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Introduction

The war in Ukraine officially started on February 24th 2022 with the intrusion of Russian troops on Ukraine's territory. Informally considered as the most dramatic event happening on European soil since World War 2, the conflict has been at the forefront of mass and social media, which has drawn extensive attention from the public. While the news might sometimes analyse the conflict with a classical pinch of a 'return of History' such as defining it as a preclude to a 3rd World War, no expert denies that the situation is worrying in the way that it also anticipates uncertain outcomes. Ambiguity is the word to be highlighted here, indeed the war conducted by Russia is mostly labelled as 'hybrid', which refers to an already-known invasive Russia's behaviour, using 'conventional' means of war on Ukraine's territory such as sending military troops, bombs, and planes, mixed with the multiplicity of 'unconventional' means and instruments to conduct modern warfare.[1] This analysis is interested in the modern techniques and means used by Russia which are responsible for a fair share of the unpredictability of this unending war. One of these techniques is disinformation, and even if disinformation is not a modern technique used by Russia (Stalin already coined the term '*dezinformatsyia*')[2], it has evolved alongside technological developments to become an instrument of 'information warfare'. The term used to describe Russia's modern disinformation strategy, particularly in relation with the war in Ukraine, has been the technique of the 'firehose of falsehood', which represents a disinformation strategy that is transnational, that attempts to conquer the hearts and the minds with a multiplicity of narratives, and through a multiplicity of channels to prevent any Kremlin-related actor to be held accountable for actions of disinformation.[3] In order to avoid falling into the pit of making an analysis that becomes as overwhelming as the 'firehose of falsehood strategy', the author decided to pragmatically focus on the most relevant narratives, and the regions and/or countries mostly targeted by Russian disinformation. Hence, this analysis voluntarily omits to include the too-difficult-to-evaluate efficiency of Russia's disinformation, as well as voluntarily omitting to include some countries, narratives or regions to prevent submerging the reader. That being said, the study firstly provides a small historical background as well as etymological clarifications on what is Russia's information warfare. Then, the main body provides an overview of the different narratives related to the war in Ukraine used by Russia in the different regions of the world by dissecting them between the West, the 'Global South' (Africa and Latin America) and the 'Near Abroad' (Baltics and Western Balkans). Finally, the paper focuses on the particular role of China in this conflict, which appears as a neutral actor in its diplomatic discourse, but nonetheless who acts as a discreet amplifier of the Russian narrative, and as an unavoidable actor to be analysed.

How information warfare came to being? Etymological clarifications and historical background

Russia's history of disinformation takes its roots in what has been labelled '*information confrontation*', which is the overarching term that captures "all hostile activities in the informational domain that are intended to influence perceptions or behaviour, and in the Russian understanding it uses information also as a tool, or a target, and that are conducted during peacetime and during

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[1] Arsalan Bilal, "Hybrid Warfare – New Threats, Complexity, and 'Trust' as the Antidote," NATO Review, November 30, 2021, https://www.nato.int/docu/review/articles/2021/11/30/hybrid-warfare-new-threats-complexity-and-trust-as-the-antidote/index.html.
[2] Ilya Yablokov, "Russian Disinformation Finds Fertile Ground in the West," *Nature Human Behaviour* 6, no. 6 (2022): 766–67, https://doi.org/10.1038/s41562-022-01399-3.
[3] Christopher Paul and Miriam Matthews, *The Russian "Firehose of Falsehood" Propaganda Model: Why It Might Work and Options to Counter It* (Santa Monica, CA: RAND Corporation, 2016), https://doi.org/10.7249/pe198.

conflicts".[4] With that definition in mind, traces of information confrontation during Russia's history can be found by stretching back from as early as the 15th century, all the way through the Soviet-era institutionalisation of propaganda, up to 'digital era' forms of 'information confrontation'.[5] The usage of '*disinformation*' or "false, incomplete, or misleading information that is passed, fed, or confirmed to a target individual, group, or country" is itself intimately linked with the concept of '*propaganda*' or "the deliberate, systematic attempt to shape perceptions, manipulate cognitions, and direct behaviour to achieve a response that furthers the desired intent of the propagandist", both terms were two faces of the same coin during the Soviet era.[6] In that sense, Hannah Arendt already evoked the usage of disinformation *(dezinformatsiia)*[7] and propaganda as prerequisites of the totalitarian 'Stalinian regime' and vice-versa[8]:

> Systematic lying (disinformation) to the whole world can be safely carried out only under the conditions of totalitarian rule, where the fictitious quality of everyday reality makes propaganda largely superfluous.[9]

> Contrary to all expectations, important concessions and greatly heightened international prestige did not help to reintegrate the totalitarian countries into the comity of nations or induce them to abandon their lying (disinformation) complaint that the whole world had solidly lined up against them.[10]

In other words, during the Cold War, propaganda was disseminated through using disinformation and lying to mislead the target social group. During the struggle between capitalism and socialism, it was vital for the Soviet state to deceive the opposition, harm the reputation of its officials, and finally sow doubt in the political system.[11] This is why the term 'confrontation' *per se* is not negligible; it is one that Moscow uses to describe how Russia and the West have become more and more involved in a 'civilisational struggle'. Russia believed that it was necessary to defend its worldview and culture against the aggressive encroachment of Western liberalism in this contest.[12] Hence, the contemporary Russian propaganda strategy draws on the traditional Soviet approaches, putting a focus on obfuscation and persuading targets to act in the propagandist's interests without being aware that they are doing so. In other aspects, it is brand-new and is influenced by the features of the modern digital environment in ways that were unthinkable during the Cold War: the Internet, social media, and the changing landscape of media sources for both professional and amateur journalism are now some of its instruments and channels.[13] '*Information warfare*' broadly captures the same essence as information confrontation, with the exception that it is the term used to describe the concept in times of war, making it the relevant term in the context of the war in Ukraine. The term emerged when Georgia successfully used mass media to portray Russia as an aggressor during the 2008 Georgian War, Russian public affairs experts attempted to create a compelling counternarrative which was the

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[4] Elina Treyger, Joe Cheravitch, and Raphael S Cohen, *Russian Disinformation Efforts on Social Media* (Santa Monica, CA: RAND Corporation, 2022), 12, https://doi.org/10.7249/RR4373.2.

[5] Treyger, Cheravitch, and Cohen, 12.

[6] Yablokov, "Russian Disinformation Finds Fertile Ground in the West."

[7] Yablokov.

[8] Africa Center For Strategic Studies, "Mapping Disinformation in Africa," April 26, 2022, https://africacenter.org/spotlight/mapping-disinformation-in-africa/.

[9] Hannah Arendt, *The Origins of Totalitarianism* (Harcourt Brace, 1985), 126.

[10] Arendt, 109.

[11] Mark Galeotti, "Active Measures: Russia's Covert Geopolitical Operations," *George C. Marshall European Center for Security Studies*, no. 31 (2019), https://www.marshallcenter.org/en/publications/security-insights/active-measures-russias-covert-geopolitical-operations-0.

[12] Treyger, Cheravitch, and Cohen, *Russian Disinformation Efforts on Social Media*, 13.

[13] Paul and Matthews, *The Russian "Firehose of Falsehood" Propaganda Model: Why It Might Work and Options to Counter It.*

first instance of information warfare involving Russia that occurred,[14] and that precipitated the remarkable evolution in Russia's approach to propaganda.[15] In other words, information confrontation evolved throughout Russian history to become the model of the current 'firehose of falsehood' which became a tool of information warfare through the modernisation of tools and channels to spread disinformation.

Geographical breakdown (The 'Near Abroad', the West and the 'Global South')

This paper analyses three distinct regions on which Russia leads its information warfare. These regions are chosen with regard to their historical and current importance to the eyes of the Kremlin. The *'Near Abroad'* refers, in this analysis, to Russia's western neighbourhood as showed on Map 1. Initially the 'Near Abroad' referred only to post-Soviet states,[16] yet it is here used to describe the countries part of Russia's western neighbourhood on which the Kremlin presses with heavy disinformation campaigns, this analysis focuses on the Western Balkans and the Baltics as the cases studied to exemplify the Russian disinformation in the 'Near Abroad'. The *West* could refer to many things such as NATO, the EU, or other states coalitions, however from a Russian modern perspective, the West refers to the nest of the countries that are the founders of the 'doctrine' that attempts to 'steal, brainwash and indoctrinate' post-Soviet states into its realm.[17] Finally, the *'Global South'* could be coined in diverse ways, in this study, it follows mostly the logic used to describe the uneven relations between the developing countries of the South and developed countries of the North and explain the different groupings alignments on the international stage, hence the countries of the South have been in most cases Asian, African and Latin American. In the modern struggle between Russia and Western countries, the 'Global South' represents important partners for both Russia and Western countries, who are also swing states on which the ideological battle has been historically and currently raging.[18] Furthermore, the war in Ukraine reinvigorated the importance of the opinion of the Global South with the UN vote to condemn Russia's invasion with the observation of a nuanced stance from many Global South countries (40 of them abstaining), hence revealing that the Global South is relevant and weighty in this analysis,[19] in that sense the cases of Africa and Latin America have been analysed for the representation of the 'Global South'.

The disinformation campaign in the 'Near abroad' (Western Balkans and Baltics)

What mainly characterises Russian disinformation in the 'Near Abroad' is that it has historically sought two antagonistic goals: a negative type that has the purpose to inflict as much damage and to

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[14] Treyger, Cheravitch, and Cohen, *Russian Disinformation Efforts on Social Media*, 14.

[15] Paul and Matthews, *The Russian "Firehose of Falsehood" Propaganda Model: Why It Might Work and Options to Counter It.*

[16] Gerard Toal, *Near Abroad: Putin, the West, and the Contest over Ukraine and the Caucasus* (Oxford University Press, 2020); Mangirdas Morkūnas, "Russian Disinformation in the Baltics: Does It Really Work?," *Public Integrity* (2022): 1–15, https://doi.org/10.1080/10999922.2022.2092976.

[17] Michel Duclos, "The Ukraine War: Russia's Duel With The West," Institut Montaigne, March 8, 2022, https://www.institutmontaigne.org/en/analysis/ukraine-war-russias-duel-west.

[18] Ivan U. K. Klyszcz, "It Is Not about 'Neutrality': How the Global South Responds to Russia's Invasion," Heinrich-Böll-Stiftung, January 30, 2023, https://www.boell.de/en/2023/01/30/it-not-about-neutrality-how-global-south-responds-russias-invasion.

[19] Marc Semo, "Le « Sud Global », Cet Ensemble Hétérogène de Pays Non Alignés," Le Monde, October 26, 2022, https://www.lemonde.fr/idees/article/2022/10/26/le-sud-global-cet-ensemble-heterogene-de-pays-non-alignes_6147333_3232.html.

harm the legitimacy of the EU and NATO and a positive that portrays Russia in much better colours in the eyes of their citizens, typically by distorting historical events, also called historical revisionism.[20] However, the modern 'firehose of falsehood' model of propaganda does not only try to simply shed light on Russia and shadow on the West by convincing the hearts of the 'Near Abroad' countries, it also tries to manipulate the ethnical and national grievances and to disrupt any internal cohesion between the 'Near Abroad' countries' structures and populations in order to create divisions and more vulnerability to disinformation. Hence, Russia wants, at the same time, to have the 'Near Abroad' on its side, yet the latter needs to be weakened and manipulated to be more compliant and obedient to Russia's propaganda. Therefore, the below analysis shows how Russia uses this sense of 'doubleness', similar to the Orwellian 'doublethink' in which two contradictory thoughts are actually accepted for the sake of keeping a logical narrative, in this case being the usage of a logical narrative that devilises the West and victimises Russia, as well as dividing internally the 'Near Abroad' countries to elevate grievances and increase vulnerabilities to disinformation.[21]

Map 1. Russia's 'Near Abroad' in the context of the Ukraine War's disinformation.[22]

The Western Balkans

Russia has been using information confrontation in the Western Balkans for decades now, it has previously worked to block Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Kosovo, Montenegro, North Macedonia, and Serbia from joining the EU before the conflict in Ukraine. Moreover, it sought to obstruct NATO's regional operations and hinder the ambitions of the remaining Western Balkan nations that have not joined the alliance. Moscow has been able to worsen the region's governance issues and undermine the internal reforms necessary for greater integration into Euro-Atlantic economic, political, and security frameworks by fostering anti-Western sentiment among the

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[20] Morkūnas, "Russian Disinformation in the Baltics: Does It Really Work?"
[21] George Packer, "Doublethink Is Stronger Than Orwell Imagined," The Atlantic, July 15, 2019, https://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2019/07/1984-george-orwell/590638/.
[22] Ukraine War Disinfo Working Group, "Russian Disinformation in Eastern Europe, October 10-16," 2022, https://fakenews.pl/en/analyzes/russian-disinformation-in-eastern-europe-october-10-16-a-summary-report/.

population and corrupt vested interests of the political elite.[23] Hence, Russia's main purpose through its information confrontation campaign prior to the war in Ukraine has been to portray a Manichean perspective of, on the hand, a vision of a devil NATO through which the narrative of the NATO bombing of the former Yugoslavia in 1999 during the Kosovo War (indeed the Kosovo conflict has been a foundational grievance against Western powers) is mainly used in order to elevate the domestic grievances against NATO and the EU.[24] On the other hand, Russia's disinformation presents a victimised Russia, emphasising on the cultural proximity with Western Balkan states, notably positioning itself as an ally and patron of the Orthodox Christian Slavs, especially in Serbia, and uses such influence to justify its war acts in Ukraine, and conversely uses the events in Ukraine to influence the regional politics in the Western Balkans.[25]

However, as mentioned above, what characterises Russia's 'firehose of falsehood' during the war in Ukraine is that it does not limit itself to the Manichean perspective of depicting a devil West and a positive image of Russia, there is also a willingness of Russia to, through disinformation, create a chaotic fragmentation in the Western Balkan countries' domestic politics. Indeed, Russia's information warfare during the war in Ukraine is notably innovative through the fact that Russia uses the regional divisions and fragmentations as a tool to elevate the already widespread ethnic, political and social fractures and grievances.[26] Hence, the Western Balkans provide a fertile ground for Russia's disinformation due to the overall fragility of the region, which creates easy opportunities for Moscow to disrupt the 'order' or to stimulate the already-existing 'disorder' in the Western Balkans.[27]

When looking more precisely at the countries in which Russian propaganda is mostly spread during the war in Ukraine, *Serbia* can be considered as the Trojan horse of Russia's disinformation campaign in the Western Balkans.[28] The internal divisions, unresolved issues, unhindered spread of information in the country, low level of media literacy, poorly regulated and atomised media scene, low standards of journalism, understaffed media outlets are factors that have created a media vacuum that has, since the beginning of the invasion of Crimea in 2014, let Russia to launch an intensive media offensive. Namely, in the aftermath of the annexation, Russia launched the Sputnik agency news in Serbian, as well as Russia Beyond,[29] which has given, Sputnik, RT and other local pro-Russian media, with the war in Ukraine, the chance to re-emphasise and reinforce certain pro-Russia and anti-Western narratives.[30] With the beginning of the full-scale invasion, the following headlines began to appear in the lying media: "Ukraine started a war against Russia"; "Ukrainian troops shelled the maternity hospital"; "Ukrainians are preparing to use chemical weapons" etc. However, what makes Russian propaganda in Serbia's media sector even more dangerous is that it is transnational, meaning that

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[23] Paul Stronski, "Russia in the Balkans After Ukraine: A Troubling Actor," Carnegie Endowment, September 20, 2022, https://carnegieendowment.org/politika/87959.

[24] Oleksandra Panasytska, "Propaganda for the 'Younger Slavic Brother' in the Balkans: How Russia Promotes a Disinformation Campaign in Serbia," Vox Ukraine, December 23, 2022, https://voxukraine.org/en/propaganda-for-the-younger-slavic-brother-in-the-balkans-how-russia-promotes-a-disinformation-campaign-in-serbia/; James McBride, "Russia's Influence in the Balkans," Council on Foreign Relations, December 2, 2022, https://www.cfr.org/backgrounder/russias-influence-balkans.

[25] McBride, "Russia's Influence in the Balkans"; Panasytska, "Propaganda for the 'Younger Slavic Brother' in the Balkans: How Russia Promotes a Disinformation Campaign in Serbia."

[26] Panasytska, "Propaganda for the 'Younger Slavic Brother' in the Balkans: How Russia Promotes a Disinformation Campaign in Serbia"; Jovan Jovanović, "Russian Disinformation in the Western Balkans during the War in Ukraine," Oslo Center, July 7, 2022, https://oslocenter.no/news/russian-disinformation-in-the-western-balkans-during-the-war-in-ukraine/.

[27] Stronski, "Russia in the Balkans After Ukraine: A Troubling Actor."

[28] Stronski.

[29] Jovanović, "Russian Disinformation in the Western Balkans during the War in Ukraine."

[30] Jovan Knezevic, "Russia's 'Information Warfare' against the 'West' in Serbia and the Western Balkans," Mondo Internazionale, October 20, 2022, https://mondointernazionale.org/focus-allegati/russias-information-warfare-against-the-west-in-serbia-and-the-western-balkans; Ivana Stradner, "Russian Disinformation and Propaganda in Relation to the War Against Ukraine," May 17, 2022, https://www.fdd.org/analysis/2022/05/17/russian-disinformation-propaganda/.

disinformation campaigns are often targeted at a number of countries and spread throughout the region, including Bosnia and Herzegovina, Montenegro, Kosovo, and North Macedonia.[31] Indeed, Serbia holds a strategic location in facilitating Russian propaganda efforts which have been labelled as "a launchpad for Russian disinformation operations in the Western Balkans".[32]

In terms of narratives, Serbia is also a great target for emphasising on a strong Russia and the need to find back the 'Russian World', which feeds expectations and hopes for the realisation of the 'Serbian World'. Both 'Worlds' are two similarly irredentist projects: the former focuses on the return of Russia as a global power, and the latter on the unification of Serbian territories.[33] In the other Balkan countries, Moscow is also busy selling its own version of the war in Ukraine. To Bosnian citizens, it cynically uses analogies with the 1995 genocide in Srebrenica to justify its invasion and destabilise Bosnia at the same time.[34] Kosovo has mostly been witnessing disinformation targeting the Serbian minority within its territory in order to exacerbate the pre-existing tensions with Serbia.[35] In Montenegro, the Kremlin has focused on anti-NATO and EU sentiments as it has 'significant institutional weaknesses' that make it the weakest chain in the link of pro-West countries in the Western Balkans, and which has, over the past two years, turned from a front-runner in EU integration to a country 'in crisis'.[36]

The Baltics

The Baltic countries have been among the most targeted countries by Russia's disinformation.[37] Indeed Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania share a long border segment with Russia, they also all contain Russian speaking minorities in their territory, which makes them vulnerable targets of disinformation in the Russian language, as well as being victims of Russia's 'reconquest' of its western neighbourhood.[38]

While the Baltic states have a few internal driving forces/voices that spread Russia's narratives, most of the disinformation comes from Russian media or media that are very close to the Kremlin. A study of the media landscape of Lithuania, Latvia, and Estonia shows active citing of Russian propaganda media RIA Novosti, TASS, Sputnik, RT and other equally notorious disinformation channels of the Kremlin.[39] However, attempts to block major news sites and channels that are pro-Kremlin have regulated the media landscape, but still new pro-Kremlin media always emerge and continue to spread narratives and to avoid the blockade, such example can be found with the case of Estonia and Baltnews and Baltija EU which are still up and running and spreading the pro-Kremlin

[31] Panasytska, "Propaganda for the 'Younger Slavic Brother' in the Balkans: How Russia Promotes a Disinformation Campaign in Serbia."

[32] Daniel Sunter, "Disinformation in the Western Balkans," NATO Review, December 21, 2020, https://www.nato.int/docu/review/articles/2020/12/21/disinformation-in-the-western-balkans/index.html.

[33] Izabela Kisic, "The Pro-Russian Media Campaign in Serbia," Atlantic Initiative, March 21, 2022, https://atlanticinitiative.org/the-pro-russian-media-campaign-in-serbia/.

[34] Irvin Pekmez, "Russia Targets Bosnia With Disinformation About Ukrainian War," BalkanInsight, May 9, 2022, https://balkaninsight.com/2022/05/09/russia-targets-bosnia-with-disinformation-about-ukrainian-war/.

[35] Shkëlzen Osmani, "Disinformation Everywhere," Kosovo 2.0, November 7, 2022, https://kosovotwopointzero.com/en/disinformation-everywhere/.

[36] Ivana Stradner, "Russia's Hybrid War Against Montenegro," Foundation for Defense of Democracies, February 22, 2023, https://www.fdd.org/analysis/2023/02/22/russias-hybrid-war-against-montenegro/.

[37] Morkūnas, "Russian Disinformation in the Baltics: Does It Really Work?"

[38] EDMO, "Disinformation in Russian Language Spreading through the EU," European Digital Media Observatory, May 24, 2022, https://edmo.eu/2022/05/24/disinformation-in-russian-language-spreading-through-the-eu/.

[39] Spravdi, "Lithuania, Latvia, and Estonia: What the Baltic Countries Write about Ukraine and How It Is Influenced by Russian Propaganda," December 10, 2022, https://spravdi.gov.ua/en/lithuania-latvia-and-estonia-what-the-baltic-countries-write-about-ukraine-and-how-it-is-influenced-by-russian-propaganda/.

narrative to the Baltic states and vice versa. Similarly, in Latvia, the blocking does not make them inaccessible, people continue to watch Russian propaganda channels via illegal websites or via VPNs.[40]

The amount of disinformation that the three Baltic countries are confronted to, and the subsequent narratives are neither equal nor the same. While, as mentioned above, Russian speaking communities are the primary target of disinformation, the national language segments in Estonia and Latvia reveal only a small amount of messaging that contains disinformation or manipulations pertaining to the war in Ukraine compared to Lithuania.[41] This phenomenon may be explained by the disinformation resilience of their speaking audiences, as well as their relatively small size, which likely prevents them from becoming priority targets of Kremlin propaganda.[42] While on the other hand, Lithuania is the most heavily targeted and impacted by Russian disinformation, this may be explained by a narrative that appears as more efficient than the ones used in Estonia and Latvia.

In *Estonia*, the most prominent source of disinformation narratives has been the far-right Conservative People's Party of Estonia (EKRE) and its associated media outlets such as Uued Uudised,[43] which manipulated information concerning Ukrainian refugees by spreading messages such as "deserters are given the opportunity to hide abroad - although it should be of the utmost importance for Estonia that the Russian war machine in Ukraine is smashed to pieces".[44] The peculiar factor is that the EKRE party is a right-wing populist actor that is supposed to be as anti-Russian as it is anti-refugees, but because the threat of refugees was so imminent, the EKRE party exploited the widespread anti-Russian sentiment, which, in the end, serves the Kremlin purposes and creates a window of opportunity to fill the information space with disinformation on Ukrainian refugees.[45] Hence, the EKRE party depicts Ukrainians as of a 'Russian mentality', fleeing war but not Russian imperialism, and conversely a possible magnet for Russian aggression towards Estonia. The government is also accused of using refugees as a cheap source of labour or to undermine Estonia's ethnic majority. This has resulted in claims that Ukrainians should be sent back to Ukraine in order to fight.[46] Hence , in Estonia, the Russian messages ended up in the information space mostly through citing persons who reproduce them, hence pro-Kremlin medias used the EKRE party's anti-refugee discourse to build their narratives.[47] Additionally, Estonian pro-Kremlin voices have claimed that the war in Ukraine is the result of media manipulation and has generally been 'orchestrated', a claim primarily propagated by niche conspiracy outlets such as Vanglaplaneet, Makroskoop, Eestinen and Telegram.ee. These channels cite major conspiracies such as the 'Great Reset', as well as repeating or

[40] David Klepper, "Russia's Information War Expands through Eastern Europe," AP, July 16, 2022, https://apnews.com/article/russia-ukraine-nato-bulgaria-misinformation-eastern-europe-0e87db7fef9263a465d6cf40d3287efe.

[41] Spravdi, "Lithuania, Latvia, and Estonia: What the Baltic Countries Write about Ukraine and How It Is Influenced by Russian Propaganda."

[42] DeBunkEU, "Pro-Kremlin Disinformation Targeting Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania," October 31, 2022, https://www.debunkeu.org/pro-kremlin-disinformation-targeting-estonia-latvia-and-lithuania.

[43] DeBunkEU; DeBunkEU, "Disinformation Actors Assert That by Aiding Ukraine the Baltics Provoke Russia," September 14, 2022, https://www.debunkeu.org/disinformation-actors-assert-that-by-aiding-ukraine-the-baltics-provoke-russia.

[44] Spravdi, "Lithuania, Latvia, and Estonia: What the Baltic Countries Write about Ukraine and How It Is Influenced by Russian Propaganda."

[45] Mari-Liis Jakobson and Andres Kasekamp, "The Impact of the Russia-Ukraine War on Right-Wing Populism in Estonia," in *The Impacts of the Russian Invasion of Ukraine on Right-Wing Populism in Europe*, ed. Gilles Ivaldi and Emilia Zankina (European Center for Populism Studies, 2023), 114–25, https://www.populismstudies.org/the-impact-of-the-russia-ukraine-war-on-right-wing-populism-in-estonia/.

[46] DeBunkEU, "Disinformation Actors Assert That by Aiding Ukraine the Baltics Provoke Russia"; DeBunkEU, "Pro-Kremlin Disinformation Targeting Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania."

[47] Spravdi, "Lithuania, Latvia, and Estonia: What the Baltic Countries Write about Ukraine and How It Is Influenced by Russian Propaganda."

manipulating controversial public statements such as those from the Russian Ministry of Defence or the widely criticised Amnesty International report.[48]

In *Latvia*, only a few pieces on the conflict in Ukraine were generated in Latvian by pro-Kremlin social media actors, and these news only garnered a small readership. The Kremlin may prioritise reaching local Russian-speaking communities rather than the small and difficult-to-persuade Latvian-speaking audiences, which is one argument.[49] Similar to how populist politicians tapped into nationalist sentiments in Estonia, Aldis Gobzems, a Latvian politician, criticised Latvian policies and the country's circumstances, citing as evidence the 'overuse' of Ukrainian flags and the acceptance of Ukrainian refugees as being detrimental to Latvian culture and nation.[50] The effects of the sanctions on Latvia have also been in the news, with worries about inflation and energy costs being used to reignite anti-EU sentiment on the premise that the anti-Russia sanctions impacted Latvia more severely than they did Russia.[51] Another prevalent narrative is the sentiment of 'Russophobia', to which Latvia has been accused the most of the Baltic States,[52] vehiculated by media such as Baltnews' Telegram with the instrumentalisation of a pro-Russian Latvian activist, Vladimir Linderman, being released from custody after being 'unjustly' charged for justification and glorification of Russian war crimes in Ukraine.[53] The national security of Latvia was depicted as being threatened by other narratives, such as NATO discussions to enhance their military presence there. Stand-alone articles promoting claims that Russia has superior military might and that sanctions are pointless have also been uncovered.[54] Putin's statements are sometimes reproduced and echoed, the Latvian information space was infiltrated by statements such as "the president of Russia is not planning to destroy Ukraine," and "Ukraine's accession to NATO will lead to World War III", etc. [55]

Lithuania is the most targeted country by Russian disinformation, this is mainly due to the fact that Baltic states have particularly strong economic relations with Russia and a dependence on Russian gas, which has allowed the topic of sanctions to become fertile ground for pro-Kremlin voices.[56] In that sense, the fact that Lithuania is located amidst Russia and its territorial exclave Kaliningrad led Lithuania to block territorial transactions through EU sanctions, which became a key source of economic disinformation narratives, including; "The Lithuanian government is dragging the country into war with Russia", "The Kaliningrad blockade will lead to disastrous consequences for Lithuania's economy", and "Lithuania secretly trades with Russia".[57] Hence, some pro-Kremlin voices in Lithuania such as the priest Robertas Grigas claimed that Lithuania should not provoke Russia and must lift the transit limitations.[58]

In the end, some narratives find common roots in all the Baltic states such as the demolition of Soviet monuments across the region, which provoked a wave of claims that the Russian population in

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[48] DeBunkEU, "Pro-Kremlin Disinformation Targeting Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania."

[49] DeBunkEU, "Disinformation Actors Assert That by Aiding Ukraine the Baltics Provoke Russia."

[50] DeBunkEU; DeBunkEU, "Pro-Kremlin Disinformation Targeting Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania."

[51] DeBunkEU, "Pro-Kremlin Disinformation Targeting Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania."

[52] Детектор медіа, "330 Shades of Russian Disinformation: Exploring the Media Landscape of Eastern Europe," 2022, https://detector.media/propahanda_vplyvy/article/206536/2022-12-30-330-shades-of-russian-disinformation-exploring-the-media-landscape-of-eastern-europe/.

[53] Ukraine War Disinfo Working Group, "Russian Disinformation in Eastern Europe, October 10-16."

[54] DeBunkEU, "Disinformation Actors Assert That by Aiding Ukraine the Baltics Provoke Russia."

[55] Spravdi, "Lithuania, Latvia, and Estonia: What the Baltic Countries Write about Ukraine and How It Is Influenced by Russian Propaganda."

[56] DeBunkEU, "Pro-Kremlin Disinformation Targeting Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania"; Spravdi, "Lithuania, Latvia, and Estonia: What the Baltic Countries Write about Ukraine and How It Is Influenced by Russian Propaganda."

[57] Детектор медіа, "330 Shades of Russian Disinformation: Exploring the Media Landscape of Eastern Europe"; DeBunkEU, "Pro-Kremlin Disinformation Targeting Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania."

[58] DeBunkEU, "Disinformation Actors Assert That by Aiding Ukraine the Baltics Provoke Russia."

the Baltics is being 'victimised' or 'discriminated against.' Governments removing Soviet-era monuments were blamed for 'provoking Russia' and 'playing games' orchestrated by the West, which is part of the overarching narrative of Western 'Russophobia'.[59]

Concluding remarks concerning the 'Near Abroad'

Russia's information warfare in the 'Near Abroad' is alive and more alarming than we think. For the Western Balkan countries, which are still inheriting from the territorial tensions resulting from the implosion of Yugoslavia, and who are caught in between a slow integration process in the EU and a disruptive but attentive Russia, the disinformation campaigns led by Russia are probably much more efficient then in Western democracies, even more when considering that Russia exploits the historical and domestic grievances to disrupt the regional order. For the Baltics, Russia exploits the Russian speaking communities, as well as taking advantage of populist movements and parties, even if they are anti-Russian, to foster the Kremlin's interests. Russia also used the threat of energy dependency, notably exemplified by the Kaliningrad narrative, to put domestic pressure. In that sense, the 'Near Abroad' is indeed enduring the contradictory attempts of the Kremlin to convince the hearts of the populations that the West is evil and Russia is virtuous and simultaneously disrupting the domestic politics of these regions.

The disinformation campaign in the West

The role of Russia's disinformation in the West has always been, despite great resiliency from Western democracies in general, to exploit the possible existing tensions to infer in the internal affairs of the West. Here, anti-NATO, anti-West, anti-EU rhetoric is pointless, and despite less efforts given by Russia to penetrate in the minds of the Western populations, some noticeable techniques are to be highlighted.

In Western democracies, most Russian disinformation exploits social polarisation, which became even bigger problem after 2008, when the Kremlin relaunched its global information warfare (*cf.* Georgian war disinformation). In the 2016 US presidential elections, Russian troll farms used divisive topics such as gun control and racial conflict to polarise voters and plant disinformation. Scholars have observed similar approaches during the Ukrainian war.[60]

Contrary to information confrontation in the 'Near Abroad' or in the 'Global South', in the West, persuasion is mostly unfeasible, hence these campaigns intend to obfuscate or confuse by overwhelming individuals until they cannot distinguish between fact and fiction.[61] For instance, in Germany, news magazine Der Spiegel warned about natural gas shortages. In the United Kingdom, the Guardian raised doubts about Russian war crimes in Ukraine. In Italy, Ansa, a leading news agency, criticised Kyiv's storage of much-needed grain (Scott 2022). These news stories were all promoted extensively on Facebook and Twitter, but more importantly they were all fake, and formed part of an extensive Russian influence operation to promote the Kremlin's invasion of Ukraine that targeted people across the European Union and UK (Scott 2022). As a rule, media fakes are based on a replica of the respective outlet design e.g. fake BBC videos have been published on social media where the BBC's logo, inserts and style were copied and transferred to give the appearance of a real

[59] DeBunkEU, "Pro-Kremlin Disinformation Targeting Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania."
[60] Yablokov, "Russian Disinformation Finds Fertile Ground in the West."
[61] Aaron Erlich and Calvin Garner, "Is Pro-Kremlin Disinformation Effective? Evidence from Ukraine," *International Journal of Press/Politics* 28, no. 1 (2023): 5–28, https://doi.org/10.1177/19401612211045221.

BBC video.[62] Other tactics than media fakes have been used in Western countries, pointing to the ongoing evolution of disinformation approaches and constant need to adapt and respond. The UK Government, for example, found that TikTok influencers were being paid to amplify pro-Russian narratives. Disinformation activities also amplified authentic messages by social media users that were consistent with Russia's viewpoint in an effort to increase the spread of such narratives, giving an artificial sense of support while evading platforms' measures to combat disinformation. Efforts to manipulate public opinion on social media took place on Twitter and Facebook, with extensive efforts also concentrated on Instagram, YouTube and TikTok. Evidence also exists of disinformation campaigns taking place in the comments sections of major media outlets.[63] Russian troll farms used bots to target populations of Western countries (even if mostly the BRICS). These bots do anything to avoid association with the Kremlin. They post in local languages, tap into local political agendas, and spread anti-US or anti-UK memes. Once in a while, they post and share messages related to the Russia–Ukraine war that should spread perspectives that are favourable to Moscow narratives.[64]

The operations of RT were shut down in most European countries and in the USA in February and March 2022. This active de-platforming of Russian disinformation might have positive outcomes that are still complicated to measure. However, it has been proven that disinformation is unescapable if society suffers from inequalities: distrust will be an eternal driver of anti-democratic movements. Therefore, Russian disinformation will remain active in Western democracies as political polarisation and growing social inequality exist.[65] Hence, while it could taken for granted that Western democracies are resilient enough to Russia's disinformation, it has been shown, for example, that more than half of French people believe that at least one explanation about the cause of the war promoted by the Russian government is true, with those voting on the extreme right and extreme left being significantly more likely to believe Russian propaganda on the origins of the war.[66]

Concluding remarks on the West

Western democracies are evidently more resilient towards Russia's disinformation, Russia conversely puts less efforts to spread disinformation. However, history has shown that Russia can exploit the social divisions and enhance populist discourses in Western democracies to disrupt the domestic politics of its adversaries. With regard to the war in Ukraine, some forms of news techniques such as deep fakes, bots, or using TikTok influencers have been amongst the instruments of influence and might be able to exploit social divisions.

The disinformation campaign in the 'Global South'

With the Cold War legacy, many countries in Africa and Latin America do not remember Moscow's role as unambiguously negative. Some countries in these regions gained independence from the West or liberation from dictatorship with a degree of Soviet and socialist support. These memories of the Cold War are wedded to these countries' histories but also to contemporary politics. Today, Russia instrumentalises these legacies and spins them to position itself as an opposition 'leader' against

[62] Joscha Weber, "Fake Content Targets International Media," Deutsche Welle, July 8, 2022, https://www.dw.com/en/fact-check-fake-news-and-content-targets-international-media/a-62381229.
[63] OECD, "Disinformation and Russia's War of Aggression against Ukraine: Threats and Governance Responses," November 3, 2022.
[64] Weber, "Fake Content Targets International Media."
[65] Yablokov, "Russian Disinformation Finds Fertile Ground in the West."
[66] OECD, "Disinformation and Russia's War of Aggression against Ukraine: Threats and Governance Responses."

'unipolarity'.[67] In that sense, the information spaces in the 'Global South' have been heavily targeted by Russian disinformation and propaganda campaigns since the war in Ukraine.[68]

Africa

In recent years, dozens of carefully designed campaigns have pumped millions of intentionally false and misleading posts into Africa's online social spaces. The ensuing confusion in deciphering fact from fiction has had a corrosive effect on social trust, critical thinking, and citizens' ability to engage in politics fairly, the lifeblood of a functioning democracy. Russia has been the leading purveyor of disinformation campaigns in Africa with at least 16 known operations on the continent as of April 2022 (see Map 2). Those campaigns, similarly to the 'Near Abroad', amplify grievances and exploits divisions within a targeted society, fostering fragmentation and inaction, all while affording the perpetrators plausible deniability. The objective often is less to convince as to confuse citizens, thereby creating false equivalences between democratic and nondemocratic political actors, precipitating disillusion and apathy.[69] In the case of Africa, at this moment, Russia's objectives are not only to justify its invasion of Ukraine, but to sway African countries to support Russia's actions and secure Russia's influence over the region, especially as the country becomes increasingly isolated from the United States and Europe. Africa has economic and political ties with both Russia and the European Union and seems to be caught in the middle of this conflict as demonstrated by the divided African vote for the UN resolution condemning Russia's invasion of Ukraine.[70]

While there are many reasons for the neutral or pro-Russian stance of certain countries in Africa, one of the main incentives for many is their reliance on Moscow for stability. Hence, the success of Russia's information warfare in many parts of Africa is closely linked with its geopolitical influence and security dynamics playing out on the continent.[71] This is the case in the Central African Republic (CAR), which has become one centre of gravity for Russian influence, host to military bases of the Wagner Group. Russian influence is also firmly present in the Sahel region countries, such as Mali and Burkina Faso. In fact, all of the Sahel's countries are plagued by violent extremism, and they are dissatisfied with the UN soldiers and the French army's efforts to stabilise the area. The pro-Russian attitude has been increasing through media campaigns supported in part by Russian oligarchs as many regional authorities are now looking eastward. The Internet Research Agency in St. Petersburg, sometimes referred to as the 'Russian troll factory', has also participated in organising pro-Kremlin demonstrations by enlisting the help of local supporters. Local opinion frequently supports Putin over Zelenskyy as a result. It is important to note that such social media efforts with an anti-French narrative were also run prior to the presence of the Wagner Group in Mali.[72] Moreover, Yevgeny Prigozhin, the Russian oligarch who leads the infamous Wagner Group mercenary force, has exported disinformation campaigns to every African country where Wagner has operated (see Map2.).[73]

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[67] Klyszcz, "It Is Not about 'Neutrality': How the Global South Responds to Russia's Invasion."

[68] Mary Blankenship and Aloysius Uche Ordu, "Russia's Narratives about Its Invasion of Ukraine Are Lingering in Africa," *Brookings*, June 27, 2022, https://www.brookings.edu/blog/africa-in-focus/2022/06/27/russias-narratives-about-its-invasion-of-ukraine-are-lingering-in-africa/.

[69] Africa Center For Strategic Studies, "Mapping Disinformation in Africa."

[70] Blankenship and Ordu, "Russia's Narratives about Its Invasion of Ukraine Are Lingering in Africa."

[71] Eero Kristjan Sild, "War in Ukraine Exposes Russia's Influence in Africa," *ICDS*, June 1, 2022, https://icds.ee/en/war-in-ukraine-exposes-russias-influence-in-africa/.

[72] Sild.

[73] Africa Center For Strategic Studies, "Mapping Disinformation in Africa."
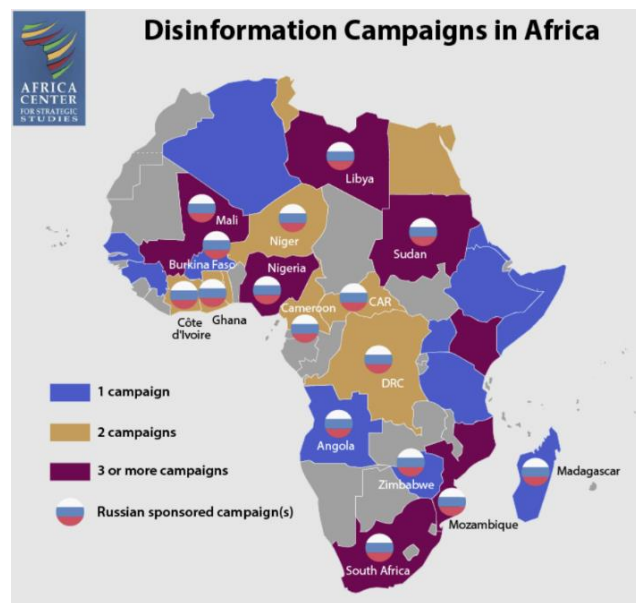
Chronologically, the first most-tweeted Russian narrative was concerning the war claim that all Ukrainians and Europeans, but not Russians, are *racist*. While many Africans stood (and continue to stand) in solidarity with Ukraine, a significant portion of the relevant discussions trending online initially focused on African students fleeing Ukraine and the racism they faced.[75] For example, some of these tweets accuse the EU of instructing Ukraine not to let African students escape. Other tweets go to a somewhat more extreme direction, calling the EU and U.S. "economic bandits" or stating that Russia does not have a history of *slavery and colonialism* while Europe does,[76] hence the Russian narrative disseminated in the media stresses the fact that Russia has never been a colonial power and has never had imperialist ambitions.[77] However, a disinformation strategy that gained much popularity in Africa relatively to other strategies is the usage of '*whataboutism*', where users avert the conversation to other topics, disregard the crisis, reject criticism of Russia's actions and political influence, or proclaim hypocrisy. These tweets often discuss conflicts going on in other parts of the world or some domestic issues in the 'Global South' are far more dire than in Ukraine. The general sentiment is that "Ukrainian lives are worth more than others" in Western media.[78] With the perceived efficiency of such 'whataboutism' strategy,[79] the traditional anti-Western rhetoric and racism decreased, whereas tweets employing 'whataboutism' have increased.

State-affiliated *Russia Today* was among the most retweeted platforms for tweets with whataboutism and anti-West rhetoric, both in the beginning of the invasion and more recently. Russian government accounts, like the Russian Embassies in Africa and the Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs, also play prominent roles in spreading disinformation.[80] What has been striking is that the most intense surges of disinformation tweets followed diplomatic actions undertaken by

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[74] Africa Center For Strategic Studies.

[75] Blankenship and Ordu, "Russia's Narratives about Its Invasion of Ukraine Are Lingering in Africa."

[76] Blankenship and Ordu.

[77] Martina Schwikowski, "Russia Targets Africa with Propaganda Machine," Deutsche Welle, November 29, 2022, https://www.dw.com/en/russia-targets-africa-with-propaganda-machine/a-63916836.

[78] Blankenship and Ordu, "Russia's Narratives about Its Invasion of Ukraine Are Lingering in Africa."

[79] Mary Blankenship and Aloysius Uche Ordu, "Russian Disinformation in Africa: What's Sticking and What's Not," *Brookings*, October 17, 2022, https://www.brookings.edu/blog/africa-in-focus/2022/10/17/russian-disinformation-in-africa-whats-sticking-and-whats-not/.

[80] Blankenship and Ordu, "Russia's Narratives about Its Invasion of Ukraine Are Lingering in Africa."

Russia on the African continent in order to strengthen the impact of these narratives. For instance, the largest surges of retweets followed Vladimir Putin's meeting with African Union Chairperson and President of Senegal Macky Sall or Sergei Lavrov's tour of Egypt, Ethiopia, Uganda, and the Republic of Congo.[81] Most of the tweets generated in these periods are retweets from Russia Today, however over time, pro-Russian anonymous conspiracy accounts and local 'franchised' influencers who are supplied content from a central source have been sources of retweets which camouflages their origins making it both harder to detect and to remove such insidious influence campaigns.[82]

Latin America

Russian state media were already a major force in Latin America before the war in Ukraine. Russia's focus on the Spanish language is not a new phenomenon. Latin America was already a prime target for Russia during the Cold War. Since the Cold War, Russia has sought to exploit historic tensions between the U.S. and Latin America by supporting communist allies on the continent, implying that the United States (and its media) should not be trusted.[83] Consequently, many Latin American leaders have not yet banned RT and Sputnik media outlets. As mentioned above, this is partially due to communist ideological ties with several Latin American countries: Venezuela, Cuba and Nicaragua in which censorship, propaganda, and disinformation have long been institutionalised along Russian lines and the historical anti-US sentiment vehiculated.[84] In Venezuela, for example, Russia's version of events has had considerable reach among the population. This is due to support from the government of President Nicolas Maduro, and disinformation from the Venezuelan state broadcaster VTV, which have justified Russia's invasion of Ukraine, and relativised it by pointing out that the US has done similar things in recent history.[85]

Alongside the communist countries which may refuse to limit Russian disinformation because of their ideological similarities, many Latin American countries want to preserve their trade agreements with Russia, and banning Russian news sites may alienate those ties. Hence, while the European Union and United States have taken steps to limit Russian disinformation, many Latin American leaders have not, either for economic or ideological reasons. Consequently, this leads to a lack of state regulation that enabled Russian disinformation in the Spanish language to flourish and become mainstream, which has been a leading factor in the pervasive disinformation in Latin America.[86] Therefore, while many regional leaders do not want to regulate disinformation, social media companies are the only force that can manage Russian disinformation to spread in Latin America. Yet, a majority of them that have an interest to regulate disinformation campaigns are from the United States and struggle to monitor disinformation in Spanish because automated content moderation in platforms like Facebook and Twitter is much weaker in languages other than English. Additionally, many Spanish phrases vary depending on the country of origin, which makes widespread monitoring difficult for companies. Other elements such as the lack of media literacy and the oversized influence

[81] Blankenship and Ordu, "Russian Disinformation in Africa: What's Sticking and What's Not."
[82] Blankenship and Ordu; Africa Center For Strategic Studies, "Mapping Disinformation in Africa."
[83] India Turner, "Why Latin America Is Susceptible to Russian War Disinformation," DisinfoLab, September 13, 2022, https://www.disinfolab.net/post/why-latin-america-is-susceptible-to-russian-war-disinformation.
[84] José Ospina-Valencia, "Russia's Propaganda War in Latin America," Deutsche Welle, April 13, 2022, https://www.dw.com/en/how-russia-is-waging-a-successful-propaganda-war-in-latin-america/a-61467050; Turner, "Why Latin America Is Susceptible to Russian War Disinformation."
[85] Ospina-Valencia, "Russia's Propaganda War in Latin America."
[86] Turner, "Why Latin America Is Susceptible to Russian War Disinformation."

of religious leaders feeding disinformation are all playing their part.[87] RT Español's social media accounts also post video clips from their news channels, further complicating disinformation regulation since sound is difficult to monitor. This combined with limited resources allows Russian disinformation to be highly effective in this language.[88]

RT Español, Sputnik Mundo, Russia's network of diplomatic missions and allied politicians, academics, influencers, and fake internet users are the main contributors to how Latin Americans perceive global politics and Russia's war in Ukraine. What is striking is that RT Español is one of the most popular news sources about Ukraine in Latin America. Its Facebook page has more than 18 million followers, while Western media channels in Spanish lag behind RT Español , CNN has around 15 million followers, BBC has around seven million, and Deutche Welle, three million.[89] Russia used its status as host of the 2018 football World Cup to establish its media toehold in Latin America, for instance Moscow presented RT as an alternative that professed not to convey propaganda or ideological or state interests. Since then, RT has penetrated the media market in Latin America, and has built up a 'loyal following' among its users.[90]

Although the intended messages are numerous, it is possible to identify a few broad narratives that Russia seeks to install in Latin American societies: Western guilt, Ukrainian guilt, claims of Russophobia, and Western hypocrisy. They are complementary, creating distrust of Ukraine and its partners and presenting Russia as the real victim of the West. One of the first explanations used to justify Russia's 'special operation' on Ukraine was the narrative of *'Western guilt',* i.e. the messages of an 'aggressive NATO expansion', perpetual 'Western imperialism', and Ukraine as a 'puppet of the West'. NATO expansion was one of the earliest justifications for military intervention. At the start of the war, the Embassy of Russia in Mexico shared a message from Sergey Lavrov, the Russian foreign affairs minister, that Russia had tried to negotiate with the West, but had only been met with 'lies and deceit'. Another historical element often exploited by Russian media is the Nazi image. The West is frequently accused – both on official diplomatic accounts and in niche TikTok videos- of supporting Nazis and ultranationalists who have infiltrated Ukraine's politics and military, of funding military or chemical weapons laboratories, and of working with Ukrainian nationalists to make the country a platform to fight against Russia.[91] *'Historical Russophobia'* is another narrative that has become crucial since Western governments decided to ban Russian media to curb disinformation. Russian diplomatic missions and Russian-funded news outlets and trolls have been very active in sharing messages about Russian-speaking citizens being persecuted outside of Russia and Russian culture being destroyed. They stress that banning Russian media deprives Westerners of the opportunity to hear Russia's version of events. Inna Afinogenova, the former deputy editor of RT Español and host of a popular political satire show in Latin America, is a particularly interesting example of the dissemination of this narrative, whose purpose has been to unconditionally defend the Russian invasion.[92] RT's most famous face in Latin America, presented and commented on world events, as well as on the inconsistencies and farcical activities of certain Latin American politicians.[93]

[87] Agustino Fontevecchia, "The Weaponization Of Information In Latin America And The Roles Of The US, Russia, And China," Forbes, October 31, 2022, https://www.forbes.com/sites/afontevecchia/2022/10/31/the-weaponization-of-information-in-latin-america-and-the-roles-of-the-us-russia-and-china/?sh=da45a7818008.

[88] Turner, "Why Latin America Is Susceptible to Russian War Disinformation."

[89] Ieva Giedraitytè and Benas Putrimas, "Russia Is Waging an Information War in Latin America," Global Voices, December 15, 2022, https://globalvoices.org/2022/12/15/russia-is-waging-an-information-war-in-latin-america/; Ospina-Valencia, "Russia's Propaganda War in Latin America"; Turner, "Why Latin America Is Susceptible to Russian War Disinformation."

[90] Ospina-Valencia, "Russia's Propaganda War in Latin America."

[91] Giedraitytè and Putrimas, "Russia Is Waging an Information War in Latin America."

[92] Giedraitytè and Putrimas; Ospina-Valencia, "Russia's Propaganda War in Latin America."

[93] Ospina-Valencia, "Russia's Propaganda War in Latin America."

The last prominent narrative is *'Western hypocrisy',* closely linked to *'whataboutism'*. The mention of Ukraine immediately brings to mind other Western interventions, notably the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, and the European response to the refugee crisis. However, these arguments are not made to help understand conflicts, but to present the United States as the real conqueror of the world and Russia's actions as resistance to their hegemony. A quest for alternatives is being sparked by tense ties with the United States, efforts to emerge from its shadow, and a desire to create an international order with a restricted role for the United States and other former colonial powers, such efforts are made by recalling Latin American countries' tumultuous historical interactions with the United States to influence public opinion in South America in Russia's favour.[94]

Concluding remarks concerning the 'Global South'

Africa and Latin America represent themselves a large proportion of the 'Global South'. This analysis revealed that the term of the 'Global South' is very relevant in the context of Russia's disinformation about the war in Ukraine. Indeed, Russia's narratives have unapologetically been targeted at expressing the historical unequal balance of power with the EU (mostly in Africa) and the US (mostly in Latin America) by expressing a 'Western hypocrisy/guilt', 'whataboutism', '(neo)colonialism', and other anti-Western sentiments and by expressing a much more 'caring than the West' Russia. Latin America and Africa have been also similar in their reactions towards Russia's disinformation with a mostly neutral stance towards the war in Ukraine and sentiments that are ambivalent about choosing a side.

China's fake neutrality alongside censoring and amplificatory role

Since the start of the Russian invasion of Ukraine on 24th February 2022, China has gone to great lengths to appear neutral, but at the same time its state media have widely adopted the Kremlin's propaganda narrative by reproducing deceptive wording such as 'special military operation' and 'Ukraine crisis' to describe the invasion, and by implying that the United States and NATO are actually responsible for the war.[95] Hence, with over a billion followers on Facebook alone, China's state-controlled channels offer Russian President Vladimir Putin a powerful megaphone for shaping global understanding of the war.[96]

Government officials and state and party media from the People's Republic of China (PRC) and the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) routinely amplify Kremlin propaganda, conspiracy theories, and disinformation. Using social media platforms banned within the PRC. The 'wolf warrior' diplomats avoid explicit public endorsement or condemnation of Russia's invasion in Ukraine, and continue to insist that Beijing is a neutral stakeholder that 'respects the sovereignty and territorial integrity of all nations'.[97] In public statements and at international summits, Chinese officials have attempted to stake out a seemingly neutral position on the war in Ukraine, neither condemning Russian actions nor ruling out the possibility Beijing could act as a mediator in a push for peace. But while its international

[94] Giedraitytè and Putrimas, "Russia Is Waging an Information War in Latin America."
[95] Reporters Without Borders, "War in Ukraine: Beware of China's Amplification of Russian Propaganda, RSF Says," April 14, 2022, https://rsf.org/en/war-ukraine-beware-china-s-amplification-russian-propaganda-rsf-says; Elizabeth Dwoskin, "China Is Russia's Most Powerful Weapon for Information Warfare," The Washington Post, April 8, 2022, https://www.washingtonpost.com/technology/2022/04/08/russia-china-disinformation/.
[96] Dwoskin, "China Is Russia's Most Powerful Weapon for Information Warfare."
[97] U.S. Department of State, "People's Republic of China Efforts to Amplify the Kremlin's Voice on Ukraine," May 2, 2022, https://www.state.gov/disarming-disinformation/prc-efforts-to-amplify-the-kremlins-voice-on-ukraine/.

messaging has kept many guessing as to Beijing's true intentions, much of its domestic media coverage of Russia's invasion tells a whole different story.[98] Meanwhile, within China, the CCP and state-backed entities censor credible reporting on Russia's atrocities in Ukraine while blaming NATO and the United States for Putin's brutal war of choice.[99]

State-run news media outlets, which dominate China's highly censored media space, have been largely echoing Russian state media stories or information from Russian officials.[100] It is not clear the extent to which these posts may be explicitly the result of a coordinated propaganda campaign between the two countries, but it is consistent with an ongoing pattern in which Russian and Chinese media have amplified and reinforced their often-interchangeable talking points on issues such as the treatment of Russian dissidents, Hong Kong pro-democracy protests, the origins of the Covid-19 pandemic, or the supposed American role in fomenting 'colour revolutions' against authoritarian regimes, and now the war in Ukraine.[101] On the *amplificatory* role, Chinese channels also have given airtime and amplification to high-ranking Russian government officials and to presenters from Russian government channels whose shows have been restricted or blocked.[102] PRC and CCP media present unverified information and claims sourced from Russia's state-run media and officials, and in a feedback loop, Russia's state-run media then cite PRC and CCP media to portray Russia's position as widely supported.[103] Another feedback loop is made between PRC's 'wolf warrior' diplomats and anti-NATO and anti-U.S. influencers who boost the Kremlin and Beijing's narratives, which are then reposted appears in PRC, CCP, and Kremlin propaganda state-media outlets (U.S. Department of State, 2022). On the *censoring* role, voices from within China who have tried to speak up, including five history professors who penned an open letter voicing their strong opposition to 'Russia's war against Ukraine', have seen their posts swiftly deleted or social accounts suspended. Therefore, the alternative, critical voices who gave subtle critiques or attempts to present scenes from the war zone and to talk about humanity and empathy toward Ukraine have been censored.[104] PRC and CCP media favourably cover Russia's false narratives, while heavily censoring and editing U.S. and other officials from democratic countries and independent media, as well as critical voices from within the PRC, regarding Russia's war against Ukraine and atrocities committed by Russia's forces.[105]

As endorsing an amplificatory role, most Chinese state-run broadcasts and official newspapers have propagated the same claims as the Russian government. Most stories relate to the facts and incidents happening on the Ukrainian battlefield, and supporting the alternative Russian version of the war. For instance the China Central Television (CCTV) propagated the claim that the United States were funding and developing biological weapons in Ukraine. China's amplification of disinformation surrounding U.S. bioweapon laboratories in Ukraine ultimately became one of its largest disinformation campaigns since 2018, with messaging targeting audiences in multiple languages and regions around the world.[106] Another fake news was a report claiming that Ukrainian president Volodymyr Zelensky had fled the capital Kyiv, shared also by CCTV, which was viewed 510 million times on the Chinese platform Weibo and reproduced by 163 media outlets throughout the country.[107]

[98] Simone McCarthy, "China's Promotion of Russian Disinformation Indicates Where Its Loyalties Lie," CNN World, March 10, 2022, https://edition.cnn.com/2022/03/10/china/china-russia-disinformation-campaign-ukraine-intl-dst-hnk/index.html.
[99] U.S. Department of State, "People's Republic of China Efforts to Amplify the Kremlin's Voice on Ukraine."
[100] McCarthy, "China's Promotion of Russian Disinformation Indicates Where Its Loyalties Lie."
[101] McCarthy.
[102] Dwoskin, "China Is Russia's Most Powerful Weapon for Information Warfare."
[103] U.S. Department of State, "People's Republic of China Efforts to Amplify the Kremlin's Voice on Ukraine."
[104] McCarthy, "China's Promotion of Russian Disinformation Indicates Where Its Loyalties Lie."
[105] U.S. Department of State, "People's Republic of China Efforts to Amplify the Kremlin's Voice on Ukraine."
[106] U.S. Department of State; McCarthy, "China's Promotion of Russian Disinformation Indicates Where Its Loyalties Lie."
[107] Reporters Without Borders, "War in Ukraine: Beware of China's Amplification of Russian Propaganda, RSF Says."

The social media accounts of China's international state broadcaster CGTN repeated Vladimir Putin's unsubstantiated accusation that 'Ukrainian neo-Nazis' opened fire on Chinese students.[108] CCTV and Global Times also amplified unsubstantiated claims that Ukrainians staged the Bucha massacre, despite satellite evidence of the killing of at least 400 civilians by Russian troops. PRC state and party-backed media amplified Russia's conspiracies that the United States and Ukraine may have fabricated evidence of the atrocities.[109] Another story is the Russian MFA, Sergueï Lavrov, who denied responsibility for the strike/bombing of Kramatorsk, saying only Ukraine was known to use the missile in question, despite evidence that Russia has previously deployed these weapons, PRC officials responded to the Kramatorsk bombing by calling for a full investigation and for 'all sides' to refrain from 'politicisation' and 'unfounded accusations'. PRC media and Consul General in Osaka, Japan, Xue Jian, went so far as to repost the Russian conspiracy theory that Ukraine is responsible for bombing its own civilians in Kramatorsk.[110] In other words, these examples show the pattern of a playbook that enables China to cover the war through the lens of Russian rhetoric and disinformation.

Concluding remarks on China

While it attempts to appear as neutral diplomatically, China actually aligns with Russia's propaganda narrative. China tries to amplify Russia's stories and serves as an echo chamber that legitimises Russia's warry acts of Russia in Ukraine. Simultaneously, it tries to shut down as many pro-NATO/EU voices domestically, but also censors Western news media outlets on its territory.

General conclusion

Disinformation has been used since centuries as an instrument to spread propaganda, to atomise a society, and to consequently control the masses. Russia is often referred as the originator and most common user of disinformation techniques throughout history. While disinformation has been at the forefront of many news agendas in our recent times, it is hence not because of the novelty of the concept but rather the development of modern technologies that enhance the impact of disinformation and diminishes the capacity to trace back the disinformation perpetrators. In a period of time when war is conducted in a manner that can be called 'hybrid', information warfare and the use of disinformation through modern spreading channels become as much common currency as phenomenons that slip out of our current understanding of modern warfare. This paper tried to give an overview of the current state of the art by using the war in Ukraine to find examples of Russian disinformation in order to identify its targets and its narratives. The author identified that the current spread of disinformation by Russia follows the logic of the 'firehose of falsehood', meaning that it attempts to overwhelm and confuse its victims through a multiplicity of narratives and of channels to avoid any possibility of tracing back Kremlin originated disinformation. What the paper reveals is a striking capacity to target countries and regions which are potentially vulnerable to Russia's narratives, as exemplified with the 'Near Abroad' and the 'Global South', by manipulating historical events, elevating grievances against the West, portraying a victimised Russia, and using other manipulative narratives that are much more playful with the ambivalent notion of 'truth' than deep fakes or purely false information. The impacts of this strategy are not measured in this analysis, yet it is highly probable that considering the relatively low cost for Russia to spread disinformation, its

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[108] Reporters Without Borders.
[109] U.S. Department of State, "People's Republic of China Efforts to Amplify the Kremlin's Voice on Ukraine."
[110] U.S. Department of State.

efficiency is likely to be in favour of the Kremlin, and some noticeable impacts could be found in the political spheres of the regions where Russia puts effort in spreading propaganda. Additionally, China endorses an amplificatory role of the Russian narratives as well as censoring various voices that would provide counternarratives domestically. Hence, more research is needed to understand the impacts of Russian disinformation in various parts of the world, but also on how to counter this always-evolving adaptation of disinformation techniques with modern technologies, and to adopt a more preventive rather than curative behaviour towards disinformation.

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L'analyse des éléments déclencheurs des conflits et des instruments de leur gestion - sanctions et incitants économiques comme moyens de politique étrangère; crises et interventions humanitaires; rôle de la mémoire dans un processus de réconciliation, par exemple - est combinée à l'étude empirique de différends internationaux et de processus de paix spécifiques.