

# KREMLIN PROPAGANDA: SOVIET ACTIVE MEASURES BY OTHER MEANS

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## **Abstract**

*This article traces the evolution of Russian propaganda and its role in active measures. Active measures were originally conceived during the Soviet era but still remain operative as they were recently deployed during the Russian occupation of Crimea and the war against Ukraine in Donbas. During these events active measures underwent something of a renaissance as there was the dramatic upsurge in propaganda usage and media manipulation. Fake media stories and forgeries have long played an integral part in the active measures that have been conducted by the Kremlin, which then amends its military capacity and diplomacy efforts to cover up the deceit. The manufacture and dissemination of fake news stories is carried out in a centralized and systematic fashion as the fabrications must be coherent and maintain alignment with the Kremlin's policies and talking points. It will be shown that the use of media-related active measures is not a new phenomenon and was widely utilized by the former Soviet Union as a way of actualizing its foreign policy by clandestine means. When examining more than 500 Russian propaganda pieces, which were debunked by the StopFake.org verification project, it becomes evident that the same of falsification and deception patterns that were common to the USSR already in the 1950's, are still present today. The only difference is the parasitic way in which the current Kremlin propaganda has seized on core liberal Western concepts, such as the promotion of freedom of speech, and then used this as a screen to allow it to deliver 'the other point of view'. Whereas before the Kremlin historically relied on traditional media, such as printed news to distribute its fake news stories, it now makes use of a much wider array of mediums such as the internet and social media.*

## What are active measures?

The Russian occupation of Crimea and the war against Ukraine in Donbas was an apogee in terms of propaganda usage, media manipulations, fake news stories, and forgeries propounded by the Kremlin. These are a just a part of the active measures conducted by Russia, which then amends its military capacity and diplomatic actions to conceal the deception. These actions are part of an overall strategy that has been termed hybrid war.

Peter Pomerantsev describes the concept of hybrid war:

*Described by scholars as ‘hybrid’, ‘full-spectrum’, ‘non-linear’, ‘next-generation’, or ‘ambiguous’—the variations in the description indicate the slipperiness of the subject—these conflicts mix psychological, media, economic, cyber, and military operations without requiring a declaration of war<sup>1</sup>.*

The War in the Eastern Ukraine has been devastating and traumatic for the local populace but has had limited national impact, and received even less attention outside of Ukraine, especially since the ceasefire under the auspices of the Minsk agreements was signed. Yet this does not mean that the information war has ceased. As a component of hybrid war, information war is especially alarming because its influences are proliferating and it is having more of a global impact as an increasing number of countries find traces of Russian active measure occurring in their territory.

Information warfare and active measures have evolved since the collapse of the Soviet Union. The ways in which media-related active measures were used separates the Soviet information war from contemporary Russian hybrid war. The Soviet Union considered these activities to mainly be part of covert operations that never were publicly declared, articulated or disclosed and could not be traced back to any Soviet government agencies. The present Russian government coopts these instruments of public opinion manipulation and makes them a visible part of the public discourse for domestic and foreign audiences.

President Putin has used a similar approach to openly describe the importance of the informational component of the military strategy of Russia. At the opening of RT’s Spanish-language broadcasting facility in Argentina he stated: “The rapid progress of electronic media has made news reporting

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<sup>1</sup> <<http://www.theatlantic.com/international/archive/2015/12/war-2015-china-russia-isis/422085/>> (accessed February 9, 2016).

enormously important and turned it into a formidable weapon that enables the manipulation of public opinion”<sup>2</sup>.

The Kremlin considers such manipulation to not only serve as an important instrument for conducting foreign policy, but also to serve as an instrument for conducting or supplementing military warfare. The Russian military doctrine that was adopted in December 2014 emphasizes the importance of information and information technologies:

*11. There is a tendency towards shifting the military risks and military threats to the information space*

*12.l) The use of information and communication technologies for the military-political purposes to take actions which run counter to international law, and which are aimed against sovereignty, political independence, territorial integrity of states and posing threat to international peace, security, global and regional stability*

*13.c) subversive information activities against the population, especially young citizens of the State, aimed at undermining historical, spiritual and patriotic traditions related to the defense of the Motherland.*<sup>3</sup>

An older version of the Military Doctrine from 2010 also mentioned (article 13d) of use of information war /.../ to pre-empt the use of the military force or to form positive public opinion after the use of military force<sup>4</sup>.

Anatoliy Nogovitsyn, former Deputy Chief of General Staff of the Armed Forces of the Russian Federation, defines the role of information in hybrid war as follows:

*The disorganization of the functioning of key military, industrial, and administrative facilities and systems of the enemy and also the information-psychological effect on his military-political leadership, troops, and population with the use of modern information technologies and means*<sup>5</sup>.

During the opening of the RT Spanish broadcasting facility in Argentina on July 2014, President Putin also focused on the importance of media, especially electronic media (first of all television but also Internet):

<sup>2</sup> <<http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/46762>> (accessed January 15, 2016).

<sup>3</sup> <<http://kremlin.ru/events/president/news/47334>> (accessed February 05, 2016).

<sup>4</sup> See <<http://kremlin.ru/supplement/461>> (accessed January 15, 2016).

<sup>5</sup> **Nogovitsyn, Anatoliy** 2009. At the Centre of Attention—Information Security. – Krasnaya Zvezda, 34, February 27, 2009, p. 1.

*Intense media warfare has become a mark of the times, when certain nations attempt to monopolize the truth and use it in their own interests.<sup>6</sup>*

When Putin speaks of media warfare, he is talking about a war that is being conducted against Russia by unnamed countries. Although the Russian President does not specifically mention who is conducting this war, it is apparent that he means the West in general, and the United States and NATO in particular. This is also overtly stated in the Military Doctrine. This policy puts Moscow reactively in a defensive position and necessitates retaliation:

*In a speech to Russia's Academy of Military Sciences in January 2013, Chief-of-Staff Valery Gerasimov complained that Russian knowledge of asymmetric warfare was "superficial." The North Atlantic Treaty Organization, and the United States in particular, had demonstrated their mastery of non-military campaigns in the Arab Spring and Ukraine's pro-Western Orange Revolution in 2004, Gerasimov said. Such modesty is disingenuous. Disinformation and subversion as weapons of war are as old as catapults and cavalry. The Kremlin's advantage in the information age is that all of Russia's major media outlets are under its control, allowing it to hammer its audience with one, unified message. The Kremlin claim that it's in an "information war" with the West implies that there is vast conspiracy among myriad media in the United States and Europe, public and private, to produce the same lies about Russia.<sup>7</sup>*

Russia perfectly grasps the importance of propaganda and heavily invests money and human talent into organizations that broadcast to an international audience like RT (formerly known as Russia Today), Sputnik International (formerly known as the Voice of Russia), Ruptly, RIA (that still operate as a brand in Russian), TASS, Russia Insider, Russia Beyond the Headlines (RBTH) and a myriad of other sources of propaganda, fake news stories and falsifications. Some of these "media" organizations are well-known propaganda brands from the Cold War era, while others are quite new.

RT was created in 2005, immediately after the Orange Revolution in Ukraine and was fully operational by the Russian invasion of Georgia in 2008. Sputnik International was launched during the Euromaidan uprising in Kyiv.

<sup>6</sup> <<http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/46762>> (accessed January 15, 2016).

<sup>7</sup> <<http://blogs.reuters.com/great-debate/2016/02/07/russia-having-success-in-hybrid-war-against-germany/>> (accessed February 21, 2016).

Both RT and Sputnik International have dropped the word “Russian” from their brand names, which is quite interesting but explainable. They do not work for the Russian market, their coverage is not primarily Russia, and they do not promote the nation branding of Russia as many have asserted. For example, Shawn Powers calls RT

*a part of global engagement strategy that combines Russian and international media platforms to communicate and articulate Russian foreign policy. The most developed of these is Russia Today (RT), which is a Russian satellite television broadcasting system similar to Qatar’s Al Jazeera or France 24.*<sup>8</sup>

The editor in chief of RT, Margarita Simonyan, offers an altogether different rationale for RT that is not at all connected to nation branding:

*To some extent, if you are not equipped for broadcasting abroad – then it’s like you do not have the army. When there is no war you do not need it. But when the war has already started you cannot create it in a week.*<sup>9</sup>

The website of Sputnik International states that their mission is “offer guidance in a multipolar world, while respecting every country’s national interests, culture, history and traditions”. The reality, however, is precisely the opposite, as the Kremlin “has systematically learnt to use the principles of liberal democracies against them in what we call here “the weaponization of information”<sup>10</sup>.

In other words, the Kremlin is using these so called ‘media’ organizations to deny other societies their right to their own culture, history and traditions, and does so through the twisting of facts, the dissemination of fake news stories, and falsifications in order to undermine the policy making process or compromise certain core values and institutions:

*Like RT, the German branch of Sputnik – named after the satellite that established the Soviet claim to supremacy in space almost 60 years ago – is part of the Rossiya Segodnya media empire. Its mandate is to broadcast Moscow’s*

<sup>8</sup> Powers, S. 2011. U.S. international broadcasting: An untapped resource for ethnic and domestic news organization. In Public Policy and Funding the News. Retrieved from < [http://fundingthenews.usc.edu/related\\_research/4\\_Carnegie\\_USInternationalBroadcasting.pdf](http://fundingthenews.usc.edu/related_research/4_Carnegie_USInternationalBroadcasting.pdf) > (accessed February 05, 2016).

<sup>9</sup> <<https://daily.afisha.ru/archive/gorod/archive/ministry-of-truth-simonyan/>> (accessed February 24, 2016).

<sup>10</sup> <<http://www.interpretermag.com/the-menace-of-unreality-how-the-kremlin-weaponizes-information-culture-and-money/>> (accessed February 24, 2016).

*worldview at Putin's behest. Dmitry Kiselyov, the Kremlin's chief propagandist, serves as Sputnik's general director. The only Russian journalist on the EU sanctions list against Moscow, he sees himself as being involved in an "information war." In fact, he says, this is the "primary form of warfare" today.<sup>11</sup>*

The core of the Kremlin's propaganda, both inside and outside Russia, is a post-modernist denial of everything. It is aimed at the total destruction of the entire liberal concept of western society including democracy itself as well as its constituent elements such as free media, fair elections, effective governance, and the right of people to self-determination and self-governance. There is no new ideology contained in current Russian propaganda, because Russia does not have a single, individual ideology. Instead, it borrows a little from everything. In this way, the system produces a large number of "small propagandas", each of them targeting a specific audience. The more messages, the better as this effectively augments confusion. To paraphrase Peter Pomerantsev, one could argue that the aim is not to provide a sole, unified narrative, but to rather create many clashing narratives in order to confuse different audiences with different messages:

*Unlike in the Cold War, when Soviets largely supported leftist groups, a fluid approach to ideology now allows the Kremlin to simultaneously back far-left and far-right movements, greens, anti-globalists and financial elites. The aim is to exacerbate divides and create an echo chamber of Kremlin support.<sup>12</sup>*

Although Russian propaganda peaked during the war in Ukraine, it was not something that came out of a vacuum. It was in fact a continuation of Soviet propaganda, which never really disappeared, even after the collapse of the Soviet Union. In reality the active measures that are now being used were simply reviewed, rebuilt, transformed, and then applied towards contemporary situations with increased efficiency.

The current Russian propaganda system is often compared to that of the Soviets during the Cold War. This is because the objectives of the current government are the same as they were then, thus modern propaganda borrows and uses similar techniques from the KGB handbook. This makes many terms easily recognizable. Phrases such as the "puppeteers from Washington", and

<sup>11</sup> <<http://www.interpretermag.com/the-menace-of-unreality-how-the-kremlin-weaponizes-information-culture-and-money/>> (accessed February 24, 2016).

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*

“foreign agents” are familiar, yet current propaganda also differs greatly in terms of quantity, quality and the mediums that it uses.

Ideology was a central element of the propaganda of the Soviet Union, which clashed with the values-based counter-propaganda coming from the West. The central role played by the communist ideology ultimately rendered Soviet propaganda weak and ineffective, and ultimately such ideological narratives only appealed to left-leaning political groups or countries.

The US Department of State’s, Bureau of Public Affairs’s, “Special Report on Soviet active measures” from 1981, summarizes some of propaganda setbacks of the Soviets stating that: “Soviet use of Marxist-Leninist ideology to appeal to foreign groups often turns out to be an obstacle to the promotion of Soviet goals in some areas; it is now being deemphasized though not completely abandoned”<sup>13</sup>.

In order to offset these setbacks, the Soviets adopted the concept of active measures (*aktivnyye meropriyatiya*) that refers to operations intended to “affect other nations policies, as distinct from espionage and counterintelligence. Some Soviet active measures included:

- *written or spoken disinformation;*
- *efforts to control media in foreign countries;*
- *use of Communist parties and front organizations;*
- *clandestine radio broadcasting;*
- *blackmail, personal and economic;*
- *political influence operations.*<sup>14</sup>

These methods are summarized by the Active Measures Working Group – the interagency taskforce, which was formed in 1981 in order to counter the effects of active measures. The organization was initially under the United States Department of State and then later became part of the United States Information Agency (USIA). In their annual reports produced from 1981 until 1989, the AMWG provided a detailed account of the use of active measures by Soviet Union.

A very important insight into active measures practices of the Soviet Union can also be gleaned from the books written by defectors from the Soviet Union or its satellite socialist states. These individuals often had

<sup>13</sup> <<http://insidethecoldwar.org/sites/default/files/documents/Soviet%20Active%20Measures%20Forgery,%20Disinformation,%20Political%20Operations%20October%201981.pdf>> (accessed January 28, 2016).

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*



worked inside the disinformation system and had a firsthand glance of its operations. Ladislav Bittman, Mihai Pacepa, Anatoliy Golitsyn, Stanislav Levchenko, and Vasili Mitrokhin were all intimately acquainted with the active measures practices of the Soviet Union and gave striking evidence.

Ladislav Bittman was a former StB Czechoslovak intelligence officer, who defected to the West in 1968. He summarizes some of the methods that were in used during the Soviet era:

*Forgeries/.../ are classified into two major categories. The first category includes misleading information (disinformation) that contributes to poor policy decisions among government leaders. This type of fake usually does not require or receive widespread attention of the media. The second type, propagandistic forgery, seeks to mold public opinion in a target country. Propagandistic forgeries take a number of different forms: leaflets in the name of non-existent organizations, counterfeit pamphlets circulated to key individuals and groups, facsimiles and subtle alterations of official publications, reproduction and shading of entire issues of newspapers and magazines, fake personal letters, and phony bank statements. Even duplicate best-sellers have been offered to publishing houses.<sup>15</sup>*

Moscow's approach included the application of many instruments related to media manipulations, such as general control of the media in foreign countries, complete or partial forgery of media stories, the establishment of bogus media organizations abroad, and the exploitation of journalists who were recruited to serve as collaborators in order to influence the policies of their home nation.

The above description is illustrative because it enumerates exactly the same set of tools that is currently being used by the Kremlin in its deception and disinformation practices. Fake news and forgeries are essential components of active measures and are of especial interest. They will be discussed in greater detail later on.

Another key factor is the existence of a chain of command and the hierarchy that is necessary to produce fake news and forgeries. In order to find the mastermind behind this elaborate system it is worthwhile to take a closer look at how this system was managed in the past. According to the Active Measure Working group report,

<sup>15</sup> **Bittman, L.** 1985. *The KGB and Soviet Disinformation: An Insider's View*. Pergamon Press, p. 96. [**Bittman** 1985]



*Depending on its sensitivity and importance, approval for a forgery may be obtained from the KGB leadership, the International Department of the Central Committee of the Communist Party, or the Secretariat of the Central Committee itself. KGB specialists prepare the forgery under the supervision of the active measures section of the KGB's First Chief Directorate.<sup>16</sup>*

According to the “Soviet Active Measures in The Post-Cold War’ Era 1988–1991” Report, it was the International Information Department (IDD) of the CPSU Central Committee that was tasked with the manufacture of fake news and forgeries. An examination of its internal organizational chart could offer some guidance as to how the system might be organized today:

*The IDD was divided into 6 sectors organized around geographical and functional lines. Each sector employed about half a dozen professionals, who determined the themes, arguments, and information used in Soviet foreign propaganda and the treatment of international affairs in the Soviet press. After these were decided upon, the IID and its successors would hold regular meetings to issue their guidance on international information issues to Novosti, TASS, Radio Moscow, Radio Peace and Progress, and other leading Soviet media.<sup>17</sup>*

When past methods are compared to current operations, then it must be concluded that there does in fact exist an effective hierarchical system of management that coordinates the production of fake news and disseminates it, across multiple platforms, throughout the world. Without such a management system, it would be impossible to achieve the high level of cohesion between active measures, policy making, the military and the diplomatic corps, and to coordinate and obfuscate events such as the Crimean occupation, and the war in the Eastern Ukraine.

If the Soviet model of command is used as a template then the KGB would be replaced with the FSB and the SVR, who divide their responsibilities according to their spheres of competence and whether the Russian domestic audience or international audience respectively are being targeted. And the GRU, which is in charge of foreign military intelligence, must also

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<sup>16</sup> **Soviet Active Measures: Focus on Forgeries.** Foreign Affairs Note, United States Department of State Washington, D.C. April 1983, <<http://insidethecoldwar.org/sites/default/files/documents/Department%20of%20State%20Note%20Soviet%20Active%20Measures%20Focus%20on%20Forgeries%20April%201983.pdf>> (accessed January 30, 2016). [**Soviet Active Measures** 1983]

<sup>17</sup> <[http://intellit.muskingum.edu/russia\\_folder/pcw\\_era/sect\\_03.htm](http://intellit.muskingum.edu/russia_folder/pcw_era/sect_03.htm)> (accessed February 01, 2016).

be deeply involved in the planning and conducting of active measures, especially as the Russian Ministry of Defense conducts its military operations. The International Department and the International Information Department of the Central Committee of the Communist Party would be replaced by the Kremlin itself meaning that the Kremlin must currently direct and coordinate active measures. Newsweek quotes Ilya Ponomarev, an opposition Duma deputy:

*That role is played by Putin's deputy chief of staff, Alexei Gromov, who calls in chief editors to coordinate the Kremlin line. Gromov distributes the orders to the mainstream media in Moscow, /.../ and his orders are as strict as any in the army.<sup>18</sup>*

Further pro proof of the Kremlin orchestrating this system of management comes from the text messages hacked by Anonymous International. The texts show that several high-ranking Kremlin officials working in the Presidential Administration, the Government and the ruling United Russia Party are involved in the planning and conducting of media-related active measures. These individuals include Vyacheslav Volodin, Timur Prokopenko, Arkadiy Dvorkovich, Robert Shlegel as well as others<sup>19</sup>.

Just as the Soviet leadership, always insisted on the defensive character of their active measures, the current Russian leadership also justifies its actions in the same manner and invokes its moral superiority:

*The KGB's active-measures doctrine improbably insisted that its influence operations were 'radically different in essence from the disinformation to which Western agencies resort in order to deceive public opinion': the KGB disinformation operations are progressive; they are designed to mislead not the working people but their enemies – the ruling circles of capitalism – in order to induce them to act in a certain way, or abstain from actions contrary to the interests of the USSR; they promote peace and social progress; they serve international détente; they are humane, creating the conditions for the noble struggle for humanity's bright future.<sup>20</sup>*

<sup>18</sup> <<http://europe.newsweek.com/pushing-kremlin-line-251587?rm=eu>> (accessed February 20, 2016).

<sup>19</sup> <<http://tsn.ua/special-projects/liar/>> (accessed February 20, 2016).

<sup>20</sup> **Andrew, C.** 2006. *The World Was Going Our Way: The KGB and the Battle for the Third World – Newly Revealed Secrets from the Mitrokhin Archive.* Basic Books, p. 188. [Andrew 2006]

The same idea of moral superiority can be found in views of one of the public faces of contemporary Russian propaganda, Dmitry Kiselev, who

*with typical brio, argued that East and West appeared to be trading places. In Russia we now take full advantage of freedom of speech, whereas in the West political correctness, or political expediency in the name of security, have become arguments against freedom of speech.*<sup>21</sup>

The ideas of freedom of speech, invoking the moral high ground in the information battle with the West, and offering access to alternative points of view via the Russian ‘media’ have become cornerstone concepts of Kremlin propaganda. This legacy was inherited from the Soviet past. In Putin’s speech for the opening of the RT Spanish 24/7 broadcasting in Argentina in July 2014, he stated:

*Your nation is now getting a reputable and, most importantly, reliable source of information on the events and developments in Russia and worldwide. The right to information is one of the most important and inalienable human rights.*<sup>22</sup>

The statements are however belied by the dissemination of more fake news disguised as real news. The individuals conducting these activities care very little about being caught lying as the audiences will have already consumed the material, thereby making it very difficult to disprove:

*Although the fabricators are aware that once a document appears in print the supposed author will promptly deny its authenticity, the Soviets calculate that a denial will never entirely offset the damage from news stories based on the forgery*<sup>23</sup>.

To make sure that fake news stories are taken at face value by the intended audiences, the publisher will create a composite story that is not completely false but rather combines some of factual information with complete fiction. This mixture of actual facts and mistruths, together with some irrelevant details to make ‘news’ looking more realistic creates stories from an alternative reality that aligns with the overarching goals of the Kremlin. The investigative journalist Andrei Soldatov describes it as follows: “Active measures

<sup>21</sup> <<http://europe.newsweek.com/pushing-kremlin-line-251587?rm=eu>> (accessed February 20, 2016).

<sup>22</sup> <<http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/46762>> (accessed January 15, 2016).

<sup>23</sup> **Soviet Active Measures** 1983.

were based on 95 percent objective information to which something was added to turn the data into targeted information or disinformation.<sup>24</sup>

Also important for a comparative perspective between the Russian and Soviet active measures is an evaluation of each their respective scales. The Soviet forgeries detected by the inter-agency Active Measures Working Group totaled only 4 cases in 1980, 7 in 1981, 9 in 1982, and 12 in 1983<sup>25</sup>.

Although during the late Soviet period the number of forgeries increased from year to year, the output never came close to the levels of contemporary Russian active measures. In just 2 years, the number of fake news stories that were debunked by StopFake.org amount to more than 500 cases. Part of the reason for this disparity can be attributed to expense. According to the Institute for National Strategic Studies (INSS) at the National Defense University (NDU),

*conducting more intense disinformation campaign was expensive for the Soviet Union, with estimated spending of about \$3 to 4 billion per year in hard currency at the beginning of the 1980s. By the end of the decade, some insiders believed that the Soviet Union was spending three to five times that much.*<sup>26</sup>

In addition to extensive outlay, believability and deniability were also essential components of Soviet propaganda. Moreover in order to ensure that fake information appeared more credible and trustworthy, and to avoid direct responsibility, or if necessary, to go so far as to use it in a false flag operation Soviet propaganda would actively employ Communist proxy newspapers to deliver their propaganda messages. Ideally – non-Communist media would also propagate the message. Very often information would be attributed to newspapers such as The Morning Star (British socialist newspaper), L'Humanite (daily newspaper of French Communist party), and Rude Pravo (the newspaper of the Communist party of Czechoslovakia). After being printed in one or several of these papers, the Soviet propaganda outlets could then 'quote'.

Ladislav Bittman explains why it was important to do it this way:

*to maintain an aura of authenticity, disinformation must first appear through a mass medium not openly identifiable as pro-Communist. A journalist-agent*

<sup>24</sup> Soldatov, A. 2011. The New nobility of the KGB. Public Affairs, p. 184. [Soldatov 2011]

<sup>25</sup> <<http://ndupress.ndu.edu/Portals/68/Documents/stratperspective/inss/Strategic-Perspectives-11.pdf>> (accessed February 10, 2016).

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*

*working for a reputable publication is usually supplied with disinformation and told how to write the story. In most cases, the initial appearance of sensational materials is enough to start a chain reaction of further publicity as other media outlets become interested in the subject. Local communist newspapers are left out of the game to act according to their ideological bias and editorial decision. Even the reaction of Pravda, /.../ does not provide the key for understanding the real purpose of the KGB Strategy.<sup>27</sup>*

Manipulation of foreign media is a widespread technique of modern active measures as well. If Russian propaganda is unable to place their doctored stories in Western mainstream media, then they will simply invent fake citations.

In 2015 several Russian web-based media outlets (including the fake Kharkov News Agency, which is actually based in Russia) distorted an actual New York Times article by titling it: “Nazi Terrorist ‘Death Squads’ Exterminate Ethnic Russians in the Eastern Ukraine” The article falsely cited a nonexistent article from the New York Times about “the extermination of ethnic Russians in the Eastern Ukraine” by Ukrainian volunteer battalions. The actual New York Times article was about three Chechen battalions fighting alongside the Ukrainian army in the eastern part of the country<sup>28</sup>.

On October 22<sup>nd</sup>, 2015 the Russia’s Ministry of Defense television network Zvezda posted a false report on its website claiming that the “Ukrainian Prime Minister Arseniy Yatsenyuk accuses the leader of the Batkivshchyna political party, Yulia Tymoshenko, of sexual harassment.” It was claimed that the original source for the story was an interview given by Yatsenyuk to a journalist of the Russian service of Radio France Internationale (RFI), Elena Servettaz. The RFI Russian service, however, immediately denied that it had made any such report and condemned Zvezda for both making up the sexual harassment story and involving RFI in its distorted coverage<sup>29</sup>.

During the initial stages of Russia’s intervention in Syria, the Russian website Ukraina.ru, which belongs to the MIA Rossiya Segodnya International Information Agency, (formerly RIA Novosti) published a story written by a relatively unknown American author named Jack Smith. The story argued that Russia was an important player in Syria, and that

<sup>27</sup> **Bittman** 1985, p. 89.

<sup>28</sup> <<http://www.stopfake.org/en/russian-media-falsely-cite-new-york-times/>> (accessed February 25, 2016).

<sup>29</sup> <<http://www.stopfake.org/en/zvezda-falsely-cites-radio-france-internationale-for-sexual-harassment-report/>> (accessed February 25, 2016)

Washington was obliged to treat it as an equal. The site presented the story as if it had been published in the prestigious Foreign Policy Magazine, whereas in fact, the cited article had only appeared on an obscure private web site called Foreign Policy Journal<sup>30</sup>.

The documentary “Ukraine: Masks of revolution” by the French journalist Paul Moreira can be considered another example of the Kremlin security apparatus manipulating foreign media, however, in this particular instance it occurred without the journalist’s prior knowledge or deliberate involvement. The film was commissioned and shown recently by the French commercial TV channel CANAL+, and included many factual mistakes and irregularities which unintentionally were in complete alignment with the Kremlin’s narrative of events in Ukraine. According to Galya Ackerman, Executive Director of the Paris-based “European Forum-Ukraine”, this is a good example of active measures, conducted in the classical Soviet tradition, wherein Western journalists are exploited (without their knowledge):

*It is one thing when documentary like this is shown on (Russian) NTV channel or spread by Sputnik International, but when it’s broadcasted by (French) CANAL+ – that’s quite another pair of shoes<sup>31</sup>.*

The Soviet legacy of exploiting journalists and their narratives was often taken a step further. In order to ‘use’ the foreign media to plant the desired fake stories, the USSR found that they would need to create and sustain their own alternative media. The Soviet government would use any means necessary to control, buy or gain access to journalists in foreign countries. Often this was done by simply supporting media establishments in other countries.

For example, according to the report “Soviet Active Measures in The Post-Cold War’ Era 1988–1991”, the Soviet Union helped to launch the Indian newspaper the Patriot “with KGB funds in order to spread Soviet propaganda and disinformation”. This newspaper was later used to break one of the most infamous ‘news item’ in the history of Soviet active measures, by alleging that that the US government was involved in ‘creating’ AIDS as part of its biological warfare research and development. Later the same

<sup>30</sup> <<http://www.stopfake.org/en/fake-using-foreign-policy-s-banner-to-tell-a-pro-russian-story/>> (accessed February 26, 2016).

<sup>31</sup> <<http://m.day.kiev.ua/ru/article/media/specoperaciya-la-francaise>> (accessed February 5, 2016).



newspaper “falsely claimed that the U.S. was encouraging Turkey to seize northern Iraq<sup>32</sup>”.

Another example of Soviet influence of a foreign media outlet is the German Magazine *Geheim*, which was founded by Michael Opperskalski in 1985. Although there is no evidence of a direct connection between Opperskalski and the Soviets, Herbert Romerstein ( a member of the Active Measures Working Group) advances some troubling findings in his book “Strategic Influence: Public Diplomacy, Counterpropaganda, and Political Warfare”. He quotes Hubertus Knabe, a leading German expert on Stasi activities, who “identified the publisher of *Geheim* with the code name ‘Abraham’ as Michael Opperskalski<sup>33</sup>”. Opperskalski closed his magazine in 1992 but then resumed publishing in 2002. He is now a regular contributor to RT.<sup>34</sup>

Another difference between the Soviet and Russian active measures is that the Kremlin now takes full advantage of the Internet and social media in order to disseminate their message. These platforms were not available in the Soviet era. Their advent now allows Russia to create and use anonymous sources to spread fake news stories that will later be picked up by mainstream media.

For example, on August 30, 2015 RT published a translated, anonymous post from the blog, *Blauer Bote* (Blue Courier), in which the writer summarized an article from the *Kyiv Post*. The original article was about an Azov Battalion children’s training camp. Yet while the *Kyiv Post* article is neutral, the anonymous writer of the German blog deliberately exaggerated and subjectively radicalized the report in his recounting. The writer also included a collection of news stories on the controversial topic of Ukrainian far right nationalists. The exaggerated piece was then picked up by *Russia Today*. It was presented under the headline “*Blauer Bote*: *Kyiv* Newspaper Boasted of Hitler Youth Camps”. – Moreover, RT erroneously described some of the material therein as opinion pieces originating from reputable German media outlets. The website, however, offers neither contact information nor the names of the writers<sup>35</sup>.

<sup>32</sup> <[http://intellit.muskingum.edu/russia\\_folder/pcw\\_era/sect\\_09a.htm](http://intellit.muskingum.edu/russia_folder/pcw_era/sect_09a.htm)> (accessed February 24, 2016).

<sup>33</sup> **Waller, J. M.** (ed.) 2009. *Strategic Influence: Public Diplomacy, Counterpropaganda, and Political Warfare*. Institute of World Politics Press, p. 172.

<sup>34</sup> <<https://www.rt.com/op-edge/188416-ukraine-special-status-cold-war/>> (accessed February 27, 2016).

<sup>35</sup> <<http://www.stopfake.org/en/russian-and-separatist-media-continue-citing-anonymous-blogs-as-official-media/>> (accessed February 24, 2016).



The current disinformation campaign is simply a continuation of the policies that began during the Soviet era and endured throughout the Perestroika and Glasnost era. In short, Soviet active measures never actually went away. During the Reagan-Gorbachev summit in 1986, USIA Director Charles Wick confronted Gorbachev personally about Soviet disinformation and Gorbachev responded by saying “no more lies, no more disinformation<sup>36</sup>”.

According to A Report to Congress by the United States Information Agency “Soviet Active Measures in the Era of Glasnost” published in March 1988,

*Since the December 1987 summit, state-controlled Soviet media have falsely claimed or suggested that: the United States manufactured the AIDS virus in a U.S. military facility at Fort Detrick, Maryland [Radio Moscow, Feb. 13, 1988]; the United States is manufacturing an ethnic weapon that kills only non-whites [TASS, Jan. 9, 1988; January 1988 Novosti Military Bulletin; Radio Moscow, Feb. 5, 1988]; the FBI assassinated Rev. Martin Luther King [Literaturnaya Gazeta Jan. 20, 1988]; the head of the U.S. delegation to the U.N. Human Rights Commission conference in Geneva, Armando Valladares, was jailed in Cuba for bombing stores [Izvestia, Feb. 6, 1988]; 2 the CIA assassinated Swedish Prime Minister Olof Palme, Indian Prime minister Indira Gandhi, and attempted to assassinate Pope John Paul II [Moscow Television, Feb. 9, 1988].<sup>37</sup>*

The Active Measures Working group tasked with monitoring Soviet active measures ceased their activities in 1989. After this date there were no further annual reports summarizing the Soviet activities in this field.

But another Report to Congress titled, “Soviet Active Measures Forgery, Disinformation, Political Operations” predicted that:

*there is every reason to believe that the Soviet leadership will continue to make heavy investments of money and manpower in meddlesome and disruptive operations around the world. While Soviet active measures can be exposed, as they have often been in the past, the Soviets are becoming more sophisticated, especially in forgeries and political influence operations. Unless the targets of Soviet active measures take effective action to counter them, these activities will continue to trouble both industrialized and developing countries.<sup>38</sup>*

<sup>36</sup> **Waller, J. M.** (ed.) 2007. The Public Diplomacy Reader. Lulu.com, p. 355. [**Waller** 2007]

<sup>37</sup> <<http://insidethecoldwar.org/sites/default/files/documents/Soviet%20Active%20Measures%20in%20the%20Era%20of%20Glasnost%20March%201988.pdf>> (accessed February 24, 2016).

<sup>38</sup> <<http://insidethecoldwar.org/sites/default/files/documents/Soviet%20Active%20Measures%20Forgery,%20Disinformation,%20Political%20Operations%20October%201981.pdf>> (accessed January 28, 2016).

The Perestroika historian Brian Crozier also identified a troubling feature of this interim period. During Gorbachev's Perestroika there were disturbing aspects of the Soviet government that the West simply overlooked in its excitement. He writes:

*there was, however, a hidden dimension to perestroika, which passed largely unnoticed by the Western media and by Western political leaders: the restructuring of the "active measures" apparatus. In contrast to the "restructuring" of the economy, the perestroika of the overt and covert propaganda apparatus of the Soviet Union was considerably strengthened and made more sophisticated under Gorbachev.<sup>39</sup>*

Andrei Soldatov, an expert on Russian security and Russia's intelligence apparatus, also confirms that the Soviet Union continued their active measure operations into the 2000s:

*When the First Chief Directorate was renamed the Foreign Intelligence Service, its Section A was renamed the Section of Assistance Operations. In the early 1990s, the CIA had asked the foreign intelligence service to stop carrying out 'active measures' that undermined the national security of the United States. As a result, the section was given a new name, but its methods, structure, and employees were retained.<sup>40</sup>*

Instead of being dismantled, the Soviet propaganda apparatus was carefully revitalized in order to make it more modern and more effective. Valentin Falin, the head of the Novosti Press Agency, and later the head of the International Department of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union, was one of the architects of this reform. It was he who envisioned the innovative methods for propaganda manufacture and dissemination which would later become actualized in the creation of RT and Sputnik International. Falin writes:

*Under capitalism information is the main commodity and you need to sell this commodity. If the government does this – it's doomed to fail. We need to create a state-public company subordinate to the Communist party Central Committee that will combine the Novosti Press agency APN, TASS, the State TV and the Radio Committee, the State Publishing Committee, the State*

<sup>39</sup> **Crozier, B.** 1996. The Other Side of Perestroika. The Hidden Dimension of the Gorbachev Era. – Demokratizatsiya: The Journal of Post-Soviet Democratization, Vol. 4, No. 1 / Winter 1996. <[https://www2.gwu.edu/~ieresgwu/assets/docs/demokratizatsiya%20archive/04-1\\_Crozier.PDF](https://www2.gwu.edu/~ieresgwu/assets/docs/demokratizatsiya%20archive/04-1_Crozier.PDF)> (accessed February 01, 2016).

<sup>40</sup> **Soldatov** 2011, p. 184.

*Cinema Committee, and the Union of Journalists. The Central Committee should start its own TV channel, TV Pravda and also a global video news agency.*<sup>41</sup>

## Russian active measures and fake news in Ukraine

Peter Pomeratsev describes the influence of Russian propaganda on Ukraine as follows:

*In the case of Russia's ongoing campaign in Ukraine, for example, hyper-intense Russian propaganda has cultivated unrest inside the country by sowing enmity among segments of Ukrainian society and confusing the West with waves of disinformation, while Russian proxy forces and covert troops launch just enough military offensives to ensure that the Ukrainian government looks weak. The point is not to occupy territory – Russia could easily annex rebel-held eastern Ukraine – but to destabilize Ukraine psychologically and advance a narrative of the country as a “failed state”, thus destroying the will and support inside Ukraine and internationally for reforms that would make Kiev more independent from Moscow.*<sup>42</sup>

Ben Nimo describes anatomy of Russian info-war against Ukraine with the concept of 4Ds:

*Russia's narrative can be viewed as an offensive weapon: Its effect is to discredit the West and shift the blame for the Ukraine crisis onto Western shoulders. When it comes to defending Russia, different tactics are used. They can be summed up in four words: dismiss, distort, distract, dismay.*<sup>43</sup>

To better understand the content of the media-related active measures, an examination of materials, researched by the fact-checking project Stopfake.org, which was launched in March 2014 by faculty, students and alumni of the Mohyla School of Journalism in Kyiv, Ukraine is instructive.

Since its inception the Stopfake team has been augmented by journalists, editors, programmers, translators, and others who are concerned about the proliferation of propaganda. The main purpose of this Project is to check

<sup>41</sup> **Фалин, В.** Конфликты в Кремле. Сумерки богов по-русски. <<http://mreadz.com/new/index.php?id=274462>> (accessed February 2, 2016), с. 48.

<sup>42</sup> <<http://www.theatlantic.com/international/archive/2015/12/war-2015-china-russia-isis/422085/>> (accessed February 9, 2016).

<sup>43</sup> <<http://www.cepolicy.org/publications/anatomy-info-war-how-russias-propaganda-machine-works-and-how-counter-it/>> (accessed February 05, 2016).

facts, verify information, and refute verifiable disinformation about the events in Ukraine that are being covered by the media. The StopFake team does not represent, nor is supported by any particular political party, or commercial organization. This also includes the Ukrainian government. The project is solely focused on maintaining journalistic standards of distributing accurate information.

In its 2 years of its existence Stopfake.org has analyzed, fact-checked and debunked more than 500 stories from Russian media sources (this includes TV, print and internet media, as well as social media, both Government-controlled and private – which is essentially under quasi-governmental control).

The debunked stories can be divided into different types and categories depending on the themes, the means (text, photo, video, meme) and the target audience, i.e. whether it for the Russian domestic audience, the Ukrainian audience, the US/European, or the rest of the world/global audience. We also differentiate stories based on the platforms used to spread them.

By analyzing 500 items of debunked disinformation (fake news stories) we have been able to identify 18 major fake narratives themes that are commonly used by Russian propaganda. They are as follows:

1. *Coup d'état* and Western-backed junta
2. Ukraine as a 'fascist state'
3. Ukraine as a 'failed state'
4. Russia is not a part of the occupation/war
5. The Ukrainian army
6. Volunteer battalions
7. Internally displaced persons (IDPs) and refugees to Russia
8. Territorial disintegration of Ukraine
9. 'Territorial claims' from neighboring countries
10. Fake legitimization of Crimea annexation and occupation of Donbass by foreign governments, international organizations or foreign media
11. War in Ukraine is actually conducted by the US, NATO or private contractors
12. Decline of Western support for Ukraine
13. International organizations manipulated
14. Ukraine and the EU
15. Disintegration of the EU, decay of the US and West in general
16. MH17
17. AIDS/ZIKA/ other disease stories
18. Ukraine/Turkey/Syria/ISIS

In order to gain a better perspective of the 18 main disinformation themes, it is also worthwhile to do a more detailed analysis of those current propaganda messages that echo the earlier Soviet propaganda patterns. The most common way of depicting post-Maidan Ukraine was to describe events in terms of a *coup d'état*, that is to say a Western-backed group (mostly US-backed junta) seizing power and implementing fascism as the defining ideology of emerging regime in Ukraine.

### **The *Coup d'état* and the Western-backed junta**

The ouster of the president (Yanukovych) and his government was the most propaganda and manipulation prone events of the entire Maidan movement<sup>44</sup>. The Russian media characterized it as a *Coup d'état* or an illegal overthrow of a legitimate president. The *Ancient regime* leaders who were removed and then fled the country, were harbored in Russia where they were used for further propaganda purposes. While residing there, they had numerous appearances in the Russian media and were subsequently proclaimed as the “Ukrainian government in exile”.

According to evidence gained from the text messages hacked by Anonymous International, the main disinformation theme characterizing the maiden movement as a US-backed junta of radicals and banderites, could actually be traced back to the Kremlin itself and Alexey Gromov in particular, who is the Deputy Chief of Staff of the Presidential Administration of Russia. The characterization was propagated and supplied to various media outlets by Timur Prokopenko, the head of the Kremlin internal affairs department<sup>45</sup>.

This disinformation theme was picked up by all Russian mainstream media and social media and became a frame of reference for the depiction of Ukraine-related events over the next two years.

One author who was instrumental in creating this perception is Valentin Zorin. Zorin was one of the most influential propagandists from the Soviet era and is now in his 90's. He still occasionally works for the RIA and still publishes inflammatory articles. In one article that appeared in a government-owned outlet he decried the US government's complicity in the Ukrainian 'coup' stating:

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<sup>44</sup> <<https://www.rt.com/news/159664-italy-protest-nazism-ukraine/>> (accessed February 27, 2016).

<sup>45</sup> <<http://tsn.ua/special-projects/liar/>> (accessed February 20, 2016).

*From the very beginning, Washington DC was in charge of the coup d'état in Kiev and relied on extreme nationalistic forces, and banderites who had made oaths to Hitler and committed atrocities against Russians, Jews, and Poles<sup>46</sup>.*

Although this was written in 2014–2015, it is impossible to differentiate between these contemporary talking points and the ideological verbiage of the former Cold war era. The purpose of portraying the Euromaidan events as the upshot of US involvement, with Cold War terminology was to mobilize the Russian domestic audience, radicalize audiences in the Eastern and Southern Ukraine (which was planned by Kremlin to be transformed into wider Novorossia separatists' entity) and sow suspicion among Europeans and the rest of the world.

As Ladislav Bittman notes,

*Anti-American propaganda campaigns are the easiest to carry out. A single press article containing sensational facts of a 'new American conspiracy' may be sufficient. Other papers become interested, the public is shocked, and government authorities in developing countries have a fresh opportunity to clamor against the imperialists while demonstrators hasten to break the American embassy windows.<sup>47</sup>*

Soviet propaganda made use of precisely the same language and visuals in their depictions of US involvement in the potential breakup of the Soviet Union. Almost 30 years later depictions of the US meddling with Ukraine within Russia's exclusive sphere of influence are still present. For example, in early January of 1991 Soviet Television produced a 40-minute documentary titled "The Faces of Extremism" that showed

*shots of terrorism in Lebanon, Northern Ireland, and Spain were mixed with film clips of U.S. military operations in Grenada, Panama, and Libya, followed by scenes of a rally held by Rukh (the democratic party in Ukraine), riots in Central Asia, fighting in Azerbaijan, and demonstrations in Lithuania. The narrator suggested that the U.S. government would soon try to organize underground political movements in Central Asia in order to cause the collapse of the Soviet Union.<sup>48</sup>*

<sup>46</sup> <<http://ria.ru/coumns/20150526/1066579933.html#ixzz41BRM17eo>> (accessed February 27, 2016)

<sup>47</sup> **Bittman** 1985, p. 23.

<sup>48</sup> <[http://intellit.muskingum.edu/russia\\_folder/pcw\\_era/sect\\_09a.htm](http://intellit.muskingum.edu/russia_folder/pcw_era/sect_09a.htm)> (accessed February 24, 2016).

In 2014 the NTV channel produced a similar ‘documentary’ titled “Ordinary Fascism: Ukrainian Variant<sup>49</sup>”, the intent of which was to create an analogous perception of the events in Ukraine among the Russian domestic audience, much as “The Faces of Extremism” did in the 1990s.

In both ‘documentaries’ the US government and western non-governmental institutions are accused of engaging in direct and indirect actions to disrupt the Soviet/Russian influence. For example, in 1991, according to the US Congressional Report, the Soviet Defense minister Yazov “joined in the anti-U.S. and anti-democratic chorus, accusing the U.S. National Endowment for Democracy, which aids democratic groups worldwide, of trying to influence events in the USSR<sup>50</sup>”.

This historic rhetoric is very similar to the rhetoric that the Kremlin now uses, which accuses organizations of being ‘foreign agents’. Even in the case of StopFake.org when opponents want to denigrate the project, they immediately point to the donor support from the National Endowment for Democracy as evidence of US government and CIA involvement<sup>51</sup>.

Just as the Soviet Union once did, Russia makes use of an overarching motif to connect the numerous fake news stories and pictures that it uses to characterize the events in Ukraine. It alleges that a Ukrainian junta, as the puppets of America (Washington DC, the White House), usurped power using ‘undemocratic’ procedures and forced the Ukrainian people into the role of lackeys for the US. Most of the fake stories encountered by the project still support this narrative strand in one form or another. It is encapsulated in fake photos such as the one titled “Kyiv Residents Kneel before Biden<sup>52</sup>”, or the fake news story “Biden Proposes to Federalize Ukraine<sup>53</sup>”, or another fake photo titled “Ukrainian Soldier Kisses the American Flag<sup>54</sup>”.

<sup>49</sup> <<http://www.ntv.ru/video/964481/>> (accessed February 27, 2016).

<sup>50</sup> <[http://intellit.muskingum.edu/russia\\_folder/pcw\\_era/sect\\_09a.htm](http://intellit.muskingum.edu/russia_folder/pcw_era/sect_09a.htm)> (accessed February 24, 2016).

<sup>51</sup> <[http://tvzvezda.ru/news/vstrane\\_i\\_mire/content/201602132031-tzwp.htm](http://tvzvezda.ru/news/vstrane_i_mire/content/201602132031-tzwp.htm)> (accessed February 23, 2016).

<sup>52</sup> <<http://www.stopfake.org/en/photo-fake-kyiv-residents-kneel-before-biden/>> (accessed February 22, 2016).

<sup>53</sup> <<http://www.stopfake.org/en/fake-biden-proposes-to-federalize-ukraine/>> (accessed February 22, 2016).

<sup>54</sup> <<http://www.stopfake.org/en/photo-fake-ukrainian-soldier-kisses-american-flag/>> (accessed February 22, 2016).



## Ukraine as a fascist state

Russian propaganda depicts Ukraine as having been transformed into de facto fascist state as a result of the coup d'état. All necessary attributes of fascism such as anti-Semitism, racism, homophobia, xenophobia are exploited by the propaganda and are the core of the active measures deployed against Ukraine.

The 'fascist narrative' is one of the most important themes as it connects Ukrainian events with the World war II narrative of, which is a heroic chapter in former Soviet, and now Russian history. It has become the bedrock of the whole anti-Ukrainian and anti-Western propaganda effort and its main points have been used as pretexts to occupy Crimea and have been used to justify the aggression of Russian army in Eastern Ukraine.

The Report "Putin. War", prepared by the Russian opposition, explains why it was important for Kremlin to use the 'fascist narrative': "Rhetoric of war was projected to current political news. This exposed Ukrainian authorities as 'banderite' and 'Nazi' by Kremlin propaganda and Russia got involved in the same cause as in 1941–45 – struggle with fascists<sup>55</sup>".

WWII (or the Great Patriotic war as it's called in Russian historiography) has very strong associations for the people of Ukraine, especially for those who fought in it. Russian propaganda often exploited this association in order to further its aims. Fake reports concerning mistreatment of WWII veterans in Ukraine, such as the revocation of their benefits, bans on celebrations or gatherings, bans on the wearing of medals, and the demolition of war memorials were often circulated. There were even reports of some veterans being beaten. The main purpose of these distorted reports was to incite unrest and foster war mongering and the dissemination of hate speech.

On April 20<sup>th</sup>, 2015 Russia's private tabloid Lifenevs TV channel falsely reported that the head of the Kharkiv regional council had forbade Second World War veterans from wearing St. George ribbons and flags (commemorating the Red Army's victory) at the forthcoming Victory Day's march on May 9<sup>th</sup><sup>56</sup>.

On September 3, 2015 Russian REN TV and Channel 5 falsely reported that unknown persons had destroyed memorial plaques commemorating Soviet soldiers in Kharkiv.

<sup>55</sup> **Report "Putin. War"**. Edited by Illya Yashyn and Olga Shorina. <<http://www.putin-itogi.ru/putin-voina/>> (accessed February 27, 2016).

<sup>56</sup> <<http://www.stopfake.org/en/kharkiv-forbids-veterans-from-wearing-st-george-ribbons/>> (accessed on February 27, 2016).

The news was accompanied by an amateur video uploaded to YouTube. The video shows two men dismantling the memorial plaques and taking them away to an undisclosed location. However, when the spokesperson for the Kharkiv city council was contacted it was in fact confirmed that the plaques had simply been removed for renovation<sup>57</sup>.

On June 30<sup>th</sup>, 2015 the LifeNews TV channel used a video from the celebration of the anniversary of the Declaration of Ukrainian Independence in Kherson. At a small event in the city's center, young people gathered to read the Declaration aloud and to sing the national anthem. The manipulated report was titled "Nationalists Swear Allegiance to Hitler in Kherson<sup>58</sup>".

In April 2015 the Zvezda TV channel and REN TV published a false report about an unfinished concentration camp financed by a "pro-American" group that had been built to incarcerate those "accused of terrorism and separatism by the ruling regime in Ukraine." The report was based on footage taken by a war correspondent who was standing at the construction site of what was actually an uncompleted prison in the city of Zhdanovka, in the Donetsk region. The correspondent opines: "It is very convenient place to keep prisoners of war here, wouldn't you say? There is such an Eastern European Guantanamo<sup>59</sup>!"

On May 18<sup>th</sup>, 2015 the government-owned Russia 24 network dedicated a news program to focus exclusively on alleged anti-Semitism in Ukraine. "Vesti at 23:00" aired a report that was followed by a discussion entitled "The new exodus of Jews from Ukraine: Jewish organizations accuse Brussels of keeping the problem of neo-Nazism in Ukraine quiet". StopFake debunked this escalating Russian disinformation narrative and Vyacheslav Likhachev, the head of a prestigious Monitoring group for the rights of ethnic minorities at Association of the Jewish Organizations and Communities of Ukraine (VAAD) confirmed the falseness of the Ukrainian anti-Semitism and neo-Nazi claim<sup>60</sup>.

Fascism is not a new invention, nor is it as prevalent as alleged, but it has certainly been one of the most exploited themes of Soviet active measures. The Russian government has used the term to smear \ policymakers in various

<sup>57</sup> <<http://www.stopfake.org/en/fake-memorial-plaques-to-soviet-soldiers-destroyed-in-kharkiv/>> (accessed February 27, 2016).

<sup>58</sup> <<http://www.stopfake.org/en/fake-nationalists-swear-allegiance-to-hitler-in-kherson/>> (accessed February 27, 2016).

<sup>59</sup> <<http://www.stopfake.org/en/fake-concentration-camp-for-separatists-under-construction-in-donetsk-region/>> (accessed February 27, 2016).

<sup>60</sup> <<http://www.stopfake.org/en/jewish-monitoring-group-expert-debunks-russia-24-claim-about-neo-nazis-and-anti-semitism-in-ukraine/>> (accessed February 27, 2016).

parts of the world, and has even used it put pressure on entire countries such as postwar Germany, Italy or Austria.

The Intelligence historian Christopher Andrew describes how a ‘fascism’-themed narrative was used to undermine the reputation of Egyptian President Sadat:

*(KGB) Service A's active measures against Sadat made much of his early enthusiasm for Adolf Hitler. Sadat himself acknowledged in his autobiography that, as a fourteen-year-old when Hitler became Chancellor of Germany, he had been inspired by the way the Führer set out to 'rebuild his country'./.../ As late as 1953 he said publicly that he admired Hitler 'from the bottom of my heart'. The KGB claimed the credit for inspiring publications with titles such as 'Anwar Sadat: From Fascism to Zionism', which portrayed him as a former Nazi agent who had sold out to the CIA.<sup>61</sup>*

Ion Mihail Pacepa, a high-ranking defector from the Romanian security services, gives a detailed account of how the ‘fascism’ narrative was an instrumental component of active measure against the Catholic Church after WWII. The Soviets were relentless in “faulting the Catholic church for its role in the rise of Fascism”. The same tool was also used to compromise, or as it was called within active measures procedures, ‘to frame’ Pope Pius XII, the Croatian Cardinal Stepinac and the Ukrainian Cardinal Slipyj who were characterized as ‘Nazi collaborators’.<sup>62</sup>

If monikers such as US-backed junta and fascists are not enough to scare an audience who might not be avid followers of politics, Russian active measures effectively uses what is known as ‘human interest stories’. Most of them will be about different diseases and the ‘fact’ that they were invented by the US government. The purpose of planting such a story is two-fold: first, to scare as many people as possible by playing on their most basic fears, and second – to blame the US for the spread of infections and fuel the new wave of anti-Americanism, which is by default the overall objective of Soviet/Russian active measures.

The classical example of this would be Operation Infektion, which sought to accuse the United States of deliberately creating the AIDS virus in a government laboratory and then spreading it<sup>63</sup>.

<sup>61</sup> Andrew 2006, p. 840.

<sup>62</sup> Pacepa, I. M. 2013. Disinformation. WND Books.

<sup>63</sup> <<http://insidethecoldwar.org/sites/default/files/documents/Soviet%20Influence%20Activities%20Active%20Measures%20and%20Propaganda%20August%201987.pdf>> (accessed February 10, 2016).

In 1983, shortly after its founding, the Indian newspaper *The Patriot*, broke a story blaming the U.S. military in creating the AIDS virus and releasing it as a weapon. This story appeared first in minor Soviet-controlled outlets. Then in 1985 it was picked up by the Soviet weekly newspaper, *Literaturnaya Gazeta* where it was published many other outlets:

*In 1987 alone, it appeared over 40 times in the Soviet-controlled press and was reprinted or rebroadcast in over 80 countries in 30 languages. The AIDS virus was terrifying and not well understood at the time, so this piece of Soviet disinformation was especially damaging to the U.S. image.*<sup>64</sup>

The US government put a lot of pressure on Kremlin and Gorbachev personally to make sure that Soviet Union would stop disseminating such fake stories. All medical research cooperation between the US and USSR was suspended before Moscow finally dropped the story:

*The Soviets stopped using the AIDS disinformation story. It became clear, /.../, that they would back off when the cost of their lies became too much for them. As the new disinformation stories appeared, we pressured the Soviets on their failure to carry out Gorbachev's promise.*<sup>65</sup>

But this story did not disappear entirely. It was recently revived in another form more recently when a tweet appeared saying that the Ukrainian army in Donbas was firing AIDS infused shells in order to spread it among the local population. This was compounded with accusations asserting that the ZIKA virus originated from US government facilities:

*An outspoken former chief Russian sanitary inspector has suggested that the United States could be infecting mosquitos with the Zika virus in the Black Sea area as a form of biological warfare against Russia. In comments to the BBC Russian Service on February 15, Gennady Onishchenko said that Russian scientists have identified a surge since 2012 in the kind of mosquito that carries the virus in Abkhazia, a breakaway Georgian region that borders Russia on the Black Sea coast. "This worries me because about 100 kilometers from the place where this mosquito now lives, right near our borders, there is a military microbiological laboratory of the army of the United States.*<sup>66</sup>

<sup>64</sup> <<http://ndupress.ndu.edu/Portals/68/Documents/stratperspective/inss/Strategic-Perspectives-11.pdf>> (accessed February 10, 2016).

<sup>65</sup> Waller 2007, p. 355.

<sup>66</sup> <<http://www.rferl.org/content/former-russian-health-chief-suggests-us-plotting-zika-attack/27555365.html>> (accessed February 22, 2016).

On January 26<sup>th</sup>, 2016 the website Pravda.ru ran a news item claiming that 20 Ukrainian soldiers died and 200 were hospitalized with the deadly California flu virus outside the eastern Ukrainian city of Kharkiv. “Doctors have recorded an unknown virus causing extremely high temperatures which cannot be brought down with any medicine”, – claimed DNR separatist spokesman Eduard Basurin. On January 22<sup>nd</sup>, the same Basurin announced at a press conference that Ukrainian soldiers had been admitted to a Kharkiv hospital suffering from a virus “that leaked from an American laboratory located in the village of Shelkostantsia”.

None of these fake stories were accompanied by facts or photos and over a period of several days, the two stories gradually melded into each other, thereby gaining greater traction on the web and social media.

There was no mass illness or viral infection among Ukraine’s armed forces nor did the Ukrainian Defense Ministry have any information about any such mass illness.<sup>67</sup>

## Conclusion

Although Russian propaganda reached its apex during war in Ukraine, it must be kept in mind that it is not a new phenomenon and it is actually a continuation of Soviet propaganda that never truly disappeared even after the collapse of the Soviet Union. In reality modern Russian propaganda is a rejuvenated, rebuilt and transformed version that has been applied to the contemporary situation with increased effectiveness. The contemporary Russian propaganda system and the Soviet system both share the same objectives. The former borrows the same techniques from the latter in its application of active measures. Yet they differ in quantity, quality and the instruments that are used.

By analyzing the more than 500 stories that StopFake has debunked over last two years, it was possible to identify 18 separate disinformation themes, originating from Russian state- and privately owned media. Many of them are variations of the Soviet paradigm, and are built on anti-Americanism, their own moral superiority and falsified historiography.

Most Russian journalists, editors, media managers or policymakers will deny the existence of propaganda or the existence of a vertical chain of command connecting their respective ‘media’ outlets to the Kremlin. Nor

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<sup>67</sup> <<http://www.stopfake.org/en/fake-20-soldiers-die-from-leaked-mysterious-virus/>> (accessed February 20, 2016).

will they acknowledge the conduction of active measures. When Margarita Simonyan, the head RT (formerly Russia Today), was questioned as to why RT distorted information in their piece titled: “Putin Will Bring Down Western Economies”<sup>68</sup> she attributed it to incompetence and lazy journalism. Simonyan explained that usually the twisting or falsification of facts does not arise from evil intentions, but rather can be attributed to the publishing of information from a source without fact checking it first. Others media outlets then republish the story also without bothering to check the information:

*There is a huge competition, everybody wants to be the first, quicker, more interesting. All this is done to get more audience. If you are the first to publish something – it will attract audience, that’s why you are doing this. It’s too long to verify information – someone might be quicker to publish it before you do.*<sup>69</sup>

Unfortunately, this is not a sufficient explanation for the hundreds and hundreds of fakes and forgeries coming from Russian media system. They are not results of bad journalism but the result of well-preserved and refurbished system of active Soviet measures used to manipulate media on a global scale and to supplement military and diplomatic efforts.

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<sup>68</sup> <<http://www.stopfake.org/en/fake-putin-will-bring-down-western-economies/>> (accessed February 20, 2016).

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