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Disinformation in a Time of War: A Critical Discourse Analysis of Russian Disinformation Strategies During the Russo-Ukrainian War of 2022

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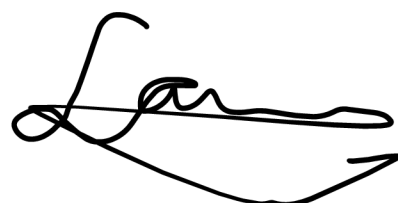
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Declaration

I, Laura de Boer hereby declare that this thesis, entitled “(Disinformation in a Time of War: A Critical Discourse Analysis of Russian Disinformation Strategies During the Russo-Ukrainian War of 2022)”, submitted as partial requirement for the MA Programme Euroculture, is my own original work and expressed in my own words. Any use made within this text of works of other authors in any form (e.g., ideas, figures, texts, tables, etc.) are properly acknowledged in the text as well as in the bibliography.

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Date 30 May 2023.....

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Abstract

This paper examines Russian broadcast media's disinformation strategies after the Ukraine invasion in 2022. In the past decade, Russian disinformation has been recognized by scholars and policymakers as a danger to European security and order. And it has made it harder for Europeans to access reliable and factual information. However, much research thus far has been conducted when the war in Ukraine was different in proportion, and where disinformation functioned as the foundation for small-scale military action. Now that the war has evolved, disinformation strategies have evolved with it.

In this paper, I applied Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) to twenty articles from three internationally oriented Russian broadcasters: RT, Sputnik, and TASS. This revealed two major themes in disinformation narratives: positive Self-representation and negative Other-representation. I demonstrate in this research that Russian disinformation is no longer used to hide Russia's direct involvement in Ukraine, but that it is used to present justifications for the invasion and further military actions.

Moreover, the research illustrates that the relationship between information warfare and conventional warfare is symbiotic and that contemporary disinformation strategies have been adjusted so that they can benefit from the current circumstances in Ukraine. Ultimately, in this research, I determine that Russian disinformation strategies have evolved since the annexation of Crimea in 2014 and are now altered to align with the Kremlin's aggressive military tactics.

Keywords: disinformation, Russo-Ukrainian war, information warfare, hybrid warfare, positive Self-representation, negative Other-representation

Word count: 21.228 words

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Chapter 1 – Introduction

It is March 17, 2022, almost a month since the Russian invasion of Eastern and Northern Ukraine. A video circulates online of Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy telling Ukrainian soldiers to stand down and surrender. He states that he “decided to return the Donbas” and that “it is not worth dying in this war.”¹ The President, however, has never said this. The video quickly turns out to be a deepfake, a clip in which the appearance of the President had been manipulated to say a fabricated message. The deepfake circulates online and even appeared to have been broadcasted by the Ukrainian TV channel TV24, which reportedly had been hacked.² Government officials and President Zelenskyy himself are quick to deny the claims made in the video, and no great harm seems to be done. According to experts, the deepfake itself is of poor quality. President Zelenskyy’s head appears too big and pixelated and the lighting is unusual. However, this does not mean that a deepfake such as this is harmless. The speed at which it is shared online makes it possible to reach thousands of Ukrainians before it is refuted. And if the video is not closely examined, it may appear very real.

Fabricated content such as this and other types of disinformation play a major role in the current Russo-Ukrainian War. This so-called ‘information war’ is an addition to what is known as conventional warfare, the type of war that is fought with guns, soldiers, and tanks.³ The concept of information war is not new at all. Wartime propaganda is almost as old as war itself and has been practised since ancient times.⁴ But the contemporary Russian approach is a little different. Developments in communication technology have allowed for the production of strategic disinformation campaigns that can reach large audiences in little time and allow for deepfakes such as Zelenskyy’s to exist.⁵ In addition, while wartime propaganda is often used domestically to gain support for the war effort, the Kremlin not only targets its own citizens but also uses disinformation as a tool of foreign policy. These attempts to influence people’s perception of Russia are long-term, systematic, and dangerous.

¹ Joshua Rhett Miller, ‘Deepfake Video Shows Volodymyr Zelensky Telling Ukrainians to Surrender’, 17 March 2022, <https://nypost.com/2022/03/17/deepfake-video-shows-volodymyr-zelensky-telling-ukrainians-to-surrender/>.

² Miller.

³ Borys Kormych and Tetyana Malyarenko, ‘From Gray Zone to Conventional Warfare: The Russia-Ukraine Conflict in the Black Sea’, *Small Wars & Insurgencies*, 9 September 2022, 1–36, <https://doi.org/10.1080/09592318.2022.2122278>.

⁴ Philip M. Taylor, ‘Introduction’, in *Munitions of the Mind, A History of Propaganda* (Manchester University Press, 2003), 1–16, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/j.ctt155jd69.5>.

⁵ Spencer McKay and Chris Tenove, ‘Disinformation as a Threat to Deliberative Democracy’, *Political Research Quarterly* 74, no. 3 (2021): 703–17, <https://doi.org/10.1177/1065912920938143>.

Problem Statement and Research Question

Russian disinformation has only recently become a major topic of interest.⁶ Early examples of research on Russian disinformation were mostly concerned with the role it played during the Cold War and the strategies the KGB used to sway public opinion to their side.⁷ It was not before the annexation of Crimea in 2014 and the influx of Russian disinformation into Western media channels that the topic gained major traction among scholars and government officials.⁸ The annexation demonstrated the Kremlin's willingness to promote false narratives to assist its military strategies. A narrative in which Russia is the victim of Western aggression and where pro-Western organisations (NATO, the EU) expand eastward to spread Russophobia among Central and Eastern European nations.⁹ This narrative existed long before 2014, but it was not until the information war was combined with conventional warfare that Western authorities were fully aware of the dangers that Russia's disinformation brings.¹⁰ The evolution of studies on Russian disinformation will be described more in-depth in the literature review in the next chapter.

Now, we are several years later and Russia has once again crossed the Ukrainian border. However, there is a major difference between the current conflict and that of Crimea in 2014. Back then, non-military actions – such as information warfare - played a major role in achieving strategic and political goals. The Kremlin used its disinformation machine to sow doubt about the annexation and portrayed it as a civil conflict between Ukrainian pro-Russian separatists and the Ukrainian army, a narrative that Western media embraced.¹¹ However, the Russian military played a defining role during this conflict by sending soldiers without insignias (the so-called 'little green men') and subsequently denying any involvement, further

⁶ Deen Freelon and Chris Wells, 'Disinformation as Political Communication', *Political Communication* 37, no. 2 (3 March 2020): 145–56, <https://doi.org/10.1080/10584609.2020.1723755>.

⁷ L. John Martin, 'Disinformation: An Instrumentality in the Propaganda Arsenal', *Political Communication*, 1982, <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1080/10584609.1982.9962747>; Herbert Romerstein, 'Disinformation as a KGB Weapon in the Cold War', *Journal of Intelligence History* 1, no. 1 (1 June 2001): 54–67, <https://doi.org/10.1080/16161262.2001.10555046>; Thomas Boghardt, 'Soviet Bloc Intelligence and Its AIDS Disinformation Campaign', *Studies in Intelligence* 53, no. 4 (2009): 1–24.

⁸ Keir Giles, 'Russia's "New" Tools for Confronting the West: Continuity and Innovation in Moscow's Exercise of Power', 21 March 2016.

⁹ Vladimir Putin, 'Address by President of the Russian Federation', President of Russia, 24 March 2014, <http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/20603>; Robert Kupiecki, 'Western Betrayal: The Founding Myth of Russian Foreign Policy', in *Disinformation, Narratives and Memory Politics in Russia and Belarus* (Routledge, 2022).

¹⁰ Giles, 'Russia's "New" Tools for Confronting the West'.

¹¹ John Besemer, 'Russian Disinformation and Western Misconceptions', in *A Difficult Neighbourhood, Essays on Russia and East-Central Europe since World War II* (ANU Press, 2016), 355–80, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/j.ctt1rqc96p.33>.

sowing confusion.¹² The warfare strategies of Crimea can therefore be considered to be a combination of small-scale military operations and disinformation campaigns focused on deniability and confusion. The current invasion is different in scale, and the Russian armed forces play a much larger role than they did before. As a result, the disinformation campaigns have shifted as well, as deniability of Russia's involvement is no longer needed, or possible. Because of its novelty, this change in disinformation strategies during the latest period of Russian aggression has not yet been researched in depth. To address this gap, I have analysed key disinformation narratives from Russian-controlled broadcasters: RT, Sputnik, and TASS. I then applied Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) to identify recurring themes within these sources. This is to answer the following question:

- What are the current disinformation strategies deployed by international Russian broadcasters in the Russo-Ukrainian war of 2022?
- How have these strategies changed since the Russian invasion of Crimea in 2014?

The European Dimension of this Thesis

Many European nations are faced with disinformation. This can undermine democratic processes and trust in government institutions and traditional media.¹³ The European Union has already done much to limit the influence of disinformation, for instance through the Action Plan Against Disinformation.¹⁴ However, it is important to first understand the underlying strategies of disinformation to be able to defend against them. Since English articles from Russian broadcasters are often aimed at Europeans, this research offers a better understanding of what types of disinformation citizens face and how disinformation strategies could affect Europe's perception of the war in Ukraine.

Key Definitions

Before going into the historical context of Russia's disinformation strategies and linking this to the current information war, it is necessary to define key terms that will be used in this research to avoid possible confusion.

¹² *The Changing Story Of Russia's 'Little Green Men' Invasion*, 2019, <https://www.rferl.org/a/russia-ukraine-crimea/29790037.html>.

¹³ McKay and Tenove, 'Disinformation as a Threat to Deliberative Democracy'.

¹⁴ European Commission, 'Action Plan against Disinformation', in *Oxford Encyclopedia of EU Law*, by Wessel Ramses A (Oxford University Press, 2022), <https://doi.org/10.1093/law-oeuul/e66.013.66>.

Disinformation

The term ‘disinformation’ is derived from the Russian term *dezinformatsiya*. This was the title of a KGB department responsible for disseminating false information among the population in the Soviet Union.¹⁵ Disinformation is commonly understood as false information that is knowingly created and spread with the intention to mislead and cause harm.¹⁶ It can also be considered a technique or strategy in larger public persuasion campaigns.¹⁷ According to Deen Freelon and Chris Wells, this gives us three important criteria to distinguish disinformation: 1) Deception. The information is fake and is known to be fake by the disseminator. 2) Potential for harm. The false information may be harmful to society in some way. It may, for instance, diminish trust in democratic institutions or increase societal polarisation. 3) There is an intent to harm. The disseminator of disinformation is aware of these harmful consequences and desires this outcome.¹⁸

This final point is important as the intention behind the spread of false information differentiates disinformation from misinformation. Misinformation is created or shared by those who are unaware that the information is false. This means that disinformation may turn into misinformation when it is shared by those who have fallen victim to false information. Disinformation is also distinguishable from malinformation, which is factually true information twisted or framed to cause harm. In this research, disinformation will be the primary subject of investigation, as the intention behind the spread of Russian disinformation is a key component of the information war.

Disinformation and Propaganda

Disinformation as described above can be considered an element of propaganda, and the two terms have often been used interchangeably concerning Russian disinformation campaigns.¹⁹

¹⁵ Aristedes Mahairas and Mikhail Dvilyanski, ‘Disinformation – Дезинформация (Dezinformatsiya)’, *The Cyber Defense Review* 3, no. 3 (2018): 21–28.

¹⁶ Serena Giusti and Elisa Piras, ‘Introduction: In Search of Paradigms: Disinformation, Fake News, and Post-Truth Politics’, in *Democracy and Fake News* (Routledge, 2020); Howard Tumber and Silvio Waisbord, ‘Introduction’, in *The Routledge Companion to Media Disinformation and Populism* (Routledge, 2021); European Commission, ‘Tackling Online Disinformation | Shaping Europe’s Digital Future’, accessed 18 November 2022, <https://digital-strategy.ec.europa.eu/en/policies/online-disinformation>.

¹⁷ Martin, ‘Disinformation’.

¹⁸ Freelon and Wells, ‘Disinformation as Political Communication’.

¹⁹ See for instance: Dominique Geissler et al., ‘Russian Propaganda on Social Media during the 2022 Invasion of Ukraine’ (arXiv, 10 February 2023), <https://doi.org/10.48550/arXiv.2211.04154>; Francesco Pierri et al., ‘Propaganda and Misinformation on Facebook and Twitter during the Russian Invasion of Ukraine’ (arXiv, 20 February 2023), <https://doi.org/10.48550/arXiv.2212.00419>; Egbert Fortuin, ‘“Ukraine Commits Genocide on Russians”: The Term “Genocide” in Russian Propaganda’, *Russian Linguistics* 46, no. 3 (1 November 2022): 313–47, <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11185-022-09258-5>; Yevgeniy Golovchenko et al., ‘Cross-Platform State Propaganda: Russian Trolls on Twitter and YouTube during the 2016 U.S. Presidential Election’, *The*

While this is not necessarily wrong, since both disinformation and propaganda have elements of manipulation and falsified information, it does lack some nuance. For this research – which will focus on the more specific element of disinformation – it is important to outline the distinction. Edward Lucas and Peter Pomeranzev give such a distinction in their report “*Winning the Information War*”. Here, they argue that the aim of “disinformation is not to convince or persuade, but rather to undermine. Instead of agitating audiences into action, it seeks to keep them hooked and distracted, passive and paranoid.”²⁰ In other words, whereas propaganda is commonly directed inwards to the own population, and to persuade them of the state’s truth, disinformation is directed outward and is aimed to create confusion and paranoia.²¹ Propaganda campaigns may use disinformation tactics to reach their goal to persuade, but this is not necessary. By itself, disinformation creates doubt among foreign populations by providing many contradictory alternatives to the truth, undermining the trust in regular reporting.²² Because of this, disinformation does not have to be believable, it merely has to present the possibility of alternate truths.

Disinformation and Fake News

Disinformation is closely related to the widely used term ‘fake news’ as both describe verifiably false information with the intent to manipulate readers. However, as stated by Freelon and Wells, the usage of the term ‘fake news’ is heavily used by politicians and media outlets to characterize information sources they may disagree with (regardless of factuality).²³ This has shrouded the term with ambiguity and made it lose any analytical value it once may have had. Therefore, I will avoid using the term ‘fake news’ and primarily focus on disinformation.

Disinformation strategies

In this paper, I analyse the Russian disinformation strategies that are used during the Russo-Ukrainian war. I use the term ‘disinformation strategies’ because it captures the relationship between information and conventional warfare. ‘Strategy’ is defined by Merriam Webster as

International Journal of Press/Politics 25, no. 3 (1 July 2020): 357–89,
<https://doi.org/10.1177/1940161220912682>.

²⁰ Edward Lucas and Peter Pomeranzev, ‘Winning the Information War’ (Center for European Policy Analysis, 2 August 2016), <https://cepa.org/article/winning-the-information-war/>. 10

²¹ Agnieszka Legucka, ‘Russian Disinformation: Old Tactics – New Narratives’, in *Disinformation, Narratives and Memory Politics in Russia and Belarus* (Routledge, 2022); Peter Pomerantsev and Michael Weiss, ‘The Menace of Unreality: How the Kremlin Weaponizes Information, Culture and Money’, 2014, <https://dataspace.princeton.edu/handle/88435/dsp014m90dx90f>.

²² Giles, ‘Russia’s “New” Tools for Confronting the West’.

²³ Freelon and Wells, ‘Disinformation as Political Communication’.

“a careful plan or method: a clever stratagem” or “the art of devising or employing plans or stratagems toward a goal”.²⁴ In this context, ‘stratagem’ means “an artifice or trick in war for deceiving and outwitting the enemy”.²⁵ Thus, disinformation strategies could be defined as clearly calculated plans and methods that make use of disinformation to outwit or deceive the enemy and reach a certain (military) objective. Admittedly, this definition is quite broad and many different information tactics could be identified as ‘disinformation strategies’. Nevertheless, this definition is still functional in the current research. It emphasises disinformation strategies as something premeditated, calculated, and coordinated. And it allows for some manoeuvrability around the ‘objective’ of the current conflict as the goal of these strategies is not necessarily to convince the audience of the Kremlin’s disinformation. Instead, it can be used to increase its influence over Ukrainian territory by presenting alternative views that confuse and sow doubt about the events of the War and hamper the enemies’ ability to access accurate information.

The Russo-Ukrainian War

When I refer to the ‘Russo-Ukrainian War’ in this paper, my frame of reference is the period after Russian forces’ full-scale invasion of Ukraine on February 24, 2022. However, I acknowledge that the war has been going on for much longer. For many, the Russo-Ukrainian war started in 2014 with the Russian annexation of Crimea and the following conflict in the Donbas in 2014 and 2015.²⁶ Some may argue that the signing of the Minsk Agreements in February 2015 could be considered the end of the conflict since both parties agreed on a ceasefire. However, the violence in the Donbas never fully ended, resulting in a complicated stalemate between the two nations that was only broken when Russia invaded its neighbour. And since the conflict never officially ended, many consider the Russo-Ukrainian war to be almost a decade old.

Nevertheless, the events of 2022 are still large enough developments to warrant a distinct categorization. The current invasion is of a different calibre than the one in Crimea, and the sovereignty of the Ukrainian nation is at stake. As described in the conclusion of this

²⁴ Merriam-Webster, ‘Definition of STRATEGY’, Online dictionary, accessed 10 May 2023, <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/strategy>.

²⁵ Merriam-Webster, ‘Definition of STRATAGEM’, Online dictionary, accessed 10 May 2023, <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/stratagem>.

²⁶ Elizabeth A. Wood et al., *Roots of Russia’s War in Ukraine* (Columbia University Press, 2016), <https://doi.org/10.7312/wood70453>; Mychailo Wynnycyk, Andreas Umland, and Serhii Plokyh, *Ukraine’s Maidan, Russia’s War: A Chronicle and Analysis of the Revolution of Dignity* (Berlin, GERMANY: Ibidem Verlag, 2019), <http://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/uu/detail.action?docID=5782890>.

paper, the shift in military action also warranted a shift in disinformation strategies. A shift that is not yet explored in academic papers. Therefore, in this paper, I focus only on instances of disinformation after the full-scale invasion.

Overview of the Thesis

In Chapter 2, I review the existing literature on Russian disinformation. The focus of this chapter is to establish how Russian disinformation has influenced its foreign policy in the years before the invasion of Ukraine. It also demonstrates what previous research on this topic has concluded. It lays the groundwork for the analysis of Russian disinformation in the Russo-Ukrainian war and makes it possible to determine how disinformation strategies have developed.

In Chapter 3, I outline the concepts of hybrid warfare and new-generation warfare. This is the theoretical framework on which my research is based and further explains what previous researchers have analysed when it comes to information warfare and how it relates to Russian disinformation. Here, I will also give my own insight into defining Russia's modern warfare strategies.

Chapter 4 presents how the data is gathered for this thesis and the qualitative methodology that is used. I explain the different Russian broadcasters I use for this research and how I selected my data. Here, I also describe the ethical concerns of this paper.

In Chapter 5, I describe how I analysed the data and the points I have focused on the most. I will provide contextualisation to give a better understanding of how the research is conducted. This improves the reliability of my research as it will become easier to recreate my work.

Chapter 6 is where I present the results, which I divided into two major and several smaller themes. These results demonstrate that, although disinformation strategies are closely linked to other forms of discursive manipulation, disinformation is unique compared to these other strategies as its main objective is not necessarily to persuade the audience.

In Chapter 7 I discuss the implications of my results and describe how my research contributes to the field of disinformation studies. Here, I will also go over the limitations of my research and suggest ideas for further research.

Lastly, in Chapter 8 I summarize my research and conclude the thesis.

Note on Spelling

Lastly, I would like to clarify some of the spelling decisions in this research. Many Ukrainian names and places have both a Russian and a Ukrainian spelling in the Latin alphabet, both of which are accepted in the English language. An example of this would be the name of the Ukrainian capital which can be written as Kiev (Russian) or Kyiv (Ukrainian). The Russian spelling of Ukrainian names is commonly associated with the Russification of the country and carries historical connotations of Russian dominion and oppression over Ukraine.²⁷ Therefore, to recognise and respect Ukraine's independence and national identity, I will be using the Ukrainian spelling in this paper. Conversely, the data in this research originates from Russian broadcasters that continue to use the Russian spelling. By keeping the Russian spelling in the titles of these articles and any direct quotations, I hope to illustrate that the Russian broadcasters are far from subjective in their reporting of the war.

²⁷ Melinda Haring, 'Kyiv Not Kiev: Why Spelling Matters in Ukraine's Quest for an Independent Identity', *Atlantic Council* (blog), 21 October 2019, <https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/blogs/ukrainealert/kyiv-not-kiev-why-spelling-matters-in-ukraines-quest-for-an-independent-identity/>.

Chapter 2 – Literature Review

As I stated in the introduction, Russian disinformation has only recently become a popular topic for research. As such, there is yet to be a common consensus on the key concepts, arguments and theories that could be used to perform a study on Russian disinformation. Nevertheless, several scholars have already outlined the Russians' (or in many cases the Soviets') historical use of disinformation. In this section, I outline early research on Russian disinformation and present the changes that have happened in the Western academic perception of this topic in recent times.

Early Research on Russian Disinformation

One early example of disinformation research is from John L. Martin, from the College of Journalism at the University of Maryland. In 1982, he described how the Soviet Union used propaganda and disinformation as a weapon during the Cold War.²⁸ While Martin categorises disinformation as an element of the Soviet Union's larger propaganda strategy, he does not outline a clear distinction between the two. He considers disinformation as an extension of Soviet propaganda and how it is used to persuade the citizens of other nations. However, Martin's use of the term 'disinformation' is closely related to how it is defined today. He employs the term to refer to Soviet forgeries that are used to disrupt relations among nations and undermine the confidence of people in their leaders and institutions. Where Martin differs from contemporary scholars is through his statement that "informational propaganda [including disinformation] is most effective when it is based on truth."²⁹ The current understanding is that modern-day Russia is less concerned with presenting its fabrications as truths. With the rise of internet use, spreading as much disinformation as possible to muddle the public debate, regardless of whether these falsehoods are 'proven' with fake evidence has become more effective.³⁰

After the fall of the Soviet Union, scholars continued to investigate the role disinformation played during the Cold War. So described Herbert Romerstein, historian and former Director of the US Information Agency's Office, how the Soviet Union used disinformation to spread its influence in other nations and to damage the reputation of the United States.³¹ The outset of this article is that disinformation is something of the past, a

²⁸ Martin, 'Disinformation'.

²⁹ Martin, 'Disinformation', 61.

³⁰ Pomerantsev and Weiss, 'The Menace of Unreality'.

³¹ Romerstein, 'Disinformation as a KGB Weapon in the Cold War'.

weapon only used to fight the Cold War. Romerstein states for instance that, “[a]s the Soviet Union moved closer to its final collapse, disinformation decreased.”³² He also describes how former KGB officials admitted that they spread disinformation and provided details on their strategies. Romerstein’s conclusion heavily suggests that because the Soviet Union had fallen and had its strategies laid bare, the threat of disinformation diminished. In 2001 this was possibly true, but times have changed since Romerstein’s publication. Contemporary scholars point to the fact that the dangers of disinformation have become much more prevalent in recent times, as is visible in Russia’s use of disinformation during the annexation of Crimea and the current invasion of Ukraine.

Similar to Romerstein, military historian Thomas Boghardt described in 2009 the KGB’s past strategies of spreading disinformation.³³ Specifically, he looks at the AIDS disinformation campaign, which was launched by Soviet intelligence agencies in the 1980s to accuse the CIA of creating the AIDS virus. Boghardt identifies several important tactics used by the Soviets in the AIDS disinformation campaign. First, they made use of the uncertainty of the virus, giving the first explanation of its origins before the scientific community could do so. This gave them a large advantage over those who needed to deny it later as the lies were already cemented in people’s minds. Then, the intelligence agencies used scapegoating, repetition and the mixing of lies, half-truths, and facts to stimulate the growth and spread of the rumour.³⁴ Contemporary disinformation strategies are less concerned with appearing true, thus they generally do not use this tactic. This will be outlined in the next section of the literature review. However, during the Cold War era, a combination of truths and half lies was still necessary for a story’s credibility. Lastly, Boghardt identifies the fact that these campaigns have a much greater effect if they adapt to pre-existing threats and concerns. A strategy that is still used today.

The early research on disinformation does contribute to contemporary approaches, but this contribution is fairly limited. These works give us a good insight into former perceptions of disinformation. They describe the Soviet Union’s strategies in controlling the information space during the Cold War, and it is possible to draw a line between these strategies of the past, and the actions of Russia today. However, early research on disinformation falls short in its insufficient creation of a consensus. The studies are isolated from one another, they do not

³² Romerstein, 67.

³³ Boghardt, ‘Soviet Bloc Intelligence and Its AIDS Disinformation Campaign’.

³⁴ Boghardt.

reference each other and do not build an empirical approach to disinformation research. Therefore, they are also hardly referenced in more contemporary disinformation studies, which are now more focused on the role of the internet and social media in the dissemination of disinformation. Nevertheless, these ‘old’ studies still provide us with the ability to draw a line between Russia’s actions today and those of the past. It shows that although disinformation has increased significantly during the past decades, it is not a new phenomenon by itself. In other words, there may be new tools, but they are still put in the same old toolbox.

Disinformation Studies Since 2014

A major change in research on Russian disinformation happened in 2014, after the invasion and annexation of Crimea by Russia. The invasion was paired with a large influx of disinformation that left many Western news outlets stunned and unable to properly respond. In fact, they repeated Russia’s false claims and became propagators of misinformation themselves.³⁵ It has since become clear that the dissolution of the Soviet Union did not mean that the Kremlin had forgotten about the power of false narratives. The invasion caused a renewed interest in disinformation studies, something that could be considered a disinformation research boom. It is important to note that 2014 was *not* the first reoccurrence of Russian disinformation since the Cold War. Moscow had already rearmed itself with information weaponry during previous conflicts, such as during the Russian invasion of Georgia in 2008.³⁶ But the Crimea annexation marks the point when Western academics became aware of the danger of Russian disinformation. Especially because Western news outlets became victims of the disinformation campaigns. In the following section, I will outline some of the most influential research on Russian disinformation during this period.

In “*The Menace of Unreality*”, Peter Pomerantsev and Michael Weiss explore the development of information warfare in the 21st century.³⁷ In this essay, published in 2014, they combine a variety of online available data (videos, articles, reports and research) to analyse the content of Russian disinformation. This qualitative method provides them with a variety of ideas on how information has become weaponised during the invasion of Crimea. In addition, they also describe the theory of hybrid warfare, which combines the

³⁵ Giles, ‘Russia’s “New” Tools for Confronting the West’.

³⁶ Emilio J. Iasiello, ‘Russia’s Improved Information Operations: From Georgia to Crimea’, *Parameters* 47, no. 2 (Summer 2017): 51–63.

³⁷ Pomerantsev and Weiss, ‘The Menace of Unreality’.

weaponisation of information, culture, and money with small-scale military operations. Chapter 3 of this paper describes the in-depth meaning and relevance of hybrid warfare. For now, it is important to note that even though ‘hybrid warfare’ is a recent term, the concept itself is not new. The combination of information warfare with more conventional methods of conflict, visible in Crimea in 2014, has clear roots in the Soviet strategies of the past. In other words, this combination is one of the older tools that Russia’s disinformation toolbox is equipped with. The main difference is that “in Soviet times, the concept of truth was important,” as stated by Kremlin insider Gleb Pavlovsky, quoted by Pomerantsev and Weiss.³⁸ Pavlovsky states that in the past the Kremlin would always attempt to prove that they were telling ‘the truth’ even if their story was a fabrication. This is for instance visible in the AIDS disinformation campaign described in the work of Boghardt in the previous section. The AIDS disinformation campaign was substantiated by fake – but also enough real – witnesses and data to appear persuasive. However, contemporary Russia has shifted towards a total disregard for truth and has caused a complete blurring between fact and fiction during the Ukraine crisis in 2014. Pomerantsev and Weiss describe how the Kremlin uses “brazenly fake” and unbelievable conspiracy theories that paint the Ukrainians in a bad light, such as the claim that Ukrainians attempt genocide in the Donbas.³⁹ The aim is not to convince the public of these theories, but to make them engaging enough for the viewer to become distracted and disinterested in the truth. This in turn makes the public passive, and unlikely to support any actions taken against Russia by their governments.

Pomerantsev and Weiss also outline the growing role of Russian international broadcasters, namely RT, formerly Russia Today. They argue that the main aim of RT has shifted in recent years. Rather than promoting the Russian perspective, it now primarily focuses on defaming the West. It uses the Western ‘weakness’ of freedom of the press and the desire to highlight every side of a conflict to its advantage to get its disinformation picked up by more mainstream news sources.⁴⁰ In addition, the channel uses conspiracy theories and interviews with Western dissidents or fake experts to make critical and reality-based discourse much harder. These strategies have played a central role during the Ukraine crisis of 2014 and other notable events such as the investigation surrounding the downing of Malaysia Airlines flight MH17.

³⁸ Pomerantsev and Weiss, ‘The Menace of Unreality’ 9.

³⁹ Pomerantsev and Weiss, 10–11; Fortuin, “Ukraine Commits Genocide on Russians”.

⁴⁰ Pomerantsev and Weiss, ‘The Menace of Unreality’, 15.

Apart from Pomerantsev and Weiss, other experts on Russian disinformation during the Crimean invasion include former Russia correspondent and Director of the Conflict Studies Research Centre Keir Giles. In 2016, Giles published the research paper: “*Russia’s ‘New’ Tools for Confronting the West: Continuity and Innovation in Moscow’s Exercise of Power.*”⁴¹ Similar to Pomerantsev and Weiss, Giles argues that the information manipulation strategies used during and after the Crimean Invasion are nothing new, but simply evolved through previously existing Soviet campaigns. However, Giles also states that the Kremlin learned to adapt to the modern age through trial and error after it failed to take control of the narrative in conflicts with Chechnya in 1999, Georgia in 2008 and during the protest movements in Moscow in 2011. In these last decades, the Kremlin has managed to turn its biggest threat, mobilization through the internet, into its greatest ally.⁴² Giles argues that this has taken considerable investment in 3 areas: 1) Internally and externally focused media with a strong online presence (RT, Sputnik, TASS) 2) Use of social media as a force multiplier, either through ‘trolls’ or ‘bots’ 3) Development of language skills to engage with audiences in their own language. The first two of these investments are important progressions from the Soviet era. Russian news broadcasters have a strong online presence and many international branches. This means that the Kremlin’s disinformation stories can reach a large international audience. This reach is only further extended through social media, where pro-Russian sentiments can appear personal, widely accepted, and logical.

In addition, what makes Giles an essential source in the context of Russian disinformation is how he connects the concept of the new Russian army to that of the old information war. Although he does not use a clearly defined method to make these connections, he still provides a thorough explanation of how disinformation and military campaigns go hand in hand. He states that disinformation prepares the ground for future Russian action in two ways: by undermining the will or support for deterrent measures and by sowing the false impression that it is justified in its actions.⁴³ Thereby, disinformation can eliminate the threat of NATO not through military force, but by undermining the unity of the West. This also touches on the theory of hybrid warfare, which is explained further in the next chapter. The deadly combination of disinformation and military is incredibly effective and is visible in the distinct inaction of the West to the annexation of Crimea. Giles: “The fact

⁴¹ Giles, ‘Russia’s “New” Tools for Confronting the West’.

⁴² Giles, 29.

⁴³ Giles, 43.

that the EU continued to find itself unable to refer publicly to the presence of Russian troops in Ukraine for almost a year denoted a broader inability to challenge the Russian version of events – without which a meaningful response was impossible.”⁴⁴

To conclude, the works of these scholars give a good indication of how disinformation strategies have evolved since the Cold War and how contemporary Russia has been using information warfare to enhance its military capabilities. Both Pomerantsev and Weiss and Giles describe how disinformation is used hand-in-hand with small-scale military operations. It is there to sow doubt in the minds of the people, and to build distrust in democratic institutions and traditional media. Confusion through the spread of false information has therefore become an important ally to the Russian military, as it limits the need for violent actions. In this research, I will refer to this as the ‘pollution of the infosphere’ as it indicates the muddling of the available information, either online or in real life.

The reports from Weiss and Pomerantsev and Giles were published when Russia’s military operations in Ukraine were of a different calibre than they are right now. The annexation of Crimea was staged as a separatist action, led by unmarked militia (the ‘little green men’) that denied having any connection with Moscow.⁴⁵ Now, it is Russia’s national army that has crossed the border, something that is even acknowledged by the Kremlin itself.⁴⁶ Since denial of its involvement is no longer an objective of the Kremlin, the role that disinformation played during the Russo-Ukrainian War has changed. I describe this change in depth in Chapter 7. But first, it is necessary to establish the theoretical framework of the paper in order to describe the theory of hybrid warfare and how this impacts the debate on Russia’s military actions in Ukraine.

⁴⁴ Giles, 31.

⁴⁵ Besemeres, ‘Russian Disinformation and Western Misconceptions’.

⁴⁶ The Spectator, ‘Full Text: Putin’s Declaration of War on Ukraine’, The Spectator, 24 February 2022, <https://www.spectator.co.uk/article/full-text-putin-s-declaration-of-war-on-ukraine/>.

Chapter 3 – Theoretical Framework

There is no major theory when it comes to studies of disinformation. The field is simply still too new for such a theory to have been developed and widely accepted. Nevertheless, some concepts play an important role in how academics understand the way modern Russia practices warfare and the growing role of disinformation therein. For instance, the term ‘hybrid warfare’ is a common occurrence in studies on Russian disinformation. While it is not a theory that applies directly to disinformation studies, it does offer an important perspective on the Western scholarly perception of Russian warfare strategies.

Hybrid Warfare

The term ‘hybrid warfare’ was first popularised in the early 2000s by Frank Hoffman. Since then, the frequent use of the term in discussions on modern-day conflicts led it to become a buzzword that caused large scholarly debate. Hybrid warfare has been described as “an elusive and catch-all term,”⁴⁷ and it is perceived as “almost grown to be an element of political pop culture.”⁴⁸ Even Hoffman himself has argued that the term is problematic when used to describe Russia’s actions in Ukraine, as it fails to encompass non-violent actions like information operations.⁴⁹ Nevertheless, hybrid warfare remains to be a key term in many papers on Russian disinformation.⁵⁰ It is central to gaining an understanding of how the West and Western scholars perceive the relation between Russia’s military and information strategies. Therefore, it is necessary to discuss the theory of hybrid warfare, why there was a need for this term, and why it is problematic.

In “*Conflict in the 21st Century: The Rise of Hybrid Wars*”, Frank Hoffman defined hybrid wars as “incorporat[ing] a range of different modes of warfare, including conventional capabilities, irregular tactics and formations, terrorist acts including indiscriminate violence

⁴⁷ Damien Van Puyvelde, ‘NATO Review - Hybrid War – Does It Even Exist?’, NATO Review, 7 May 2015, <https://www.nato.int/docu/review/articles/2015/05/07/hybrid-war-does-it-even-exist/index.html>.

⁴⁸ Maxim A. Suchkov, ‘Whose Hybrid Warfare? How “the Hybrid Warfare” Concept Shapes Russian Discourse, Military, and Political Practice’, *Small Wars & Insurgencies* 32, no. 3 (3 April 2021): 415–40, <https://doi.org/10.1080/09592318.2021.1887434>.

⁴⁹ Frank Hoffman, ‘On Not-So-New Warfare: Political Warfare vs Hybrid Threats’, War on the Rocks, 28 July 2014, <https://warontherocks.com/2014/07/on-not-so-new-warfare-political-warfare-vs-hybrid-threats/>.

⁵⁰ See for instance: Lucas and Pomeranzev, ‘Winning the Information War’; Besemer, ‘Russian Disinformation and Western Misconceptions’; Mark Galeotti, ‘The Mythical “Gerasimov Doctrine” and the Language of Threat’, *Critical Studies on Security* 7, no. 2 (4 May 2019): 157–61, <https://doi.org/10.1080/21624887.2018.1441623>; Francesco Bechis, ‘Playing the Russian Disinformation Game: Information Operations from Soviet Tactics to Putin’s Sharp Power’, in *Democracy and Fake News* (Routledge, 2020); Jakub Olchowski, ‘How to Weaponise Information: Russian Patterns’, in *Disinformation, Narratives and Memory Politics in Russia and Belarus* (Routledge, 2022); Mason Richey, ‘Contemporary Russian Revisionism: Understanding the Kremlin’s Hybrid Warfare and the Strategic and Tactical Deployment of Disinformation’, *Asia Europe Journal* 16, no. 1 (2018): 101–13, <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10308-017-0482-5>.

and coercion, and criminal disorder.”⁵¹ In other words, this type of war is not only fought between traditional armies that meet at the battlefield but also by eroding the opponent’s influence and willpower through other violent tactics. Hoffman states that many, if not all, wars have irregular components. However, hybrid wars are distinct as the different forces (both conventional and unconventional) blur together rather than taking place in different locations. Although it is not directly mentioned by Hoffman, it is clear that his definition of hybrid warfare is shaped to fit one war in particular: the United States War on Terror. Hoffman states that the events of September 11, 2001, signalled the start of a new era of warfare. Moreover, he uses Hezbollah’s actions in Israel as an example of hybrid warfare. The definition of hybrid warfare also includes terrorist acts as irregular tactics used in war. Ultimately, ‘hybrid warfare’ is used to make sense of modern-day violent conflicts that are unfamiliar to researchers and policymakers alike.

It is important to note that Hoffman’s definition of hybrid warfare is used exclusively for violent tactics. But over time, the term has also been used to describe an increasingly broad set of unconventional wartime tactics like cyber or information warfare. After 2014, NATO used the term hybrid warfare to characterise Russia’s actions in Ukraine, and the term was adopted in the terminology of many NATO countries as a result.⁵² The rise in popularity of the term also appears to go hand in hand with an increase in war strategies that Western scholars perceive as new and unfamiliar. Keir Giles states that phrases such as ‘hybrid warfare’ reinforce the perception of novelty in Russia’s armed conflict with Ukraine.⁵³ However, as established in the previous chapter, Russia’s disinformation tactics in Ukraine have their origin in Cold War Soviet strategies. The perception of novelty the term brings is therefore largely unfounded. Thus, the concept of hybrid warfare undermines the continuity between Russia’s past war efforts and the current war in Ukraine by presenting the current events as something brand new. Nevertheless, it continues to be widely used by scholars in the context of Russian disinformation. Often accompanied by another contested term: the ‘Gerasimov Doctrine’.

⁵¹ Frank G. Hoffman, *Conflict in the 21st Century: The Rise of Hybrid Wars* (Potomac Institute for Policy Studies, 2007), 14.

⁵² NATO, ‘NATO’s Response to Hybrid Threats’, NATO, 10 February 2023, https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/topics_156338.htm.

⁵³ Giles, ‘Russia’s “New” Tools for Confronting the West’, 2.

Gerasimov Doctrine

When the concept of hybrid warfare is applied to Russia, it often goes hand in hand with the concept of the ‘Gerasimov doctrine’. This term was first introduced in Mark Galeotti’s blog “In Moscow’s Shadows.”⁵⁴ He named it after Russian general Valery Gerasimov, who in 2013 used the terms ‘non-military’ and ‘non-linear’ to describe variations of warfare used by the Americans during the Arab Spring.⁵⁵ Similar to ‘hybrid warfare’, ‘Gerasimov doctrine’ is a contested term. It is considered broad and vague, it has various interpretations, and it gives the false impression of novelty. Galeotti himself regrets having introduced it and has since asked others to stop using it because 1) the way of war it describes was not invented by Gerasimov and 2) it is not a doctrine.⁵⁶ ‘Gerasimov doctrine’ was only a placeholder to refer to the evolution of modern Russian warfare. Nevertheless, it has gained a life of its own and remains connected to Russia’s war efforts in Ukraine. Scholars generally use the ‘Gerasimov doctrine’ to refer to the blurred lines between war and peace and the growing emphasis on non-military means to achieve political and strategic goals. In addition, a specific element of this ‘new’ non-military approach is the use of social media and the internet to fuel public unrest and uprisings. Overall, Gerasimov’s doctrine is similar to hybrid warfare in that both terms are used to distinguish a new mode of warfare that moves away from the traditional battlefield and into the information and digital space. But if neither term can be used to address this new mode of warfare, what other term can we use to make sense of the current situation?

Defining Modern Russia’s Military Actions

Scholars seem to have a distinct urge to define Russia’s actions in Ukraine with an all-encompassing term. However, it appears hard to find the correct one. Whether it is hybrid

⁵⁴ Mark Galeotti, ‘The “Gerasimov Doctrine” and Russian Non-Linear War’, *In Moscow’s Shadows* (blog), 6 July 2014, <https://inmoscowsshadows.wordpress.com/2014/07/06/the-gerasimov-doctrine-and-russian-non-linear-war/>.

⁵⁵ Suchkov, ‘Whose Hybrid Warfare?’; Jānis Bērziņš, ‘The Theory and Practice of New Generation Warfare: The Case of Ukraine and Syria’, *The Journal of Slavic Military Studies* 33, no. 3 (2 July 2020): 355–80, <https://doi.org/10.1080/13518046.2020.1824109>.

⁵⁶ Galeotti, ‘The “Gerasimov Doctrine” and Russian Non-Linear War’; Galeotti, ‘The Mythical “Gerasimov Doctrine” and the Language of Threat’.

warfare,⁵⁷ unrestricted warfare,⁵⁸ fourth-generation warfare,⁵⁹ or a Gerasimov Doctrine,⁶⁰ the ways of war have changed enough for academics to search for a fitting description.

Undoubtedly, with the arrival of the internet, the information element (and therefore also disinformation) has taken a larger role than ever before. So, as a result, there has been a shift in how wars are being fought. However, how Russia has waged its wars in the past two decades can sooner be considered a warfare *evolution* rather than a *revolution*. In other words, the strategies are not new, but their application is.

Take, for example, the event of the ‘little green men’ (or ‘polite people’ as they were referred to in Russian media). These men were Russian soldiers in unmarked uniforms and without insignias. For a while, the Kremlin strongly denied being associated with these troops, referring to them as “local self-defence units.”⁶¹ However, roughly a year after their arrival, the Kremlin changed its story and declared that the little green men were, in fact, Russian soldiers in disguise. This strategy of masking your troops is also an old tool and Russian military deception, or *maskirovka*, and it has been deployed since the 20th century, for instance during the Cuban Missile Crisis or the Prague Spring.⁶² What differentiates the little green men from earlier instances of *maskirovka* is the media's role in spreading online rumours about these soldiers' origin. For instance, the Russian news agency TASS continues to refer to the soldiers as ‘polite people.’⁶³ This term was designed by the Russian defence force as a euphemism for the Russian soldiers and it was spread by Russian broadcasters to sow confusion and doubt about the origin and goals of these soldiers.⁶⁴ Moreover, social media were the perfect platforms where speculations about the ‘little green men’ could run rampant.

⁵⁷ Richey, ‘Contemporary Russian Revisionism’.

⁵⁸ Ofer Fridman, ‘The Conceptual Foundations of “Hybrid Warfare”’, in *Russian ‘Hybrid Warfare’: Resurgence and Politicization*, ed. Ofer Fridman (Oxford University Press, 2018), 11–30, <https://doi.org/10.1093/oso/9780190877378.003.0002>.

⁵⁹ Tim Benbow, ‘Talking ‘Bout Our Generation? Assessing the Concept of “Fourth-Generation Warfare”’, *Comparative Strategy* 27, no. 2 (1 April 2008): 148–63, <https://doi.org/10.1080/01495930801944685>.

⁶⁰ Galeotti, ‘The “Gerasimov Doctrine” and Russian Non-Linear War’.

⁶¹ *The Changing Story Of Russia’s ‘Little Green Men’ Invasion*.

⁶² Lucy Ash, ‘How Russia Outfoxes Its Enemies’, *BBC News*, 29 January 2015, sec. Magazine, <https://www.bbc.com/news/magazine-31020283>; Mark Lloyd, *The Art of Military Deception* (Pen and Sword, 2003).

⁶³ TASS, ‘Monument Honoring “Polite People” Installed in Crimea’, 10 June 2016, https://tass.com/society/881438?utm_source=google.com&utm_medium=organic&utm_campaign=google.com&utm_referrer=google.com.

⁶⁴ Larysa Masenko, ‘Ukraine and the Kremlin’s Myth of the “Polite” Invader’, trans. Anna Mostovych, Euromaidan Press, 6 September 2017, <https://euromaidanpress.com/2017/09/06/the-kremlins-myth-of-the-polite-invader/>.

However, with the recent developments in the Russo-Ukrainian war, Russia's approach to disinformation has also taken a different role than it had during the Crimea invasion of 2014. No longer does the Kremlin hide its military forces under the guise of them being Ukrainian separatists. There is no longer a need for *maskirovka*. Of course, the disinformation campaign continues, both in official channels and in the shadows. The invasion is played down as a 'special military operation' by the Kremlin,⁶⁵ and Russian-based broadcasters continue to spread disinformation about the war, which is described further in Chapter 6. But if there is a term that can explain the shift from the military strategies during the invasion of Crimea to the current war, it would be 'mask-off warfare'. Note that this is not a term to be used instead of 'hybrid warfare' or 'Gerasimov doctrine', but can specifically be applied to the changing circumstances that surround the recent events in Ukraine. Mask-off warfare defines the change from the weaponisation of information combined with limited military action to an increase of disinformation campaigns to legitimize a full-scale military assault. This is what differentiates the role of disinformation from 2014 to 2022, and this is what this research demonstrates in the following chapters.

⁶⁵ Putin, 'Address by President of the Russian Federation'.

Chapter 4 –Methodology and Data Collection

Research Question

Before going into the methodology and data collection, it may be helpful to restate the aim of the paper and research question to substantiate my approach to the research. The objective of this paper is to determine the current disinformation strategies that Russia applies during the ongoing Russo-Ukrainian war of 2022. Because of the war's novelty, little research is available on this topic. Furthermore, as described in Chapters 2 and 3, past research on Russian disinformation in the context of the Crimean conflict has described the use of information warfare in combination with small-scale military intervention. However, since 2022, the Russian military presence in Ukraine has increased significantly. The war can therefore hardly be categorised as information warfare with a limited presence of armed forces. This raises the question of how disinformation tactics have developed to accommodate this increase in military force. Therefore, in this paper, I answer the following questions:

- What are the current disinformation strategies deployed by international Russian broadcasters in the Russo-Ukrainian war of 2022?
- How have these strategies changed since the Russian invasion of Crimea in 2014?

Methodology

In this paper, I use qualitative research to determine the strategies used in contemporary Russian disinformation. The use of qualitative research is imperative to gather in-depth insight into these strategies and to analyse the power dynamics that are hidden behind the discourse.

Furthermore, this research is conducted with the use of critical discourse analysis (CDA). I have chosen CDA for several reasons. Firstly, it is used often in information studies as an effective way to examine information used as a discursive action.⁶⁶ Not only does CDA explore which words are used to convey messages, nor does it merely examine the role of discourse in creating a subjective social reality, but it also demonstrates how discourse contributes to the constitution of social phenomena.⁶⁷ This differentiates CDA from other

⁶⁶ Kirsty Williamson, Lisa M. Given, and Paul Scifleet, 'Chapter 19 - Qualitative Data Analysis', in *Research Methods (Second Edition)*, ed. Kirsty Williamson and Graeme Johanson (Chandos Publishing, 2018), 453–76, <https://doi.org/10.1016/B978-0-08-102220-7.00019-4>.

⁶⁷ Martyn Hammersley, 'Conversation Analysis and Discourse Analysis: Methods or Paradigms?', *Discourse & Society* 14, no. 6 (1 November 2003): 751–81, <https://doi.org/10.1177/09579265030146004>.

methods like linguistic or psychosocial discourse analysis. It also allows CDA to uncover how disinformation narratives influence societal developments and general perceptions.

Secondly, CDA is a suitable methodology for this study because it concerns the question of power. Specifically, it can be used to analyse how power is exercised through ideology and discourse. This is especially relevant for the study of Russian disinformation, as the power dynamics that follow false Russian narratives are tied to the nation's attempt to exert authority over its citizens and the citizens of other countries, namely Ukrainians. Disinformation, at its core, is about spreading false information to ultimately improve your power and influence or to diminish the power and influence of your opponent.

Lastly, I chose CDA for this study as it can be used to analyse the role of discourse in the creation of ideology. According to John Flowerdew and John E. Richardson, both experts on the field of discourse analysis studies, discourses are based around ideologies, which they define as “a set of beliefs and values belonging to particular social groups.”⁶⁸ Our ideologies are formed around social interactions with others but also through engaging with discourse. Furthermore, they shape our beliefs about the position of our and other social groups. These beliefs are presented as facts and can become part of common sense through the process of *legitimation*.⁶⁹ Discourse that is spread with ill intent, for instance, Russian disinformation, may become a major factor in the creation of the ideology of Russians (either in Russia or Ukraine) by presenting a strong ‘Us versus Them’ narrative. Here, the Russian in-group (portrayed positively) will have to withstand the danger from the out-group (portrayed negatively). As described in Chapter 6, this out-group is either the Ukrainian government, the West or the United States. Continuous disinformation that portrays the out-group unfavourably will become increasingly believable because it fits the presumed reality formed through these ideologies. In other words, (dis)information and ideology can increasingly reinforce each other by repeating the same set of beliefs and ideals until these are cemented in our common understanding.

During the past few years, other researchers have also applied CDA in their investigations into disinformation or matters related to disinformation. For instance, Ali Haif Abbas used CDA to analyse the politicization of Covid-19 vaccinations during the pandemic and considered the role that disinformation and misinformation played in the rise of vaccine

⁶⁸ John Flowerdew and John E. Richardson, ‘Introduction’, in *The Routledge Handbook of Critical Discourse Studies* (Routledge, 2017), 3.

⁶⁹ Flowerdew and Richardson, ‘Introduction’.

hesitancy.⁷⁰ Others, like Ashleigh L. Haw, have applied critical discourse methods to the topic of fake news in the media to establish how Australian media (falsely) represents asylum seekers.⁷¹ However, the usage of CDA to analyse Russian disinformation strategies has, to my current knowledge, never been done before.

I have used the work of Teun A. van Dijk, *Discourse and Manipulation*, as guidance during my analysis.⁷² Manipulation and disinformation are two distinct concepts but share a surprising amount of similarities. Both involve the abuse and the reproduction of power through discourse. In addition, both put a strong emphasis on positive Self-representation and negative Other-representation and the construction of polarized oppositions between Us and Them. Although Van Dijk's approach to discourse is not directly related to disinformation, certain concepts and techniques are still effective tools to conduct the current research.

Ultimately, I have chosen CDA because it offers the most extensive approach possible to disinformation narratives. It is effective in underlining and answering questions of power, ideology, and societal relations. Therefore, CDA provides the tools that are necessary to uncover the contemporary Russian disinformation strategies in the Russo-Ukrainian war.

Data Collection

For this research, I gathered 20 sources from three major Russian-based broadcasters: RT, Sputnik, and TASS. These broadcasters are all associated with the Russian state and are considered by Western scholars and journalists to be central elements in the Kremlin's disinformation ecosystem.⁷³ All articles that are analysed in this research originate from the websites of these broadcasters and are still publicly available at the time of writing.

⁷⁰ Ali Haif Abbas, 'Politicizing COVID-19 Vaccines in the Press: A Critical Discourse Analysis', *International Journal for the Semiotics of Law - Revue Internationale de Sémiotique Juridique* 35, no. 3 (1 June 2022): 1167–85, <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11196-021-09857-3>.

⁷¹ Ashleigh L. Haw, 'Audience Constructions of Fake News in Australian Media Representations of Asylum Seekers: A Critical Discourse Perspective', *Journal of Language & Politics* 20, no. 5 (September 2021): 761–82, <https://doi.org/10.1075/jlp.21028.haw>.

⁷² Teun A. Van Dijk, 'Discourse and Manipulation', *Discourse & Society* 17, no. 3 (2006): 359–83.

⁷³ CBS News, 'Inside RT, Vladimir Putin's English-Language International Mouthpiece', 22 January 2017, <https://www.cbsnews.com/news/inside-rt-vladimir-putins-english-speaking-international-mouthpiece/>; Pomerantsev and Weiss, 'The Menace of Unreality'; Giles, 'Russia's "New" Tools for Confronting the West'; Besemeres, 'Russian Disinformation and Western Misconceptions'; Yevgeniy Golovchenko, Mareike Hartmann, and Rebecca Adler-Nissen, 'State, Media and Civil Society in the Information Warfare over Ukraine: Citizen Curators of Digital Disinformation', *International Affairs* 94, no. 5 (1 September 2018): 975–94, <https://doi.org/10.1093/ia/iij148>.

RT

RT was launched as ‘Russia Today’ on April 6, 2005.⁷⁴ It was created to rival large global news networks such as the BBC and Al Jazeera and to break up the perceived Anglo-Saxon monopoly on global news with a Russian perspective.⁷⁵ In 2009, the news organisation went through a major rebranding phase. It changed its name to RT, presumably to limit its association with the Russian state, and introduced the ‘Question More’ slogan. It also changed its primary objective. Rather than promoting Russia, the broadcaster is now mostly concerned with delivering critiques of Western institutions, media, and foreign actions.⁷⁶

RT is owned by TV-Novosti which is part of RIA Novosti, a Russian state-owned news agency. How much funding RT receives from the Kremlin is unclear. The news organisation does not publish public budget sheets or annual financial reports.⁷⁷ Over the years, RT has launched several sister channels: RT Arabic, RT Spanish, RT DE, RT UK, RT France and RT America. However, because of the Russian invasion of Ukraine, both RT and Sputnik have faced EU sanctions due to their role in spreading Russian disinformation.⁷⁸ As a result, the German, American, British, and French branches were forced to cease their broadcasting due to the pressure of national authorities.

Sputnik

Sputnik, formerly known as Voice of Russia, was launched in 2014 by the Russian state-owned news agency Rossiya Segodnya.⁷⁹ Similar to RT, Sputnik aims to distribute Russian narratives and perceptions about world affairs.⁸⁰ It publishes news articles in more than 30

⁷⁴ RT, ‘About RT’, RT International, accessed 13 April 2023, <https://www.rt.com/about-us/>.

⁷⁵ Benjamin Bidder, ‘SPIEGEL Interview: Russia Today Editor in Chief Margarita Simonyan’, *Der Spiegel*, 13 August 2013, sec. International, <https://www.spiegel.de/international/world/spiegel-interview-russia-today-editor-in-chief-margarita-simonyan-a-916356.html>; Jim Rutenberg, ‘RT, Sputnik and Russia’s New Theory of War’, *The New York Times*, 13 September 2017, sec. Magazine, <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/09/13/magazine/rt-sputnik-and-russias-new-theory-of-war.html>.

⁷⁶ Giles, ‘Russia’s “New” Tools for Confronting the West’.

⁷⁷ US Department of State, ‘Kremlin-Funded Media: RT and Sputnik’s Role in Russia’s Disinformation and Propaganda Ecosystem’, *GEC Special Report*, January 2022, https://www.state.gov/wp-content/uploads/2022/01/Kremlin-Funded-Media_January_update-19.pdf.

⁷⁸ European Council, ‘EU Imposes Sanctions on State-Owned Outlets RT/Russia Today and Sputnik’s Broadcasting in the EU’, 2 March 2022, <https://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/press/press-releases/2022/03/02/eu-imposes-sanctions-on-state-owned-outlets-rt-russia-today-and-sputnik-s-broadcasting-in-the-eu/>.

⁷⁹ Sputnik International, ‘About Us’, Sputnik International, accessed 13 April 2023, <https://sputnikglobe.com/docs/index.html>.

⁸⁰ Jakub M. Godzimirski and Malin Østevik, ‘How to Understand and Deal with Russian Strategic Communication Measures?’ (Norwegian Institute of International Affairs (NUPI), 2018), <https://www.jstor.org/stable/resrep17626>.

languages and provides non-stop newswire services in English, Spanish, Arabic, Chinese and Farsi.

Similar to RT, Sputnik lacks fiscal transparency and objectivity and plays a large role in Russia's disinformation ecosystem.⁸¹ Where these two media outlets differ is that Sputnik was created by presidential decree while RT is merely financed by the Russian government.⁸² This implies that the Kremlin has been closely involved with the creation and evolution of Sputnik, where it appears to be less associated with RT. However, similar to her broadcast companion, Sputnik was also temporarily sanctioned by the EU after the Russian invasion of Ukraine.⁸³ However, the effects of the sanctions appear to be less damaging to Sputnik than RT, as Sputnik did not manage different European branches that were forced to close as a result of the sanctions.

TASS

TASS is the oldest and largest Russian state-owned news agency examined in this research. Founded in 1904, TASS has experienced and participated in the Soviet Union's active measures strategy, which refers to a certain form of political warfare that includes espionage and propaganda.⁸⁴ During this time, TASS also owned affiliated news agencies in all other Soviet republics, stretching its influence across the entire Union.⁸⁵ Currently, TASS publishes articles in six languages and has 56 global branches, although the news agency is not clear about the exact location of these branches.⁸⁶

Although TASS was not included in the EU's sanctions against Russian media outlets in 2022, it still faced a fair amount of criticism. The news agency was suspended in 2022 by the European Alliance of News Agencies for its inability to provide unbiased news.⁸⁷ In

⁸¹ US Department of State, 'Kremlin-Funded Media: RT and Sputnik's Role in Russia's Disinformation and Propaganda Ecosystem'.

⁸² EUvsDisinfo, 'Three Things You Should Know About RT and Sputnik', EUvsDisinfo, 11 September 2017, <https://euvsdisinfo.eu/three-things-you-should-know-about-rt-and-sputnik/>.

⁸³ European Council, 'EU Imposes Sanctions on State-Owned Outlets RT/Russia Today and Sputnik's Broadcasting in the EU'.

⁸⁴ Thomas Rid, 'Active Measures: The Secret History of Disinformation and Political Warfare - CIA', *Center for the Study of Intelligence* 64, no. 1 (21 April 2022), <https://www.cia.gov/resources/csi/studies-in-intelligence/volume-64-no-1/active-measures-the-secret-history-of-disinformation-and-political-warfare/>.

⁸⁵ TASS, 'About TASS', TASS, accessed 13 April 2023, <https://tass.com/today>.

⁸⁶ Ibid.

⁸⁷ EANA, 'The European Alliance of News Agencies (EANA) Suspends TASS from Alliance Pending Exclusion Decision', 27 February 2022, accessed 12 April 2023, <https://www.newsalliance.org/news/the-european-alliance-of-news-agencies-eana-suspends-tass-from-alliance-pending-exclusion-decision>.

addition, during the past year, TASS has also been identified as a major participant in disseminating the Kremlin's disinformation, similar to Sputnik and RT.⁸⁸

Data selection

All of the articles that are used in this research are written in English, available online, and published between February 2022 and April 2023. Since these broadcasters have written much about the Russo-Ukrainian war in this period, it was necessary to make a selection. Therefore, I chose to focus on several major disinformation claims made by the Kremlin that had already been proven false or unverifiable by reliable fact-check websites (such as Politifact, EUvsDisinfo, BBC news, and AP news) or that are otherwise easily refuted. This ensured that the articles were directly related to the Russo-Ukrainian war and that they were examples of Russian disinformation. In this analysis, I have focused on the following specific claims:

- Britain fuels fear by sharing a map of a Russian “invasion” of Ukraine
- President Zelenskyy hastily fled Kyiv shortly after the start of the war.
- The massacre in Bucha in April 2022 was staged by Ukraine
- The air strike on Kremenchuk Hall in June 2022 was staged by Ukraine
- The massacre in Kharkiv in September 2022 was staged and/or perpetrated by Ukraine
- Ukraine is creating a dirty bomb with the help of the United States
- The Ukrainian government and army support neo-Nazis
- The West will stop supporting Ukraine
- The West uses the war in Ukraine to destroy Russia

All of these claims have been made by one or more news broadcasters. The full list of articles used in this research is available in Appendix 1.

In this paper, I will often refer to the ‘author’ of the analysed data. In some instances, the articles in this research are attributed to a specific author. Articles that sway more towards opinion pieces generally contain an author’s name. However, in most cases, the articles cannot be traced back to a single person. This is somewhat problematic as it is more difficult to establish whether the articles are created by one person or several, and thus more difficult to determine whether the article reflects the views of an individual or a collective.

⁸⁸ Tara Law, ‘How Russian Media Are Covering the Ukraine Invasion’, Time, 28 February 2022, <https://time.com/6151572/russian-media-ukraine-coverage/>.

Nevertheless, I assume that since the articles are published on the official website of RT, Sputnik and TASS, the content of these articles reflects these organisations' views and attitudes. For the sake of simplicity, an anonymous author is therefore treated as an employee and representative of their organisation and their work is reflective of these organisations as a whole.

Ethical Concerns

This research does not use questionnaires, interviews, focus groups, or any other form of primary data collection. As a result, there is no need to establish the anonymity of the research participants or the confidentiality of their data. Nevertheless, there are ethical considerations that require to be specified.

While doing this research, I avoided biases in gathering and analysing the data to the best of my ability. In other words, this research is done critically and as objectively as possible. However, as stated by social researcher Alan Bryman, “the social researcher is never conducting an investigation in a moral vacuum – who he or she is will influence a whole variety of presuppositions that in turn have implications for the conduct of social research.”⁸⁹

Disinformation studies often run the risk of falling into a two-sided debate where the concepts of ‘truth’ and ‘fact’ become contested. Each side accuses the other of spreading falsehoods and distorting the available information.⁹⁰ Even as researchers, we are inclined to believe the claims of the side that we agree with ideologically, which hampers our ability to do objective research. To limit the effects of my personal biases, I ensured that I checked the facts behind each of the claims made in the researched articles. This is to restrict any preconceived notions, avoid any potential for factually true statements to be treated as ‘Russian disinformation’, and ensure that the research is reliable. This also led to several sources being excluded from this research, as they could not be verified.

In addition, I am aware that disinformation and other forms of propaganda are spread by both the Russians and Ukrainians. For instance, the Ukrainian government spread stories about the ‘Ghost of Kyiv’, a Ukrainian fighter pilot who allegedly shot down six Russian aircraft during the first hours of the war. However, this legendary pilot was nothing more than

⁸⁹ Alan Bryman, *Social Research Methods*, Fifth edition (Oxford: University Press, 2016), 149.

⁹⁰ Jeff Kao and Craig Silverman, ‘In the Ukraine Conflict, Fake Fact-Checks Are Being Used to Spread Disinformation’, ProPublica, 8 March 2022, <https://www.propublica.org/article/in-the-ukraine-conflict-fake-fact-checks-are-being-used-to-spread-disinformation>.

a myth, created to boost morale.⁹¹ It does not fall under the definition of disinformation as this untrue information was not used to cause harm or mislead. The scale of Russia's disinformation campaigns is much larger, and its techniques are more advanced, as was outlined in the literature review in Chapter 2. The Kremlin has gained much experience in creating effective disinformation strategies over the past decades and its reach is much greater than that of the Ukrainian authorities. Therefore, only Russian disinformation has been analysed in this research because of its reach, quantity, and power.

⁹¹ Patrick Galey, 'Ukraine Admits the "Ghost of Kyiv" Isn't Real, but the Myth Was Potent for a Reason', NBC News, 2 May 2022, <https://www.nbcnews.com/news/world/ukraine-admits-ghost-kyiv-isnt-real-wartime-myth-russia-rcna26867>.

Chapter 5 – Analysis

Before going into the results of this research, it is necessary to describe how the data has been analysed. There are many different ways in which Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) can be conducted, and these different approaches may lead to many different outcomes. Therefore, to improve the reliability of my research, it is important to outline how the data used in this research is analysed. My approach towards the data can be roughly divided into four aspects. In the following section, I outline the aspects I focused on while conducting CDA and I explain in detail how they relate to this research.

Analysed Aspects

Context

An important element of CDA is the context in which the discourse is created. Historical and cultural contexts are of great influence in the production of texts, and discovering the contextual background allows for a deeper analysis of the content. Understanding the context can answer questions about why a text was produced, why certain words and phrases are chosen, and how the text's message fits within broader societal structures. Analysing the historical and cultural contexts of the texts will reveal the social practices behind the production and dissemination of disinformation and therefore provide a better understanding of different Russian disinformation strategies.

Historical context

In this research, the context for many of the selected articles is the same. As I mentioned in the chapter above, all articles come from Russian broadcasters and are related to the Ukrainian War of 2022 in some way. Still, there are many nuances to be found in the context behind some of these texts. One important aspect that may differentiate between different articles is the historical context. According to Martin Reisigl, the historical approach to discourse analysis is considered “one of the most prominent critical approaches to the study of discourse.”⁹² Even though this research is not conducted with the Discourse-Historical Approach, the historical context of the texts remains a key aspect in their creation, and should therefore be analysed closely. It can give insight into how pre-existing power relations can be reiterated or undermined through discourse, and how this power balance can influence the objective of the text. I define the historical context as the period in which a text is created and

⁹² Martin Reisigl, ‘The Discourse-Historical Approach’, in *The Routledge Handbook of Critical Discourse Studies* (Routledge, 2017), 44.

how this has influenced the author's perception while creating the text. Even though the research period is only roughly one year, articles that were published in the early months of the invasion of Ukraine have a different historical context than articles that are published as the war continued. For instance, the RT news article "*Progress Made in Ukraine Talks – Moscow*" describes a statement made by Russian Foreign Minister Lavrov, who argues that the peace talks with Ukraine have progressed significantly and that Ukraine will give up on Crimea and the Donbas to end the conflict.⁹³ This article was published on March 30, around one month after the War began. In the context of this period, a quick Ukrainian defeat and forced concessions towards the Russians were not out of the realm of probability. However, over time it became more clear that peace talks were out of the question. In the contemporary context, the statement of Lavrov – and as a result the article by RT – would carry a different connotation, may be significantly changed, or may not even exist at all. Therefore, during the analysis, I actively considered the historical context of the selected articles and investigated how the current situation of the war may have impacted the format and content of the texts.

Cultural context

In addition to the historical context, it is also important to consider the cultural context of the texts. The author's cultural values and practices greatly influence their perception of the world and therefore the content of their texts. Dalia Gavriely-Nuri argues that cultural codes are embedded in discourse and contribute to the reproduction of abuses of power.⁹⁴ Therefore, analysing the discourse will reveal these cultural codes and expose the prominent power relations in that specific culture. In the framework of research, the national culture of the authors of the analysed texts is certainly important. Their position as Russian, or Ukrainian authors for Russian broadcasters will lead to their national culture influencing the discourse and revealing different perceptions of events during the war. In addition, in some of these articles interviews are conducted with citizens of other nationalities. Their national culture influences their perception of the war and in turn, affects their discourse. These aspects have also been taken into consideration during the analysis of the data.

Of course, 'culture' can encompass more than just the culture of a nation. Communities of all sizes can have a distinct culture and so can businesses, enterprises, and professions. During the analysis, I actively looked at whether the different Russian

⁹³ RT, 'Progress Made in Ukraine Talks – Moscow', RT International, 30 March 2022, <https://www.rt.com/russia/553003-lavrov-ukraine-talks-progress/>.

⁹⁴ Dalia Gavriely-Nuri, 'Cultural Approach to CDA (CCDA): From Theory to Practice', in *The Routledge Handbook of Critical Discourse Studies* (Routledge, 2017).

broadcasters have specific corporate and/or journalistic cultures that are distinguishable through discourse. The broadcaster's cultural context can affect the articles' production and content. And this can in turn reveal the specific disinformation strategies that are used in the presentation of Russian disinformation narratives concerning the war. There are large differences in the format, language, and content between the different Russian broadcasters. This indicates that RT, TASS, and Sputnik have distinct journalistic cultures and – more importantly – contrasting approaches to disseminating Russian disinformation. By analysing the specific journalistic cultures of these broadcasters, the various approaches they apply come to light and allow for a greater understanding of the different strategies that the broadcasters apply in their dissemination of Russian disinformation.

Audience

Apart from the context in which the articles are created, I also analysed the intended audience of the texts. By identifying the audience that the author is addressing, it becomes easier to determine the message and objective of the discourse as it provides insight into the information the author wants to convey. I argue that the intended audience of the Russian broadcast websites is Western citizens who are already partisan towards the Russian government. Therefore, the main goal of the articles is not to persuade the audience of the Russian point of view, but to further reinforce pre-existing pro-Russian and anti-Western sentiments.

Before the analysis process, I already surmised that the articles in this research are written with a Western or English-speaking audience in mind since they are uploaded on the international versions of the websites of Russian broadcasters. However, many articles in this research use speeches and messages from high-ranking Russian officials, diplomats, and also Russian President Vladimir Putin himself. The intended audience of these messages is often different from the intended audience of the article. For instance, one article by RT references a message from former Russian President Dimitry Medvedev about the future of Ukraine. Medvedev originally shared his message in an online post on the VK social network. Although VK is an online media platform that is available in different languages, it is predominantly used by Russian speakers. Therefore, the intended direct audience of Medvedev's post would be Russian-speaking users of this platform, especially because the message itself was originally shared in Russian. However, RT's summary of this post is written in English and published on their international news website. This indicates that several audience groups can be identified in a single article, a Russian-speaking audience for

the original post and an English-speaking audience for the subsequent news article. In turn, the underlying message and objective of the discourse also differentiate. The two types of audiences receive their information from different sources and likely have diverging levels of knowledge about the subject. Therefore the same discourse can lead to different reactions. How these reactions differ is sadly out of the scope of the current research. For now, it remains important to be aware of the original messages that the disinformation narratives wish to convey.

In this research, there are several instances similar to the example described above – where an original message aimed at Russian speakers has been taken by the Russian broadcaster and adapted for an English-speaking audience. Because this research specifically investigates the disinformation strategies used by Russian broadcasters, it is the audience of English speakers that is crucial for determining the broadcasters' disinformation strategies. Nevertheless, the originally intended audience of Russian speakers remains important to consider when it comes to determining the intended message and objective of the discourse. Therefore, I considered both audiences when analysing the articles. This will ensure that different interpretations of the discourse are reviewed. In addition, by keeping the original audience in mind, it is easier to establish the community that the author identifies with and it makes it possible to determine the in and out-groups that are outlined by the discourse. However, the main focus of the analysis remains on the English-speaking audience.

Attitude

To determine the attitude of the analysed articles, I analysed the use of adverbs and adjectives that reveal the stance of the author and the viewpoint that they wish to communicate to the audience. These word categories are either used to provide attributes to nouns (positive or negative) or to modify verbs, adjectives and other adverbs. In this research, it is important to scrutinize how the two nations in conflict are described by the author. Of course, one can assume that since these Russian broadcasters are created to “acquaint international audiences with a Russian viewpoint on major global events,”⁹⁵ they are inclined to describe the Russian invasion and subsequent military actions in Ukraine in a positive light. And that the adjectives and adverbs that are used to describe Ukraine will be mostly negative. This assumption will be largely correct, although there are nuances that will have to be accounted for.

⁹⁵ RT, ‘About RT’.

As described in Chapter 6, the reasoning behind the use of adjectives and adverbs can vary. They can be used to simply improve the Russian self-image and deteriorate the image of Ukraine. But they can also be an effective tool in legitimising violent actions, boasting about military successes, and developing personal identification between the audience and the Russian state. Positive Self-representation and negative Other-representation can take many forms, each that can be used to reach a different objective. These will be described in-depth in the next chapter.

Concerning disinformation, the tonal attitudes of the text are used to provoke strong emotions in the audience.⁹⁶ The purpose of emotionally driven disinformation narratives is to undermine the value of rationality and factual evidence by triggering strong emotions like anger or disgust.⁹⁷ Therefore, the analysis of the data involved close examination of adjectives and adverbs, but also sentences and phrases, that could provoke these strong emotions in the audience.

Assumptions and Interpretations

Two central elements in this research analysis are the implicit assumptions in the analysed texts and the author's interpretations of certain events, persons, or actions. Both the author's assumptions and interpretations can reveal their biases and the presumed biases and knowledge of the audience.

Discovering a text's assumptions is a complex process as it not only involves the discourse that is available on the page but also the information that is left out. It, therefore, requires a thorough understanding of the text and all the aspects described above (the context, the audience, and the use of adjectives and adverbs). The author's assumptions are never explicitly stated but drawn from the evidence in the discourse, which raises issues during the analysis. Researching an author's assumptions will inevitably involve assumptions made by the researcher.⁹⁸ However, since the context in which the analysis takes place is different from the context in which the author creates their discourse, the assumptions can diverge significantly if one is not careful. This is why a thorough understanding of the text, the context, the author, and the audience is needed before it is possible to make a correct

⁹⁶ Juan-Luis Manfredi, Adriana Amado, and Pablo Gómez-Iniesta, 'State disinformation: emotions at the service of the cause', *Communication & Society*, 1 April 2022, 205–21, <https://doi.org/10.15581/003.35.2.205-221>.

⁹⁷ Manfredi, Amado, and Gómez-Iniesta.

⁹⁸ For a good example of a researcher's approach to an author's assumptions, see for instance Joel E. Dworin and Randy Bomer, 'What We All (Supposedly) Know about the Poor: A Critical Discourse Analysis of Ruby Payne's "Framework"', *English Education* 40, no. 2 (2008): 101–21.

deduction about the underlying assumptions. Regarding disinformation, the texts' assumptions can provide insight into the alternate version of reality created and maintained through false narratives.

A similar approach has to be taken when it comes to an author's textual interpretations. For a researcher, it is important to understand what contextual factors have contributed to the author's interpretation of these events and how they are explained to the audience. This will provide insight into the author's objectives for the text and their relation with the audience. For example, a claim about war crimes made by Ukraine can be interpreted as a simple lie (there are no war crimes to speak of), a 'false flag' operation (the war crimes are committed by Ukrainians on their own people to vilify Russia), or a projection (Ukraine committed war crimes against Russian soldiers and acts as if they are Ukrainians civilians).⁹⁹ Different interpretations of a single event can sow doubt and create confusion about what occurred.¹⁰⁰ This is a central element of disinformation as the goal is not necessarily to persuade the audience of Ukraine's wrongdoings, it is also used to disorient the audience and pollute the infosphere.

Ultimately, by analysing the assumptions and interpretations that are identifiable through discourse, it is possible to gain a better understanding of the disinformation strategies that are used by Russian broadcasters. The implicit assumptions can give insight into pre-established false narratives on which contemporary articles are built. Whereas the texts' interpretations can offer a better understanding of how a variety of alternate interpretations may lead to confusion and distrust among the audience.

⁹⁹ See for example: RT, 'Kiev's War Crime Claim Is "a Lie" – Moscow', RT International, 19 September 2022, <https://www.rt.com/russia/563093-kremlin-responds-ukraine-war-crime-claim/>; TASS, 'Kiev Regime to Pin Ukrainian Crimes in Kherson on Russia, Warns Politician', TASS, 14 November 2022, <https://tass.com/politics/1536275>; TASS, 'Kiev Using Bucha-Style False Flag Propaganda in Kherson — Politician', TASS, 16 November 2022, <https://tass.com/politics/1537765>.

¹⁰⁰ Giles, 'Russia's "New" Tools for Confronting the West'.

Chapter 6 – Results

During the analysis, two large themes emerged from the data that can be divided into several sub-themes. As stated in Chapter 4, these themes are inspired by the work of Van Dijk in his article on discourse and manipulation, as there are several similarities between manipulation discourse and disinformation, but the differences between these two discursive tactics will still lead to varying results.¹⁰¹

This chapter is divided into three sections, two for the two major themes, and one for less important sub-themes. The first section addresses the positive Self-representation of Russia and how it portrays itself and its allies in a favourable light through the use of disinformation. It also goes over how positive Self-representation can aid the further dissemination of disinformation. The second section pertains to the opposite, namely the negative representation of the Other (Ukraine, the West, Europe, NATO and the United States) through disinformation and how this creates doubt in the reliability of Western news outlets. Through these two sections, it is possible to establish the Russian attempt to (re)construct a polarized opposition between Us & Them. The third section goes over other recurring themes that are visible in the data but are not directly related to disinformation strategies. Nevertheless, they remain important in the contextualisation of the data and still contribute in an indirect way to the spread of disinformation.

It is important to note that some findings fit into more than one section. As a result, there will be some overlap between the different sections. Nevertheless, since I take different approaches in each section, they will still provide a unique perspective on recurring concepts.

Positive Self-representation

Positive Self-representation is common in ideological discourse and thus not exclusive to disinformation. Nevertheless, it is an important tactic that, as described in this section, makes use of and supports various forms of disinformation.

Winning of Goodwill

In his article on manipulation in discourse, Van Dijk identifies the concept of *captatio benevolentiae*, which is Latin for ‘winning of goodwill’.¹⁰² This rhetorical technique is often used at the start of a speech or appeal to gain the goodwill of the audience as early as

¹⁰¹ Van Dijk, ‘Discourse and Manipulation’.

¹⁰² Van Dijk.

possible.¹⁰³ Although the articles of RT, Sputnik and TASS are neither speeches nor appeals, they apply a similar technique to harness the goodwill of the reader.

In the articles of this research, the Russian perspective of events during the war is consistently given a more prominent position than the Ukrainian perspective. In short, the Russian statements and arguments are always presented in the title of the article and the first few paragraphs, whereas the Ukrainian arguments are always further down. See, for instance, the article by RT titled “*Progress made in Ukraine talks – Moscow*”.¹⁰⁴ Here, the statements by Lavrov about Ukraine’s surrender of the Donbas and Crimea take a prominent position in the article. The statements are mentioned in the headline, the opening paragraph, and in a direct quote from Lavrov in the first paragraph. Only then is the Ukrainian refutation presented.

On one hand, this approach to article formatting makes it less likely for the reader to encounter the Ukrainian perspective. Some members of the audience may be content with reading the title and lead and are not interested in knowing more details. On the other hand, this allows Russia to garner the goodwill of the reader by immediately presenting itself in a positive way, namely as a peaceful and successful negotiator. Furthermore, as stated by Van Dijk, positioning your statement in a salient position (for instance, in the title and the lead) will draw more attention to it and it will be processed with extra time and memory resources.¹⁰⁵ This leads to a better recollection of the statement by the audience. In other words, even after reading the entire text, it will be more likely that the audience will remember the words of Lavrov and not the refutation by Ukraine.

This strategy in formatting is particularly useful when it comes to the dissemination of disinformation. As stated in Chapter Two of this paper, Boghardt asserts that being the first to make a claim about a certain event or occurrence will give you a large advantage over those who will deny it later as the first claim becomes rooted in the mind of the recipient.¹⁰⁶ Russian broadcasters take advantage of this, by ensuring that the first statements, conclusions, and arguments their audience encounters are of Russian origin. Once these false Russian narratives are ingrained, the Ukrainian denials and clarifications no longer matter as

¹⁰³ Mohamed El-Nashar and Heba Nayef, ““Cooking the Meal of Terror” Manipulative Strategies in Terrorist Discourse: A Critical Discourse Analysis of ISIS Statements”, *Terrorism and Political Violence* 34, no. 1 (2 January 2022): 155–75, <https://doi.org/10.1080/09546553.2019.1676238>.

¹⁰⁴ RT, ‘Progress Made in Ukraine Talks – Moscow’.

¹⁰⁵ Van Dijk, ‘Discourse and Manipulation’.

¹⁰⁶ Boghardt, ‘Soviet Bloc Intelligence and Its AIDS Disinformation Campaign’, 19.

it is unlikely that they will result in a change of mind. In fact, they can even contribute to the resilience of disinformation. In the words of Washington Post writer Shankar Vedantam: “[O]nce an idea has been implanted in people's minds, it can be difficult to dislodge. Denials inherently require repeating the bad information, which may be one reason they can paradoxically reinforce it.”¹⁰⁷ Being the first to make a claim is therefore a powerful disinformation strategy as it allows you to control the narrative from the beginning.

A different article where this strategy is prominent is titled “*Kiev regime to pin Ukrainian crimes in Kherson on Russia, warns politician*”. This article by TASS focuses on statements made by Vladimir Rogov, leader of the movement We Are Together With Russia.¹⁰⁸ Rogov told TASS that “Ukrainian authorities will present pro-Russian residents, tortured to death in the process of so-called ‘filtration measures’ in Kherson, as ‘victims of Russia.’”¹⁰⁹ This prediction by Rogov is intended to undermine future claims by Ukraine about Russian war crimes by subverting them before they happen. It allows the Russian authorities to sow doubt about Ukraine’s authenticity and promote their narrative.

Emphasising Russia’s Good Actions

A second sub-theme that is used for positive self-presentation is the emphasis on the good attributes of the in-group. Russia underlines its favourable actions and twists its bad actions to present itself as dependable and believable.

Take, for instance, the article by Sputnik titled “*What is a ‘Dirty Bomb’ and Why is Russia Warning About It?*”¹¹⁰ The author’s assumption in this article is that the creation of a dirty bomb by Ukraine can lead to further escalation of the conflict, as it opens up the possible increased use of radioactive or even nuclear weaponry. Although a dirty bomb is not a nuclear weapon, it can be used to irradiate radioactive materials over a large area. The title and the two intro paragraphs of the Sputnik article portray Russia as a nation that is concerned with the well-being of others and feels threatened by the possible use of a dirty bomb. The word ‘warning’ is used to indicate Russia’s desire to avoid further escalation and that it is even willing to warn its enemies (in this case NATO) of the danger. An accompanying article by Sputnik titled “*Ukrainian ‘Dirty Bomb’ Threat is Real, Up to West*

¹⁰⁷ Shankar Vedantam, ‘Persistence of Myths Could Alter Public Policy Approach’, *Washington Post*, 4 September 2007.

¹⁰⁸ TASS, ‘Kiev Regime to Pin Ukrainian Crimes in Kherson on Russia, Warns Politician’.

¹⁰⁹ *Ibid.*

¹¹⁰ Ilya Tsukanov, ‘What Is a “Dirty Bomb” and Why Is Russia Warning About It?’, Sputnik International, 25 October 2022, <https://sputnikglobe.com/20221025/what-is-a-dirty-bomb-and-why-is-russia-warning-about-it-1102619770.html>.

Whether They Want to Believe It or Not: Kremlin” underlines that not only Russia is in danger of a dirty bomb. This article mentions that “Moscow was preparing to raise the issue of Kiev’s possible preparations to use a bomb at the United Nations.”¹¹¹ This article hopes to capture the sympathy of the audience by presenting Russia as a benevolent nation that not only looks out for itself but is even willing to reach out to its enemies despite being shunned by them.

A second instance where this technique is applied is the Sputnik article “*Russia’s Special Operation Isn’t ‘Aggression,’ Merely Putting End to Kiev’s War on Donbass: Putin.*”¹¹² This article summarizes a speech from Russian President Putin that was given in Kaliningrad at an event celebration of Knowledge Day. This speech uses positive Self-representation in tandem with negative Other-representation to present itself as an admirable and exemplary nation to the audience. In this speech and the corresponding article, Russia is portrayed as a defender and a saviour to the people of the Donbas region. The juxtaposition between the violent and cruel Ukraine and the principled defender Russia is used to sway the audience’s opinion in Russia’s favour. There is a large emphasis on the notion that it was Ukraine who started a war against Donbas, and that it is Russia who has come to end it. Not only has Russia crossed Ukraine’s borders to defend itself, but it is also the protector of the “Donbass Republics” whose “rag-tag militias” are oppressed by the excessive military force of Ukraine. In this case, Russia gains the admiration of the reader by presenting itself as the guardian of democracy as the people of the Donbas and Crimea supposedly do not support the current Ukrainian government and should therefore, in the eyes of Russia, not be ruled by it.

Ultimately, there is a large emphasis on Russia’s good deeds in the majority of the data. The invasion of Ukraine itself, categorized as a special military action, is spun positively through the use of false accusations of Ukraine’s cruelty and oppression towards Russians living in the Donbas. In other words, through the use of disinformation, Russia wishes to project a more positive self-image to the rest of the world. This positive image can in turn improve the credibility of further disinformation narratives as it presents Russia as a

¹¹¹ Ilya Tsukanov, ‘Ukrainian “Dirty Bomb” Threat Is Real, Up to West Whether They Want to Believe It or Not: Kremlin’, Sputnik International, 24 October 2022, <https://sputnikglobe.com/20221024/ukrainian-dirty-bomb-threat-is-real-up-to-west-whether-they-want-to-believe-it-or-not-kremlin-1102574978.html>.

¹¹² Ilya Tsukanov, ‘Russia’s Special Operation Isn’t “Aggression,” Merely Putting End to Kiev’s War on Donbass: Putin’, Sputnik International, 1 September 2022, <https://sputnikglobe.com/20220901/russias-special-operation-isnt-aggression-merely-putting-end-to-kievs-war-on-own-people-putin-1100274278.html>.

more believable source of information. In other words, there is an identifiable symbiotic relationship between positive Self-representation and the dissemination of disinformation.

Self-victimisation

The Russian approach to self-victimisation is likely recognizable to those familiar with the Russo-Ukrainian war. Indeed, matters such as Western economic sanctions and support to Russian opposition leaders such as Alexei Navalny have long been presented as attacks on Russian culture and way of life. Self-victimisation has also been a major contributor to the justification of Russia's invasion of Ukraine. The data of this research has many references in which Russia is threatened by Ukraine and, more importantly, the West. This is largely substantiated by disinformation narratives.

In the articles of Russian broadcasters, Ukraine is never presented as a direct military threat to Russia's existence. Ukraine has historically been under the domination and oppression of Russia. Therefore, it would be counterintuitive for Russia to feel intimidated by the neighbour that it once controlled. It is therefore not Russia itself but the Russian-speaking population of the Donbas that is presented as the main victim of Ukrainian violence. In the words of Sputnik journalist Svetlana Ekimenko: "The Ukrainian authorities engaged in ever-increasing humiliation of the predominantly Russian-speaking people in Donbass, all the while openly supporting Nazi ideas."¹¹³ In addition, Ukrainian soldiers are often illustrated as having a clear disdain against Russians, as stated by former US soldier John McIntyre in an interview with RT: "It's hatred. They hate Russian people, they want to kill them, they want to genocide them."¹¹⁴ These claims are all unsupported, but they exemplify Russia's attitude towards self-victimisation. Putin has stated that the people of Donbas "consider themselves part of a common cultural and linguistic space with Russia."¹¹⁵ Through the use of discursive extension, the "oppression" of Russian speakers in the Donbas by Ukraine is considered an attack on Russian culture as a whole.

Moreover, it is not Ukraine, but 'the West' that is considered an actual threat to Russia's sovereignty. In several articles from RT, Sputnik and TASS, Ukraine is not considered an independent and sovereign nation, but merely a tool for the West to attack

¹¹³ Svetlana Ekimenko, 'Targeting the Unarmed: Ukraine's Grim Record of Terrorist Attacks', Sputnik International, 3 April 2023, <https://sputnikglobe.com/20230403/targeting-the-unarmed-ukraines-grim-record-of-terrorist-attacks-1109074865.html>.

¹¹⁴ RT, 'Ukraine's Army Has a Big Nazi Problem, Ex-US Soldier Tells RT', RT International, 28 February 2023, <https://www.rt.com/russia/572220-ukaine-nazi-problem-us-soldier/>.

¹¹⁵ Tsukanov, 'Russia's Special Operation Isn't "Aggression," Merely Putting End to Kiev's War on Donbass'.

Russia.¹¹⁶ Some even suggest that all European countries only follow the orders of their “American mentor”¹¹⁷ implying that Europe, and NATO by extension, are under the control of the United States. This worldview is reminiscent of the international order during the Cold War, where Ukraine plays the role of a nation entangled in a proxy war between two ideologically distinct superpowers. The article where this worldview becomes the clearest is arguably from Sputnik and is titled: “*Fate of Russia, Its Place in the World Being Decided Today, Russian Foreign Intelligence Chief Says*”.¹¹⁸ This article released less than a month after the start of the invasion, argues that Russia had no choice but to attack Ukraine because of, among other things, its “Pentagon-backed biowarfare programme” and “US-funded Biolabs”. There is a strong indication of a dichotomy between the Russian and Western ideologies which are constantly at odds with one another and where only one can dominate the global stage. The current conflict in Ukraine is presented as Russia overturning the current US-dominated world order and creating a new global system where Russia can finally be free from the sanctions of its enemies.

In short, disinformation about the West’s and Ukraine’s actions is used by Russia for the purpose of self-victimisation and to justify its military actions. Although European nations and the United States have undeniably been at odds with Russia, the Kremlin regards (or at least presents) many Western actions as a deliberate attempt to destroy Russia and harm its people. By presenting itself as the victim and not the aggressor, Russia legitimizes its invasion of Ukraine and presents it as an act of self-preservation.

Negative Other-Representation

Similar to positive Self-representation, negative representation of the ‘Other’ is a common ideological discourse. Still, disinformation adds another layer to the use of negative Other-representation by using false narratives to demonize and dehumanize the enemy.

Demonizing the ‘Other’

In the data, Ukraine and the United States are often presented as the ‘Other’, although more general references towards the West and NATO are also used. The Other is often illustrated as

¹¹⁶ TASS, ‘Putin Points to Ukraine as Only Country Glorifying Neo-Nazism’, TASS, 5 October 2022, <https://tass.com/politics/1518285>; TASS, ‘West Aspires to Dismember, Destroy Russia — Envoy’, TASS, 23 February 2022, <https://tass.com/politics/1580735>.

¹¹⁷ RT, ‘Ukraine Will “disappear” – Medvedev’, RT International, 8 April 2023, <https://www.rt.com/news/574402-ukraine-medvedev-us-china/>.

¹¹⁸ Ilya Tsukanov, ‘Fate of Russia, Its Place in the World Being Decided Today, Russian Foreign Intelligence Chief Says’, Sputnik International, 16 March 2022, <https://sputnikglobe.com/20220316/fate-of-russia-its-place-in-the-world-being-decided-today-russian-foreign-intelligence-chief-says-1093930038.html>.

an out-group that is distinctly different from the in-group because of its (negative) actions attributes, and characteristics. In the articles, the perceived incompatibility between the two groups creates strife and is at the root of the current conflict. The most prominent strategy is to present Ukraine as cruel and murderous Nazis, something already mentioned above. In addition, the West is presented as untrustworthy and hypocritical.

In the data, the Ukrainian government and its soldiers are continuously presented as Nazis,¹¹⁹ terrorists,¹²⁰ and liars.¹²¹ This, as I demonstrated above, is used as a justification by Russia to continue the current war in the name of freedom and democracy for the people of the Donbas. However, with the audience of the Russian broadcasters in mind, the demonization of Ukraine can also be considered as an attempt to discourage the West and Western citizens from further supporting ‘Ukrainian violence’. For instance, in the RT interview with former US soldier McIntyre, he states that: “And we’re [the West] supporting these guys? And these are supposed to be our allies? And we’re supposed to put them in NATO with us? And they can’t even follow Geneva conventions?”¹²² In other words, the demonization of Ukraine is not only used to justify Russia’s military attack but it is also meant to dissuade Western citizens from further supporting Ukraine.

Apart from terrorists and Nazis, the Ukrainians are also portrayed as cowards. During the early stages of the invasion, TASS published an article stating that President Zelenskyy had “hastily fled” Kyiv, thereby abandoning his citizens in their time of need.¹²³ Furthermore, in a different article by TASS, Alexander Malkevich who is a member of Russia’s Public Chamber and an adviser to the Kherson Region states that: “it is known that the Ukrainian armed forces always abandon their comrades-in-arms in retreat.”¹²⁴ The depiction of the Ukrainian government and soldiers as cowards has two main advantages. On the one hand, it makes the enemy seem weak and afraid, thereby portraying the Russian military as stronger in comparison. On the other hand, it may reduce morale among the enemy and give Ukrainians a sense of abandonment and distrust in their government and military.

¹¹⁹ TASS, ‘Putin Points to Ukraine as Only Country Glorifying Neo-Nazism’.

¹²⁰ Ekimenko, ‘Targeting the Unarmed’.

¹²¹ TASS, ‘Medvedev Slams Bucha Story as Fake Ukrainian Propaganda’, TASS, 5 April 2022, <https://tass.com/politics/1432595>; RT, ‘Kiev’s War Crime Claim Is “a Lie” – Moscow’.

¹²² RT, ‘Ukraine’s Army Has a Big Nazi Problem, Ex-US Soldier Tells RT’.

¹²³ TASS, ‘Zelensky Hastily Fled Kiev, Russian State Duma Speaker Claims’, TASS, 26 February 2022, <https://tass.com/politics/1411855>.

¹²⁴ TASS, ‘Kiev Using Bucha-Style False Flag Propaganda in Kherson — Politician’.

The West is also the target of Russia's demonizing strategies. The leaders of Western countries are characterized as narcissistic and self-centred, who only support Ukraine for their personal economic and political gain while disregarding the needs of their people. For instance, in an article by RT, former Russian President Dmitry Medvedev argues that "ordinary Americans [...] wonder why the establishment in the US isn't trying to deal with inflation and [the lack of] jobs or emergencies in their home states, but is instead occupied with this 404 country."¹²⁵ The former president uses national polarizing issues such as high inflation as a wedge between the American people and their government. This has the ultimate goal to sow distrust among the population and diminish their support for Ukraine. This article is also used to present Ukrainian resistance to the Russian invasion as futile since it states that everybody in the world will be better off if Ukraine does not exist. Implying that Ukraine's sovereignty and independence are meaningless, as it supposedly is not supported by the people.

In addition, the American government is also presented as an untrustworthy ally. Several articles present the viewpoint that Western leaders do not have Ukraine's interest in mind, but are using the war to attack Russia.¹²⁶ However, once their interest fades, or the war becomes a burden instead of a benefit, they will leave Ukraine to fend for itself. The article in which this view is the most apparent compares the American withdrawal from Afghanistan to the current situation in Ukraine.¹²⁷ The author, Felix Livshitz, states that "With weapons, ammunition, political will and public support all nearly spent across Europe and North America, the current proxy war with Russia probably can't be sustained for two decades, and maybe not even two years." To put it bluntly, Livshitz implies that Ukraine would be unwise to rely on America for military support, as it is undependable and merely delays the inevitable Russian victory.

All in all, disinformation used to demonize Ukraine and the West has two main goals. Firstly, it is used to justify the Russian invasion and rally support for the Russian cause. This is primarily done by highlighting the 'bad' actions of Ukrainian soldiers and the government. The second goal is to sow distrust among the Western and Ukrainian populations. This is

¹²⁵ TASS, 'Medvedev Slams Bucha Story as Fake Ukrainian Propaganda'.

¹²⁶ Tsukanov, 'Fate of Russia, Its Place in the World Being Decided Today, Russian Foreign Intelligence Chief Says'; RT, 'Ukraine Will "disappear" – Medvedev'.

¹²⁷ Felix Livshitz, 'Absent "Friends": What Ukraine Could Learn from a New Report about the US Withdrawal from Afghanistan', RT International, 10 March 2023, <https://www.rt.com/news/572642-abandoned-puppets-us-afghan/>.

done by arguing that the current war is not in the self-interest of anyone and that the support of the current Kyiv government is harmful to both Ukrainians and Western citizens.

Dehumanization

In several articles, there are instances of dehumanization of the enemy, that is, the authors deprive Ukrainian soldiers of all positive human qualities. For instance, in one article by TASS, former Russian President Medvedev states that “enraged beasts from nationalist battalions and territorial defense forces are ready to casually kill their own civilians in a bid to dehumanize Russia and tarnish its image as much as possible.”¹²⁸ Of course, the irony of this statement is that Medvedev claims that Ukraine wishes to dehumanize Russia, while he is actively doing the same thing to Ukrainians by referring to them as ‘enraged beasts’. In an article by Sputnik, Azov soldiers are described as having “no human attitude, no emotions”.¹²⁹ According to El-Nashar and Nayef, the process of dehumanization and the use of non-person nouns mitigates the impact of violent actions, adds legitimization to those actions, and adds to the aggrandizement of the in-group.¹³⁰ In other words, by dehumanizing the enemy, Russia can demonize Ukrainians, justify the war, and make themselves appear more powerful and righteous. Disinformation is a central tactic in the dehumanisation of Ukraine as disinformation strategies can fundamentally alter a person’s perception of a nation. A continuous flow of disinformation that portrays the Ukrainian government and military as less than human will become increasingly believable and eventually may cement these beliefs in the common understanding of the audience.¹³¹

Use of the ‘Other’

In the articles from Russian broadcasters, the Other is not only presented negatively. In fact, members of the ‘out-group’, can actually play a very important role in the dissemination of disinformation. Besemeres states that RT employs many Western citizens to critique their own societies or actively promote Russia’s interests.¹³² Indeed, in the data I have gathered, there are also two sources in which Westerners take a central position. I have already mentioned the first of these in the section above. It is the RT interview with former US soldier John McIntyre who supposedly fought for nearly a year for Ukraine as a mercenary,

¹²⁸ TASS, ‘Medvedev Slams Bucha Story as Fake Ukrainian Propaganda’.

¹²⁹ Sputnik International, ‘French Volunteer: I Witnessed Bucha Frame-Up’, Sputnik International, 1 August 2022, <https://sputnikglobe.com/20220801/french-volunteer-i-witnessed-bucha-frame-up-1098000423.html>.

¹³⁰ El-Nashar and Nayef, “Cooking the Meal of Terror” Manipulative Strategies in Terrorist Discourse’.

¹³¹ Flowerdew and Richardson, ‘Introduction’.

¹³² Besemeres, ‘Russian Disinformation and Western Misconceptions’.

before defecting to Russia. The second article is a Sputnik interview with French soldier and writer, Adrien Bocquet. He is described by Sputnik as a volunteer who brought humanitarian aid to Bucha where he allegedly witnessed war crimes committed by the Azov battalion. Both McIntyre and Bocquet likely still reside in Russia, with Bocquet receiving a Russian passport earlier this year.¹³³

In the interview with RT, McIntyre repeats many of the Russian disinformation narratives that other pro-Russian sources have already stated. He argues that all Ukrainians he worked with were neo-Nazis, that the Russian soldiers and citizens of the Donbas are subjected to Ukrainian violence, that corruption runs rampant in the military and that it is not Russia but Ukraine that is responsible for the war crimes committed against Ukrainian citizens.¹³⁴ In reality, McIntyre's interview is hardly unique in its content and the parts where he shares his personal story are inconsistent. For example, he first states that he "grew disillusioned with Kiev's cause" but later claims that he had always planned to defect to Russia.

Likewise, Bocquet's recollection of the events in Bucha is similar to the claims made by the Russian authorities about the events that transpired there. He claims to have witnessed Ukrainians following the Nazi ideology, the torture and murder of Russian prisoners of war, and the staging of the Bucha massacre. In addition, he shared his fear of being prosecuted by the French authorities, implying that they are complicit in Ukrainian war crimes. However, regular European citizens are, in his eyes, unaware of the actual situation in Ukraine and the pressure that the native population is under.

Ultimately, the eye-witness reports of McIntyre and Bocquet align with the claims made by the Russian authorities. They use the same narrative devices to demonize Ukrainian soldiers and Western authorities. In addition, because they both fled to Russia, they give the impression that Russia is a haven for political dissenters who are unwilling to participate in Ukraine's (and the West's) atrocities and propaganda. Yet, to put it bluntly, it is not their recollections of events that are important to RT and Sputnik, it is their position as Westerners. Because of their nationalities, McIntyre and Bocquet have a unique relationship with the audience. They represent the readers' disillusionment with Western media and Western authorities. In addition, because of their position as non-Russians and non-Ukrainians, they

¹³³ TASS, 'French Journalist Adrien Bocquet, Who Covered Events in Donbass, Receives Russian Passport', TASS, 24 March 2023, <https://tass.com/society/1594177>.

¹³⁴ RT, 'Ukraine's Army Has a Big Nazi Problem, Ex-US Soldier Tells RT'.

appear more objective about the events in Ukraine and therefore, more trustworthy. They are ‘one of us’ and therefore we – the Western audience – are more inclined to believe their story, as they share the same cultural context as us, but still believe the Russian recollection of events.

Additional Themes

The following themes are also distinguishable in the articles by Russian broadcasters. These themes are still important in the broad characterisations of Ukraine and Russia, but they are less common and are not directly tied to the two major themes above. Therefore, I will only mention them in short.

Use of Emotions

Russian broadcasters often use emotional language or refer to emotional events to get their messages across. According to Lucas and Pomeranzev, news from the Kremlin is more emotional and therefore more entertaining, drawing more viewers than regular reporting.¹³⁵ Moreover, Van Dijk states that emotional events that have a large impact can be used to influence the mental models of people.¹³⁶ In other words, the use of strong emotional language and references to emotional events have two main goals in the context of Russian disinformation. On one hand, it is used to draw people in, to keep them engaged, and to have them avoid other sources of news and media. On the other hand, once the audience is engaged, it becomes easier to affect their state of mind as emotion can limit rational thought.¹³⁷

A prime example where emotions are used to disseminate disinformation is in the Sputnik article by Svetlana Ekimenko. Take, for instance, her statement that “Kiev was gearing up for a new attempt to crush the fledgeling Donbass republics by force.”¹³⁸ Words such as ‘crush’, ‘fledgeling’ and ‘by force’ are used to evoke negative emotions such as shock, anger and hatred from the audience.¹³⁹ In addition, this article defines many of Ukraine’s actions as terrorism. For Western audiences, ‘terrorism’ recalls many negative emotions because of various terrorist attacks in Western countries. Those who have experienced these attacks, either in person or through media coverage, can recall strong

¹³⁵ Lucas and Pomeranzev, ‘Winning the Information War’.

¹³⁶ Van Dijk, ‘Discourse and Manipulation’.

¹³⁷ Manfredi, Amado, and Gómez-Iniesta, ‘State disinformation’.

¹³⁸ Ekimenko, ‘Targeting the Unarmed’.

¹³⁹ Fortuin, “‘Ukraine Commits Genocide on Russians’”.

emotions related to them.¹⁴⁰ Arguably, the Western population has almost been conditioned to condemn any form of terrorism. Now, these emotional events and the feelings that accompany them are weaponised by Russian broadcasters by presenting the Ukrainians as terrorists and therefore the enemy.

Emotional language and references to emotional events can make the audience more susceptible to disinformation. An emotional response can hamper a person's critical thinking, making them more inclined to believe false narratives.¹⁴¹ It can also pacify the audience, making them enthralled in the stories and making it less likely that they consult other sources or make further inquiries on the topic.¹⁴²

Use of History

It should come as no surprise that Russia makes strong use of historical narratives to vilify and demonize Ukraine. In various sections, I have already mentioned that the Kremlin argues that the Kyiv authorities and its military are neo-Nazis, but this concept must be explored further. In short, Russia has stated that Ukraine glorifies and follows neo-Nazi ideology. What this ideology exactly entails is hardly ever mentioned. In one article, Russian President Putin mentions "the neo-Nazi ideas of glorifying yourself while humiliating others and trying to destroy them".¹⁴³ Which does not align with more widely accepted definitions of Nazism.

Following an argument from Lucas and Pomeranzev, by painting the Ukrainian government as Nazis, the Kremlin can present its aggression against the nation as a continuation of World War II.¹⁴⁴ Similarly, Maria Domańska states that Moscow is increasingly reliant on historical narratives such as references to the victory over Nazis to legitimise its foreign policy.¹⁴⁵ World War II, or the Great Patriotic War as it is known in Russia, remains a fundamental element in Russian identity. The Soviet victory over Nazi Germany evokes emotions of pride and patriotism and is central to the Russians' self-image. This makes these disinformation narratives particularly effective when disseminated domestically. The Western audience, however, does not have the same frame of reference as the Russian population. Although many nations in Europe celebrate the end of Nazi Germany, it is hard for European audiences to consider the current conflict in Ukraine as a continuation

¹⁴⁰ Van Dijk, 'Discourse and Manipulation'.

¹⁴¹ Van Dijk.

¹⁴² Lucas and Pomeranzev, 'Winning the Information War'.

¹⁴³ TASS, 'Putin Points to Ukraine as Only Country Glorifying Neo-Nazism'.

¹⁴⁴ Lucas and Pomeranzev, 'Winning the Information War'.

¹⁴⁵ Maria Domańska, 'The Myth of the Great Patriotic War and Russia's Foreign Policy', in *Disinformation, Narratives and Memory Politics in Russia and Belarus* (Routledge, 2022).

of World War II and even harder to identify with Russia's mission herein. Therefore, I argue that the Russians are the primary audience of the claim that Ukraine is run by neo-Nazis. Of course, the Western audience may believe that Moscow's claim is true and that there are indeed Nazis in Ukraine. But the main aim of this narrative is to draw a historical continuity between the Soviet's fight against Nazi Germany and Russia's fight against Ukraine and to gather support for the current conflict from the domestic population. Aims that are either lost or less meaningful to the Western audience.

Accusations of Fake News and Propaganda

Lastly, in the data, there are various instances where the Kremlin accuses its enemies of being the ones who are responsible for spreading false information. This is not very surprising. To promote the position of your narrative, you must undermine the credibility and authority of the Other. Therefore, terms such as 'fake news' and 'propaganda' are weaponised against Ukrainian and Western authorities and media.¹⁴⁶

On the one hand, this strategy is used to promote the Russian perspective of events. To convey to the audience that there is more going on than the mainstream Western media is showing. If the article fails to convince the reader of the Russian perspective, it can still be effective by promoting the idea that there is no 'objective truth' in the media. The article can indicate that every news source is biased and aims to influence public opinion in the way it is most beneficial to them. Through these claims, Russian disinformation is, therefore, able to sow doubt about the credibility of Western media, without having to convince the reader of their disinformation narratives.

On the other hand, stating that Ukraine and the West spread false information could be considered another element of victimisation. The Kremlin is arguing that Russia itself is under attack from Western information and influence. This perception implies an information war is fought to determine who has the right to decide what is right and what is wrong, what is truth and what is false. This, in turn, could also justify further censorship of domestic Russian media to protect the Kremlin's right to create and sustain their alternative reality.

¹⁴⁶ RT, 'UK Military Shares Map of "Putin's Invasion"', RT International, 18 February 2022, <https://www.rt.com/russia/549776-uk-military-russia-invasion-map/>; TASS, 'Medvedev Slams Bucha Story as Fake Ukrainian Propaganda'; TASS, "'Fake News': Diplomat Castigates Claims about "Russian Strike" on Kremenchug Mall', TASS, 29 June 2022, <https://tass.com/politics/1473195>; RT, 'Kiev's War Crime Claim Is "a Lie" – Moscow'.

Chapter 7 – Discussion

In this research, I have examined the disinformation strategies used by Russian broadcasters during the Russo-Ukrainian War of 2022. However, despite my best efforts, I am aware that my research is far from infallible. Therefore, in this chapter, I reflect on my research process and consider its strengths and weaknesses. First, I shortly present the main disinformation strategies I have uncovered from the data. I then explain how these findings can be interpreted to gain a better understanding of the use of disinformation. Then, I contextualise my findings within the broader scholarly debate on disinformation studies and demonstrate how my research contributes to this field. Lastly, I acknowledge the limitations of my work and make recommendations for how future studies could adopt my results.

Key Findings

The goal of this research was to identify the main disinformation strategies that were practised by Russian broadcasters after the 2022 invasion of Ukraine, and how these strategies have evolved since the Russian invasion of Crimea in 2014. The broad disinformation strategies I identified were the use of positive Self-representation, negative Other-representation, and emotional and historical references. In Chapters 2 and 3, I demonstrated with the help of precedent scholarly research that this approach to disinformation is not necessarily new, but it was mostly used to mask Russia's military actions in Ukraine and to muddle the infosphere by flooding it with falsified information. Now, according to the results of my analysis, the Kremlin primarily employs disinformation strategies to retroactively react to the events caused by conventional warfare. As a result, disinformation narratives adapt to the current war by presenting justifications for the invasion and polluting the information available about the events of the war.

Interpretations

In Chapter 1, I defined 'disinformation strategies' as clearly calculated plans and methods that make use of disinformation to outwit or deceive the enemy and reach a certain (military) objective. I theorised, following the results from the two reports I outlined in the literature review, that disinformation strategies are not to convince or persuade the audience of the Kremlin's disinformation, but to use them as a means to confuse and hamper the enemy and ultimately to expand Russia's military and political authority over its neighbour's territory. The data in this research supports this definition as the disinformation strategies that I identified are not intended to convince its international audience of the Kremlin's claim per

se. The articles by the Russian broadcasters repeat the information made by Russian authorities, but they do not research or analyse these claims in any way. In fact, there is no evidence, data, or independent research presented that would substantiate the Russian claims or refute statements made by Ukraine or Western governments and media. This indicates that the audience of the Russian broadcasters is likely already convinced of the Kremlin's arguments, or at the least has doubts about the verity of other news outlets and is curious about an alternate perspective. Therefore there is no need for RT, Sputnik, and TASS to present proof of its statements and allegations, they simply need to reiterate what the audience already believes.

The fact that disinformation is not created to convince is only one of the correlations that can be identified from the data. Additionally, a second recurring element in all articles is that international relations are presented as a zero-sum game, in which one nation can only become more powerful by reducing the power of a different nation.¹⁴⁷ On one hand, Russia plays this game on an international level with Ukraine through its attempt to physically change the borders between the two nations. Here, it is clear that Russia's influence increases where that of Ukraine diminishes and vice versa. On the other hand, the zero-sum game also has a global element, where the current War in Ukraine is merely a single component in a large whole. In the global zero-sum game, the primary opponent of Russia is not Ukraine but the United States. In the articles I examined for this research, this underlying struggle for domination and influence in Ukraine, Eastern Europe and the world seeps through the Kremlin's stories about Ukrainian Nazism, biowarfare, and self-defence. These are simply the result of disinformation strategies applied by Russia to justify its pursuit of global influence. In addition, these disinformation narratives present Ukraine as nothing more than an American puppet, undermining the concept of Ukrainian sovereignty and interpreting it as an increase in American influence and therefore a loss for Russia. The power struggle is thus not only fought on the battlefield but also in the infosphere, where truth and lies are subjected to the needs of the powerful.

This brings us to the final correlation that can be encountered in the data, namely, the close cooperation between information and conventional warfare. Of course, this by itself is not unique to this data set as this type of cooperation – referred to as 'hybrid' or 'non-linear' warfare – is a central element of previous research (Chapter 3). However, other scholars have

¹⁴⁷ Robert Powell, 'Absolute and Relative Gains in International Relations Theory', *The American Political Science Review* 85, no. 4 (1991): 1303–20, <https://doi.org/10.2307/1963947>.

primarily looked at how (dis)information has contributed to the efforts of conventional warfare but there is a lack of understanding of how this type of warfare is affecting the production and spread of disinformation. In the articles from Russian broadcasters, it becomes clear that the physical conflict of the Russo-Ukrainian War is aiding their disinformation efforts. The most prominent way in which the War affects Russian broadcasters is that it provides content for their articles. By writing about the events of this conflict, RT, Sputnik and TASS have an easy segue to present Russia positively and introduce threatening narratives about Ukraine, Europe, and the United States. Moreover, apart from the content, the War also likely contributes to the dissemination of disinformation by creating interest. Admittedly, this is not distinguishable from the articles themselves. But it is highly probable that because of the current conflict, there is an increase among Westerners who wish to investigate why Russia has invaded Ukraine. This may cause them to search for sources that present the Russian perspective and lead them to RT, Sputnik or TASS. Of course, this is just a hypothesis and requires further investigation in future research.

Relevance to previous research

The Russo-Ukrainian war has been going on since the invasion and annexation of Crimea in 2014. When this happened, there was an increase in scholarly interest in Russian disinformation narratives. Disinformation was no longer a forgotten Soviet strategy that was applied during the Cold War, but it played an active role in Russia's contemporary military strategies. I have outlined some of the most important works of this period in Chapters 2 and 3 of this paper. However, since the escalation of the Russo-Ukrainian War of 2022, there have been various new developments that were not yet relevant when these works were published.

In the work of Weiss and Pomerantsev, it is clear that Russia had a limited military approach to the invasion of Crimea. They state that "In its on-the-ground military involvement in Ukraine, the Kremlin has generally sought to use a mix of covert troops directing local vigilantes. When this has not worked, Russia has resorted to small-scale incursions and 'limited war'".¹⁴⁸ Similarly, Giles has stated that Russian information campaigns lay the groundwork for Russian military action and to avoid a more direct military confrontation.¹⁴⁹ Therefore, the main difference between now and then is the increase in conventional military tactics, which have changed the role of disinformation. Disinformation strategies are no longer used proactively to lay the groundwork for military action. They are

¹⁴⁸ Pomerantsev and Weiss, 'The Menace of Unreality', 29.

¹⁴⁹ Giles, 'Russia's "New" Tools for Confronting the West', 43.

not used to confuse the West about masked soldiers without insignias or to give the impression that Russia is not involved with the conflict in the Donbas. Instead, disinformation is now used retroactively to present justifications for the invasion and further military actions in Ukraine. Rather than hiding behind a mask, Russia therefore now hides behind these justifications to avoid potential repercussions. In addition, Russian disinformation can now make use of conventional warfare to further promote alternative narratives and potentially reach a larger audience than it ever did before.

Nevertheless, I should clarify that the disinformation strategies have not changed much in essence since 2014. The Kremlin has for a long time presented itself as morally superior by villainising Ukraine, the West and NATO. This is not unique to the current data, but a recurring theme throughout the history of Russian broadcasters. Furthermore, many secondary objectives of disinformation such as sowing doubt and distrust in Western media and authorities, polluting the infosphere, promoting polarisation, and hampering objective reporting, remain relevant in the articles I examined in this research.¹⁵⁰

Limitations and Recommendations

The main limitation of the current research is that only English news articles were used for the critical discourse analysis (CDA). In his report, Keir Giles identified the Russian investment in language skills as one of the major threats of Russian disinformation strategies.¹⁵¹ He states that, over the years, Russian broadcasters RT and Sputnik have reached a much broader audience by providing news coverage in many different languages. Thus to completely understand the extent and nuance of different Russian disinformation strategies, it is necessary to also analyse news articles in other languages as they might provide insight into how Russia uses local and national issues to promote their false narratives. Future research could potentially look at how Russian disinformation is presented in different languages and whether the disinformation strategies diverge depending on the audience. It would be possible to take a comparative approach between different nations and regions to determine if disinformation is tailored depending on geographical and cultural closeness with Russia.

¹⁵⁰ Anna Zafesova, 'Lie to Live: The Production of a Faked Reality as an Existential Function of Putin's Regime', in *Democracy and Fake News* (Routledge, 2020); Legucka, 'Russian Disinformation'; Olchowski, 'How to Weaponise Information'; Kupiecki, 'Western Betrayal'.

¹⁵¹ Giles, 'Russia's "New" Tools for Confronting the West'.

A second limitation of this research is that it only focuses on Russian broadcast media. One of the largest developments that differentiate the invasion of Crimea in 2014 and the invasion of Ukraine in 2022 is the level of social media usage in the world.¹⁵² Social media is a very effective tool for the dissemination of disinformation. It allows for bots and trolls to spread disinformation fast and without interference from journalists or other third parties. The information, therefore, undergoes little to no scrutiny and reaches the audience directly. Over the years, researchers have already argued that Russia uses social media to a great extent to take part in or influence public debates in Europe, the US, and possibly other nations in the world.¹⁵³ The Internet Research Agency (IRA) is especially of interest as this Russian organisation coordinates the use of internet trolls on social media. In other words, when it comes to Russian disinformation strategies, the use of social media is a major one. However, I made a conscious decision to only focus on internationally-targeted Russian broadcast media. Because while social media is an important facet of Russian disinformation, it is not the only one. Multiple studies on different ways disinformation can be disseminated are necessary to create the full image of Russian disinformation strategies. In this sense, the strategies used in broadcast media are as relevant as social media. Or, as stated by Kuo and Marwick, “examining the larger media ecosystem, including broadcast media, can help us better understand sites of study within disinformation research.”¹⁵⁴ Broadcast media provides more extensive disinformation narratives that could very likely be shared online to reach a larger audience. Both forms of media work together to create and disseminate disinformation. Therefore, future studies could focus on Russian disinformation strategies on social media, mainly the use of trolls and bots. In addition, it could also be possible to analyse the cooperation between social and broadcast media and determine how they reinforce each other. Lastly, research on Russian disinformation on social media makes it also possible to evaluate its impact, as it will be possible to examine how the audience directly interacts with the false information through comments, reposts, and likes.

The final limitation of the current research is that I have not considered the impact of Russia’s disinformation strategies on the audience. Although disinformation by itself is not

¹⁵² Esteban Ortiz-Ospina and Max Roser, ‘The Rise of Social Media’, *Our World in Data*, 20 March 2023, <https://ourworldindata.org/rise-of-social-media>.

¹⁵³ Giles, ‘Russia’s “New” Tools for Confronting the West’; Pomerantsev and Weiss, ‘The Menace of Unreality’; Lucas and Pomerantsev, ‘Winning the Information War’; Gabriele Cosentino, *Social Media and the Post-Truth World Order: The Global Dynamics of Disinformation* (Springer International Publishing AG, 2020), <http://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/uu/detail.action?docID=6135165>.

¹⁵⁴ Rachel Kuo and Alice Marwick, ‘Critical Disinformation Studies: History, Power, and Politics’, *Harvard Kennedy School Misinformation Review*, 12 August 2021, 3, <https://doi.org/10.37016/mr-2020-76>, 3.

meant to persuade or convince, it is still possible for the reader to fall for Russia's false narratives. The EU's decision to temporarily ban RT and Sputnik indicates a concern about the effects of disinformation on Europe's security. However, what the exact effects are and if they have also evolved since 2014 is still largely unknown. Further research could look into the full implications of Russian disinformation, and determine if it has led to more pro-Russian sentiments or undermined democratic processes in European nations.

Chapter 8 – Conclusion

In this research, I analysed contemporary Russian disinformation strategies that are used during the Russo-Ukrainian war. To discover these strategies, I applied Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) to twenty articles from the English language websites of RT, Sputnik, and TASS. From these articles, I determined that the disinformation strategies can fit into two major themes: Russian positive Self-representation and negative Other-representation. Granted, this is hardly a ground-breaking revelation by itself. These strategies are very common in other discursive forms of persuasion and manipulation. However, in this research, I demonstrated that these strategies have a different role in the context of disinformation.

The Russian broadcasters spread false rumours about war events to juxtapose a morally righteous Self against an evil Other, which can take the form of Ukraine but is also often defined as the West or the United States. The Kremlin attempts to use disinformation to debilitate Western citizens' ability to find truth in the scarce amount of information available about the war. It is also used to confuse an inattentive audience about current events. These findings are largely in line with the conclusions drawn from earlier researchers, who argued that disinformation's goals are to sow doubt about and undermine trust in objective reporting. To put it bluntly, the main goal of the articles in this research is not to persuade their audience. No objective proof is presented to back up Russia's claims of Ukrainian war crimes, neo-Nazism, or genocide of its Russian-speaking population. Of course, this does not mean that disinformation is unable to convince the audience of Russia's false narratives, but it does mean that disinformation does not have to be persuasive to be successful.

This research adds two main new insights into the use of disinformation during an active war. First, Russian disinformation has changed in its content. During the annexation of Crimea and the conflict of the Donbas, disinformation was actively used to mask Russia's military actions in Ukraine. Through the dissemination of falsified information, it was difficult for European news outlets and citizens to determine if, or to what extent, Russia was involved with the supposed 'separatist' movements. Now that there has been a full-scale invasion of Ukraine, there is no longer a need for Russian disinformation to hide the existence of the Kremlin's troops. Admittedly, some of the exact actions of Russia's military are still masked through the use of disinformation, but the main strategy is now focused on presenting justifications for those actions. Of course, since disinformation is not primarily used to persuade, these justifications are not, by definition, used to justify. Instead, the Russian justifications for the War, which are spread through disinformation, are simply new

forms of information pollution. They aim to present alternative versions of reality to confuse the audience about the truth and undermine the concept of objective reporting.

The second insight of this research has to do with the relationship between disinformation and conventional warfare. Earlier research analysed how disinformation was used to lay the groundwork for small-scale military operations. This approach is often referred to as 'hybrid warfare', a highly contested theory that combines non-military forms of warfare, such as disinformation, with conventional warfare tactics. Since the current conflict in Ukraine is no longer small-scale, disinformation has taken a new role. Rather than just aiding the Russian military, disinformation strategies can now also benefit from the events during the War. They provide ample opportunity for disinformation narratives involving positive Self-representation and negative Other-representation and allow these strategies to flourish. For example, wartime incidents that involve civilian casualties can be employed to demonize the Other by blaming death and destruction on the enemy. This abominable utilisation of people's suffering is sadly one of the most common, and arguably most effective, uses of disinformation in the current conflict.

In short, although studies on Russian disinformation have become more popular during the past decade, there was a distinct lack of research on how the approach to disinformation has evolved in a wartime situation. With this paper, I have partially addressed this gap by analysing the disinformation strategies of Russian broadcasters during a period of active warfare. However, this is only one side of a multi-faceted issue. To better understand the practice and implications of Russian disinformation, future research could address the role of social media in the dissemination of disinformation. For instance, one could examine the role of the Internet Research Agency (IRA) in employing trolls and bots to pollute the infosphere and their part in making it more difficult to access verifiably factual information online. This could provide insight into the reach and influence of disinformation. Furthermore, to build on the results of this research, future research could look more in-depth into how conventional warfare in Ukraine supports Russia's war on information on an international scale. A possible approach could be a comparative analysis of the effects of war-time disinformation and disinformation used for small-scale military operations. Ultimately, even though *dezinformatsiya* has already been an active force of Russian foreign influence since the Cold War, there is still much we do not understand about its effects. But if we wish to become more resistant to the influence of disinformation, it is imperative that we understand how it works and what its goals are. Only then can Europe become more resistant to disinformation.

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Appendix 1: List of Articles

By broadcaster and in chronological order

RT:

- “UK military shares map of ‘Putin's invasion.’” Published on 18 February 2022.
<https://www.rt.com/russia/549776-uk-military-russia-invasion-map/>
- “Progress made in Ukraine talks – Moscow.” Published on 30 March 2022.
<https://www.rt.com/russia/553003-lavrov-ukraine-talks-progress/>
- “Putin comments on Bucha ‘massacre’ allegations.” Published on 12 April 2022.
<https://www.rt.com/russia/553765-putin-bucha-massacre-comment/>
- “Kiev’s war crime claim is 'a lie' – Moscow.” Published on 19 September 2022.
<https://www.rt.com/russia/563093-kremlin-responds-ukraine-war-crime-claim/>
- “Ukraine’s army has a big Nazi problem, ex-US soldier tells RT.” Published on 28 February 2023.
<https://www.rt.com/russia/572220-ukaine-nazi-problem-us-soldier/>
- “Absent ‘friends’: What Ukraine could learn from a new report about the US withdrawal from Afghanistan.” Published on 10 March 2023.
<https://www.rt.com/news/572642-abandoned-puppets-us-afghan/>
- “Ukraine will 'disappear' – Medvedev.” Published on 8 April 2023.
<https://www.rt.com/news/574402-ukraine-medvedev-us-china/>

Sputnik

- “Fate of Russia, Its Place in the World Being Decided Today, Russian Foreign Intelligence Chief Says.” Published 16 March 2022.
<https://sputnikglobe.com/20220316/fate-of-russia-its-place-in-the-world-being-decided-today-russian-foreign-intelligence-chief-says-1093930038.html>
- “French Volunteer: I Witnessed Bucha Frame-Up.” Published 1 August 2022.
<https://sputnikglobe.com/20220801/french-volunteer-i-witnessed-bucha-frame-up-1098000423.html>
- “Russia's Special Operation Isn't 'Aggression,' Merely Putting End to Kiev's War on Donbass: Putin.” Published 1 September.
<https://sputnikglobe.com/20220901/russias-special-operation-isnt-aggression-merely-putting-end-to-kievs-war-on-own-people-putin-1100274278.html>

- “Ukrainian 'Dirty Bomb' Threat is Real, Up to West Whether They Want to Believe It or Not: Kremlin.” Published 24 October 2022.
<https://sputnikglobe.com/20221024/ukrainian-dirty-bomb-threat-is-real-up-to-west-whether-they-want-to-believe-it-or-not-kremlin-1102574978.html>
- “What is a 'Dirty Bomb' and Why is Russia Warning About It?” Published 25 October 2022.
<https://sputnikglobe.com/20221025/what-is-a-dirty-bomb-and-why-is-russia-warning-about-it-1102619770.html>
- “Targeting the Unarmed: Ukraine's Grim Record of Terrorist Attacks.” Published 3 April 2023.
<https://sputnikglobe.com/20230403/targeting-the-unarmed-ukraines-grim-record-of-terrorist-attacks-1109074865.html>

TASS

- “Zelensky hastily fled Kiev, Russian State Duma Speaker claims.” 26 February 2022.
<https://tass.com/politics/1411855>
- “Medvedev slams Bucha story as fake Ukrainian propaganda.” 5 April 2022.
<https://tass.com/politics/1432595>
- “‘Fake news’: Diplomat castigates claims about ‘Russian strike’ on Kremenchug mall” Published 29 June 2022.
<https://tass.com/politics/1473195>
- “Putin points to Ukraine as only country glorifying neo-Nazism.” Published 5 October 2022.
<https://tass.com/politics/1518285>
- “Kiev regime to pin Ukrainian crimes in Kherson on Russia, warns politician.” Published 14 November 2022.
<https://tass.com/politics/1536275>
- “Kiev using Bucha-style false flag propaganda in Kherson — politician.” Published 16 November 2022.
<https://tass.com/politics/1537765>
- “West aspires to dismember, destroy Russia — envoy” Published 23 February 2023.
<https://tass.com/politics/1580735>