. Whether those changes are cosmetic is unclear due to the nature of the enterprise. Disclosures of mutual espionage could not but put governments on the defensive. Snowden's actions had the potential of placing those organisations tasked with intelligence and counter-intelligence functions—missions important for tackling disinformation—in disrepute.

Interestingly, we have already observed Russia undertake questionable activities that NATO cannot properly address due to barriers in intelligence cooperation. These activities involve possible violations of the Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces (INF) Treaty. Signed between the United States and Russia, this international agreement banned all ground-launched cruise missiles and associated launchers that have short (500-1000 kilometres) and long (1000-5500 kilometres) ranges, be they conventional or nuclear. Putin has long complained that the INF Treaty does not serve Russian interests, partly because of American-led initiatives to develop a missile defense sys-

tem in Eastern Europe.<sup>17</sup> However, only in the last few years has Russia tested weapon-systems that might be in violation of the agreement—the R-500, the 9K720 Iskander launcher, and an intercontinental ballistic missile called the RS-26 that could hit targets within the proscribed range.<sup>18</sup> Despite making charges about certain Russian weapon tests, the United States has been reluctant to supply firm evidence of wrongdoing.<sup>19</sup> One hypothesis is that it and other FVEY members do not want to share, let alone publicise, the relevant intelligence with Western European countries, lest FVEY capabilities become compromised.<sup>20</sup> Russia can thus continue denying that it is breaking its INF commitments, while making counter-allegations that the United States is in breach of the treaty with the placement of a missile defence launch system in East Central Europe. Western European governments (and publics) have to take the United States at its word about Russian non-compliance. Indeed, to counter opportunistic violations of the INF Treaty by Russia, it is now even more imperative that FVEY and non-FVEY intelligence organisations find ways to cooperate.

### Counter-intelligence as Deterrence

The current disinformation campaign belongs to a larger tradition in Russian counter-intelligence history of using subversion and prejudiced narratives to create divisions among Western countries. Indeed, states have long had good strategic reasons to mislead and to confuse their adversaries, thus hiding evidence of wrongdoing and deflecting blame. Intelligence is often a cat-and-mouse game that states play in the public sphere as well as in the private. In this case, offensive counter-intelligence operations serve to enhance deterrence because it helps forestall unfavourable policy responses. Accordingly, Russia promotes narratives that and cultivates politicians who resonate with voters who are disillusioned with the political status quo in their countries; adopts certain military tactics (e.g. ‘little green men’) to make externally-driven events appear indigenous; uses revelations of domestic surveillance programmes to delegitimise Western institutions; and exploits the reluctance of some intelligence agencies to share information on possible Russian treaty violations.

Intelligence gathering and cooperation will no doubt continue among NATO members, including those in Western Europe. The incentives for collaboration are simply too strong and the

history thereof too significant for it to be otherwise, but Russia cannot be expected to present itself as an easy target and so it uses creative means like disinformation to stymie intelligence and counter-intelligence efforts in the West and to create policy paralysis. It is thus essential for intelligence agencies in Western Europe to be granted more resources from their national governments and to cooperate even more in order to prevent Russia from being successful in its divisiveness.

## Footnotes

<sup>1</sup>States worry about whether allies would entrap or abandon them. See Glenn Snyder, *Alliance Politics* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1997). Intelligence gathering offers one monitoring mechanism, though scholarship on intra-alliance intelligence gathering is sparse. See Martin S. Alexander, "Introduction: Knowing Your Friends, Assessing Your Allies—Perspectives on Intra-Alliance Intelligence," *Intelligence and National Security* 13/1 (1998): 1-17.

<sup>2</sup>Richard K. Betts, *Enemies of Intelligence: Knowledge and Power in American National Security* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2007): 9.

<sup>3</sup>On Russian information warfare, see Rod Thornton, "The Changing Nature of Modern Warfare: Responding to Russian Information Warfare," *The RUSI Journal* 160/4 (2015): 40-48.

<sup>4</sup>Jon White, "Dismiss, Distort, Distract, and Dismay: Continuity and Change in Russian Disinformation," *Institute for European Studies Policy Brief* 2016/13 (May 2016): [http://www.ies.be/files/Policy%20Brief\\_Jon%20White.pdf](http://www.ies.be/files/Policy%20Brief_Jon%20White.pdf) (accessed 23 October 2016).

<sup>5</sup>Kristin Ven Bruusgard, "Russian Strategic Deterrence," *Survival* 58/4 (2016): 7-26.

<sup>6</sup>Dmitry Adamsky, *Cross-Domain Coercion: The Russian Art of Strategy* [Proliferation Papers 54] (Paris: IFRI, November 2015).

<sup>7</sup>Roberta Wohlstetter, *Pearl Harbor: Warning and Decision* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1962): 393-395.

<sup>8</sup>Neil MacFarquhar, "A Powerful Russian Weapon: The Spread of False Stories," *New York Times* (28 August 2016): <http://nyti.ms/2bR9n3c> (accessed 30 August 2016).

<sup>9</sup>See Olivier Schmitt, *Pourquoi Poutine est notre allié: Anatomie d'une passion française* (Paris: Hikari Éditions, 2017) and Marlene Laruelle, Lóránt Györi, Péter Krekó, Dóra Haller, and Rudy Reichstadt "From Paris to Vladivostok": The Kremlin Connections of the French Far-Right," *Political Capital Institute* (2015): [http://www.politicalcapital.hu/wp-content/uploads/PC\\_Study\\_Russian\\_Influence\\_France\\_ENG.pdf](http://www.politicalcapital.hu/wp-content/uploads/PC_Study_Russian_Influence_France_ENG.pdf) (accessed 23 October 2016).

<sup>10</sup>For the logic of this type of strategy, see Alexander Lanoszka, "Russian Hybrid Warfare and Extended Deterrence in Eastern Europe," *International Affairs* 92/1 (2016): 175-195.

<sup>11</sup>See Dutch Safety Board, MH17 Crash (The Hague): October 2015: <https://www.onderzoeksraad.nl/en/onderzoek/2049/investigation-crash-mh17-17-july-2014> (accessed 23 October 2016). American intelligence reported that Russia likely supplied rebel groups operating in eastern Ukraine the missile that shot down the passenger aircraft. See Greg Miller, "U.S. discloses intelligence on downing of Malaysian Jet," *Washington Post* (22 July 2014): [https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/national-security/us-discloses-intelligence-on-downing-of-malaysian-jet/2014/07/22/b178fe58-11e1-11e4-98ee-daea85133bc9\\_story.html](https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/national-security/us-discloses-intelligence-on-downing-of-malaysian-jet/2014/07/22/b178fe58-11e1-11e4-98ee-daea85133bc9_story.html) (accessed 23 October 2016).

<sup>12</sup>Marcin Andrzej Piotrowski, "The Swedish Counter-Intelligence Report on Hostile Russian Activities in the Region in a Comparative Context," *Polski Instytut Spraw Międzynarodowych* 25/875 (24 March 2016): [https://www.pism.pl/files/?id\\_plik=21575](https://www.pism.pl/files/?id_plik=21575) (accessed 14 November 2016).

<sup>13</sup>Jeffrey Lewis, "A Few Words on Ed Snowden," *Arms Control Wonk* (17 April 2014): <http://www.armscontrolwonk.com/archive/207258/a-few-words-on-ed-snowden/> (accessed 14 November 2014).

<sup>14</sup>James Shotter, "Angela Merkel's government embarrassed by German spying scandal," *Financial Times* (1 May 2015): <https://www.ft.com/content/27bd7eb8-efef-11e4-ab73-00144feab7de> (accessed 23 October 2016).

<sup>15</sup>Leif-Eric Easley, "Spying on Allies," *Survival* 56/4 (2014): 142-144.

<sup>16</sup>"Pentagon: WikiLeaks has damaged operations," *CNN* (8 December

2010): <http://edition.cnn.com/2010/US/12/07/wikileaks.damage/> (accessed 30 October 2016).

<sup>17</sup>The INF Treaty also limits Russian capabilities while China remains free to acquire such weapons.

<sup>18</sup>Paul N. Schwartz, "Russian INF Treaty Violations: Assessment and Response," *Center for Strategic and International Studies* (16 October 2014): <https://www.csis.org/analysis/russian-inf-treaty-violations-assessment-and-response> (accessed 30 October 2016).

<sup>19</sup>Daryl G. Kimball, Kingston A. Reif, and Alicia Sanders-Zakre, "Next Steps on U.S.-Russian INF Treaty Dispute," *Arms Control Association Issue Briefs* 8/6 (25 October 2016): <https://www.armscontrol.org/Issue-Briefs/2016-10-25/Next-Steps-on-US-Russian-INF-Treaty-Dispute> (accessed 25 October 2016).

<sup>20</sup>For another hypothesis, see Jeffrey Lewis, "An Intercontinental Ballistic Missile by any Other Name," *Foreign Policy* (25 April 2014): <http://foreignpolicy.com/2014/04/25/an-intercontinental-ballistic-missile-by-any-other-name/> (accessed 30 October 2016).

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