Osadchuk R. Yu.
National University of Kyiv-Mohyla Academy

MULTI-STEP APPROACH FOR DISINFORMATION – ANALYSIS OF 'UKRAINIAN TRADES US-DONATED WEAPONS' NARRATIVE

The article focuses on building a model of disinformation campaigns using network analysis and digital humanities methods. The article explores how Russia can increase distrust in providing assistance to Ukraine by spreading a repetitive narrative in various forms. Examples of "active measures" – a combination of disinformation, propaganda, and information operations to influence foreign public opinion and policy – are considered, using the example of the «arms sales» narrative. The purpose of this article is to develop a model of recurring disinformation campaigns that Russia is waging against Ukraine. The article discusses the detailed steps that symbolize a systematic approach to spreading disinformation and building a narrative based on publications in the media and social networks. The author shows that in order to consolidate the narrative, authoritarian countries use methods of external validation, i.e., the dissemination of information by foreign media or social media users. It is also determined that the multi-step structure of a disinformation campaign is used to complicate the process of debunking this false information by independent sources and researchers. The article outlines that this model can serve as a basis for future research, as well as debunking by competent actors in order to effectively counter such campaigns. It also identifies the structure and evolution of these campaigns, which provides key stakeholders in democratic societies, including politicians, media professionals, and civil society, with the opportunity to better anticipate threats in the information space, identify manipulative narratives, and build resilience. The broader implications of this study go beyond the Ukrainian context, offering a methodological framework applicable to the approaches of other authoritarian states used against democratic countries that are vulnerable to disinformation and influence operations.

Key words: media, information space, disinformation, Ukraine, Russia, social media, hybrid war, information security.

Statement of the problem. The dissemination of Russian propaganda and disinformation targeting foreign audiences has been extensively documented [24, p. 2; 1, p. 217-19], including the identification of its strategic pillars [11, p. 8] and the role of state-sponsored media such as RT and Sputnik [14, p. 4-7; 5, p. 29-31]. However, the full-scale Russian invasion of Ukraine in February 2022 triggered a significant disruption in these established channels, as many countries imposed sanctions and blocked Russian state media, in the EU, in particular. This shift undermined traditional communication patterns and compelled Russian actors to adapt their disinformation strategies to continue reaching external audiences through alternative or more covert means.

Despite a growing body of research examining the narratives spread by Russia, there remains a lack of in-depth analysis focused on how disinformation campaigns have evolved in response to these constraints. Specifically, few studies have traced or modeled the long-term, recurring nature of these campaigns in the post-invasion context. This gap risks underestimating the resilience and adaptability of Russian state-run disinformation, especially as it pivots to exploit new channels and formats to bypass countermeasures.

Analysis of recent research and publications. The main objective of influence and disinformation campaigns is to sow confusion and weaken opponent states by decreasing trust in state institutions. For example, the notorious Operation Denver [26, p. 300-302] suggested the artificial creation of HIV by the US, and even after its public debunking by Soviet defectors, the disease still has a trove of conspiracies that influence people's decision-making in that regard decades later. While researching the possible effects of online campaigns, Eady et al. [9, p. 8-9] argued that the impact of foreign interference online is limited and most likely does not swing significant events like elections, mainly referring to the 2016 presidential elections in the US. However, the study focused primarily on identified accounts of the Internet Research Agency on Twitter, effectively ignoring many other platforms and ways

to influence public opinion, including alternative ones. At the same time, Allcott & Gentzkow [1, p. 223-24] showed that social media was not a dominant news source during this election cycle, hinting at the limitation of this mode of influence in 2016, but they also highlighted that false stories stuck to the respondents since more than half of surveyed by researchers who remembered false stories believe them. Thus, the results of the long-term influence of these stories are unknown, especially in the context of topics that do not include previously held hard-held beliefs, like 'Ukraine sells military aid.' The literature shows that active measures might have an effect on public opinion and influence the trust and decision-making of specific audiences [2, p. 651-3]. Moreover, Pennycook and Rand [24, p. 389-90] highlighted that repetition is one of the few features that increase the trustworthiness of information.

Ognyanova et al. [21, p. 7] researched the effect of false information by prompting respondents to install a browser extension that tracked their consumption. Scientists found that false information negatively affects trust toward media that might backfire in a time of emergency, arguing that false information "may not only leave its consumers misinformed but also make them more vulnerable when disaster strikes"[21, p. 2]. In another meta-study, Colomina et al. [4, p. 13] pointed out that the reduced trust in media creates "alternative news ecosystems," which are driven to create sensational and polarizing content, thus making the dialogue between divided parts of the societies less likely and, thus, undermining the stability of the system, which might be the worst during an emergency or conflict. Moreover, Russia constantly uses its own and alternative media [19, p. 11-13] with slanted news coverage to reach foreign audiences, disappointed in traditional media. For instance, RT and Sputnik appealed to small but specific audiences in democratic countries of the EU before the ban but remain influential in parts of the world where it is not banned. One study [34, p. 1855-58] showed that primarily young people who are skeptical of media and government were among avid consumers of RT, according to a survey in Sweden.

Task statement. Based on the theories of framing [3, p. 110-11], agenda-setting [17, p. 790-93], using content analysis [29, p. 8-9], the author analyzed multiple complex Russian disinformation campaigns related to the new disinformation topic of 'western weaponry trade.' The results determine a hypothetical Russian disinformation dissemination and narrative injection multi-step model, which serves as a blueprint for similar operations. Identified campaigns

suggest a schematic approach used by Russian actors to influence foreign public opinion and discourse. The study's results will be helpful in the disinformation and propaganda studies that research Russian campaigns. They will also be of interest to researchers of international relations and communication, as well as practitioners from counter-disinformation fields and governments.

By analyzing how the campaigns spread, the author hypothesized that stories might have the same patterns of appearing on social media and the web. To test the hypothesis, the researchers picked a few different instances of the same overarching pattern of "weapon trading" based on the previous academic and professional research [35, p. 277-78] that appeared after the Russian full-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022. Since Russian disinformation has a pattern of operating based on a certain structure [11, p. 9], the research traced the origin and the roots that multiple new campaigns utilized to provide veal of trustworthiness.

This study addresses two central questions: *How has the Russian disinformation apparatus adapted in response to international sanctions and media restrictions?* and *Is there a discernible structure or template that guides the design and spread of these campaigns?* By focusing on multiple case studies – particularly those advancing the narrative that "Ukraine sells Western-aided munition" – this research aims to identify emerging patterns and propose a model of recurring propaganda tactics, based on the multiple steps approach. Each steps in the model describes specific tactics employed by Russia to influence foreign audiences. Such a model can contribute to a better understanding of how disinformation campaigns function under pressure and offer practical insights for counter-disinformation efforts.

First step – setting the scene

The first step was introducing the idea via a series of forgeries on fringe social media channels. The concept of Ukraine selling weapons, tanks, and military equipment during the war with Russia is counter-intuitive, so it should have been introduced via an obscure source but featuring some evidence, like Operation Denver a few decades ago [26, p. 298-300]. The most useful tool, in this case, was anonymous Telegram channels, which were both popular [13, p. 26] and provided the needed plausible deniability of the involvement of Russian state actors.

Multiple channels that are connected with Russian intelligence [28] published a forged response [6, 30] from the Ukrainian Minister of Defense to the member

of parliament's request, in which he acknowledges the sale of extra equipment. The letter featured multiple mistakes and was of poor quality, but was featured in a few fringe pro-Kremlin media. The step is foundational since it creates a fertile ground for future reference of new stories that will use it as a background.

Second step – build a more solid foundation

The next step of the disinformation campaign is to set the foundation in stone with the new round of falsehoods. Similarly, multiple pro-Kremlin Telegram channels published numerous screenshots of the Dark Web stores that featured weapons and offered them for sale from Kyiv. The messages featured photoshopped advertisements and messages from the forums that anyone could publish without verification [7, p. 1]. However, the second step required mainstream amplification. Therefore, the message was promoted by Russian diplomats and mainstream media [32], which claimed that Ukraine 'sells weapons to the Middle East, Idlib.' The wave also included Russian war correspondents and proponents of war that echoed similar messages [33] This round of persistent story weaponizes the unknown negative ('Dark web') to the issue. It breaks the topic to the mainstream via the use of Russian diplomats for foreign audiences and mainstream Russian media and commenters for internal and Russian-speaking audiences.

Third step – activation of useful idiots abroad

To influence foreigners, the campaign needs internal actors who could serve as 'independent sources' in promoting prevalent stories in local languages and insert them into the local context. It might be an organic overspill of already produced Russian content or a targeted campaign, like Doppelganger [10]. For the French audience, such a story became an alleged 'capture' of French-donated howitzers by Russians. The story was injected by a local commenter with the 'source from FSB' and critique of help to Ukraine by the French administration [22]. The step is essential to nudge a discussion in foreign information spaces to sow distrust and suspiciousness towards a specific concept, in this case – aid to Ukraine. The message of the foreigner is picked by the Russian media to provide a case at home and solidify the notion of the current story, weapon loss, with a potential for future manipulation and criticism of the opponents. The French commenter received multiple citations in Russian media, as an additional loop for the internal Russian audience.

The fourth step – deny fact-checking

The previous three steps usually appear with a body of refutation messages from fact-checking organizations, media, and governments that are being accused during disinformation campaigns. Therefore, the Russian propaganda machine needs to counter those messages by raising doubts over the credibility of the sources and investigations, blurring the line between its crafted messages and reality. With weapons trade, debunks by fact-checkers and governmental sources [30] were denied and doubted by Russian media [22] with claims that no data to counter French commenters was provided, putting the weight of evidence to the defending side, rather than the accusatory side.

The constant denial is part of the Russian 4D toolbox [18] that is still prevalent in the Russian communication toolbox. In the case of widescale and multi-step disinformation campaigns, it is essential to undermine opponents' debunks and fact-checking by mixing the line between truth and lies. This step is rather constant and present in parallel with every next step.

The fifth step – transform and twist the foreign sources to your advantage

When the story has some momentum abroad, it might be utilized even further to make a claim more outrageous or in line with the general message communicated by the disinformation campaign. To achieve this, disinformation actors need to apply new twists to the foreign message so that it receives a new push but also better aligns with the central theme of the main narrative. This step also includes the attachment of other narratives to enhance them and tie the message to the broader area of tried messages.

In the case of the 'weapons trade,' pro-Kremlin sources came up with an idea to fabricate the message that the Ukrainian Armed Forces did not simply lose French howitzers in a battle but traded them to the Russian army for a modest sum [22]. This twist not only allowed to change the narrative but also opened an opportunity to use 'useful idiots' statements as evidence of dissent and dissatisfaction with the French government's help to Ukraine.

The sixth step – create a compelling 'investigation' from forged stories

To insert the discussion for wider audiences, new 'investigative' articles from foreign outlets and actors are required so that a compelling story of how 'Ukraine consistently trades weapons' might be created based on the previous iterations and forgeries. This is crucial to reinforce previous marginal messaging and put it into perspective, building an illusion of cause and effect. Such compilations serve as the future reference point in any tangential discussion as a 'proof' of opponents' sins in the form of a researched topic, even if it is

built from the multiple cases of disinformation that link to each other. The compilations might have forged information and some real statements that are indirectly related, or experts' opinions, making such pieces a formidable task to debunk that requires multiple checks of everything.

Weapons trade has seen a compilation on the Bulgarian military blog [22] that served as a reference point for the next interactions of the story. This article had links to Dark web messages, a French user, the twisted story about howitzers, and experts' statements that frequently appear on Kremlin-owned RT.

Steps 7 – till infinity

The first six steps create the basis for the future re-appearance of the story in the context of new events. The basis created in the first steps provides plausible deniability for the hostile actor since the compilation of facts was made by foreign entities and actors, so nothing directly points at the originator. The further steps were aggregated together because they indefinitely echo the base story with new findings that either repeat old or introduce somewhat new tactics.

These next steps usually follow the pattern of new revelations already utilized in previous stages, with a reference to those 'findings.' It might be new instances of the dark web [8], articles in the controlled media, or anonymous sources that confirm this information.

Sometimes, malign actors launch new influence operations abroad to prove the original message and impact new audiences. For instance, a Kremlin-tied website [12] launched a forged story of Ukrainian soldiers supposedly selling Stinger man-portable air defense systems (MANPADS) in Germany [23] which included information laundering [27, p. 7-12] and a hack of a Ukrainian media website.

Finally, the previous body of 'evidence' is used to blame an opponent and tie it to any adverse event or movement to discredit it, thus re-introducing the topic to the mainstream via new forgeries, useful idiots, etc. Ukrainian weapon trade was used in connection to the cartel [16] and the Hamas-Israel war [15, 20]. These attempts tried to portray Ukraine as the negative actor that spread Western weaponry and destabilized other countries with the ultimate goal of hindering further aid. The new approaches to undermine Ukraine and

Western military aid to the country will possibly continue, but they became possible due to the baseline created in the first six steps.

Conclusions. The article focuses on the seeding of the narrative that was absent before since it is targeted on the Ukrainian 'misuse' of Western military aid after the Russian full-scale invasion of Ukraine on February 24, 2024. The article focuses on the most basic and essential steps in a few campaigns that were combined by the same topic. It is not a comprehensive study of the specific narrative since the war is ongoing and new instances will reappear. However, it tried to demonstrate how the modern Russian disinformation machine works in creating, updating, and utilizing disinformation campaigns to discredit opponents and influence public opinion and discussion in Russia and foreign countries.

Consistent with previous research on Russian active measures (Rid, 2020) and similar investigations of Russian campaigns and tactics, the author finds that some general lines are developed along the same lines, aiming to reach foreign mainstream sources or social platforms. The article might help create a timeline and map disinformation campaigns, tracing their stages and predicting possible developments for the preparation of countermeasures and pre-bunking initiatives.

More research is needed for similar narratives and campaigns that emerged simultaneously or before so that the model could be tested for consistency. More granular analysis of specific messages and their diffusion on social media and path to mainstream sources is needed to understand the effects of such campaigns. Additionally, the impact of such campaigns is still contested, so more research is required on testing people's responses to this and other campaigns to understand how and what should be done to counter such messages.

This research provides an essential systemic approach to disinformation, thus helping to summarize tactics and techniques and define the stage of a certain campaign. It also shows the importance of treating the new appearances of the same story as a part of the whole that could be used to strengthen the false narrative and make it harder to debunk.

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Осадчук Р. Ю. БАГАТОКРОКОВИЙ ПІДХІД ДО ДЕЗІНФОРМАЦІЇ – АНАЛІЗ НАРАТИВУ «УКРАЇНА ПРОДАЄ ЗБРОЮ ПОДАРОВАНУ США»

Стаття присвячена побудові моделі дезінформаційних кампаній за допомогою мережевого аналізу та методів цифрових гуманітарних наук. У статті досліджено як Росія може посилити недовіру до надання допомоги Україні через поширення повторюваного наративу в різних формах. Розглянуто приклади «активних заходів» – поєднання дезінформації, пропаганди та інформаційних операцій з метою впливу на іноземну громадську думку та політику на прикладі наративу про продаж зброї. Метою цієї статті є розробка моделі повторюваних дезінформаційних кампаній, які Росія веде проти України. У статті розглянуто детальні кроки, які символізують систематичний підхід до розповсюдження дезінформації та побудові наративу на основі публікацій у медіа та соціальних мережах. З'ясовано, що для закріплення наративу, авторитарними країнами використовуються методи зовнішньої валідації, тобто поширення інформації іноземними засобами масової інформації чи користувачами соціальних мереж. Також, визначено, що багатокрокова структура дезінформаційної кампанії використовується для ускладнення процесу розбиття цієї неправдивої інформації незалежними джерелами та дослідниками. У статті окреслено, що ця модель може слугувати основою для майбутніх досліджень, а також розвінчання компетентними акторами з метою ефективної протидії таким кампаніям. Також визначено структуру та еволюцію цих кампаній, що надає ключовим зацікавленим сторонам в демократичних суспільствах, включно з політиками, працівниками ЗМІ та громадянським суспільством, можливість краще передбачати загрози в інформаційному просторі, виявляти маніпулятивні наративи та підвищувати стійкість до них. Ширші наслідки цього дослідження виходять за межі українського контексту, пропонуючи методологічну базу, застосовну до підходів інших авторитарних держав, що використовуються проти демократичних країн, які є вразливими до дезінформації та операцій впливу.

Ключові слова: ЗМІ, інформаційний простір, дезінформація, Україна, Росія, соціальні медіа, гібридна війна, інформаційна безпека.