



Laidlaw Undergraduate Research and Leadership Programme

*Summer 1: Research Report*

**How to Hack American Society and Get Away with it: An Investigation  
into Russia's Disinformation of Ukraine**

Scholar:  
Ryem Khanin

Supervisors:  
Dr Andrew Wilson  
Ms Freya Proudman



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## **Introduction:**

Ukraine and Russia have a long history of difficult interstate relations, with the latter being historically viewed as the aggressor in the West. In the modern age, Russia launched a war of aggression against sovereign Ukraine in 2014, and Ukrainians have been fighting for their freedom since then. The role of information and psychological operations which largely consist of disinformation campaigns, cannot be overstated. Information battles are a crucial component of conventional arms and military confrontations and can in many cases completely change the tide of war. Putin and the Russian state apparatus are acutely aware of this fact and have thus developed a reputation for Russia as a prime manufacturing ground for disinformation. My aim is to demonstrate the impact of Russian state-sanctioned disinformation by focusing on the ways that it may influence public opinions of US Citizens. It matters because disinformation aimed at US citizens can influence how supportive they might be of aid and military packages to Ukraine which it desperately needs since the start of the full-scale invasion and likely for the fathomable near future.

My research does not aim to prove The Russian Federation's wrongdoing in relation to my homeland; one can simply look to the UN Charter for an objective conclusion, the founding document of an institution in which Russia occupies (arguably) the most prestigious and powerful position – a *permanent* seat on the Security Council. Namely, the country's violation of UN Articles 2 (3), 2 (4), 2 (7), and 24, to name a few, clearly outline Russia's disregard for international law. Instead, I openly admit to having a pro-Ukrainian position and aim to demonstrate exactly *how* Russian state-sanctioned disinformation aims to manipulate information and manufacture false narratives for the benefit of its aggressive and imperialist agenda. My investigation explores how Russia's disinformation campaigns aim to influence the public opinions of United States citizens about Ukraine. This is significant because Ukraine heavily relies on the military support of the USA and, therefore, it's very important that US citizens have accurate information about the country, its culture, and its politics. USA– the traditional and most powerful representative of “the West” as a concept in global politics (Greeson, 2013), is clearly one of Ukraine's biggest strategic partners today and in the near future. For the purposes of this report, disinformation is understood as

“false information deliberately and often covertly spread (as by planting rumours) in order to influence public opinion or obscure truth (Merriam-Webster, 2018).” As noted expertly by Aristedes Mahairas and Mikhail Dvilyansky in their article “Disinformation”, the term was developed wholly by Russians when it became a part of the Soviet “active measures” strategy which aimed to destabilise the West as early as in the 1920s, rewiring Westerners in the ideological war between their liberal democracies and the socialist project pushed by the USSR by breaking institutions (mainly NATO) from the inside (Mahairas & Dvilyanski, 2018).

Research about the spread of Russian disinformation is important because: it helps uncover covert Russian aggression, serves as a litmus test for the severity of the damage brought forth by Russian campaigns, partially recovers trust in institutions, and re-establishes an accurate recollection of history. This consequently results in the development of defence mechanisms within the audience, allowing individuals to recognise fake narratives and prevent their spread, thereby rendering the so-called “Gerasimov Doctrine” ineffective. The stated reasoning led me to my research question - “how does Russian disinformation aim to influence The United States of America’s support for Ukraine?”

## **Context**

The context for my research can be split into two main themes: Russia’s Invasions of Ukraine (2014, 2022) and the Gerasimov Doctrine (2013-).

Although there is ample evidence to support claims of Russian aggression towards Ukrainian culture and Ukrainians as an ethnic group at least as far back as the 17<sup>th</sup> century (Siruk, 2023), the primary context behind this report is the geopolitical situation since 1991, the year that the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (USSR) disintegrated de jure following the Belovezha Accords (Schuette, 2023). Since then, Russia has refused to recognise the sovereignty of its neighbours and has systematically employed various forms of power, including military aggression, throughout the post-soviet space to achieve its

own objectives and protect its national interests (Pomerantsev & Weiss, 2014). Often, Russia has targeted this aggression towards sovereign Ukraine and her citizens (Lange-Ionatamishvili, 2015). This is best embodied by the Russian illegal annexation of the Ukrainian Crimean Peninsula on 20 February 2014 (Mankoff, 2014) and the ongoing full-scale invasion launched on 24 February 2022.

The Gerasimov Doctrine, on the other hand, refers to the means by which modern Russia deploys its aggression. The doctrine is outlined in a February 2013 article titled “The Value of Science Is in the Foresight: New Challenges Demand Rethinking the Forms and Methods of Carrying Out Combat Operations” (Gerasimov, 2013) published by Russia’s Chief of General Staff Valery Gerasimov in a prominent Russian military paper, the *Military-Industrial Courier*. Within it, Valery, the most powerful man in the Russian military, laid out a new method of “hybrid warfare” which many have equated to being a version of total war (McKew, 2017); one which incorporates political, informational, diplomatic, economic, and cultural aspects in conjunction with traditional military means. *Politico*’s 2017 article by Molly McKew famously described this as Russia’s way of “hacking an enemy’s society” rather than attacking it openly. The US, with its hostile outlook on censorship and culture of liberal “open-mindedness”, as well as tolerance becomes a perfect breeding ground for Russian disinformation.

## **Methodology**

In order to achieve a thorough understanding of how Russian disinformation may impact US citizens' perceptions of Ukraine, I first had to compile examples of fake and instrumentally crafted narratives about the country. I consulted the disinformation databases (EU vs. Disinfo and FactCheck.org) to create a list of 10 different Russian disinformation myths about Ukraine in relation to various themes: legitimacy, corruption, religion, and Nazism. Then, I wanted to understand whether US Citizens had heard these narratives before and whether they are able to correctly identify them as confirmed Russian disinformation. For this, I then designed an online survey which was digitally distributed to US Citizens over aged 18. The survey presented the participants with each of the 10 myths and asked them to identify if the statement was Russian disinformation or not. It then asks the participant to explain their selection

and where they may have heard this before. Finally, select sources recorded by the respondents were analysed and their rhetoric checked for correlation with proven disinformation narratives of Russian origin. The figures who were chosen for further analysis had to have a relatively large audience/support in the United States (eg Tucker Carlson) and/or had to have held a position of responsibility in a major government institution (eg Marjorie Taylor Greene), both characteristics of individuals that are highly regarded by foreign intelligence agencies for direct and indirect recruitment, including that of Russia's Federal Security Service (FSB) and Main Directorate Intelligence (formerly known as GRU). For the purposes of clear communication, any respondents who opted-in to receive a breakdown of the narratives featured were sent follow-up emails with a brief description and links to the narratives themselves on the EU vs Disinfo database.

### **Findings: Main Narratives and Disinformation Themes**

As mentioned in the methodology section, 70-80% of the Russian disinformation narratives found in the EU vs Disinfo database can be classified into the themes of legitimacy, corruption, religion, and Nazism. Upon further analysis, the themes were found to be composed of smaller subtopics as follows:

#### **1. Disinformation about Legitimacy of the State of Ukraine**

- Ukrainian statehood
- Euromaidan Revolution
- Post-2014 Ukrainian governments and governance
- Legitimacy of President Volodymyr Zelenskyy
- Allegiance of the Autonomous Republic of Crimea

Being a fundamental concept in both domestic and international politics, legitimacy plays a key role in Russian propaganda. Russia's narratives aim to delegitimise Ukraine's claims of sovereignty and sustainable statehood by attacking its history, culture, and day-to-day politics. This is done for three main

reasons: to alienate Ukrainian citizens and erode their will to resist Russian aggression, undermine Ukraine's reputation in the eyes of the international community, and decrease and/or conditionalize material support to the country from the United States as the largest donor of military aid.

## **2. Corruption in Ukraine**

- Misuse or mishandling of Westerns aid and military supplies
- General economy and well-being in Ukraine

While not a fundamental theme in itself, corruption plays a crucial role in Russia's campaigns to delegitimize Ukraine as a nation-state. As strong states typically have low levels of corruption and high levels of economic well-being (Fragile States Index, 2024), it is easy to target Ukraine, a country that has struggled to meet average Western metrics in these components, and accuse it of being incapable of self-governance; Ukraine has largely failed to effectively tackle corruption since regaining its independence in 1991, ranking 104<sup>th</sup> in the Corruption Perception Index (Transparency International, 2023). Yet almost all of Russia's corruption-related disinformation narratives spread fake statistics and/or those structured according to a slippery slope fallacy, as well as omitting a crucial fact – that much of corruption in Ukraine has been instigated and funded directly by Russia.

## **3. Religion**

- Legacy of the Ukrainian Orthodox Church of Moscow Patriarchate (UOCMP)
- Creation of the Orthodox Church of Ukraine (OCU) separate from the Russian Orthodox Church

It is no surprise that religion, specifically Orthodox Christianity, has remained a contentious topic within Russo-Ukrainian relations. Both Russians and Ukrainians claim Kyivan Rus to be their cultural ancestor

and territorial origins: a powerful 11<sup>th</sup> century European medieval state whose ruler Volodymyr I Sviatoslavovych (Volodymyr the Great) baptized the wider region and Christianised modern-day Ukraine, Russia, and Belarus. A common religion means that sanctioning investigations into the Ukrainian Orthodox Church of Moscow Patriarchate (UOCMP), a church that has always had close ties with Russian state institutions, was always difficult due to the political backlash associated with such actions; this means that Russia could continue developing its “fifth column” through the UOCMP and recruit agents that would further Russia’s so-called “national interests” largely unchecked and unpunished.

#### **4. Accusations of Nazism in Ukraine**

- Elements of Nazism in the Ukrainian government and military (Azov Brigade)

Despite popular belief, Russia’s fake and ridiculous narratives about the proliferation of Nazis and “Nazi elements” in the Ukrainian government and Ukrainian Armed Forces likely does not have the US, or even more generally, influence on Western audiences as a primary goal. Instead, the lie has been crafted to appeal to the Russian population’s collective trauma of World War II and Nazi Germany’s invasion of the Soviet Union on June 22, 1941, and national pride around the Soviet Union’s contributions to beating Nazi Germany in WWII; This aims to maliciously and falsely reframe Ukrainians as a nation who fought Nazis into one that aided and became their modern-day equivalent (ISD Global, 2022), allowing Putin to dehumanise Ukrainians in the eyes of his domestic audience and legitimise their brutal killing under false pretences. Nevertheless, this thesis is easily refuted by the absence of significant far-right representation in Ukraine’s parliament *Verkhovna Rada* in its post-Soviet history. Notably, the most recent parliamentary elections in 2019 saw the country’s largest far-right party *Svoboda* (“Freedom”) gain just 2.16% of the national vote, dropping far from reaching the minimum threshold of 5% and gaining no seats in parliament.

These main disinformation themes fit well within the Gerasimov Doctrine as it encompasses politically, informationally, culturally, diplomatically, and economically associated narratives.

### **Findings – Survey Data**

The following was data gathered on respondents' demographics

Total Survey responses: 21

<b>Gender (21 responses)</b>	
Male	10
Female	9
Prefer Not to Report	2
<b>Age (21 responses)</b>	
18-20	7
20-25	7
25-30	2
30-35	1
35-40	0
40-45	1
45-50	1

50-55	1
55-60	0
60-65	1
65-70	0
70-75	0
75-80	0
<b>If you live in the USA, which state do you live in (19 responses)</b>	
California	3
Georgia	1
Illinois	3
Michigan	1
New Hampshire	1
Pennsylvania	1
Texas	6
Washington	2
Virginia	1
<b>If you live outside the USA, which country do you live in? (1 response)</b>	

China	1
<b>Would you say you live in a... (21 responses)</b>	
City or urban area	17
Suburban area	4
Rural area	0
Other	0
<b>Please indicate your highest level of education (20 responses)</b>	
Undergraduate Programme at University	13
Postgraduate Programme at University	4
High School	2
Vocational School	1

### **Findings – Survey (Data Analysis)**

1. The total number of responses totalled to be 210 as there are 10 Russian disinformation statements and each of the 21 participants were asked “is this statement an example of Russian disinformation”. Thus, if all individuals surveyed would have accurately identified all the narratives as proven Russian disinformation, we would have 210 “yes” answers. My data had 125 “yes” , 80 “not sure” and 4 “no” responses, as well as 1 unanswered question. So, of 210 instances, there were only 4 in which someone thought the Russian disinformation was correct.

Our focus should be on the 80 responses of people who were not sure, because these are the people who are likely to be the most vulnerable to manipulation from Russian disinformation.

2. There were 2 Russian disinformation myths in particular that had a higher amount of “not sure” responses. The two statements in question were affiliated with religion (Orthodox Christianity and Ukrainian government policy) and are, arguably, the most “niche” and complex questions in the whole list. Religion in Ukraine generally, due to its complexity and sensitivity, remains to be the easiest topic to target for disinformation by Russian state actors.
3. In response to “please briefly explain why you chose your selected option”, sources that correctly identified a statement as Russian disinformation usually stated Ukrainian sovereignty, Ukrainian history, and international law as reasons. In contrast, those that failed to correctly recognise a fake narrative as disinformation claimed to believe it to be factual due to a lack of knowledge (e.g. answers such as “sounds true” and “makes sense”) on the topic, rather than citing evidence. This implies that Russian narratives were, at least in this instance, more readily accepted by those with a lack of information on the topics given.
4. One of the ways that the Russian disinformation statements shown to participants appear to enter the US discourse is through right-wing news media and MAGA Republicans including Fox News, RFK Jr, and Tucker Carlson, as well as through Russian state-affiliated sources like media channel Russia Today (RT) and through Russian officials directly. Therefore, participants who engage more with these organisations and media sources are more likely to have been exposed to this disinformation than those that choose to consume the content and activities of the majority of other political groups and media.

## **Findings – Correlation with US public discourse**

As mentioned earlier, it appears that narratives spread by right wing media outlets and representatives/supporters of the MAGA wing of the US Republican party most align with the Russian disinformation narratives. Hence, participants who engage with these outlets are more likely to be subjected to Russian disinformation and have their perceptions of Ukraine manipulated.

For instance,

### **1. Donald Trump, former President of USA**

Russian disinformation myth that survey participants were presented with:

- “The Crimean Peninsula was legitimately reunited as Russian territory after a referendum in 2014.”

Quote from Trump

- “But you know, the people of Crimea, from what I've heard, would rather be with Russia than where they were. And you have to look at that, also” (Interview with ABC News on July 31<sup>st</sup>, 2016).

### **2. Tucker Carlson, Conservative American political commentator**

Survey disinformation statement:

- “President Zelenskyy initiated anti-Christian purges in Ukraine.”

Quote:

- “Zelensky’s secret police arrested dozens of priests for no reason whatsoever” (Fox News episode on December 8<sup>th</sup>, 2022) .

### **3. Robert F. Kennedy Jr (RFK Jr), Candidate for President 2024**

Survey disinformation statement:

- Ukraine is a colony of the West

Quote:

- “I think this is a proxy war...this is a war that the neocons in the White House wanted” (Podcast with Lex Friedman on July 6<sup>th</sup>, 2023).

### **4. Vivek Ramaswamy, Businessman and Former Candidate for President 2024**

Survey statement:

- Zelenskyy is not the legitimate leader of Ukraine

Quote:

- “Ukraine is not a paragon of democracy. It has threatened not to hold elections this year unless the U.S. forks over more money. That is not democratic” (Republican presidential debate, November

8<sup>th</sup>, 2023).

## 5. **Marjorie Taylor Greene, Representative US House of Representatives**

Survey statement:

- The United States is openly supporting Nazis from the Azov battalion

Quote:

- "It's antisemitic to make Israeli aid contingent on funding Ukrainian Nazis. These should be separate bills (Post on X on April 14, 2024)."

As mentioned earlier, all the stated narratives have been proven to be Russian disinformation.

### **Conclusions**

Russia continues to use the Gerasimov Doctrine to sow distrust between Westerners and create an image of Ukraine that serves its aggressive agenda, that being, in Russia's ex-president Dmitry Medvedev's words, "...the complete removal of it (Ukraine) as a from the geopolitical map of the world" (2023).

Peculiarly, the US Republican Party, which once stood for freedom and many of whose supporters still vocally denounce Russia's aggression and support Ukraine, has been heavily affected by its isolationist and Euro-sceptic MAGA wing. This research shows that debunking Russia's fake narratives about the persecution of "the Church" or Christians and Orthodox Christianity in Ukraine more generally could help change MAGA's outlook on Ukraine aid, and if that is not possible, to ridicule their rhetoric in the light of facts and its uncanny correlation with that that of Russian state officials, many of whom have proclaimed all Americans, inclusive of isolationist members of the Republican Party, as enemies.

Overall, the responses collected could imply that US citizens maintain a generally healthy understanding

of the context of the Russo-Ukrainian War but that more resources should be devoted by both independent media and the Ukrainian government to explain the religious context in the country, providing greater clarity and reducing Russia's disinformation successes in this sphere.

### **Further Application**

My research has largely been an exploratory study on the topic of Russian disinformation about Ukraine and it provides a rich start to a variety of future investigations. For example, the disparity between the relative effectiveness of religion-affiliated disinformation stands in stark contrast to the rather ineffective disinformation campaigns centred around the themes of corruption, Nazism, and legitimacy. Because of this, it is worth exploring why this narrative specifically has had the most success so far, whether it is due to the sensitivity of the topic, its complexity, or any other reason. In addition, a similar study could also expand the score and/or reach of the survey to build on existing findings, expanding our knowledge of Russia's unethical tactics and allowing US citizens to build defence mechanisms against them.

### **Reflections**

This research has proven both important and insightful, deepening my knowledge of Russia's historic disinformation narratives and strategies as well as allowing me to spread awareness amongst my peers. We stand at a pivotal moment for several reasons; autocratic regimes continue threaten the well-being of the free world, there is a continuous disregard for international law both by state and non-state actors, and consumerisation of AI-powered technology creates an environment where every piece of information can easily be altered, purposefully misinterpreted, or even crafted from scratch to serve the propagandistic needs of dictators like Putin. Thus, practicing good information hygiene is crucial for a worldview based on facts and evidence rather than emotions and lies. I look forward to creating an expanded version of this research which would incorporate existing research from world-leading academics in this field; I will then present it to my university department.

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