DOCTORAL DISSERTATION

Information Operations of the Russian Federation in the Cognitive Area: Understanding and Countering Russian Disinformation in Romania

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Executive Summary

Introduction

In a world gripped by unprecedented geopolitical turmoil, particularly underscored by the recent escalations in war dynamics, the role of narratives and disinformation has never been more critical. Disinformation campaigns, meticulously orchestrated to manipulate narratives and sway public opinion, have transitioned from being just tools of misinformation to potent weapons of war, having concrete and significant consequences for national security and defense.

The surge in these campaigns, often deployed through various Information Operations (IOs), reverberates with profound implications on the geopolitical dynamics of nations, shaping perceptions, and in many instances, forging realities. This thesis delves deeply into understanding the nuances of Russian disinformation campaigns, focusing principally on their impact on Romania—a nation uniquely positioned in this high-stakes geopolitical narrative play, grappling with the pressing exigencies of the contemporary war situation.

Objectives

The pivotal objective of this research is twofold: first, to pinpoint the gaps in the prevailing literature surrounding Romania's distinctive geopolitical scenario amidst the convoluted landscape of Russian disinformation, and second, to ground the empirical data in a robust conceptual and theoretical framework. This approach facilitates a nuanced understanding of the disinformation campaigns, painting a vivid picture of their anatomy, and the counterstrategies adopted globally and specifically in Romania to counteract their burgeoning influence.

Structure

The thesis embarks on a meticulous journey, traversing a rich analytical narrative distributed across four pivotal chapters, each serving as a lighthouse illuminating different facets of disinformation campaigns:

- **Chapter 1**: Initiating the discourse with a theoretical underpinning, this chapter crafts the conceptual groundwork, setting a robust platform to understand the intricate web of disinformation strategies amidst the grave realities of modern warfare dynamics.

- **Chapter 2**: The focal point here is the meticulous dissection of the Russian strategies of disinformation, a deep dive into their historical roots, and tactical apparatus, elucidating the geopolitical intricacies that delineate Russia's stance and operational strategies in the information warfare arena.

- **Chapter 3**: As the discourse shifts from theory to practice, this segment offers an in-depth look at the application of Russian strategies, delineating their real-world implications with a focused lens on the Ukraine conflict while contextualizing Romania and the EU's responsive strategies against the backdrop of the complex global scenario.

- **Chapter 4**: Standing as the empirical cornerstone, this chapter delves into the Romanian landscape, probing public perceptions and the media's role in sculpting narratives concerning the ongoing Ukraine conflict, weaving through a set of research questions carved to foster a deep understanding of the disinformation dynamics in Romania.

Research Questions

A comprehensive set of nine research questions stand at the helm of this investigation, designed to delve into public perception, media influence, and the roles of various stakeholders in shaping the narrative landscape, offering a compass in the complex maze of disinformation campaigns.

Methodology

The thesis adopts a clearly defined working definition of IOs, focusing on non-kinetic operations confined to the information and communication spaces. It decidedly excludes areas like electronic warfare and computer network operations, and instead gravitates towards mechanisms involving the weaponization of media and information. The chosen approach fosters a structured investigation into StratComms, propaganda, PSYOPS, and other related avenues of disinformation campaigns.

Theoretical underpinnings

Disinformation and Persuasion Theories: Understanding the nature and influence of disinformation is pivotal in communication sciences. Central to this exploration is the elaboration

likelihood model (ELM) by Petty and Caccioppo (1986), which delineates two pathways of persuasion - central (based on logical reasoning) and peripheral (based on superficial elements such as emotions). Disinformation campaigns often exploit these paths, using well-articulated arguments with misleading evidence for the central route, and leveraging cues such as authority and scarcity to invoke emotional responses for the peripheral route. Strategies to counter disinformation involve debunking false information through cognitive and socio-affective approaches, emphasizing the importance of scrutinizing the credibility of the source and the plausibility of the information, as outlined in Ecker et al., 2022.

Supply Chain of Disinformation: Lecheler & Egelhofer (2022) shed light on the ecosystem of disinformation, pinpointing the roles of political and media actors and citizens in propagating falsehoods, often driven by political or financial incentives. This delineation extends to acknowledging the covert strategies employed by political actors to disseminate false information clandestinely, making the identification and counteraction of disinformation a complex endeavor. The traceability of such campaigns becomes increasingly challenging as naive citizens amplify these misinformation narratives.

Strategic Narratives: Research highlights the use of strategic narratives by government and state actors to shape perceptions and dictate behavior concerning international politics. These narratives, rooted in the fields of international relations and strategic communication, often appeal to emotions, historical analogies, and political myths to influence target audiences, adapting fluidly to specific contexts (Khaldarova, 2021). Specifically, Russian narratives, as explored by various researchers, indicate a meticulous use of mass media to wield control over narrative circulation both internationally and domestically, portraying a complex landscape of information warfare punctuated by elements of threat articulation and demonization of adversaries.

The prevalent perspective in **Russia's current strategic landscape**, deeply influenced by the convergence of viewpoints in its strategic documents and leadership after 2000, hinges on the comprehensive utilization of information operations (IOs) within a framework that transcends the conventional boundaries of warfare. This approach, rooted in a belief of Western decay and the rise of multipolar power dynamics, leverages both psycho-social and technical segments of information warfare, albeit with a pronounced emphasis on the former. It encompasses a broad

spectrum of tools — from mass media campaigns to cyber operations — strategically employed to not only counteract perceived Western aggression but to shape a global narrative in Russia's favor, fostering a continual state of confrontation where information serves as a potent weapon in achieving geopolitical objectives and ensuring national security. This paradigm shift, echoed by scholars and military experts, necessitates a deep-dive into the psycho-social dimensions of IOs, highlighting the critical role they play in influencing the cognitive sphere of potential adversaries, thereby redefining the contours of modern warfare.

Information Operations (IOs) During and Post February 2022 Invasion of Ukraine

Leading Up to the Invasion

In the build-up to Russia's invasion of Ukraine on February 24, 2022, a deteriorating regional security environment was witnessed, underscored by aggressive military posturing through exercises like "Zapad 2021" and a heightened Russian military presence near the Ukraine border. Information narratives from the Kremlin alleged Western nations, particularly the U.S and NATO, were encroaching on Ukrainian territory, setting a tense international stage, heightened by misinformation and contradictory statements. The Russian administration firmly denied any plans for invasion, instead attributing the rising tensions to provocations from the U.S, NATO, and potential forces in Ukraine, and depicting the West as whipping up hysteria.

Invasion and Immediate Aftermath

Upon initiating a full-scale invasion in February 2022, Russia complemented its military efforts with a substantial information operations campaign targeting not just Ukraine but casting a wide net globally. The Kremlin meticulously crafted narratives portraying Russia as a responsible actor forced into defensive action, and assigned blame for the conflict to Ukraine and Western powers. These narratives were globally disseminated, with notable traction in the Global South. Key narratives include depicting Ukraine as a puppet state controlled by the West, underlining supposed NATO provocations as the root cause of the war, and glorifying Russia's "successes" on the battlefield, a tactic employed to deflect blame while assuming credit for perceived victories. This approach extends to alleging a Western plot to provoke a nuclear confrontation with Russia.

Broader Implications and Narratives

This multipronged information strategy also saw Russia purportedly engaging in negotiations to prevent further escalation, albeit with false pretenses. In the post-invasion period, narratives circulated globally, including in Romania, adapting to local contexts and focusing on a range of topics from the alleged aggressive nature of Ukrainian refugees to the inefficacy of sanctions against Russia. In Romania, a barrage of misinformation also surrounded military developments, defense agreements, and other state actions, creating a persistent atmosphere of uncertainty and tension. Alongside this, Russia utilized narratives around food security post its withdrawal from the Black Sea Grain Initiative to further its strategic objectives. Thus, the information landscape became a pivotal battleground, with narratives meticulously crafted to shape perception and foster divisions, indicating a war fought as much in the cognitive realm as on the ground.

Romania's Incipient Response to Counter Disinformation

Romania has initiated efforts to tackle the pressing challenges posed by disinformation and information operations, as underscored in its National Defense Strategy (NDS). The strategy reflects an understanding of the multi-faceted nature of these threats, advocating for a cooperative approach involving a range of stakeholders and a firm commitment to fostering a society resilient to misinformation through concrete actions. This denotes a commendable shift towards acknowledging the gravity of the threat, aiming to curb its potential detrimental impacts on society and national security.

Yet, the translation of this robust strategy into tangible actions remains to be seen. The absence of a comprehensive legal framework to guide these efforts exacerbates the lack of significant progress on the ground. While there are institutional initiatives indicative of a budding policy-level consciousness of the necessity for more robust counter-disinformation mechanisms, they appear to be somewhat narrow in scope. Limited to specific topics and audiences, mainly the elite, these endeavors fail to permeate the broader societal fabric, hence falling short of establishing a wide-reaching defensive front against disinformation campaigns. Despite the potential efficacy of pre-bunking and debunking as tools to counter misinformation, their utilization remains underexplored, suggesting an urgent need to broaden the range of topics covered and deepen the engagement with society to truly effect change. The road ahead demands concerted efforts to

develop a cohesive legal framework and to foster comprehensive societal engagement to not only address the symptoms but the root causes of disinformation, forging a society resilient to the influences of misinformation.

EU's Enhanced Efforts in Countering Disinformation Still Yielding Mixed Results

The European Union has been more proactive in addressing the challenges posed by disinformation and misinformation in recent years, spearheading several initiatives to curb the influence of malevolent information operations. A key legislative proposal that stands out is the Digital Services Act (DSA), which aims to regulate digital platforms to ensure safer digital spaces, promoting transparency and accountability in the online environment. The DSA is widely viewed as a positive step forward, setting a blueprint for digital regulation that could potentially deter the dissemination of misinformation at its source.

Despite these proactive measures, the results remain mixed, showcasing a landscape of both breakthroughs and bottlenecks in the fight against disinformation. The EEAS (European External Action Service) has somewhat bolstered its capacity to counter Russian disinformation, exhibiting a more robust stance against the onslaught of misinformation campaigns. Yet, the complex nature of information warfare requires a persistent, evolving strategy, marrying policy initiatives with on-the-ground action, and fostering a culture of critical thinking and digital literacy. There is room for improvement, and while strides have been made, a concerted, sustained effort that leverages the collective capacity of EU member states will be essential in fostering a more resilient information space in Europe. The pathway to success lies in a harmonized approach that capitalizes on the momentum built through initiatives like the DSA, whilst continually enhancing the operational capacity of entities such as the EEAS to adapt to the dynamic landscape of information operations.

Key findings of the empirical research
Objective 1: Main Disinformation Channels Regarding the War in Ukraine

1. **Sources of Disinformation**: According to public perception, the Russian government (77.5%), Russian media outlets (76.2%), and Russian politicians (61%) are the primary disseminators of disinformation regarding the Ukraine conflict. Additionally, nearly half of

the respondents view Ukrainian media and government skeptically, at rates of 48.2% and 47.9% respectively.

2. **Domestic Distrust**: About 48.3% of Romanians are skeptical of information from Romanian state institutions, and 48% have similar views on Romanian media outlets.

3. **Educational Variance**: Respondents without higher education are more likely to believe that NATO disseminates misleading information (40.4%) compared to those with higher education (33.4%).

4. **Age Factor**: Older individuals (55 and above) are less skeptical of NATO compared to the younger demographic (18 to 34).

5. **Media Consumption**: Frequent social media users are more divided in their opinions about NATO's credibility compared to occasional users.

Objective 2: Romanians' Attitudes Towards Russia in Context of the War

1. **Narrative Disagreement**: The majority of Romanians disagree with pro-Russian narratives regarding the war. However, an average of 30% do agree with these narratives, indicating significant polarization.

2. **Public Opinion on the War**: Most respondents believe Romania should focus on its citizens first (74.9%) and maintain neutrality (72.4%). Over half see Ukrainian refugees as a burden on Romania's economy (51.9%).

3. **Educational Gap**: People with higher education levels show lower agreement with pro-Russian narratives compared to those without higher education.

4. **Political Knowledge**: Those with lower levels of political knowledge tend to agree more with pro-Russian narratives compared to those with good political knowledge.

Objective 3: Media and Attitudes about Russia in the Context of the War in Ukraine

1. **Traditional Media Impact**: Both occasional and frequent consumers of traditional media recorded higher average scores on pro-Russian narratives. For instance, frequent

consumers scored 3.55 in agreement with the narrative that "current tensions between Ukraine and Russia are due to Ukraine and its Western allies."

2. **Social Media Influence**: Similar to traditional media, social media consumption is also associated with pro-Russian attitudes. Frequent users scored 3.59 in agreement with the same narrative mentioned above, indicating a slightly stronger impact than traditional media.

3. **Narrative Variance**: Across various pro-Russian narratives, frequent consumers of both traditional and social media consistently scored higher than occasional consumers, suggesting a potential link between media usage and attitudes.

4. **Differential Impact**: The data indicated more significant value differences between frequent and occasional consumers in the case of social media compared to traditional media.

Objective 4: Trust in Institutions and Romanians' Attitudes Towards Russia

1. **Institutional Trust**: Higher trust in Western institutions like NATO, EU, and the U.S. is associated with anti-Russian attitudes. In contrast, high trust in the Romanian Army and Church aligned with pro-Russian views.

2. **Political Trust**: Public trust is low for domestic political institutions. Interestingly, those with pro-Russian attitudes show slightly higher trust in Romanian politicians (2.98) compared to those with anti-Russian attitudes (2.71).

3. **Religious Factor**: Trust in the Church shows a higher level among pro-Russian attitudes (4.83) compared to anti-Russian attitudes (3.83), indicating a religious aspect in the alignment.

4. **Media Trust**: Radio, TV, and websites are generally more trusted than social networks and messaging platforms. Trust in Western media is higher among those with anti-Russian attitudes (4.01) compared to those with pro-Russian attitudes (3.40).

Objective 5: Mechanisms of Russian Disinformation in Romania

1. **Strategic Aims:** Russian disinformation seeks primarily to fragment societal attitudes towards Euro-Atlantic alliances rather than pull Romania towards Russia directly.

2. **Complex Campaigns:** Russian disinformation uses multiple vectors—social media, traditional media, religious institutions—and blends truth and falsehood to create a divisive impact.

3. **Religious Influence:** Higher levels of trust in religious institutions is associated with greater susceptibility to disinformation, especially narratives that exploit traditional and conservative values.

4. **COVID-19 Factor:** The pandemic has further enabled Russian disinformation campaigns, capitalizing on existing fears and vulnerabilities.

Objective 6: Role of Romanian Media in Propagating Russian Narratives

1. **Traditional vs. Social Media:** Both traditional and social media play a pivotal role in spreading Russian disinformation, with social media platforms often using bots and trolls to amplify narratives.

2. **Complicit Channels:** Channels like Romania TV and Realitatea were identified as significant contributors to the spread of disinformation.

3. **Balanced Views:** Traditional media's attempt to present 'balanced' perspectives can inadvertently amplify Russian disinformation.

4. **Political Amplification:** The role of political actors in Romania further complicates the media landscape, contributing to the spread of disinformation.

Objective 7: Societal Impact of Russian Disinformation in Romania

1. **Eroding Trust:** Disinformation campaigns have significantly eroded public trust in Euro-Atlantic institutions, affecting Romania's geo-strategic importance.

2. **Fringe Support:** The disinformation has led to increased support for fringe parties and a 'neutrality option' regarding Romania's international alignments.

3. **Youth Vulnerability:** Younger demographics are particularly susceptible to disinformation, primarily due to inadequate education and lack of firsthand experience with the communist regime.

4. **Broader Consequences:** Disinformation affects not only political opinions but also societal behaviors, such as vaccine uptake and economic decisions.

Objective 8: Institutional Responses to Disinformation

1. **Inadequate Actions:** Despite isolated efforts, Romanian institutions have been largely ineffective in combating disinformation, lacking coordinated strategies.

2. **Governmental Communication:** Poor communication from governmental entities has exacerbated the disinformation problem, creating a void that false narratives can fill.

3. **Strategic Need:** Experts call for a multi-stakeholder, comprehensive approach to combat disinformation, emphasizing education and effective communication.

Objective 9: Recommendations for Countermeasures

1. **Education Imperative:** Media literacy and critical thinking education are essential for pre-emptive disinformation countermeasures.

2. **Strategic Communication:** Governmental entities need to improve their strategic communication to bolster public trust and counter false narratives.

3. **Multi-Stakeholder Approach:** Collaboration involving government, media, civil society, and the corporate sector is crucial for combating disinformation effectively.

Future Research: Given the evolving nature of disinformation campaigns, continuous research and monitoring are necessary to adapt and refine countermeasures.

Conclusion

As we stand at the crossroads of a deeply polarized world, this research aspires to furnish a nuanced insight into the potent realms of disinformation in Romania, aiming to carve out strategic

pathways for policy directives and steering a roadmap for further research in this critical domain, while emphasizing the urgent need to foster narratives grounded in truth and reality, as nations grapple with the harsh realities of war and conflict in the contemporary global landscape.