



Countering the Threat of Russian Disinformation in Canada

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Exercise Solo Flight

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COUNTERING THE THREAT OF RUSSIAN DISINFORMATION IN CANADA

Introduction

Notable in Canada's recently released defence policy, *Our North, Strong and Free*, was recognition of the threat that foreign nations pose within Canada, operating below the threshold of conflict.¹ The threat from Russia in particular was noted due to its global disinformation campaigns and cyber intrusions.² NATO defines disinformation as: "information which is intended to mislead," which is distinct from misinformation, which is "false or inaccurate information," but which might not have been intended to deceive. Disinformation in this way can be seen as a key component of enemy propaganda, which NATO defines as: "Information, especially of a biased or misleading nature, used to promote a political cause or point of view."³ It is hard to over-state the reach and influence of Russian disinformation campaigns.

As a telling example, we can look to the United States, where in October 2023, President Biden asked the U.S. Congress to pass a \$60 billion dollar aid package for Ukraine. This aid was intended to ensure that Ukraine would be able to continue purchasing such things as artillery shells and anti-air munitions critical to fending off Russian advances (purchases that would include sales from U.S. factories). There was much discussion about this request throughout the fall, with resistance from some Republican members. This prompted President Zelinsky to visit Washington in December 2023, to personally lobby for the much-needed aid.⁴ During the visit, he was asked to address allegations of corruption in Ukraine. According to one Republican Senator, this was brought up as some members were concerned that aid to Ukraine would not be used for munitions but would instead be used to "buy yachts" for its leaders.⁵

It turns out that this idea (that aid to Ukraine was being misused by Ukraine's leaders to buy yachts), was one of the disinformation themes pushed by a Russian propaganda outlet (DC Weekly) a month earlier, in November 2023.⁶ While the story was completely false, it was picked-up by other outlets and reportedly circulated in Republican circles in the U.S., where it apparently successfully influenced members of U.S. Congress and contributed to the delay of aid being provided to Ukraine.⁷ In April, 2024, the Chair of the U.S. House Intelligence Committee, Republican Mike Turner spoke to media about the reach of Russian disinformation, saying "It is absolutely true we see, directly coming from Russia, attempts to mask communications that are anti-Ukraine and pro-Russia messages, some of which we even hear being uttered on the House

¹ Government of Canada. "Our North Strong and Free: A Renewed Vision for Canada's Defence." National Defence. 08 Apr 2024. P.36

² Government of Canada. "Our North Strong and Free... P6.

³ North Atlantic Treaty Organization Standards Office. "NATO Term, The Official NATO Terminology Database."

⁴ Liptak, Kevin; Saenz, Arlette; Lee, MJ. "Zelensky's latest Washington visit comes at critical moment for Ukraine on the battlefield and Capitol Hill." CNN. Dec 12, 2023.

⁵ Barrett, Ted. "Zelensky addressed concerns about corruption in Ukraine during all-senators meeting." CNN. Dec 12, 2023.

⁶ Olmstead, Molly. "With Republicans Like These, Who Needs Russian Propaganda?" Slate, Apr 20, 2024.

⁷ Olmstead, Molly. "With Republicans Like These..."

floor.”⁸ It wasn’t until the end of April 2024 that the aid package was finally approved through Congress and signed by President Biden.

Throughout the winter, Russia took advantage of this delay to take Avdiivka, with Ukraine forced to pull back due to ammunition shortages.⁹ According to the Institute for the Study of War, Russia was able to seize 360² kilometres of territory between January and April alone.¹⁰ In summary, Russia successfully used disinformation to influence some of the political leaders of Ukraine’s largest backer, with influence extending into Congress itself, and leveraged this for advantage on the battlefields of Ukraine.

This is part of a broader trend from Russia, which was called out by NATO on May 02, 2024, for conducting operations on Allied soil and through proxies that include “sabotage, acts of violence, cyber and electronic interference, disinformation campaigns, and other hybrid operations.”¹¹ The threat of Russian propaganda or disinformation however is not new. Russian capability in the global disinformation space is well documented, particularly in the Baltic region of Europe,¹² offering examples that Canada can draw from to counter this threat.

This paper will examine some of the techniques that Russia has employed, and the lessons that have been learned by the Baltic countries countering them. We will review measures that Canada has already taken to help raise public awareness and counter Russia, measures that build on some of these lessons learned. Finally, we will discuss additional measures that could also be taken to further bolster our defences against this threat.

Through this examination, this paper will demonstrate that while Defence institutions have a role to play in this domain, effectively countering disinformation requires effort by more than one department, or even a whole of government effort. An effective defence requires awareness and cooperative efforts across society, much as would be required in a ‘total war’ scenario – because in the information domain, warfare is not confined to the battlefield. It extends across society, targeting hearts, minds, and the will to fight; far before bullets ever start flying.

Russian Disinformation Pattern

Russia has a history of conducting disinformation campaigns in the Baltics, stemming from the Soviet Union’s occupation in the 1940s. Since then, the Soviets have re-written history

⁸ Lotz, Avery. “House Intelligence Committee Chair says Russian propaganda has spread through parts of GOP.” CNN, Apr 7, 2024.

⁹ Goudreau, Claire. “Will U.S. Aid Change the Trajectory of the War in Ukraine?” HUB John Hopkins University, Apr 30, 2024.

¹⁰ Kagan, Frederick W. “America’s Stark Choice in Ukraine and the Cost of Letting Russia Win.” Institute for the Study of War, Apr 16, 2024.

¹¹ North Atlantic Treaty Organization. “Statement by the North Atlantic Council on recent Russian hybrid activities.” Newsroom, Official Texts. May 02, 2024.

¹² Thompson, Terry. “Countering Russian disinformation the Baltic nations’ way.” The Conversation, 09 Jan 2019.

books and national anthems to create perceived links to the Soviet Union, settled Ethnic Russians there and changed the language taught in schools to Russian.¹³

More recently, after Estonia moved a statue that honoured Soviet soldiers in 2007, Russia responded with a massive cyber-attack, and bussed Russian speakers across the border to protest what they falsely referred to as Nazism.¹⁴

In 2008, Russia employed cyber-attacks and disinformation tactics prior to invading Georgia. Then in 2013, General Gerasimov, the head of the Russian Armed Forces, penned an article on the utility of employing such measures to achieve strategic outcomes, in what would become known as the Gerasimov Doctrine.¹⁵ A year later, Russia appeared to leverage this doctrine with a comprehensive disinformation campaign waged prior to seizing Crimea.¹⁶ Fast forward to 2022, and Russia once again employed a disinformation campaign prior to its full-scale invasion of Ukraine.¹⁷

Widespread Russian disinformation campaigns, be they tied to military activity or not, continue to this day. In February 2024, France accused Russia of what it called ‘hostile disinformation manoeuvres’ against backers of Ukraine, with 193 websites spreading disinformation.¹⁸ In March 2024, a Canadian Committee heard about foreign interference, including Russian, taking the form of election meddling, propaganda, and disinformation tactics.¹⁹

Thus, we see that Russia has historically leveraged disinformation campaigns for its strategic objectives, and is continuing to do so today.

Russian Disinformation in the Baltics

In the Baltics, Russian disinformation campaigns have sought to leverage the cognitive dimension to foster positive views of Russia and create rifts with local governments through the misrepresentation of history.²⁰ For this they have utilized narratives that suggest that the Baltics are failing states, puppets of the US, fascist, and anti-Russian.²¹

¹³ Thompson, Terry. “Countering Russian disinformation....”

¹⁴ Gerdziunas, Benas. “Baltics battle Russia in online disinformation war.” *Deutsche Welle*. Lithuania. 10 Aug 2017.

¹⁵ Ng, Nicole; Rumer, Eugene. “The West Fears Russia’s Hybrid Warfare. They’re Missing the Bigger Picture.” Carnegie Endowment for International Peace. Jul 3, 2019.

¹⁶ Ng, Nicole; Rumer, Eugene. “The West Fears Russia’s Hybrid Warfare...”

¹⁷ Perez, Christian; Nair, Anjanya. “Information Warfare in Russia’s War in Ukraine - The Role of Social Media and Artificial Intelligence in Shaping Global Narratives.” *Foreign Policy*. Aug 22, 2022.

¹⁸ The Associated Press. “France accuses Russia of disinformation campaign in key election year.” *The Globe and Mail*. 12 Feb 2024.

¹⁹ Coyne, Andrew. “On foreign interference, Canada has been a sitting duck.” *The Globe and Mail*. 29 Mar 2024.

²⁰ Thomas, Matthew. “Baltic Bulletin - Defeating Disinformation Threats.” Foreign Policy Research Institute, Eurasia Program, 19 Feb 2020.

²¹ Thomas, Matthew. “Baltic Bulletin...”

Russia has employed a variety of methods to push these narratives, including official discourse, press releases, announcements, and speeches, intended to make the claims seem credible.²² It has leveraged state sponsored news outlets including Sputnik News in the Baltics since 2016, which appear to be legitimate news sources while broadcasting propaganda, and reaching an audience that can be missed by traditional media.²³

Russia also leverages Russian-language bots, or social media accounts that are engineered to flood the information sphere with disinformation. Some accounts are unattributed, which provides Russia with a level of deniability, while others are from third party social media influencers, or sites that have a significant number of followers.²⁴ Recently, Russia has started to also release social media posts in Latvian, further extending their reach and influence.²⁵ The social media networks Russia uses have in some cases been developed over decades, leveraging both official and proxy channels.²⁶ To quantify the pervasiveness of this, one study by NATO's Strategic Communications Centre of Excellence, found that 10% Russian-speaking social network users generate 70% of the ideological information on those networks.²⁷

While disinformation has been around for decades, the advent of artificial intelligence is definitely changing the game. It is being used, for example, to create deep-fake videos that show real people saying and doing things that never occurred. Shortly after their full-scale invasion of Ukraine, Moscow leveraged this technology, to release a video of Ukrainian President Zelensky purportedly stating that he was fleeing the country, and calling on members of the military to lay down their arms claiming that fighting the Russians would be hopeless.²⁸ Had the video not been poorly made, it might have caused significant confusion and impaired Ukraine's defence.

Artificial Intelligence is also being used to generate articles that are designed to manipulate audiences.²⁹ In May 2024, a report issued by Recorded Future found that Russia had leveraged Artificial Intelligence to re-write previously published articles with a particular bias, with 19,000 posts translated into English and French, released across 11 websites in March of 2024 alone.³⁰ One article which claimed that Ukraine's President Zelensky had purchased a house from King Charles was viewed 250,000 times in a span of 24-hours.³¹ This outlandish claim is

²² Government of Canada. "Russia's use of disinformation and information manipulation." Global Affairs Canada. Last Modified 28 Feb 2024.

²³ Gerdziunas, Benas. "Baltics battle Russia in online disinformation war...."

²⁴ Government of Canada. "Russia's use of disinformation and information manipulation." Global Affairs Canada. Last Modified 28 Feb 2024.

²⁵ Inge, Sprunge. "Pro-Kremlin 'bots' are starting to speak Latvian." Public broadcasting of Latvia. Mar 12, 2024.

²⁶ Foreign Policy

²⁷ Teperik, Dmitri, Senkiv, Grigori, Bertolin, Giorgio, Kononova, Kateryna, Dek, Anton. "Virtual Russian World in the Baltics: Psycholinguistic Analysis of Online Behaviour and Ideological Content among Russian-Speaking Social Media Users in the Baltic States." National Centre of Defence & Security Awareness, Estonia, NATO Strategic Communications Centre of Excellence, Latvia, Singularex, Ltd., Ukraine. 21 May 2018.

²⁸ Pearson, James; Zinets, Natalia. "Deepfake footage purports to show Ukrainian president capitulating." Reuters. March 17, 2022. www.reuters.com/world/europe/deepfake-footage-purports-show-ukrainian-president-capitulating-2022-03-16/

²⁹ Government of Canada. "Our North Strong and Free... P8.

³⁰ The Economist. "A Russia-linked network uses AI to rewrite real news stories." Science and Technology, The Economist. May 10, 2024. www.economist.com/science-and-technology/2024/05/10/a-russia-linked-network-uses-ai-to-rewrite-real-news-stories

³¹ The Economist. "A Russia-linked network..."

part of a broader narrative being pushed by Russia designed to reduce international support for Ukraine, such as the article released by the same outlet that falsely claimed that President Zelensky had purchased two mega-yachts with aid sent to Ukraine.³²

Lessons Learned from the Baltics

As much as Russia has spent years waging disinformation campaigns against the Baltic countries, Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania, these countries have also spent years working to counter these efforts, which offers examples of best practices and lessons learned that Canada can potentially draw from.

Promoting Audience Resilience

The Baltic countries have long recognized that they are under threat of Russian disinformation, which has helped to increase their resilience. Ignorance of the threat of disinformation can make an audience much more vulnerable to it. When an audience is aware that news reports can't always be trusted, and that other nations are actively trying to leverage disinformation against them, they can be more resilient to its effects. Estonia's foreign news service helps to promote audience resilience by publishing annual reports on the threats facing the country, including from Russian disinformation.³³

International Collaboration

The Baltic countries have also leveraged international collaboration to advance concepts and strategies to counter Russian influence, working both within the NATO and European Union frameworks. A year after Estonia was hit by the massive Russian cyber attack in 2007, it worked with NATO to found the Cooperative Cyber Defence Centre of Excellence. In 2014, Latvia established the NATO Strategic Communications Centre of Excellence in Riga. In 2015, the Baltic countries joined their EU counterparts in creating EUvsDisinfo, a website and social media outlet that is geared to raising awareness of disinformation through fact-checking and verifying published information.³⁴ Another website, Debunk.EU, works with volunteers and foreign services to analyze 20,000 articles a day looking for evidence of disinformation.³⁵ By working together with international partners, they have helped to foster greater awareness of the threat of Russian disinformation, and increase resilience to it.

Crack-Down on Disinformation

Some of the Baltic countries have leveraged the courts to counter disinformation, penalizing outlets that peddle it, and enacting legislation to counter its influence. For example, Lithuania and Latvia have placed temporary bans on Russian media outlets which are guilty of

³² Olmstead, Molly. "With Republicans Like These...."

³³ Center for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS) Blog Post. "Countering Russian... Disinformation." CSIS Executive Education Program: Understanding the Russian Military Today. 23 Sep 2020.

³⁴ EUvsDisinfo. "'To Challenge Russia's Ongoing Disinformation Campaigns': Eight Years of EUvsDisinfo." European External Action Service (EEAS), Brussels, Belgium. 05 Jul 2023

³⁵ Center for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS) Blog Post. "Countering Russian..."

spreading false information. In 2017, Lithuania adopted a law to limit Russian content on Lithuanian TV. Their new law requires 90% of content to be produced in the EU and broadcasted in one of the official languages of the EU.³⁶ In 2018 they went further by requiring programs produced in Russian that are longer than 1.5 hours to be translated into Lithuanian.³⁷ In an effort to ensure that they can't be misrepresented, Estonian military officials refuse interview requests from Russian outlets.³⁸

Alternative Russian-Language Content

Estonia has recognized that it has a sizable Russian-speaking population that could be vulnerable to disinformation. So, in 2015 they started providing Russian language news and entertainment,³⁹ to ensure that this audience had a source for news and entertainment that it could trust.

Quality Media

Having access to dependable, independent, and truthful news media has long been considered a pillar or cornerstone of any democracy.⁴⁰ It is through this, or what has been termed the Fourth Estate, that the public is able to access the unbiased information that is required to hold elected leaders to account. When this is not available or when it is hard to access, then the public is at greater risk of falling victim to disinformation. Therefore, strengthening traditional media and its financing practices, and promoting local media have also been identified as important factors to build resilience to disinformation.⁴¹

Citizen Mobilization

In perhaps the most notable technique employed in the Baltics, citizens have actively joined in the effort to counter disinformation. In Lithuania in 2014, a group of 50 concerned citizens got together to work to identify and call-out Russian disinformation. They formed a group called the Baltic Elves, which has since expanded to include 5,000 members.⁴²

Estonia relies on the Estonian Defense League, a volunteer force that works with the Ministry of Defense to promote cyber defence, and public education.⁴³ These examples point to the success that can be achieved when the response to disinformation is broad-based, and not confined to a single department or agency.

³⁶ Thomas, Matthew. "Baltic Bulletin..."

³⁷ Thomas, Matthew. "Baltic Bulletin..."

³⁸ Center for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS) Blog Post. "Countering Russian..."

³⁹ Center for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS) Blog Post. "Countering Russian..."

⁴⁰ Dunlop, Tarsi. "In the Fourth Estate We Trust?" German Marshall Fund, Harvard University. Oct 19, 2022.

⁴¹ Teperik, Dmitri, Denisa-Liepniece, Solvita, Bankauskaitė, Dala, Kullamaa, Kaarel. "Resilience Against Disinformation, A New Baltic Way to Follow." International Centre for Defence and Security, Estonia. Oct 2022.

⁴² Disinformation Analysis Center. "About Elves." www.debunk.org/about-elves

⁴³ Center for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS) Blog Post. "Countering Russian..."

Collaboration Across Society

Individually, each one of the techniques outlined above can contribute to countering disinformation. Collectively, they point to the benefit of engagement from multiple departments across government (enacting new legislation where necessary, pursuing international collaboration, leveraging state media); the need for quality media; and the benefits of broad citizen awareness and engagement – in short, collaboration across society.

Canada's Efforts

While Canada by no means faces the same existential threat posed by Russia in Eastern Europe, it is subject to Russian disinformation, and has taken measures to increase domestic awareness of the threat and has worked with international partners to counter it.

In 2018 Canada led the creation of the Rapid Response Mechanism, which was designed to enable the sharing of information amongst G7-partner nations concerning threats to democracy, including from disinformation.⁴⁴ In 2019, it launched the Digital Citizen initiative, to help further increase audience awareness of disinformation.⁴⁵

In June 2022, in the wake of Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine, Canada released the backgrounder "Helping Citizens Critically Assess and Become Resilient Against Harmful Online Disinformation," and launched 20 related projects to raise awareness of disinformation.⁴⁶ Later, in August of the same year, Prime Minister Trudeau called out Russian Disinformation and pledged to create a special team to combat it.⁴⁷

In February 2024, Canada issued a joint statement with the United States and United Kingdom endorsing a framework to counter foreign state information manipulation (otherwise known as disinformation).⁴⁸ Later the same month, Canada signed an agreement on security cooperation with Ukraine, under which both countries committed to working together to help counter disinformation.⁴⁹

Through these measures, the Government of Canada has helped to increase audience awareness and resilience to Russian disinformation; and has worked with international forums and partners to share information and collaborate to counter it. Both methods reflect lessons learned from the Baltics.

⁴⁴ Government of Canada. "Rapid Response Mechanism Canada: Global Affairs Canada." Global Affairs Canada. Last Modified 21 Feb 2024.

⁴⁵ Government of Canada. "Digital Citizen Initiative – Online disinformation and other online harms and threats." *Canadian Heritage*. 20 Mar 2023.

⁴⁶ Government of Canada. "Backgrounder – Helping Citizens Critically Assess and Become Resilient Against Harmful Online Disinformation." *Canadian Heritage*. 28 Jun 2022.

⁴⁷ Berthiaume, Lee. "Canada to create team to counter Russian disinformation, Trudeau says." *The Canadian Press*, Published in *The Globe and Mail*. 23 Aug 2022.

⁴⁸ Government of Canada. "Joint statement by Canada, United States and United Kingdom on foreign information manipulation." Global Affairs Canada. 16 Feb 2024.

⁴⁹ Government of Canada. "Agreement on security cooperation between Canada and Ukraine." Global Affairs Canada. Signed 24 Feb 2024. Last Modified 26 Feb 2024.

Other Options to Consider

Yet, from our examination of the experience of the Baltic countries, there are perhaps more methods that Canada could employ to enhance resilience to disinformation in Canada.

Canada could do more to promote traditional professional journalism, with broadcasters working at the local and regional levels (which are often underserved by national outlets). National resilience to disinformation can be aided by having a healthy media landscape,⁵⁰ which is not what Canada has. In the spring of 2023 for example, Bell Media announced that it would be laying off 6% of its workforce and closing or selling nine regional radio stations.⁵¹ The newsroom of the Ottawa Citizen was closed.⁵² Then in February of 2024, Bell Media announced further substantial lay-offs, cuts to programming at CTV and BNN Bloomberg, and the sale of nearly half of its regional radio stations.⁵³ These closures and layoffs reflect problems with the business model used for traditional media, in an era in which access to digitized new sources is rising. Yet the result is less quality news content getting to Canadians, which opens the door for other sources of information, ones that might not be credible.

The Government of Canada has worked to promote traditional media by enacting legislation to ensure that they receive payment from digital platforms such as Facebook and Google. However, Facebook has refused to pay this, and has therefore stopped sharing traditional news stories.⁵⁴ In consequence of this measure, millions of Canadians lost access to their previous sources of media information,⁵⁵ and the amount of news on Facebook in Canada that is considered to be from ‘unreliable’ sources has reportedly increased from 2.2% to 6.9%.⁵⁶ Clearly, this is an area where more can be done.

Targeted resiliency programs can also be encouraged for specific segments of the population, such as Parliamentarians. This was one of the recommendations from Katherine Hill, executive director of MediaSmarts, a digital media literacy centre, offered to a House Ethics Committee meeting on Apr 30, 2024, which was examining the impact of disinformation on Parliamentarians.⁵⁷

Canada could also do more to partner with private industry to leverage the Tech sector to help develop better technologies to identify and counter disinformation, especially when it is

⁵⁰ Teperik, Dmitri, Denisa-Liepniece, Solvita, Bankauskaitė, Dala, Kullamaa, Kaarel. “Resilience...

⁵¹ The Canadian Press. “Bell Media planning cuts to CTV, BNN Bloomberg following BCE layoffs, sale of 45 radio stations.” CBC. Feb 08, 2024. www.cbc.ca/news/business/bce-cuts-1.7108658

⁵² BulldogOttawa.com. “Ottawa Citizen Closes Its Newsroom.” *Journalism*. June 03, 2023. Updated June 04, 2023. www.bulldogottawa.com/ottawa-citizen-closes-its-newsroom/

⁵³ The Canadian Press. “Bell Media planning...

⁵⁴ The Economist. “Facebook turned off the news in Canada. What happened next?” *The Americas*, The Economist. May 16, 2024. www.economist.com/the-americas/2024/05/16/facebook-turned-off-the-news-in-canada-what-happened-next

⁵⁵ Kaye, Byron. “When Facebook blocks news, studies show the political risks that follow.” Reuters. 14 Apr, 2024.

⁵⁶ The Economist. “Facebook turned off the news in Canada...

⁵⁷ Jeffery, Stephen. “Disinformation campaigns having long-term impact on public trust, MPs warned.” *The Hill Times*, May 06, 2024. www.hilltimes.com/story/2024/05/06/disinformation-campaigns-having-long-term-impact-on-public-trust-mps-warned/420590/

powered by AI. Just as technology is being leveraged to enable hybrid attacks in the information domain,⁵⁸ so can it be leveraged for defence.⁵⁹ There is also a role for government here, as there are now calls for increased legislative measures to protect Canadians from deepfakes, particularly in the run-up to the next federal election.⁶⁰

These measures absolutely involve the government of Canada – be it to help promote traditional media, or to introduce new legislation; but they also point to the need for broader engagement and awareness of the perils of disinformation across society.

Conclusion

In short, there is much that Canada can learn from the experiences of the Baltic countries countering disinformation. There is a role for government (for legislation and international collaboration), for industry (particularly traditional media and the tech sectors), and for the public (for greater awareness). Without a more existential threat, we are not likely to see ‘Canuck Elves’ start forming, but increasing broad media literacy remains critical to building resilience. Broad engagement across government, industry, and society, in this way can offer the best resilience to disinformation in Canada.

⁵⁸ Government of Canada. “Our North Strong and Free... P10

⁵⁹ The Economist. “Disinformation is on the rise. How does it work?” Science and Technology, The Economist. May 1, 2024. www.economist.com/science-and-technology/2024/05/01/disinformation-is-on-the-rise-how-does-it-work

⁶⁰ Jeffery, Stephen. “Disinformation campaigns...

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<https://www.theglobeandmail.com/canada/article-canada-to-create-team-to-counter-russian-disinformation-trudeau-says/>
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