What is Russian propaganda and how it works - The case of Georgia

Mariami Ghibradze

International Relations
# Table of Contents

Introduction ........................................................................................................................................... 3

1. Russian propaganda – What is it really? ......................................................................................... 3
   1.1. Ideological Framework .................................................................................................................. 4

2. Case of Georgia .................................................................................................................................. 6

Conclusion .............................................................................................................................................. 9

Bibliography .......................................................................................................................................... 10
Introduction

“The International Relations study domain has long concluded that every country attempts at promoting its interests on the international scene.” However, last several years have proved that the Russian Federation has been pursuing her national interests and strategic goals with a specific manner – using propaganda as a tool. It has posed serious threats not only on a regional, but also on an international level particularly, to the entire democratic system. Russian propaganda is becoming more challenging and hard to counter.

The principal aim of this article is to convey the importance of Russian propaganda as it is a fundamental to Russia’s foreign policy. In the first chapter, by offering an ideological framework within which it is operated makes it easier to recognize propaganda messages, hence, gives an opportunity to prevent one’s self from getting under the influence of malign purposes.

The second main part of the article will examine Georgia’s experience regarding the Kremlin’s propaganda. Contemporary digital advancements made every necessary method more convenient and flexible for the propaganda dissemination process. A key aspect of this chapter will be highlighting and emphasizing Russian fundamental narratives and strategic goals in Georgian state, even in such a challenging times as of global pandemic.

1. Russian propaganda – What is it really?

The meaning of the term ‘propaganda’ has changed somewhat from its original definition. Initially, it “was a neutral term implying dissemination and promotion of a certain idea, however, later it gained a negative connotation.” Nowadays, main aim of propaganda is to mislead and influence cognition and intent to do harm. In addition to that, it has systematic, purposeful and intentional manner in order to amplify an ultimate impact.

While some scholars may consider that Russia engages in a new kind of warfare, the truth is that “using information as a strategic advantage is not a new concept for Russia” as it “inherited a long tradition of propaganda warfare” from the USSR. However, as Samadashvili notes, “Putin’s Russia has taken propaganda to its next level, taking advantage of technological

---

3 Ibid.
advancements, especially in social media, and completely disregarding reality.”  

In other words, Kremlin upgraded its means of spreading (dis)information. With the help of technological advancements, “while realising the importance of the online field, current Russian information operations combine some of the Soviet tested tricks with modern technology and its capabilities.”

After all, due to such transformations “the lines of fact, fiction and dezinfomatsiya have become utterly blurred.” As Pomerantsev writes: “The Kremlin weaponizes information!” Nevertheless, there is a distinctive difference between Soviet and contemporary Russian propaganda, which is that “in Soviet times the concept of truth was important. Even if they were lying they took care to prove what they were doing was ‘the truth’. Now no one even tries proving the ‘truth’. You can just say anything. Create realities.” All in all, it is obvious that utilizing information as a weapon has become a signature move for the Kremlin with the intention to keep and leave viewers “hooked and distracted, passive and paranoid rather than agitated to action.”

1.1. Ideological Framework

It is essential to comprehend an ideological foundation of Russian propaganda in order to understand narratives and the methodology of it. As Grigol Julukhidze points out, two main facts regarding the Kremlin’s propaganda should be outlined:

1. “Vladimir Putin’s political manifest: Russia and the Changing World
2. Valery Gerasimov’s, Head of the Russian General Staff, new military doctrine.”

In “Russia and the Changing World” Putin offers his definition of “soft power” that refers to “the mechanism for achieving foreign policy goals without the use of force, intervention and aggressive campaign.” This definition is not relatively close to the one of Joseph Nye, an

---

6 Ibid.
7 Topuria, “Russia’s Weapon of Words in Numbers,” 42.
10 Ibid.
11 Ibid, 11.
American political scientist, who coined the term and defined it as a means of getting “what you want through attraction rather than coercion.”  

Apart from that, “Gerasimov’s doctrine” is perceived to be the statement made by Valery Gerasimov, who stated that “the 21st century political goals could be achieved through non-military and informative means. Modern Russia is capable of neutralising any threat coming from the West and acting the same way as the Europeans and Americans did while changing the political systems in Georgia, Ukraine and North Africa.” Galeotti says that he had accidentally coined the term himself. Gerasimov was actually discussing the Kremlin’s understanding of “Arab Spring” uprisings, the “color revolutions” and against pro-Moscow regimes in Russia’s neighborhood, and in due course Ukraine’s “Maidan” revolt while attempting to figure out “how to fight, not promote, such uprisings at home.”

There are several major ideologues of Russian disinformation campaigns including Igor Paranin and Aleksandr Dugin. Paranin, who is a professor at the Moscow State University and author of The Information War against Russia frequently draws attention to his belief that the main objective of the West’s post-Cold war policy is the complete annihilation of Russia and it needs to be tackled with manipulation, public stereotypes, fabrications and misinformation.

Notwithstanding, Paranin has an aggressive approach, Aleksandr Dugin is the Kremlin’s main ideologue, who promotes the idea of “Russian World” while criticizing liberal democratic values. According to him, this concept implies unity based on Russian common history, culture, language and the “Orthodox morale” (Russian Orthodox Church (ROC)) and “he predicts the realization of this political vision in the Eurasian space (in the geopolitical area stretching from Cairo to Beijing).” Overall, it is portrayed as a healthy alternative to the “hostile decaying west”.

Following the previous paragraph, another significant ideological pillar of the Kremlin’s propaganda is religious indoctrination in which ROC is playing a crucial role, and moreover, the majority of such campaigns are carried out with a tool of Orthodoxy. As Julukhidze observes: “the Russian Patriarchate is trying to get political dividends through the

17 Mark Galeotti, “I’m Sorry for Creating the ‘Gerasimov Doctrine,’” Foreign Policy (Foreign Policy, March 5, 2018), https://foreignpolicy.com/2018/03/05/im-sorry-for-creating-the-gerasimov-doctrine/.
18 Galeotti, ‘I’m Sorry for Creating the ‘Gerasimov Doctrine’.
20 Julukhidze, “Russian propaganda,” 5.
instrumentalization of religious issues” and furthermore, Russia is funding various forums and conferences which aim to criticize and demonize the Western World.”21 Therefore, using religion is a tool of manipulation and the Russian propaganda machine and the actions of Moscow’s Patriarchate are in accordance with each other.

2. Case of Georgia

In the beginning of the article it was already mentioned that the main objective of the Kremlin’s propaganda is to threaten the global democratic system. “The Kremlin’s fluid use of ideology allows it to ally with an array of actors and to promote a range of principles that foster divisions within the West.”22 However, it should be noted that these disinformation campaigns are immensely strong in some regions in particular, in the Eastern Partnership countries, whose susceptibility enables Russia to increase its political influence whilst simultaneously undermining the stability of the European Union.23

Since the article had already offered the ideological framework of Russian propaganda, it is time to discuss how it operates in Georgia, which has been a target of the Kremlin’s propaganda mainly due to its declared pro-Western orientation. However, “as is the case elsewhere, Russian disinformation campaigns vis-à-vis Georgia operate in line with its foreign policy objectives.”24

First and foremost, during the Russo-Georgian war in August, 2008 Russia carried out numerous cyber-attacks and disinformation campaigns against Georgia and “it could be said that this was the first large-scale and well-organised hybrid warfare operation by the Russian Federation.”25 In addition to that, important thing to emphasize it that “Russian disinformation campaigns are seen by security experts as following a “4D model:” dismiss the critic, distort the facts, distract from the main issue and dismay the audience.”26

All aforementioned strategies was and are used to control the information. Although “following the Russo-Georgian War of 2008, Russia promptly produced a film about this war which portrayed brave Russian soldiers defending the helpless civilians in South Ossetia from Georgian aggression”27, it proved to be rather useless, because in the end, as Pomerantsev

21 Julukhidze, “Russian propaganda,” 5-6.
stresses: “during the 2008 conflict over Georgia many in the Russian establishment again felt the country had lost out in the information game.”

After 2008, the Kremlin has improved its approaches, used modern technological developments to its advantage. The significance of internet, social media platforms and also traditional media sources has soared, while creating the perfect ground for Russia’s propaganda targets in Georgia. Thereafter, throughout past several years a number of narratives had been created and spread in Georgia, including:

- “The West fights against national identity, traditions and family!”
- “Western values are unacceptable for Georgia!”
- “Same-sex marriage will be legalized due to Euro-Atlantic integration!”
- “Homosexuality, pedophilia and perversion is imposed on Georgia be the West;”
- “Western democracy is a mere declaration and it applies double standards;”
- “The West meddles in Georgia’s sovereign affairs and virtually runs the country;”
- “President Saakashvili was incited by the USA to start the war with Russia.”

This list goes on, whereas still continues to serve the ultimate strategic goals of Russian Federation at the same time. Weakening pro-Western opinion among Georgian public; discrediting Ukraine, USA, the EU, NATO; promoting conspiracy theories and nihilism; representing Russian foreign policy positively as compared to “hostile West” – these are major goals which attempt to undermine the sovereignty of Georgia and the unity of public opinion regarding Georgia’s western development. Therefore, further agreeing with Pomerantsev that “when people stop trusting any institutions or having any firmly held values, they can easily accept a conspiratorial vision of the world”, which Russia obviously realizes and tries to utilize that in favour to sow distrust and doubt, polarise societies and gain control over its targets.

Recently, Covid-19 pandemic appeared to be a paradise for Russian propaganda. Over the last year, “Kremlin-funded news agencies, together with their Georgian counterparts, have skilfully exploited the country’s vulnerabilities in the face of the pandemic outbreak and have

---

33 Pomerantsev, “The Kremlin’s Information War,” 42.
tried to deepen societal divisions with an eye to the upcoming parliamentary elections, including circulating disinformation, online rumors and conspiracy theories.”

The results of a recently published research “Infodemic in Georgia” by the Media Development Foundation (MDF) indicated five main groups of messages concerning the Covid-19: Denial of the pandemic / coronavirus and other conspiracy theories; Vaccine hesitancy; Russia/China vs the West; Religion and identity; Diagnosing, regulations, etc. As for the sources of disseminating the flummoxing information, several directly or indirectly Kremlin-affiliated media outlets, such as Sputnik, News Front, Sakinformi and Geworld.ge have made a huge effort. Aside from them, several pro-Kremlin political forces and individuals have also assisted this unfruitful process to become more influential.

The study provided a large set of significant clusters of pandemic propaganda, purposefully promoting these messages:

- Coronavirus is artificially created in US labs and spread establish new world order
- Americans conduct experiments in Lugar Lab
- Aim of vaccination is to implant chips (even blaming Bill Gates for that)
- Experimental vaccines are tested on third-world countries
- The West does not show solidarity with / help other countries
- Poses threat to NATO integration / EU
- The West failed to cope with the pandemic
- Coronavirus is divine retribution
- Pandemic is used against church and religion (Holy Communion)

Even though this list does not represent every message conveyed by the MDF research, it is still sufficient to realize that the sole objective of the Kremlin’s propaganda lies in its deep desire to undermine the West and each value it relies on through the dissemination of disinformation. “Pandemic-related issues were mainly covered through the prism of politics, which was in conformity to the agenda of the Russian government and apparent from titles chosen for stories and messages contained therein. The news agency tried to help the Russian vaccine secure its place on the market by promoting it and portraying Western vaccines as unsuccessful and unreliable, on the one hand, and on the other hand, by voicing skepticism sowed doubts about the future of the West and the Western institutions.”


However, the fortunate thing is that more than 80% of Georgian population supports the Euro-Atlantic aspiration of the country, which is clearly increased compared to past figures and hopefully, will maintain this course without getting under the impact of Russian propaganda.

Conclusion
The two initial aims of the present article was to show ways by which Russian propaganda is carried out and how it works in Georgia. Putin’s perception of “soft power” and Dugin’s idea of “Russian World” with so-called “Gerasimov’s Doctrine” and the religious direction finally shape a frame for the Kremlin’s propaganda.

“The existence of the internet, cable news, social media and the general spread of the Russian language has enabled Russia to operate extensively within Georgia.” Various pro-Russian political forces and media, in addition, Kremlin-funded media outlets aggravated situation here in terms of flowing extremely wide range of disinformation campaigns over the period of time. But a strong belief and desire of Georgian citizens proved to be resilient as 4/5 of them supports the Western course of country’s progress.

It is pivotal that “the dynamics of Russian propaganda show that the most difficult and critical situations are opportunities – and not barriers – for it to continue” as well. Thus, it will remain as a challenge not only for Georgia, but for the whole world.

Bibliography


