Narrating Disinformation: The Templates for Kremlin Lies

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Executive Summary

⯈ The European Union's East StratCom Task Force is mandated to detect, document and debunk Kremlin disinformation, i.e. verifiably false or misleading information that could cause public harm.

⯈ The Task Force's publicly available database contains over 13,000 cases, which allows study of patterns in the narratives of Kremlin disinformation.

⯈ Any issue – from migration to unemployment or COVID-19 – can be narrated according to five core narratives: elites vs the People, threatened values, threatened sovereignty, the imminent collapse and "Mahananda" – a portmanteau that combines "haha" and "propaganda".

⯈ This report uses the pandemic to study how disinformation is spread by Kremlin-controlled media according to these five core narratives

Narration is a core element of human communication.[1] People tend to process information through narratives rather than factual statements. We do not accept a statement because of its factual accuracy, but based on whether it lies within an appealing narrative or is narrated by an appealing person or entity. The EU-funded database on Kremlin disinformation,[2] which has been maintained by the European External Action Service East StratCom Task Force since late 2015, currently contains over 13,000 cases. This allows study of the patterns of narratives in Kremlin disinformation.

The East StratCom Task Force is mandated to detect, document and debunk Kremlin disinformation. According to the European Commission's Action Plan against Disinformation,[3] disinformation is understood as verifiably false or misleading information that is created, presented and disseminated for economic gain or to intentionally deceive the public, and could cause public harm. At the time the Task Force was established, Russian state actors in the field of disinformation were seen as the greatest threat to the EU.[4]

The East StratCom Task Force collects cases of disinformation for the database, delimited by three factors: (a) a claim must be either directly or indirectly connected to Russian state actors; (b) a claim must be verifiably false; and (c) there must be malign intent. To put it simply, a claim that is factually wrong, such as that "Vladimir Putin is the biggest man in the world", would not make it into the database, even though it is verifiably false. Nor would a value statement such as "Vladimir Putin is the greatest man in the world". It is possible to agree or disagree with this statement, but it is not verifiably false. A claim that "Vladimir Putin is the most popular leader in the world", however, can be verified and can be said to have malign intent. Should such a claim be found in an outlet connected to Russian state actors, it would be added to the database.

The mandate of the East StratCom Task Force is limited to media outlets connected to Russian state actors. Claims made by European individuals or in EU-based media outlets are not covered, unless they are openly attributed to an outlet owned or managed by a Russian state or state-affiliated actor.

All of the current more than 13,000 cases of disinformation in the database have been inputted manually from information provided by a network of experts in EU member states and partnership countries. Each individual case is attached to a "debunk", which explains the lack of factual support for the claim. These cases constitute a corpus of text available for further study. It is possible, for instance, to easily establish that Ukraine has been targeted by Kremlin disinformation more than any other nation in the world. Roughly one-third of the cases concern Ukraine. Among EU member states, Germany and Poland top the list of Kremlin targets. In comparison with their size, the Baltic states are highly over represented.

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1   See for instance Fisher, Walter R. "Human Communication as Narration: Toward a Philosophy of Reason, Value and Action", 1987

2   https://euvsdisinfo.eu/disinformation-cases/

3   https://eeas.europa.eu/sites/default/files/action_plan_against_disinformation.pdf

4   According to the EU Hybrid Fusion Cell, disinformation by the Russian Federation poses the greatest threat to the EU. It is systematic, well-resourced and on a different scale to that of other countries. In terms of coordination, levels of targeting and strategic implications, Russia's disinformation constitutes part of a wider hybrid threat that uses a number of tools and levers, as well as non-state actors.

While the database's individual cases are collated according to their factual rather than narrative function, the totality of the collection can be used to identify narrative patterns. First and foremost, the database exploits certain keywords. It is easy to identify the number of cases devoted to the topic of NATO[5] or to the COVID-19 pandemic,[6] to various countries and in which languages. Identifying the narratives, however, demands an entirely different approach.

A "narrative" is the how in storytelling. In journalism, the term often used is "spin"; in dramaturgy the term is "plot". As noted above, we communicate through narratives. We do not simply relay facts or figures – we express wishes and fears, and other sentiments, and we create relations and a rapport with our interlocutors.

The East StratCom Task Force has experimented with various approaches to identifying the narratives exploited by Kremlin-related media outlets. In an article from May 2019,[7] the team suggests five core narratives. In a series of articles published in the summer of 2021, it explores the concept of storytelling using cases from the database,[8] comparing the Kremlin's disinformation efforts with fairy tale dramaturgy that identifies heroes, monsters, villains and "damsels in distress'.

Both approaches are used to illustrate how disinformation is produced according to fairly predictable templates. Any piece of information can be narrated in a way that is convenient for the producer and familiar to the selected audience. The East StratCom Task Force suggests five core narratives:

> The elites vs the people
> Threatened values
> Threatened Sovereignty
> The imminent collapse
> "Hahaganda" (see below)

The numbering is not supposed to be understood as a hierarchy or a suggestion of the frequency of the use of the narratives in question. An article might also contain several narratives at the same time. It would be wrong to believe that the narratives suggested reflect instructions given to the producers of disinformation. The narratives are beaten tracks in the Russian media landscape. Some of them have been in use for a very long time, in Soviet journalism and in some cases even longer. The expression "The Decaying West" can be traced to 1841, in an essay by the Russian Slavophile writer, Stepan Shevyryov.[9] Using old tropes such as this is comfortable for any writer. Any issue – from migration to unemployment,

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5   https://euvsdisinfo.eu/disinformation-cases/?text=NATO&date=&per_page=

6   https://euvsdisinfo.eu/disinformation-cases/?disinfo_keywords%5B%5D=keyword_106935&date=&per_page=

7   https://euvsdisinfo.eu/5-common-pro-kremlin-disinformation-narratives/

8   https://euvsdisinfo.eu/storytelling-the-disinformation/

9   "In our deeply friendly and close relations with the West we fail to realise that we are dealing with something like a person carrying a malign, contagious disease, surrounded by an atmosphere of dangerous vapours. We kiss him, embrace him, share our spiritual meal with him; we drink our thoughts together.… And in our carefree entertaining of this soon-to-be corpse we do not note the smell of the hidden poison coming from him". https:/ru.m.wikipedia.org/

the COVID-19 pandemic or the availability of a milkshake – can be narrated accordingly. Below, the pandemic is used to study how disinformation is narrated following the East StratCom Task Force's five core narratives.

1. The Elites vs the People

The first example of disinformation on the COVID-19 outbreak in a Kremlin-linked media outlet appeared on 22 January 2020.[10] Russian state-owned news agency Sputnik's Belarusian edition claimed that a new virus, reported in China, had probably been developed in NATO laboratories and the outbreak coincided with the Davos Forum. Sputnik's correspondent reported:

> *I don't believe the appearance either of this virus, or the H1N1 or anything else is a coincidence. This is business, all intended to create a certain political and economic situation.*

This claim, put forward almost two months before the World Health Organisation (WHO) declared the COVID-19 outbreak a pandemic, has since become a bread-and-butter COVID-19 conspiracy theory. At its core is the claim that covert decision makers are working in the shadows, hidden behind veils, as hidden elites. The "proofs" of the existence of such elites are usually limited to mentions of certain individuals or organisations: the Davos Forum,[11] the WHO,[12] George Soros,[13] the Rothschild Family,[14], Bill Gates,[15] and so on.

The appeal of this narrative is obvious. Very few of us feel we have full control over our lives. The notion of powerful rulers behind veils has a timeless and universal appeal. Different eras have had different hidden elites. The narrative of elites vs the people functions as a template that does not require any proof to prop up the claim. The producers of disinformation can comfortably leave it to the reader to fill in the blanks with a foe of their choice. When pro-Kremlin media outlets mention George Soros or Rothschild, part of the audience reads "the Jews", another reads "the capitalists", "the corporations", and so on.

This narrative allows its reproducers to quickly shape a message that resonates with the audience. The subject matter can vary but the overall story is the same. Another example is when the state-owned news agency RIA Novosti narrates a shortage of milkshakes in the UK as a looming food shortage in Western Europe triggered by "US and the Corporations":[16]

> *An induced deficit and a subsequent price hike on foodstuffs, hunger riots – all are elements of classical methods to create "controlled chaos" in different countries.*

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10   https://euvsdisinfo.eu/report/a-new-chinese-coronavirus-was-likely-elaborated-in-nato-biolabs

11   https://euvsdisinfo.eu/report/the-coronavirus-moves-us-towards-a-totalitarian-state-of-the-world-and-the-introduction-of-agenda-id2020

12   https://euvsdisinfo.eu/disinformation-cases/?disinfo_keywords%5B%5D=keyword_77285&date=&per_page=

13   https://euvsdisinfo.eu/disinformation-cases/?disinfo_keywords%5B%5D=keyword_77169&date=&per_page=

14   https://euvsdisinfo.eu/disinformation-cases/?disinfo_keywords%5B%5D=keyword_77385&date=&per_page=

15   https://euvsdisinfo.eu/disinformation-cases/?disinfo_keywords%5B%5D=keyword_83255&date=&per_page=

16   https://euvsdisinfo.eu/report/the-government-and-the-corporations-in-the-us-are-creating-food-riots-in-europe

In this case, the subject matter is a BBC report[17] that the fast food chain McDonald's was facing difficulties with logistics in Great Britain due to the shortage of delivery drivers after Brexit.

2. Threatened Values

The perception of "our times" as a period of moral degradation and decay is as old as humanity itself. The Kremlin-linked media frequently exploits this narrative, describing the moral decay of the West while Russia has supposedly preserved genuine European virtues of family values and decency. Russia's President, Vladimir Putin, frequently refers to Russia as a bulwark of tradition. Russia's current security doctrine contains a chapter entirely devoted to the preservation of "Russia's spiritual and moral values, its culture and historical memory".[18]

> *Russia's traditional spiritual, moral, cultural and historical values are being actively attacked by the United States and its allies, and by transnational corporations, foreign NGOs, religious, extremist and terrorist organisations. They apply influence through psychology and information on individuals, groups and society as a whole through the distribution of social and moral standards that are foreign to the traditions, convictions and beliefs of the peoples of the Russian Federation.*

> *Information-psychological sabotage and "Westernisation" of the culture amplify the threats against the cultural sovereignty of the Russian Federation. Attempts to falsify Russian and world history have become more frequent, as have the distortion of historical truth, the destruction of historical memory, and the instigation of inter-ethnic and inter-religious conflicts.*

The centre of gravity of this narrative is the concept of "Liberalism", which in the Kremlin's terminology is an extremist ideology with close ties to fascism. Liberals attack Russia because the country is virtually the last defender of real values. Liberalism is the enemy of all that is sacred to mankind. Russian state television claims that Liberalism advocates cannibalism.[19]

This narrative tends to assume a rather high pitch, evoking perceptions that Satan himself stands behind the Western world.[20] Such rhetoric is highly prevalent in certain strata of the pro-Kremlin disinformation ecosystem. A notable example is the media holding owned by the Kremlin loyalist oligarch, Konstantin Malofeev.[21]

The pandemic is narrated as a deliberate attempt to create a "New World Order" ruled by an unelected elite, and as imposing values foreign to Russia and decent people worldwide. The database reproduces a quote from the Journal of the New Eastern Outlook, which is

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17   https://www.bbc.com/news/business-58315152

18   https://www.consultant.ru/document/cons_doc_LAW_389271/1e2b5c5fc29c839c457c3d876e9cc7b475bc7d45/

19   https://euvsdisinfo.eu/report/liberals-advocate-cannibalism

20   https://euvsdisinfo.eu/report/the-treacherous-west-is-destroying-russia-by-injecting-atheism-into-it-while-the-ukrainians-are-turning-the-christian-world-to-satan

21   https://jamestown.org/program/hot-issue-konstantin-malofeev-fringe-christian-orthodox-financier-of-the-donbas-separatists/

managed by Russia's Academy of Sciences:[22]

> *The Diabolical Masters of Darkness, who invented and launched this COVID-19 pandemic, are nothing less than murderers. Mass-murderers, that is. They are committing mass genocide on a worldwide scale in proportions unknown in recent history of humankind. And this to dominate a world under a New World Order, aiming at a massively reduced world population.*

3. Threatened Sovereignty

The narrative on threats to sovereignty illustrates how disinformation can be shaped into a dialogue between the Kremlin and selected audiences abroad. Obviously, the narrative is also present when the Kremlin reaches out to a domestic audience, as shown in the National Security Strategy quoted above, but filtering information for an international audience that suggests threats to national sovereignty and independence has proved effective. The term "sovereigntist" has rooted itself in the European political discourse, and several Eurosceptic political parties in Europe identify themselves as such.[23]

The core of this narrative is that the Russian state is virtually the only sovereign country still in existence. Only Russia can provide true independence to its allies.[24] Other countries, be they Germany,[25] Ukraine[26] or the Baltic states[27], are "really controlled by foreign masters". This narrative is very similar to the elites vs the people narrative.

The narrative of threatened sovereignty has been used successfully in several high-profile cases: Brexit being one example and the Scottish referendum another. The EU[28] and NATO[29] are described as "threats to the independence" of sovereign states. Even the COVID-19 pandemic has been narrated as a threat to national sovereignty.[30]

In the case of the pandemic, the trope that the virus was deliberately spread to undermine sovereign countries' independence makes frequent appearances, as in this quote from geopolitica.ru, an outlet owned by the oligarch Konstantin Malofeev:[31]

> *The coronavirus pandemic may be the result of US biological warfare attack against China, Russia and Iran. Zionist neocons have designed a strategy for*

22   https://euvsdisinfo.eu/report/the-masters-of-darkness-who-invented-the-covid-19-pandemic-are-mass-murderers-that-seek-world-domination

23   For a more detailed account on the concept of "sovereignism" and its connection to Kremlin disinformation efforts, see https://euvsdisinfo.eu/disinformation-as-dialogue/

24   https://euvsdisinfo.eu/report/true-belarusian-statehood-and-genuine-independence-are-only-possible-in-the-union-state-with-russia

25   https://euvsdisinfo.eu/report/germany-is-not-a-sovereign-state-it-is-an-occupied-territory

26   https://euvsdisinfo.eu/report/the-us-is-an-external-overlord-of-ukraine

27   https://euvsdisinfo.eu/report/latvia-is-governed-by-the-us-embassy-clerks

28   https://euvsdisinfo.eu/report/the-sovereignty-of-the-eu-countries-is-fiction

29   https://euvsdisinfo.eu/report/nato-liquidates-sovereign-states

30   https://euvsdisinfo.eu/report/to-overcome-coronavirus-implications-poland-may-need-to-become-part-of-big-germany

31   https://euvsdisinfo.eu/report/coronavirus-pandemic-may-be-the-result-of-a-zionist-us-biological-warfare-attack

global domination by means of perpetual wars. This group's motto is "the ends justify the means", and the means include the use of genocidal biological weapons.

4. The Imminent Collapse

Kairos is an element of classic Aristotelian rhetoric. The speaker emphasises the urgency of a crisis in order to obtain support for his or her claims: the enemy is at the gates. The coronavirus pandemic has provided frequent examples of this narrative – that civilisation as we know it is on the verge of collapse. By March 2020, Russian nationalist ideologist Alexander Dugin was already relishing the outbreak, promising the end of the liberal world order.[32]

We are living in the period of the end of liberalism and its "obviousness" as global meta-narrative, the end of its measures and standards. Human societies will soon become free floating: no more dogmas, no more dollar-imperialism, no more free market spells, no more Fed dictatorship or global stock exchanges, no more subservience to the world media elite.

This narrative has strong connections with eschatological ideas in both traditional Christianity and Soviet Communism. The idea of capitalist society's imminent demise was central to Soviet-era propaganda. Virtually every societal challenge in the West has been described as the final blow to capitalist society. Even though Russia is currently a market economy with all traces of socialism carefully erased, the template persists.

Societal challenges do occur. Migration crises, the climate crisis, the pandemic, mass unemployment, there is no shortage of urgent issues, but Western societies have managed to endure despite these challenges. Democracy allows society to bring forward ideas on how to act in times of crisis. The early stages of the pandemic demonstrated very clearly major shortcomings in both national and EU-level preparedness, but the authorities in both managed to adapt and adjust. The migration crisis of 2015– 2016 was undoubtedly a severe test for many European countries, and the pro-Kremlin media attempted to describe the situation as "a final blow" to European states on the verge of a civil war.[33]

The Russian state broadcaster RT has invested heavily in covering the Yellow Vest movement in France, suggesting that the country is on the verge of a societal collapse.[34]

5. "Hahaganda"

The last of the five core narratives identified by the East StratCom Task Force is more of an approach than a narrative. The portmanteau hahaganda combines propaganda with ridicule, sarcasm and humour. The NATO StratCom Center of Excellence in Riga has published a

32 https://euvsdisinfo.eu/the-virus-to-liberate-us-from-freedom/

33 https://euvsdisinfo.eu/report/europe-on-a-verge-of-civil-war

34 https://euvsdisinfo.eu/report/repression-of-the-yellow-vests-in-france-way-more-violent-than-demonstrations-in-russia

paper on humour as an instrument in influencing operations.[35] Hahaganda can be used to discredit foreign leaders or policies. Both Russian state television and official spokespersons poke fun at, first and foremost, women leaders in the West:

> *It is interesting to study who Europe has trusted with the positions as ministers of defence.… A German gynaecologist by the name of Ursula von der Leyen – currently head of the European Commission used to be minister of defence in Germany. Now a lawyer by the name of Christine Lambrecht holds this post. Her colleague in Spain Margarita Robles is also a lawyer. The professional financier Florence Parly is minister of defence in France – a land with nuclear weapons.[36]*

"Hahaganda" is most often used to evade a discussion on a subject. The Skripal Affair, for instance, is often brushed aside using memes and sarcastic comments,[37] which eventually lend something absurd to the attempted assassination. Similar actions can be found when Kremlin-related outlets comment on the poisoning of Aleksei Navalny.[38] Claims of "Russophobia" can also be found in this category. Criticisms of Russia are not fact-based or relevant, but mental deviations promoting confusion and hysteria.

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The five narratives can be combined and mixed, and occasionally all five can be found in the same text. The five core narratives explored by the East StratCom Task Force are primarily an attempt to demonstrate the repetitiveness of disinformation. There are also several other ways to categorise disinformation. A crisis can be comfortably narrated using ancient, well-known tropes. There is no need for much research or analysis to filter any piece of news through a narrative on a conspiracy by the rich and powerful.

A second approach used by the East StratCom Task Force is to study the storytelling used by the disinformation outlets. Journalism – and disinformation – follow certain traditions of human narration. The storytelling approach goes a step deeper than the above-mentioned five narratives, in search of a fundamental story – a starting point in the conceptual world view of the producer of disinformation.

In his ground-breaking work,[39] Christopher Booker explores the fundamentals of storytelling and identifies seven plots present in all human stories. According to Booker, the film Jaws and the epic poem Beowulf have the same basic plot: "overcoming the monster". This is no place to elaborate on Booker's plots,[40] but the method provides an instrument for establishing the worldview of the pro-Kremlin disinformation ecosystem.

The East StratCom Task Force has published a tongue-in-cheek attempt to describe the storytelling of the Kremlin disinformation outlets, identifying the heroes, monsters and villains present in most forms of disinformation. To some degree, the elements of storytelling

35   https://stratcomcoe.org/publications/stratcom-laughs-in-search-of-an-analytical-framework/201

36   https://vesti7.ru/article/2667291/episode/23-01-2022/

37   https://euvsdisinfo.eu/one-year-into-salisbury-drowning-an-assassination-in-sarcasm/

38   https://euvsdisinfo.eu/lets-laugh-at-political-murder/

39   Booker, Christopher, The Seven Basic Plots, 2004

40   Booker suggests that at least one of the following plots is present in all storytelling: Overcoming the monster, Rags to riches, The quest, Voyage and return, Comedy, Tragedy and Rebirth.

correspond with the narratives. The Task Force breaks down the elements according to:

> The Threatened Kingdom
> Threatened values
> Forces of destruction
> The helpless people
> The hero

If the narratives above were focused on topics, these categories highlight the functions of disinformation. Using the storytelling paradigm on the corpus of disinformation, the Task Force extrapolates from a premise of Kremlin disinformation:

Destructive forces controlling the government, money flows and the media threaten the natural order and values of the World. The forces of destruction have subdued the people, Russia has been attacked at several times and brought almost to a point of obliteration. Wise and strong leaders have always managed to make Russia rise again and fight back. Now Russia is mankind's last hope of order and decency, a bastion of Christian values and stability.[41]

This is, of course, not a policy document issued by Kremlin spin doctors, but it is surprisingly close to official doctrines devised by Russian state actors, not least the above-mentioned National Security Strategy. In this myth, Russia is an island of stability and normality, ever ready to support people that struggle in a world of chaos and greed. Here, we must pay special attention to how the 'forces of destruction" are described. A key element is that Russia's enemies are perpetual. The concept of the "Anglo-Saxon" is fundamental to Kremlin disinformation: an enemy of inherent evil.[42]

Anglo-Saxons are predestined to be aggressive and unable to be anything but destructive. The Anglo-Saxons of Kremlin disinformation adhere strictly to the roles of the monster as described by Booker. Depending on the stage of the story, the monster can have three functions: predator, holdfast or avenger. The predator insatiably roams the world hunting for prey.[43] The holdfast lurks in his lair, protecting its riches or guarding its hostage.[44] The Avenger is the challenged monster, forced out of its lair and viscously bent on the pursuit of revenge.[45]

This mythology corresponds with the Kremlin's realist conception of security policy; the great powers can never cooperate but only compete.[46] Great powers can agree on "spheres of influence", but only from a perspective of force. The moment a power demonstrates weakness, the monster will attack.

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41   ttps://euvsdisinfo.eu/storytelling-the-disinformation/

42   https://euvsdisinfo.eu/what-do-the-pro-kremlin-media-mean-by-anglo-saxons/

43   https://euvsdisinfo.eu/report/in-every-country-where-the-anglo-saxons-act-against-civil-wars-are-organised

44   https://euvsdisinfo.eu/report/the-us-and-anglo-saxons-promote-global-totalitarian-caste-system-under-the-cover-of-liberalism

45   https://euvsdisinfo.eu/report/anglo-saxons-change-the-rules-and-cancel-globalization-because-china-began-to-win

46   Putin has referred on several occasions to a quote attributed to the Russian Emperor, Alexander III: "Russia has only two allies: its army and its navy".

The pandemic has clearly demonstrated a readiness to exploit any form of discontent in order to create rapport. Kremlin media outlets have catered to the anti-vaxxer movement abroad, while at the same time – and relatively unsuccessfully – attempting to convince its domestic audience to get vaccinated.[47] The Kremlin disinformation outlets quickly identified the "monsters" in the story of the pandemic: NATO, the World Economic Forum and Anglo-Saxons.

The East StratCom Task Force has been building and maintaining the database on disinformation since the end of 2015. The database has developed, along with its mandate and methods. Between 50 and 90 cases are added to the database every week, building up the corpus of text. Further development of the software and of inputting methods will enable an even more detailed understanding of the dynamics of disinformation and the Kremlin's efforts to reach out to a worldwide audience.

Policy recommendations

> Continue, develop and deepen the analysis of narratives, ideally in cooperation with academia, media organisations and the intelligence community;

> Engage in a dialogue with government agencies, media organisations and the general public to raise awareness of Kremlin narrative techniques;

> Emphasise that democratic public discourse, dissent and debate are key elements of a sustainable democracy.

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47   https://euvsdisinfo.eu/a-chronicle-of-kremlin-contradictions/

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About SCEEUS

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