

# Disinformation as Tool of Information Warfare: Example of Disinformation Against Russia

Xuan Li

Peoples' Friendship University of Russia, Russia  
Jinan University, China

Disinformation has been widely used as an information warfare tool since the Cold War. After Putin came to power in 2000, the disinformation against Russia did not subside with the disintegration of the Soviet Union. Instead, the West launched the third generation of normalized information warfare against Russia, in which disinformation is the main tool. The notion of disinformation results from the subjective interpretation of events, and the ordinary audiences are unconvinced of the information's authenticity. The dissemination of disinformation has a significant effect on the people's minds and behavior. Therefore, Russia listed the online spread of disinformation as one of the main threats to Russia's national information security in 2021. By identifying disinformation to strengthening the overall resilience of societies against these threats, "disinformation" has gradually become a labeling tool to expose propaganda, which meanwhile decline the public trusts in the media and the country that publishes the information.

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"The West unleashed an information war against Russia. The world has moved into the era of disinformation from the era of 'information'," Federal Council President Valentina Matvienko said at the first plenary meeting of the Federation Council in 2022 (Matviyanko, 2022, p. 3), the remarks came as the "Ukrainian crisis" escalated again. Since Putin came to power in 2000, Russian government personnel have repeatedly issued statements that the West is launching an information war against Russia, and this vigilance against information warfare attacks originated the Cold War between the United States and the Soviet Union.

## Western Disinformation Against Russia Stems From Cold War

Disinformation includes "deliberately misleading or biased information; manipulated narrative or facts; propaganda". Disinformation is more subjectively misleading than misinformation, meaning that those who spread disinformation intentionally manipulate the direction of public opinion and change people's mind and behavior. In 2014, President Putin talked about the western media's discourse in his Crimean speech: "The West says it's white today, but says it's black tomorrow."

Disinformation is not a product of this era, but the prevalence of disinformation is closely related to the Cold War between the United States and the Soviet Union. During the Cold War, the United States and Russia

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Xuan Li, Doctoral student, Peoples' Friendship University of Russia, Jinan University. Research fields: international communication; information warfare. E-mail: 592534214@qq.com.

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conducted an all-round confrontation. Among them, information warfare was an important area. The Russian historian Andriy Vsov (Андрей Фурсов) believes that the information warfare against Russia can be traced back to earlier, that is, in 1953, when the United States created the “Radio Liberty” to support the “dissent” against Russia, which means that the United States was the first to launch an information warfare against the Soviet Union (Fursova A., 2013). Besides, America had a lot of plans for large-scale information warfare against the USSR: US Law No. 402 of 1948 requiring the media to exercise systematic influence over public opinion of other peoples; task of directive No. 68 of April 15, 1950 was to “ensure a fundamental change in the nature of the Soviet Union” and to sow the seeds of destruction in the Soviet system, encouraging and supporting unrest in some of the Soviet Union’s strategically disadvantaged neighbors (Craylov E. A., 2016, pp. 116–121).

But during the reigns of Khrushchev and Brezhnev, American propaganda was successfully blocked. After Gorbachev launched perestroika (“restructuring”) and glasnost (“openness”), the United States was able to successfully implement an information warfare that eventually promoted to the disintegration of the Soviet Union.

Ekaterina Petrova (Петрова Екатерина), the chief researcher of the Department of Philosophy of Natural Sciences at Moscow State University, believes that the Information warfare can be either military or non-military in nature. “Non-military” information warfare, that is, the use of information technology by one country to deliberately attack the information, power, management systems, and consciousness of another country, the purpose of which is to impose its culture and ideology on the other rather than adopt military action (Petrova E. C., 2016, p. 429).

In information warfare, fake news is the main form of disinformation. Russian scientist Zinoviev (А. Зиновьев) believes: “The globalized world has formed a new war. Fake news is the main weapon of this war. Fake news has become a new form of information.” Another scientist Parshev (А. Паршев) said: “The essence of globalization is an invisible war in which other countries create fake news.” (Zaldasbaeva Aizhamal, 2020, pp. 117–119).

### **The West Wages the Third Generation of Normalized Information Warfare Against Russia: Disinformation Is the Main Tool**

In 2016, Dmitry Peskov, the Press Secretary for the President of Russia, pointed out that “now we are in a state of information warfare, an information confrontation with the trendsetters in the field of information, mainly the Anglo-Saxon media” (Peskov D., 2016). In the 1998 “Strategic Information Warfare Rising” report, the American “Rand” Corporation classified information confrontation into the first and second generations. Among them, the first generation of information confrontation emphasizes more targeted activities to disrupt the opponent’s system, rather than the use of traditional force means; the second generation of information confrontation is “a brand new strategy, caused by the information revolution, where the information space and many other domains are introduced. The execution period can be divided into weeks, months and years.” (Shatillo I. C. & Cherkasov V. N., 2009).

The third generation of information warfare is mainly based on disinformation. From the experience of the history of the disintegration of the Soviet Union, the most important principle for launching information warfare is that the intruder constantly expands the controlled information space, bypasses the established moral standards and rules, deliberately violates all social restrictions, and erodes moral principles.

In March 2021, Andrei Ilitsky, an advisor to the Russian minister of defense, put forward the theory of “Mental War”, arguing that the “Mental War” of the United States against Russia is a kind of strategy aimed at

changing the self-perception of the Russian people, destroying the Russians' national identity and their foundation of spiritual field Russian national civilization. The probability of a "Mental War" between the United States and Russia in the next ten years is far greater than that of an armed war.<sup>1</sup>

The concept of "Mental War" is similar to the Pentagon's positioning of special operations in 1956, when then-General Troxel said: "Special methods of warfare combine the methods of psychological operations with various other means aimed at destroying the enemy from within. Combined together." This method was fully used in the Cold War and the Vietnam War. After the Vietnam War, Americans made great strides in their ability to wage psychological warfare, as well as in the way they reached audiences and interacted with so-called independent media. For example, during the Georgia War in August 2008, the United States used foreign media to portray Russia as an aggressor against Georgia.<sup>2</sup> Although the term "psychological operations" was renamed "Military Information Support Operations" twice in June 2010 and 2015, it was finally changed back to "psychological operations" in 2017. It can be said that American psychological warfare is mainly carried out under the guidance of the military.

The understanding from information warfare to mental warfare means that the confrontation in the information field has become more intense and targeted. Russia is the main target of this informational attack. And in addition to the US military that launched psychological warfare, the Information and Psychological Operations (IPSO) of the Ukrainian Armed Forces Command is also at the forefront of the attack, the Czech Republic's 103rd CIMIC/PSYOPS (Center for Information Management, Integration, and Connectivity/psychological operations) is also active against Russia. Their psychological warfare operations are overseen and directed by the NATO Strategic Communications Center in Riga, the NATO Cyber Center, Special Operations Command, and the Pentagon's Fourth Information Operations Group.

The main tool to launch information warfare against Russia is disinformation. Disinformation is the most important and effective tool among all the measure in information warfare (Brusnitsin N. A., 2001, p. 30). In 2021, the Russian Defense Minister Sergey Shoigu said that the West has deployed an entire training center for information attacks on Russia. The first are the propaganda and strategic centers in Riga, Tallinn, and Warsaw. Their main job is to fabricate and spread various rumors in Russia, and to train dozens of Russian citizens to subvert the government in Russia.<sup>3</sup>

In addition, some other institutions in the West also spread disinformation or conduct black propaganda through social networks against Russia. Among them, "Workshop of bloggers" ("Мастерская блогеров"), "School of local self-government" ("Школа местного самоуправления") and other institutions successfully carried out so-called "election preparations", but it is actually training extremists to prepare for street riots. After Vladimir Putin participated in the 2012 presidential election, information pressure on Russia from the United States and Western countries has increased significantly. With the help of foreign funds and a domestic "fifth column", the "White Ribbon" movement (Белая Лента), which is the symbol of Russia's 2011–2013 protest movement, attempted to implement a color revolution in Russia. After a series of counter-rallies organized by

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<sup>1</sup> Advisor to Russian Defense Minister warns of "mental war": Who is waging it and against whom?, available online at: <https://jamestown.org/program/advisor-to-russian-defense-minister-warns-of-mental-war-who-is-waging-it-and-against-whom/>.

<sup>2</sup> Как западные спецслужбы ведут информационную войну против России (How western intelligence agencies launch an information war against Russia), available online at: <https://news.rambler.ru/other/43831134-kak-zapadnye-spetssluzhby-vedut-informatsionnyu-voynu-protiv-rossii/>.

<sup>3</sup> Шойгу рассказал о центрах антироссийской пропаганды в Европе (Shoigu talks about the centers of anti-Russian propaganda in Europe), available online at: <https://ria.ru/20210806/propaganda-1744625304.html>.

Patriots and supporters of the current government, the White Ribbon Revolution failed. Its leaders were ultimately discredited and the “Opposition Coordinating Council” collapsed. However, many participants of the White Ribbon continue their anti-Russian activities today, despite the damage to their reputations. And the pro-western rallies also continued in Moscow (Craylov E. A., 2016, pp. 116–121).

Alexandra Grabernikov (Александр Грабельников), professor at the Department of Journalism from the People’s Friendship University of Russia, said that at this stage, the information warfare carried out by the West against Russia has penetrated into almost every aspect, such as the delivery of natural gas from Russia to Europe. Unlike the Soviet period, the reason why the West, especially the United States, is conducting information warfare at this stage is that it has lost its leading position in the world. Therefore, the information warfare is carried out to urge the targeted countries to act as they want.

### **The Judgment of Disinformation in Information Warfare Is Subjective**

Compared with disinformation in the scientific and social fields, the judgment criteria of disinformation in information warfare are more subjective and difficult to verify. For example, in the Covid-19 epidemic, a series of rumors such as “wearing a mask is not conducive to epidemic prevention” are relatively easy to be verified by scientists and quickly refuted. However, the judgment of false information in information warfare is highly subjective, because disinformation in information warfare is usually provocative and resonant, and the viral spread of disinformation is mainly because it creates a kind of emotions and it is difficult for ordinary citizens to judge the actual situation.<sup>4</sup>

Andrey Manoilo (Андрей Манойло), professor at the Department of Politics from Moscow State University, said, “Fake news is information that is deliberately created, which usually draws information from the context of resonant events, with the sole purpose of creating excitement.” Combining media and “Virus” technology and transmission mechanism in social networks, fake news in modern political movements are becoming a kind of dangerous tool to influence people’s mind. The main task of fake news in modern political movements and processes is to set the political agenda, then create general buzz around informational events generated by fake news itself. In some cases, extremists can use “fake” news to create socio-political tensions, spark panic and protests, which pose a major threat to national security.<sup>5</sup>

Some Russian scholars have compared the image of Russia in the Western media and the events from the Russian perspective when Russia intervened in the Syrian civil war in September 2015.

From the Following table, we can see the difference between the facts from the Russian perspective and the discourse constructed by Western media. The information constructed from the interests of the West is disinformation in Russia’s opinion, on the other hand, the West called the “facts” from the Russian perspective fiction, which means “fakeness” of disinformation in information warfare is more reflected in the interpretation of different events, that is, the distortion of the interpretation of the purpose of the action, such as “Russian intervention at the request of the authorities” is understood as “aggression”, or the emphasis on negative cases, such as “All Russian artillery shells are ineffective and endanger the lives of the people”, to generalize. This set

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<sup>4</sup> “Фейковые новости” как метод перехвата информационной повестки в условиях современного информационного противоборства (“Fake news” as a method of intercepting the information agenda in the context of modern information confrontation), available online at: <https://nstarikov.ru/fejkovye-novosti-kak-metod-perehvata-informacionnoj-povestki-v-uslovijah-sovremenno-go-informacionnogo-protivoborstva-112296>.

<sup>5</sup> Фейки – часть глобальных информационных войн (Fakes are part of the global information wars), available online at: <https://news.myseldon.com/ru/news/index/242514208>.

of words is basically similar in events such as “Ukraine crisis” and “Belarus/Kazakhstan anti-government protests”. Denis Denisov, director of the Institute for Peacekeeping Initiatives and Conflictology, believes that the United States and its partners need to cement Russia’s image in the minds of Ukrainian citizens as an aggressor and a country that could wage war against them.<sup>6</sup>

Events from the Russian perspective	Image of Russia in the Western media
Russia joins fight against IS at Syrian leader’s request	Russia joins fight against IS at Syrian leader’s request Russia goes to war in Syria without world authorization
Russia respects Syria’s sovereignty as it treats other countries	Russia wants to save the dictator, just like it has always done
Russia protects the interests of its southern border and the Eurasian Economic Union	Russia wants to annex the Middle East (e.g., Ukraine)
Russia wants to ensure regional peace	Russia is a natural aggressor
Russian Air Force cracks down on IS group and other terrorist groups	Russia is bombing moderate opposition; Russia strikes civilian buildings, mosques, schools
Russia conducted effective strikes on fixed targets from the air	Russian missiles landed in Iran and did not reach Syria, their missiles flew past the target or did not explode at all
Russia protects Syria in anti-IS operation and prevents large numbers of refugees from fleeing to Western countries	Russia’s crackdown prompts refugees to flee to Europe in retaliation for European economic sanctions
Russia destroyed IS infrastructure, including hydrocarbon black market	Russia bombed IS to raise world oil prices
Russia shows world its military capability to abide by international law and defend national interest	Russia seeks retaliation after Ukraine Crisis
Russia is not fighting the war against the Sunnis in the Middle East, but to protect the true Islam and fight against terrorists and extremist Islamists	Russia supports Shiites, opposes Sunnis

In August 2020, the Department’s Global Engagement Center (GEC) of US government published “Pillars in Russia’s Disinformation and Propaganda Ecosystem” in six languages, proposing five pillars of Russian disinformation: official government communication; state-funded global messaging; cultivation of proxy sources; weaponization of social media; and cyber-enabled disinformation. Two years later, on January 20, 2022, the US State Department released a series of reports on Russian disinformation, proposing five major disinformation themes in Russia: “Russia is an innocent victim”; historical revisionism; “Western civilization is about to collapse” “Mass movements are US-sponsored ‘color revolutions’”; reality is arbitrarily defined by the Kremlin. They also accused Russia’s foreign propaganda media RT and Russia’s largest satellite news agency, the state-directed media, of spreading Russian rhetoric to foreign audiences, and regularly amplifying content from several other parts of Russia’s disinformation ecosystem, including websites linked to Russian intelligence.<sup>7</sup> Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov said that the report could not stand any critical analysis and that the report itself is a lie.<sup>8</sup>

The subjectivity of disinformation judgment criteria makes it difficult to verify, and the general audience cannot understand the full picture of the situation. Western media can create a “mimic image” of “Russian invaders”, and in the eyes of Western media, the facts from the Russian perspective have become “disinformation”. The completely different interpretations of the two have led to completely different understandings by the audiences of different countries, and the differences of opinion have further widened and

<sup>6</sup> Аналитик: Против России развязана гибридная информационная война (Analyst: Launch a mixed information war against Russia), available online at: <https://www.politnavigator.net/analitik-protiv-rossii-razvyazana-gibridnaya-informacionnaya-vojna.html>.

<sup>7</sup> Disarming disinformation: Our shared responsibility, available online at: <https://www.state.gov/disarming-disinformation/>.

<sup>8</sup> Лавров начал переговоры с блинченом с едкой шутки о сотрудниках госдепа (Lavrov started negotiations with Blinken with a catering joke about state department employees), available online at: [https://by.tsargrad.tv/news/lavrov-nachal-peregovory-s-blinkenom-s-edkoj-shutki-o-sotrudnikah-gosdepa\\_481890](https://by.tsargrad.tv/news/lavrov-nachal-peregovory-s-blinkenom-s-edkoj-shutki-o-sotrudnikah-gosdepa_481890).

are difficult to narrow.

### **Conclusion: “Disinformation” Has Become a Label Tool for Russia to Expose — Propaganda in Information Warfare**

“Disinformation” is gradually becoming a label tool for exposing propaganda after “foreign agents”, and the government has become the main body of exposing disinformation in the information warfare. At the same time, the information of the two sides is often referred to as “dis information” in each respective, because the judgment of false information is subjective and difficult to verify. Merely stating that “this is not the fact” is not enough to effectively combat the attack of disinformation. Under these conditions, “disinformation” becomes a label. After being labeled as “disinformation”, the credibility of the media that publishes the news and the country to which it belongs will be weakened, thereby further losing its discourse right in international events. And the republics of the Russian Federation have responded unanimously to disinformation under the guidance of the government.

In order to deal with the offensive of disinformation, in the new version of the “National Security Strategy” released in July 2021, Russia listed “information security” as a national strategic priority for the first time, and included the online spread of disinformation in the current Russian national information security one of the main threats. According to relevant Russian laws, individuals who does not constitute a crime to create but spread disinformation, will face a fine of up to 400,000 rubles (1 US dollar is about 122 rubles), and officials and legal entities will be subject to administrative penalties of up to 900,000 and 10 million rubles respectively; if the act constitutes a crime, the offender faces up to 5 years in prison.

The punishment for disinformation is more severe than the punishment for “foreign agents”. Russia’s latest legislation on “foreign agents” was on December 30, 2020, “Amendment to the Law on Supplementary Measures for Responses to National Security Threats”, which was introduced to improve the management of foreign agents’ activities, also known as the “New Foreign Agents Law”. Although foreign agents are listed as a “state threat” earlier than disinformation, Russia’s maximum penalty for foreign agents is 500,000 rubles, while the penalty for disinformation starts at 400,000 rubles. Moreover, there is no establishment of criminal responsibility for foreign agents in Russia’s “New Foreign Agents Law”. Putin therefore believes that Russia’s “Foreign Agents Law” is much more liberal than the American version of “Foreign Agents Law” and demanded that this version of the law be re-examined and that criminal responsibility be introduced. For disinformation, the Russian procuratorate will investigate the administrative or criminal responsibility of the corresponding responsible subjects according to the specific illegal circumstances and the consequences.

After Putin announced the special military operation on February 24 with the Russian-Ukraine conflict escalation, disinformation against the Russian army was rampant. On March 4, (Roskomnadzor) the Russian media regulator announced the ban on Facebook, Twitter and a number of Western media. On the same day, Russian President Vladimir Putin signed an amendment to the Criminal Code of the Russian Federation, which will severely punish disinformation involving the Russian military.

It stipulates that anyone who publicly and knowingly publishes disinformation about the Russian Armed Forces can be punished with up to three years in prison or a fine of 1.5 million rubles. Those who use their public office to violate the relevant laws for reasons of employment, or based on political, ideological, racial, ethnic, or religious hatred are punishable by imprisonment for up to 10 years or a fine of up to 5 million rubles. If the disinformation has serious consequences, the sentence is 10 to 15 years in prison.

Compared with the previous regulations, the new regulations make a special interpretation of the punishment for disinformation against the Russian military, and the prison time has also increased from a maximum of 5 years to a maximum of 15 years. The harsher punishment is to ensure the justice of Russia's special military operations and reduce domestic anti-war voices. The anti-war voices try to create an image of Russian troops killing innocents, similar to the 2008 conflict in South Ossetia, Georgia, when a South Ossetian girl told Fox News that Russian peacekeepers saved her from an attack by Georgian soldiers, "Fox News" did not report this. The scene of the Georgian armed forces installing artillery shells, shot by RT, was used by CNN to prove that the Russian army was bombing Georgia.

So in the 2022 Russian-Ukrainian conflict, the western countries tried to prevent RT and Sputnik from reporting. The reason is that many Russian journalists are on the front line of the conflict and have access to first-hand reporting materials, while Western media reporters are difficult to access the front of the conflict, and lack of first-hand information makes more likelihood for them to make fake news, which lead to what the spokesman for the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation Zakharova calls "the day of Western propaganda failure".

It is foreseeable that disinformation, as an "offensive tool" in Western information warfare, will become a "labeling tool" for its self-defense under the identification of Russia. In the future, strict control of disinformation and the effective combination of foreign agents will make Russia more vigilant against Western disinformation attacks and have stronger defense capabilities in information warfare.

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