



DISINFORMATION AS A FORM OF HYBRID WARFARE
**HOW HAS THE RUSSIAN DISINFORMATION STRATEGY AGAINST
THE USA EVOLVED SINCE THE COLD WAR?**

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Abstract

This thesis analyses the evolution of Russian disinformation strategy against the USA. It concentrates on the research of Russian utilization of hybrid warfare tools as a foreign policy approach. Study seeks to uncover the complexity of observable practices and underlying mechanisms in the context of Russian American relations. By implementing neoclassical realist assumptions in the modern hybrid warfare context, this paper is able to carry out in-depth investigation. It argues that in the case of examining foreign policy of a state, it is important to connect domestic variables with systemic pressures. Combination of those two components can provide a solid argument regarding explanation of the state's behaviour in an international setting. This paper contributes to the comprehension of Russian hybrid warfare tools and methods of identifying disinformation narratives.

A research design is built upon longitudinal single case study. By observing the variable disinformation strategy over an extended period of time, it allows us to understand the complexity of how national interests collide with external threats. The analysis reveals that the Russian disinformation strategy against the USA is a part of a grand hybrid warfare model which Russia tested internally and in the neighbouring states. Methods of influence that are chosen by the state's leadership reflect its national interest, which, as this paper argues, sometimes prioritizes regime survival. Unable to confront the Western hegemony, Russia comes to the adaptation of asymmetrical methods. Modern hybrid warfare strategy of Russia draws inspiration from the Soviet toolkit of the Cold-War era which was adapted to the modern information technologies.

The study consists of two main chapters – theoretical framework and analysis which provides a historical overview and three stages of periodization from 1991 until today. Each stage consists of three components: domestic dynamic, near abroad influence and foreign policy towards the USA. Each period follows an unstrict structure of analysing goals of the hybrid warfare strategy, its methods and specifications of disinformation narratives.

Glossary

Term	Translation and definition
Aktivnye meropriyatiya	Active Measures - Covert Soviet-era influence operations
Dezinformatsiya	Disinformation - Deliberate Soviet disinformation campaigns
Operatsiya Infektsiya	Operation Infection - Soviet disinformation about HIV/AIDS origin
Refleksivnoye upravleniye	Reflexive Control - Soviet reflexive decision manipulation technique
Siloviki, sila	Force, Force institutions - Russian security and military elites
Vserossiyskaya politicheskaya partiya "Yedinaya Rossiya"	United Russia - dominant political party
Russkiy Mir	Russian World - Russian cultural-political unity concept
Zelyonye chelovechki	Unmarked Russian military personnel
Maskirovka	Military deception and camouflage strategy
Ostalgie	Eastern Nostalgia - Nostalgia for East Germany
Kyiv VS Kiev	Kyiv: Ukrainian spelling. Kiev: Russian - derived, outdated
RT	Russia Today - Russian state-funded news channel
TASS	Telegraph Agency of the Soviet Union - Russian state news agency
Agentstvo internet-issledovaniya	Internet Research Agency - Russian online trolling farm

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Introduction

After the collapse of the USSR in 1991 and shift from a bipolar to a unipolar world order, many believed that the divide between East and West would fade. Relations between Russia and the United States went through periods of cooperation and tensions since then. Following the 2016 presidential election, America was confronted with the reality of its societal vulnerability to the external interference from the Russian side. Since the Cold War, disinformation efforts played an important role in shaping perceptions. Disinformation campaigns became embedded in Russia's foreign policy after Soviet propaganda efforts during the Cold War, and since then have progressed and adapted to the technological changes, geopolitical dynamics and domestic developments. This paper examines the progression of the Russian approach to the hybrid warfare strategy towards the USA from the period of the Cold War to the present. Therefore, the main goal is to answer the research question:

“How has the Russian disinformation strategy against the USA evolved since the Cold War?”

Role of the Russian troll factories in encouraging the candidate Trump in 2016 while simultaneously polarising American society brought academic attention to the issues of disinformation and hybrid warfare. Washington Post assessment concluded that by the time President Trump reached 1,055 days in the office in 2019 he had misled or lied to the American people 15,413 times (Washington Post, 2019). Nevertheless, Trump entered his second term of presidency in 2025. The connections of his associates with Russian nationals caused anxiety among European nations regarding the fate of the future security in Europe. Since 2022, the West has stood united with Ukraine in its defence against the Russian invasion, however, with Trump's return to office, this solidarity faces growing uncertainty. Eight years prior to that, in 2014, Russian military operations had already begun in Ukrainian Crimea, Donetsk and Luhansk. However, this military operation employed a different kind of strategy — a hybrid warfare tactic which was difficult to discover, oppose and react to. Russian methods of hybrid warfare received increasing academic attention, as they gradually became a key feature of Russian foreign policy directed not only at its neighbouring states but also at Western countries, including the United States. After the testing ground in Ukraine, Russian approach to 2016 American presidential elections was characterised by adoption of hybrid tools such as cyber operations and social media disinformation campaigns. While analyzing Russia's utilization of the hybrid warfare, many would find some similarities with the Soviet style toolkit of

propaganda during the Cold War, where the goal was to damage the prestige and perception of its main rival – the USA. By analysing the development of the disinformation strategy, it contributes to the Western understanding of Russian hybrid operations, how they are getting implemented and what are their goals. Recognizing malicious narratives enables the construction of the societal resilience and helps to avoid becoming victims of foreign state interests

This thesis is structured in three main parts: first is the theoretical framework where I outline realist theory, then hybrid warfare and informational influence operations with a conclusion of disinformation methods and goals. Second is methodology where I explain the research approach. Third is the analytical part which I divided into four parts: first is a historical overview of Soviet tools in the Cold War era. Second part is a chronological periodization of the development of the Russian strategy based on inner developments: first period until 2000, second until 2013 and third until 2025.

Theoretical framework

This chapter's goal is to develop the theoretical foundation that will guide the analysis throughout the paper. First, it introduces the theory of realism with a focus on the neoclassical realist perspective. Second, it outlines the concept of hybrid warfare, highlighting its main features, methods and goals. Third, it examines information warfare as a key aspect of modern hybrid warfare, where it defines disinformation as a key component of influence operations.

Realist overview

The Realist theory of International Relations has evolved into several distinct branches over the years. Three fundamental assumptions that unite realist thought are that the sovereign nation-states are the main actors, there is no world government and international order is anarchical (Jackson et.al., 2022). The first assumption is based on state-centrism. One of the main scholars of classical realism T. Hobbes stated, that the “natural” state of life which existed before the formation of the nation-states, was a state of constant war. Thus, the only and necessary way of avoiding this “natural” state is to move to the formation of sovereign states which unite people under the fear of being attacked by their neighbouring states (Weber, 2021). According to the Morgenthau, another frontier of the classical realist theory, power is the main goal of international politics, thus constant wars and rivalries are inevitable since each state is

working for its own interest and has one goal – ensuring their position in the global stage (Jackson et.al., 2022).

The second theoretical assumption is the absence of the world government. As states are self-interested and seek security for their nation, no world government can be created nor trusted, thus every alliance is fragile as its members are involved only until it benefits them. Therefore, for classical realists, great powers are the most vital players in global politics as they strive to establish dominance and spread influence to eventually become hegemon. Smaller states do not have a choice but to be dependent on alliances with one of the superpowers (Weber, 2021). Moreover, any type of warfare is seen as the tool for self-protection. Following on from Morgenthau, there is a clear distinction between the ethics of the public and private morale in warfare. He believes that only unwise leaders would use individual principles in the field of global politics, as nations are in a constant state of survival, there is a big responsibility on the authority of a state to handle potential threats, and even bigger obligation is expected from the leadership of the superpowers. Hence, they are acting without much consideration of private moral principles but rather with the aim of using any necessary means to protect the state's interests. Especially during threatening situations, tools that contradict ethics of private morality can be tolerated in the political realm with the necessity of protecting national security (Jackson et.al., 2022). The third realist assumption is that international order is anarchical. Therefore, IR echoes the pre-states “natural” order which leads to the constant state of war, where no enduring peace can be achieved. This is what is known as “the security dilemma” popularized by T. Hobbes - creation of the independent states for the goal of domestic security which is threatened by the anarchic root of the international system. Thus, defensive action by one actor can be interpreted as a threat by another (Jackson et.al., 2022).

Realist theory is often discussed through the prism of the events of the Cold War. Scholar of offensive realism, J. Mearsheimer's, among other realism researchers, attributed a big part of his analysis to the Cold War consequences. He claims that this period offered prolonged peace in the region that ceased to exist since the potential of a new multipolar order may bring instability and war. Superpowers that seek hegemony are aiming at domination so no other adversary can be powerful enough to wage a war on them (Jackson et.al., 2022). According to J. Mearsheimer, great powers focus on four basic objectives. First, they seek regional hegemony by dominating their own region as well as limiting the influence of other great powers. Second, they aim to increase the world's wealth they own as economic prosperity leads to military strength. Third, those states seek to dominate the balance of global power, so

having a strong army is necessary to protect their interests and reaffirm their status. And fourth, great powers pursue nuclear superiority since the possession of nuclear weapons can both shape other states' perceptions and be strategically used in diplomatic efforts (Mearsheimer, 2001). To sum up, realist thought portrays the international system as an arena of state-centric competition, shaped by the strategic interests of the superpowers which are operating in a landscape of global anarchy. Superpowers are constantly exploring methods of increasing their share of world power by shaping their foreign policy according to their national goals. This theory can help to broadly analyse behaviour of a country like Russia; however, it often overlooks domestic factors or non-material aspects which are vital in a state's foreign decisions trajectory. Neoclassical realism, on the other hand, provides an important context for understanding the foreign policy decisions of a state by connecting domestic components of political culture and leadership perceptions with systemic pressures. Including this perspective to my theoretical framework will help to answer the research question with a greater understanding of underlying dynamics.

Neoclassical Realism

An article "Neoclassical Realism and Theories of Foreign Policy" published in 1998 by Rose suggested a new theoretical approach which incorporates the foundation of the classical realist theory together with the internal and external variables. Neoclassical realist theory suggests that a foreign policy of a state is driven by its domestic goals, its place in the international system and its relative material power capabilities (Rose, 1998). Moreover, it's the political leaders' perceptions of the relative power and country's role in the world order as well as their approach of governing the population that influence foreign policy choices. The theory suggests that actions of a state are the response to systemic pressures and uncertainty of international anarchy. Domestic goals that are shaped by the national interests guide the approach that the state is using in shaping its external environment. Consequently, if a country's relative power will grow, its ambitions to project influence abroad will grow accordingly (Rose, 1998). As much as classical realism, state plays central role in international relations, but it adds the concept of a "top-down" governance meaning that the executives of the national security (leaders, ministers and officials of the government) get access to the unique knowledge which contributes to the best decisions for national interest (Lobel, 2009). National identity of the leaders, type of regime they provide, public opinion about them – all those factors are crucial internal components that form foreign policy. Although the executives of power are potentially separate from the society, they often come to agreements with

domestic actors to enable policy and collect resources for its implementation. Neoclassical realism emphasizes important nuance - domestic policies are determined by intra-state competition, when sometimes the leaders may be more worried about regime's survival rather than the survival of the nation-state (Steinsson, 2017). In summary, neoclassical realism is a theory of foreign policy that aims to explain why states make certain decisions. The anarchical system of global distribution of power is affecting those choices as much as inner components like elite worldview, political culture and governmental regime.

Hybrid Warfare

Modern notion of foreign policy approaches contemporary and sophisticated methods of influence. State's strategy can vary from soft power tools to open cooperation. Hybrid warfare as a tactic grew popular due to its distinctive characteristics of integrating military and non-military means. From a realist perspective, usage of hybrid warfare methods is a rational strategy that allows the state to reinforce its power with little risks. Additionally, as realism sees political morale distinct from the private, any means for reinforcing state's security is justified.

Definition and key characteristics

In academia, the concept of hybrid warfare was first introduced by Hoffman in 2007 with an emphasis on the growing blurring nature of various levels of warfare. He defined it as "a range of different modes of warfare, including conventional capabilities, irregular tactics and formations, terrorist acts including indiscriminate violence and coercion, and criminal disorder" (Hoffman, 2007, p. 14). However, the term gained more recognition since NATO's statement during the Wales Summit in 2014: "We will ensure that NATO is able to effectively address the specific challenges posed by hybrid warfare threats, where a wide range of overt and covert military, paramilitary, and civilian measures are employed in a highly integrated design" (Wales Summit Declaration, 2014, p. 13). As a result of Russia's actions in Ukraine in 2014, NATO had to build a new strategy of handling the hybrid threats which led to the creation of the NATO-accredited Strategic Communications Centre of Excellence in Latvia, enhanced responsiveness of the NATO Response Force and establishment of the Very High Readiness Joint Task Force (Weissmann et al, 2021). All those developments brought closer attention of researchers and academics to the concept and particularly the case of 2014 Russian intervention in Ukraine which became a case study of a new developing form of hybrid warfare.

Although hybrid warfare is not a new term, its constant state of rapid development makes it complex and unpredictable. Hence, below I will outline three key characteristics that can help with defining the concept: the field of decision, conduct of operations and employment of means and methods (Thiele, 2021). The *field of decision* is moving military-centric warfare into horizontal and vertical domains which can be political, diplomatic, cultural, technological, moral, societal, economic etc. It sometimes can also be called “mosaic-warfare” as it spreads from military into non-military dimensions. *Conduct of operation* means that the warfare operates in the grey zones of different affiliations thus blurring the lines between usually opposite terms such as war and peace, reality and propaganda, civil and military, friend and adversary etc. The key feature of this characteristic is the creation of vagueness to make decision-making challenging and to avoid direct confrontation. Lastly, *employment of means and methods* combines all potential instruments to target an opponent’s weaknesses (Thiele, 2021). Combination of these components helps to reinforce uncertainty and fear, exploit the adversary’s vulnerabilities, and undermine or destabilize state’s security.

Methods and goals of Hybrid Warfare

NATO’s strategy for countering hybrid threats described hybrid warfare as seeking to “exploit the gaps between collective defence, crisis management, and cooperative security” (NDC Conference Report, NATO Defence College, 2015, p.9). To successfully implement this strategy without starting an actual war, hybrid warfare aims at weakening the political system of a target state by using methods like subversion, manipulation, violence and spreading of false information (Weissmann et al, 2021). According to “The Cyber Défense Review” published by Army Cyber Institute, there is a new global competitive model of hybrid warfare which consists of a wide range of military and nonmilitary methods (Fleming et al, 2017). However, as the combined military capabilities of the collective West remain significantly more advanced, superpowers that intent to challenge the Western hegemony, such as Russia or China, avoid the implementation of the military methods which could trigger war and instead come to the usage of less resource-demanding means of warfare. These tools are often described as asymmetrical because the differences in economic and military power prompt the weaker state to utilize non-traditional tactics that seek to exploit the vulnerabilities and undermine the security of the state without triggering the direct military confrontation (Weissmann et al, 2021). As a result, tools of non-military warfare are much more common, as they are less costly, more difficult to tackle and quite effective. Some of the non-military warfare tools mentioned in the “The Cyber Défense Review” include media, propaganda,

culture, ideological and diplomatic warfare (Fleming et al, 2017, p.31). However, the fear of potential deployment of military tools can increase the effectiveness of non-military methods. This correlates with realism, which emphasizes the state's constant search for military strength and nuclear arsenal.

Hybrid warfare targets daily peaceful life by creating an environment in which confusion, conspiracy theories and ambiguity are thriving. Tools of hybrid warfare are especially effective in times of crisis or emergency: when there are social and cultural tensions, conspiracy theories and anti-tolerance tendencies are much easier to exploit (Mälksoo, 2018). Additionally, as those methods are implemented in the shadows, laws of armed conflicts struggle to create a distinction between grey zones and hold anyone accountable. Those tactics are sometimes described as hybrid threats meaning their application of malicious activities without the military escalation (Borch & Heier, 2024).

Information Warfare

Asymmetrical and non-military tools of hybrid warfare became a widely debated subject especially in the context of the current geopolitical situation. New stage of hybrid warfare came with a technological evolution in media and press which offered new possibilities for implementation of those hybrid warfare strategies.

Influence operations

As mentioned earlier, non-military forms of warfare are one of the most inexpensive and highly effective methods. Thus, because of its availability and efficiency, information influence operations became a significant feature of a modern hybrid warfare model (Weissmann et al, 2021). Information dominance and control over the spread of narratives proved to be vital especially after the development of information technologies, when communication through the internet and social media became an essential part of a societal change. Therefore, by navigating the information narratives, a state can significantly impact cultural preferences and political views of domestic and foreign audiences (Polyakova et al, 2021). If a state seeks to damage the reputation of an adversary, the current stage of the media creates a perfect environment for narrative dissemination. Digital age era generates a dynamic where an average internet user constantly experiences informational overdose. Fighting false narratives online is extremely demanding and almost impossible due to the animosity of the internet, which makes it an ideal setting for disinformation campaigns. Monetizing social media activities has created a dynamic where the posted content does not have to be reliable or

factual but must collect as many views and reports as possible (Freelon & Wells, 2020). Provocative and sensationalized media is very effective in grabbing attention of users through attention-grabbing titles or emotionally charged content that push them to interact with the post in some way. This information chaos forms a context where manipulative and offensive content often from non-credible sources overshadows proper journalistic media. Potentially malicious narratives shared by unknown creators that are getting popular on social media also draws attention of more respected media sources that without proper investigation may continue the chain of disinformation spread (Freelon & Wells, 2020).

Influence operations in the modern information environment can be seen as a new challenge of facing the hybrid threat in the framework of a contemporary hybrid warfare strategy. Information technologies offer many opportunities for implementing these influence operations. I will describe the main tactics of influence operations. First method is collection of data from large social media platforms which allows to target audience's preferences and identify best ways of reaching out to them. Next method is hacking of different computer systems that can give useful insights regarding timing and design of those operations that aim to polarize targeted communities. Besides that, hacking allows the usage of the doxing technique which means publishing classified or private information of a person or organization to humiliate or to ruin their reputation. Another method is DDoS (Distributed Denial-of-Service Attack) attacks – they refer to the covert process of overwhelming a server or a computer to deny the real users requests and instead providing fake traffic (Weissmann et al, 2021). The goal for this tool is to create a sense of vulnerability and cause distrust in a targeted institution and potentially to distract from other malicious activities. Finally, disinformation is a method that is highly effective since nowadays social media allows almost instant dissemination of information. The communication channels of social media and internet blogs allow to target both domestic and foreign audiences. Especially for authoritarian regimes, this method can serve as a tool of increasing the target capacity. Additionally, for authoritarian systems, disinformation can be utilized both in domestic and foreign contexts. Internally, it can contribute to limitation of the communication between population and external actors, meanwhile abroad it can build false networks and use unaware individuals for narrative distribution (Weissmann et al, 2021). Therefore, disinformation became a central characteristic of the new hybrid warfare model due to the development of information technologies and change in media perceptions.

Disinformation as a method of influence operations

Disinformation tool is most successful during periods of instability, as it strives to destroy democratic principles, increase societal polarization, undermine trust in governmental institutions, and finally weaken the adversary state. Current geopolitical order causes anxiety among many states, which creates an opportunity for disinformation diffusion. Internet and social media created a new dimension where false narratives can reach massive audiences and unroll without any consequences. Disinformation is often used in a combination with other synonyms constructions like propaganda, misinformation, fake news, false information. As many of these methods of communication evolved within modern democracies, their definitions grew with many implications. Often those concepts are deeply interlinked, but I will attempt to outline what makes disinformation different. Thus, in the next section I will provide a depiction of a definition of disinformation, its methods and goals.

NATO's definition of disinformation is "the deliberate creation and dissemination of false and/or manipulated information with the intent to deceive and/or mislead" (NATO, 2020). Another view on the term was suggested by Bennett as "intentional falsehoods or distortions, often spread as news, to advance political goals such as discrediting opponents, disrupting policy debates, influencing voters, inflaming existing social conflicts, or creating a general backdrop of confusion and informational paralysis" (Bennett, 2021, p.3). However, to extend our comprehension of definition and its correlation to other similar terms, I will use the Murphy framework of three criteria for identifying disinformation (Murphy, 2023). First includes the concealed identity of the originator of the information since if the agent is known, it affects how we perceive the information. Second criteria is the maliciousness of the content, as it must include destructive intentions often for increasing polarization, dismantling credibility of certain institutions or threatening democracy. This is also how disinformation differs from misinformation and propaganda, as propaganda is not necessarily ill-natured and its sources are often traceable for a proof, meanwhile misinformation entails inaccurate information but does not have bad intended nature. While disinformation has a goal of destabilization or polarization, propaganda's objective is power and control. There is also an opinion that disinformation is actually the most effective when disguised as misinformation, so people will spread the narrative unaware of its malignant character (Bokša, 2019). Third criteria for identifying disinformation are predetermined political, military, economic or social objectives (Murphy, 2023). Those three factors together can be used as a guide of identification for disinformation. Nonetheless, hybrid warfare strategy often combines propaganda,

misinformation and disinformation, so strict differentiation between those terms is not necessary for this paper's goal. However, as *dezinformatsiya* played a crucial role in the context of my case study, I will put an emphasis on analysing it.

Methods and goals of disinformation

Although disinformation is not a new concept, the dynamic environment in which it operates constantly changes its implementation. Especially, the follow-up of 2016 elections in the USA brought global attention to the issue of illiberal ways of communication and raised a question of how disinformation campaigns can shape the results of the political changes (Freelon & Wells, 2020). Media manipulation strategy that is being implemented through disinformation narratives has developed a lot in recent years, so in this section I will outline the modern methods and goals those tactics entail.

Murphy determines three categories of using media manipulation against a rival state: the action is led by one country against the other, the attacking state must have an objective (military, social, ideological, etc.) and the attacking country must covertly produce content of disinformation within the state it targets. The strategic tools are social media for producing deep fake videos, messages, pictures; posing as citizens of another nation; target an already fragmented audience and not letting them out of the disinformation bubble; buying bots, trolls and data (Murphy, 2023). From a realist perspective, superpower competition is a zero-sum game, so political paralysis of an adversary state is a way to change the balance of power. Disinformation can help to disbalance targeted society and to increase mistrust between the targeted government and its citizens. The utilization of disinformation often seeks to threaten democratic principles by promoting illiberal discourse that includes populist rhetoric, polarizing language and fake news. This process is gradual, so it will take years to erode the principles of democracy, thus the goal is usually long-term. Polarization can be done politically and socio-demographically and the modern stage of technology allows illiberal speeches to target an already fragmented base (Murphy, 2023).

Rising role of cyberspaces led to the emergence of distinct tools of disinformation spread in online settings. Use of social media became a regular practice in contemporary war efforts. Nissen describes some options of how social media can support military operations. Those include *Targeting* – using social media data for potential search of targets vulnerable to the physical attack by military forces; *Intelligence Collection* – analysing data from social media platforms to identify the information bias of the targeted group; *Cyber Operations* –

include DDoS and doxing attacks, seeks to pull the sensitive information, passwords or expose private files of chat rooms, emails or phone conversations; *Inform and Influence* – dissemination of information to influence a targeted audiences’ perceptions and behaviour. This method can be both overt from the official accounts and websites and covert such as fake accounts and bots (NATO StratCom COE, 2016). Therefore, social media became a platform of non-military support of military operations. Some other mentioned techniques include *spamming* – sending thousands of a similar messages and minimize alternative voices; *saturating of information environment* – use of online blogs and articles posted by opinion leaders or fake accounts, *hijacking of trending hashtags* – especially in X (Twitter); *targeting and distracting the opponent* - distribution of misinformation and rumours, *attacking the target* – blocking content or asking social media platforms to remove it, *deception* — creating “noise” or “informational fog” around a topic in order to distract attention from more strategically important events (NATO StratCom COE, 2016). However, social media can be utilized by more chaotic tools: aggression against other participants, using slurs and offensive language, promoting conspiracy theories, diverting discourse to other problems etc. (NATO StratCom COE, 2016).

To summarize, disinformation is often used in the processes of undermining democratic principles, which makes it an attractive method of hybrid warfare for authoritarian regimes. Due to all the possibilities online media offer, disinformation narratives can be spread momentarily and target wide audiences. They became central in the modern hybrid warfare model since the contemporary consumption of news in information chaos of the internet allows false narratives to be perceived as truthful.

Operationalization of theory

In this chapter I will connect the outlined earlier theoretical assumptions with the empirical analysis of the next chapter. This section will explain how I will bridge my theoretical framework with the context of the case study of this paper - “*How has the Russian disinformation strategy against the USA evolved since the Cold War?*”

Firstly, realist perception of the role and behaviour of superpowers explains the general characteristics of Russia’s approach to foreign policy. As it also allows the usage of non-military tools as an expansion of the state’s power, realist assumptions can explain why Russia is eager to use methods like media manipulation and disinformation to gain influence.

Secondly, neoclassical realism allows us to build a connection between systematic and domestic elements: after 1991 and the collapse of the USSR, a new international system was established with a unipolar hegemony of the USA which are systematic factors, meanwhile Russia's loss of its superpower status and internal instabilities are domestic factors. Combining and examining both components enables us to approach a topic of disinformation strategy with a deeper understanding and greater context. Thirdly, neoclassical realism emphasizes the role of the nation's leadership whose perceptions of history, culture and power often determines the choices regarding foreign policy - in case of Russia, the governing system, leadership's perceptions about Russia's place in the world and its views on the West deeply affect all the choices, specifically in terms of strategic use of disinformation efforts. Lastly, neoclassical realism helps to navigate the evolutionary structure of the case study as tracking the change of domestic dynamics and systematic pressures assists in identifying how exactly disinformation strategy has developed. Specifically, as during the 1990s, Russia's state capacity was relatively low, its interference in foreign states was minimal, but with the gradual gaining of strength it became more and more strategic about implementation of the hybrid warfare techniques in its foreign policy.

Another theoretical focus of the paper is hybrid warfare and disinformation as a method of information influence. Here I will suggest the foundation for implementing these concepts in this case study. Russia's actions in 2014 which included annexation of Crimea and starting the Donbas War, reintroduced hybrid warfare to the general public. Since then, Russia kept using it as a foreign policy tactic – and not only in neighbouring Ukraine but in significantly increased targeted areas including the USA. Later, Russia's hybrid interference will become a usual practice. By looking retrospectively, it can help to track which domestic changes and perceptions of external threats influenced current hybrid warfare strategy. Using disinformation as a point of reference allows us to track historical similarities of the measures taken by the USSR and modern Russia. In a context of both neoclassical realism and hybrid warfare theory, disinformation is a strategic instrument of statecraft whose goals are determined by national interests. It helps states like Russia to participate in asymmetric competition with stronger adversaries such as the USA or NATO. To summarize, the combination of those theoretical assumptions will influence the structure of the analysis and main components I will analyse to answer the research question.

Methodology

Philosophy of science

Philosophical approach of *critical realism* this paper is adopting was introduced by Bhaskar in the 1970s. It suggests that even outside of our perceptions, objective reality exists – “realist” component. However, human understanding of it is subjective due to the factors of our social, cultural and political affiliations – “critical” components. This explanation encourages the researcher to look for hidden mechanisms of observable activities in the objective reality (Maisuria & Banfield, 2023). In terms of the case study of this paper, it suggests that hidden mechanisms are Russia’s domestic changes of national interests in combination with leadership’s perceptions of systemic pressures, while more obvious and apparent phenomena is Russia’s implementation of hybrid warfare strategy in real life events like in Ukraine in 2014 or the USA in 2016. Ontologically, as I previously outlined in the theoretical framework, power struggle between states exists regardless of our opinions about it. Russia’s foreign policy objectives prove its attempts to assert power. Epistemologically, my personal perceptions which are based on the analysed empirical data, reflect my comprehension of the topic according to the context of my research and personal bias. Although disinformation exists in objective reality, I can’t observe it directly, therefore, I will use contextual framework, historical overview and theoretical assumptions to answer the research question. In summary, this philosophical approach of science encouraged me to examine both observable events and hidden mechanisms behind them which contributed to the complexity of my analysis and linked theoretical assumptions to real-life situations.

Research design and methods

Analysis of this paper is based on the longitudinal study of a single case. The choice of this case allows me to track the complex development of Russian domestic changes and how they contributed to the approach of its foreign policy. To determine how disinformation strategy targeting the US appeared, looking at it in retrospect is highly effective as it can help to identify all the stages. By tracing those changes, it will help me to answer the research question with the biggest accuracy possible – even find connections or similarities between different stages. Analysis follows a qualitative method of analysing data from a perspective of critical realism. As to answer the research question with the context of neoclassical realist theory, it’s vital to explore deeper, sometimes hidden developments that influenced the evolution of Russia’s disinformation strategy against the USA. To find recurring themes

throughout all data sources, thematic coding was categorized in relation to geographical position (Russia, near abroad and USA), methods of hybrid warfare (military, non-military, asymmetrical) and ideology framing (both internal and external). Historical and narrative analysis contributed to the complexity of findings. Historical tracing helped to follow the change in the strategy and underlying reasons for it, when narrative analysis helped to examine the construction of strategic storytelling through rhetorical framing.

Data collection

Because of the longitudinal design of the research, methodology for the data collection was dependent on each period of the analysis. By analysing secondary sources, I was able to structure my empirical data through thematic coding which then encouraged me to divide the collected data according to the structure of the analysis – due to its period in time. After identifying main stages of the evolution, I looked into the validating found assumptions by reviewing primary sources. The collection of my secondary sources consisted of books and articles, while my primary sources included official government documents and records, both from the Russian and American side. Additionally, as analysis consists of historical chapters, some historical public and official documents were used including declassified Cold War documents. Thematic coding of documents helped to reveal hidden mechanisms behind the changes in the disinformation strategy of Russia. To ensure validity of the collected data, thematic source triangulation was used. This process included comparing overlapping statements from independent researchers from Russia, the USA and Europe. Moreover, some of the official open documents and reports were used from credible institutions who have clearer assessment of themes and bigger capacity to make conclusions. Those included NATO reports, EU vs. Disinfo databases, publications from the Centre for European Policy Analysis, and NATO's Strategic Communications Centre of Excellence. Some of the online resources were used to identify if the source is reliable, e.g. Credibility Coalition.

However, there were some data limitations I will describe here. Firstly, independent research published in Russia is difficult to track for validity. Incorporating Russian academic perspectives proved challenging due to Russia's censorship of any critical media. However, the solution was found, and some Russian articles were chosen which were analysed through thematic source triangulation to ensure credibility. As Russian opposition is the most active online, some of the investigative journalists' projects were found through social media platforms. Alternatively, publications from Russian perspective were found either from

foreigners who resided there for a while or Russian academics who published their works before the intensified control over media.

Limitations

Biggest limitation of the research design of this paper is difficulty in generalising beyond the specific case. As Russia practically reintroduced the topic of hybrid warfare in the Western academia, the theoretical framework of the issue is almost always built around Russia. But the case of this country remains very unique, hence the founding of this paper may not be applicable to any other region. However, the theoretical framework of how autocratic governments influence other states may have a potential of being implemented. Hybrid warfare strategy is a very broad theme, especially while attempting to track it down retrospectively. That is why disinformation as a main component was chosen – to narrow the research to a realistic scope. Still, by reducing hybrid warfare strategy to only disinformation, it overlooks some other important components. Also, the paper doesn't have an ambition of comparing methods of the Cold War era with modern tools, but sometimes historical parallels are easy to spot on.

Analysis strategy

To answer the research question “*How has the Russian disinformation strategy against the USA evolved since the Cold War?*” The analysis is structured into four parts. First part is a historical overview of the Russian hybrid warfare doctrine where I outline what was the strategy implemented during the Cold War, what methods were used, and which goals were pursued. Then, I provide three sections based on the periodization of the disinformation strategy evolution that Russia has been implementing against the USA after gaining independence in 1991. As I analyse the data from the neoclassical realist perspective and in the context of hybrid warfare doctrine, it is important to approach Russian foreign policy with the understanding of its international interests at the time of each period. The selected stages correspond to the major inner developments that had a substantial impact on the trajectory of Russian foreign policy: first phase from the collapse of the USSR in 1991, second phase from the first election of the president Putin in 2000 and third phase from the annexation of Autonomous Republic of Crimea in 2014.

As neoclassical realism includes systematic pressures and domestic variables as key determinators of a state's foreign policy, each period consists of three components: domestic dynamics, near abroad influence and foreign policy towards the USA. *Domestic dynamics*

explore how internal Russia's development has changed over time, which characteristics were present in each period and how national interests evolved. Moreover, the domestic population of Russia was often the first target of the hybrid warfare tools the Russian state experimented with. By accessing those internal variables, it will help to identify how they impact foreign policy strategy towards the US. Second part is *Blizhneye Zarubezhye* (from Russian "near abroad"), which examines Russian involvement in Central and Eastern European countries, focusing on former Soviet republics. As Russia perceives this area as its natural zone of influence, it seeks to limit American presence and to stop the states from integration with the West. The region became a testing ground for Russian hybrid threats, thus by investigating them, it will assist in identifying how the strategy was adapting similar tools in targeting the US. Lastly, *foreign policy towards the USA* will focus directly on answering the research question.

Each part has an overall structure of firstly identifying the overarching strategic goal of hybrid warfare strategy, then laying down its methods and finishing with narratives that disinformation has spread. By doing so, it will help to track the evolution of the Russian disinformation strategy, find similar patterns and analyse which domestic and systemic pressures triggered them. As the geographical scope of the analysis is large, it is important to set some limitations according to the theoretical framework introduced earlier. As from the neoclassical realist view, I will examine internal developments that led Russia to its foreign policy choices towards near abroad and the USA, as well as systemic pressures of the global order established after 1991 with American hegemony.

Analysis

In this chapter I will analyse the development of Russian disinformation strategy. I will start with providing background context where I outline Soviet-era hybrid warfare. Then, I will dive into three stages of disinformation evolution, which I will investigate through domestic, near abroad and foreign policies. Domestic policy chapters among all three stages seek to describe Russia's internal political and social situation and how domestic challenges shaped Russia's hybrid warfare approach in each respective period. Near abroad and Foreign Policy Chapters aim to outline the overarching goal of hybrid strategy, which methods it used and which narratives it created.

Historical overview: Soviets' methods of hybrid warfare during the Cold War

The Cold War was a period of tensions that started approximately after WW2 and lasted until the collapse of the USSR in 1991. Core aspects of this period included the emergence of the Soviet Union as a hegemony and establishing bipolar global order which led to the ideological conflict between the West and the East. Cold War history included many components, but in the context of my research, the most important development was the extensive use of disinformation and propaganda efforts. To prevent nuclear war that would result in mutual annihilation, both the USA and the USSR avoided direct military confrontation and instead came to the information manipulation tactics. However, as the Soviet Union used those methods more excessively, the American government needed to address the issue and even to create a group to counteract Soviet disinformation narratives - Active Measures Working Group. In 1981 the United States Department of State Bureau of Public Affairs published a report called "Forgery, Disinformation, Political Operations". The paper summarized the so-called "*aktivnye meropriyatiya*" (from Russian "active measures ") USSR was implementing since the beginning of the Cold War with a goal of discreditation of the USA and weakening of American reputation and. In the report, active measures include disinformation, efforts to control media in foreign states, use of Communist parties and front organizations, illegal radio broadcasting, blackmail and political influence operations (U.S. Department of State, 1981). Main feature of those active measures is their covert characteristic – they are undertaken in a secret way, often involving threats and exploitation of individuals and groups. Another important component is that the decisions of the measures taken come from the highest level of authority in the USSR and because the structure of the state is so centralized, it allows it to implement those measures with complete control and usage of government as well as citizens:

“Moscow seeks to disrupt relations between states, discredit opponents of the U.S.S.R., and undermine foreign leaders, institutions, and values” (U.S. Department of State, 1981, p.1).

While talking about specific methods, the report suggests next tactics that can be expected from the Soviets:

- Efforts to manipulate the press in foreign countries – Soviet agents insert false press materials into the media of a foreign country.
- Forgeries – fabricated or altered versions of actual documents created to mislead public opinion and foreign governments.
- Disinformation – usage of distortion of facts, rumors, insinuations to discredit foreign leaders and governments.
- Control of front organizations – entities that appear to be independent but controlled by a state actor (often covertly), Soviet examples are World Peace Council or the World Federation of Democratic Youth.
- Covert radio stations – broadcasting narratives in support of foreign goals of the Soviet Union, example is the National Voice of Iran.
- Economic manipulation.
- Political influence operations – they seek to exploit contacts in target countries to secure collaboration with Moscow.
- Use of academics and journalists – engaging in political activities to represent Kremlin's interests.

Dezinformatsiya (from Russian “disinformation”) became an explicitly effective weapon of active measures during the period of the Cold War since it allowed Soviets to leak the misleading information to the foreign media and present their narratives as enhanced truth that expose nature of capitalism (Boghardt, 2009). The process of spreading disinformation included certain stages: firstly, central Soviet authorities approved strategic ideas for the campaign, then the experts were creating the ideas based on examination of the local press, later after the authorities evaluated the ideas, specialists translated forged documents and targeted outside of Soviet bloc-controlled press, resulting in finally picking the ideas up by the Soviet media and propagation. One of the famous planted stories was the AIDS conspiracy theory (from Russian “*operatsiya infektsiya*” – operation infection) that spread a myth about American military invention of the AIDS virus, that became so famous and effective that in 1992 polls, 15 percent of Americans considered the laboratory nature of the virus truthful (Boghardt, 2009). Another key element of the Soviet disinformation strategy during the Cold War was *refleksivnoye upravleniye* (from Russian “*reflexive control*”). This theory was born from Soviet military doctrine in the early 1960s and was used to convince targeted actors to make decisions despite their own interests by manipulating the informational environment (Kelley, 2024). To achieve that goal, agents of influence (also described as “useful idiots”)

were exploited to insert a direction of Soviet interest through their position as authority in the West. During the Cold War, they were usually spies – often hired by the KGB, for example, the Russian Orthodox Church was largely sponsored by the state and remained loyal to the Kremlin. Thus, KGB used it as a state-controlled tool to spread disinformation narratives like peace offers to judge Western militarism (Pincher, 1985).

Soviet Union disinformation campaigns were not only targeted at the US but also its own population. Construction of the enemy image became a central characteristic of internal disinformation methods. Building on tactics rooted in WWII propaganda, Soviet Cold War disinformation methods regularly portrayed Americans in association with the traditional enemy: the Nazis. Visual media became a main tool for spreading the narratives: in the cinematography, the plot of the movies was related to a somewhat military or detective scenario where American Nazi German conspiracy is revealed by the Soviet citizens. Similarly, for targeting younger audiences, Soviet animation was presenting American masculinity as vulgar, self-assured and morally decadent, when American femininity was presented as materialistic, selfish and lacking spirituality (Wu, 2024). Similar logic was implemented in press and posters production, where the constructed narrative was built around the process of “fascization of the enemy image” (Fedosov, 2017). Fascism here is no longer a specific regime or ideology, but a symbolic category denoting a certain political behaviour that Soviets condemned. Since 1948, not only the foreign and domestic policies of the US, but also the bourgeois culture of Western countries, which, according to Soviet propaganda, was in a state of degradation and served exclusively the interests of imperialism, became the object of incessant criticism. Articles and reports appeared in the media, comparing American policy with the policy of Nazi Germany (Kolesnikova, 2011).

Main disinformation narratives were American aggressive nature, militarism and disagreement with Soviet peace proposals. It correlates with neoclassical realism, where the perceptions of the leadership of the state and their calculations about external threats affect its strategy of communication and internal choices that influence their foreign policy. Soviet usage of “peace” has been reflected in Soviet propaganda toolkit even earlier as in 1922 when Soviet Commissar of Foreign Affairs, Chicherin, presented to the Genoa Conference the first in what would become an endless series of proposals advocating immediate and comprehensive disarmament (Shultz & Godson, 1984). It shows that it has been an established narrative that the US didn't want to agree with Soviet terms thus forcing the USSR to become a “peacemaker” in the international arena. Later, narratives were focused on allegations of NATO and American

belligerence and specifically nuclear policy and participation in the Vietnam War. The narratives were distributed through the hybrid warfare framework with the usage of the information operations aimed to undermine the authority of the West. Closer to the end of the Cold War, narratives were covering broader audiences (Shultz & Godson, 1984).

To summarize, understanding of this historical period is important because the leadership that would eventually shape Russian foreign policy in modern Russia brought their perceptions from this Cold-War period. Disinformation was one of the main components of Soviet foreign policy. In popular culture, the USSR portrayed America as a decadent and militant state, associating its image with the biggest evil from the Soviet perspective – fascism. This reflects how hybrid methods were implemented by the USSR to shape domestic and international perceptions about the USA, and from the neoclassical realistic point of view this proves how combination of systematic pressures (superpowers rivalry) and internal state dynamics (Soviet elites view on the West) guided the conduct of foreign policy and disinformation strategies.

Stage one: The Foundations of Russian Hybrid Strategy (1991-2000)

Domestic Dynamics

Period of the 1990s became a pivotal change for the development of the Russian state and society. Losing its status as a superpower, reviving the newly established independence and navigating the change from the communist past to a new capitalist reality was a challenge. Societal development of the state became a responsibility of the newly elected president Yeltsin. I could identify three important domestic developments that contributed to Russia's foreign policy and its information warfare strategy in the period from 1991 to 2000: first is Yeltsin's consolidation of power, second is the rise of oligarchy and third is a search for national identity.

To begin with, Boris Yeltsin became the first president of post-Soviet Russia. His consolidation of power was followed by the opposition from the old Soviet elites and rise of oligarchs who quickly gained their assets in the chaos of the privatization process of the 1990s. Initial hope for a Russian leader was to lead the “second Russian revolution” which would transform the state into a new liberal democracy with a strong economy and national unification (Sherr, 2013). Old elites and new leaders didn't share the vision of the future of the Russian state: Yeltsin pushed for rapid market reforms and growing the role of the presidential power,

while the parliament opposed those changes, ultimately leading to his decision to dissolve it. Obviously, the legislature condemned his actions and appointed a new position of a president to Rutskoy who at the time was Vice President. Tensions were getting higher as none of the sides would back up followed by the demonstrator's uprising supporting either side. After the parliament barricaded itself in the White House, Yeltsin resolved the issue by ordering the military troops to storm the building. Clashes with gathered outside protesters led to the death and injuries of hundreds of people and ended with Yeltsin's centralization of authority and controversial changes to the constitution which now maximized the presidential power and minimized the responsibilities of the parliament (Sherr, 2013).

As a result of 1993, Russian separation of power gradually became more and more blurred which inevitably led to war in Chechnya. The country still was experiencing turbulent times, and Yeltsin could not blame the parliament anymore, so he decided to use Chechen rebels as an actor to blame. Some would say the operation was a disaster where Russian forces were revealed as not methodological, cruel and violent. The relatively free Russian media was covering the war and exposing events like the Samashki massacre when Russian forces committed the mass murder of Chechen civilians in 1995, which led to the decline of Yeltsin's popularity during his 1996 election campaign (Satter, 2016). Yeltsin's view of politics and a goal of keeping the authority as long as possible was an important element of the domestic variable, as according to neoclassical realism, shaped Russia's foreign policy course. His actions of using military power as a method of consolidating the population became a tool that next elected president Putin used not only inside Russia but in the near abroad.

Moreover, the weakness of the state apparatus led to the emergence of a second important domestic variable - the rise of oligarchy. Satter describes three factors that contributed to the establishment of the oligarchy advance: firstly, while hyperinflation left millions of average Russians in poverty, when those who were well-connected found ways of getting wealth; secondly, the process of privatization brought an opportunity for the oligarchs to grab cheap states assets; and thirdly, the lawless decimalized environment led to the rise of organized crime in which oligarchs were able to build their fortunes. By 1996, oligarchs became an acknowledged part of the Russian system since they sufficiently helped Yeltsin's re-election (Satter, 2016). The system where a small group of people owned the biggest Russian companies led to the dynamic where the state would depend on their political and financial support. This development correlates with the neoclassical realist perspective on the national elites' interests. Combination of the weak presidency of Yeltsin and gradual rise of oligarchs'

influence shaped the foreign policy according to the interests of a small group of the nation's leaders rather than in correlation to the public needs.

Those processes allowed a third dynamic to unfold - a search for a new national identity and a new system of a state. Yeltsin's drive for power reflected the actions that he took in a new state building: he consolidated power in his hands, started war in Chechnya, allowed the criminalized economy to rise and contributed to the development of the authoritarian political system. These new developments brought Russia to serve the interests of few, meanwhile Yeltsin couldn't provide the unified national idea for everyone else (Michlin-Shapir, 2021). Absence of a new identity led to the feeling of loss of the previous glory caused by the dissemination of the USSR which swayed Russia's global status as a superpower. Meanwhile other newly independent states gained more national self-identification and confidence, moreover, ethnic nationalism accumulated even in the territory of Russia, as Chechnya is a prime example. Those changes were dangerous for the Russian elite that still wanted to keep regional hegemony and strong centralized power – a dynamic that correlates with neoclassical realism, where the elites care more for a survival of the regime than a state (Michlin-Shapir, 2021).

Many hopes were put on Yeltsin's role in the period of the 1990s. Russian integration in the new global order under the USA hegemony was expected to happen through the processes of liberalization and democratization. Unfortunately, Yeltsin wasn't able to help Russia on its way to democratization, he concentrated on a change in economic structures to build a democracy and later his only goal was to withhold his power as long as possible (Satter, 2016). Over time, when economic reforms lost their influence, new actors entered the political arena; actors that later became arguably the most important component of Russian domestic and foreign policy – *siloviki* (from Russian *sila* is “force” or “power”). As a result, the period of Yeltsin's rule failed in developing a new liberal democracy in Russia and instead brought more authoritarian development that the next president Putin consolidated and incorporated. Those internal factors shaped Russian response to the systemic pressures and later would be a key element of the foreign policy response. Instead of liberal democracy as a system of the state, Russia developed what Sherr describes as “a growing nexus between politics, business and crime” (Sherr, 2013).

Near Abroad Influence

As the post-Soviet transition was the biggest domestic challenge to tackle, the Russian state's focus was not on the foreign policy at the period until 2000. However, hybrid warfare strategy was beginning to develop in the near abroad - fifteen states that were established after the fall of the Soviet Union: Armenia, Azerbaijan, Belarus, Estonia, Georgia, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Latvia, Lithuania, Moldova, Russia, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, Ukraine, and Uzbekistan. Russia didn't oppose the developments of sovereignty and independence in those states; however, it counted it as a natural zone of influence thus it started to implement hybrid methods early on although without the coherent strategy. The overarching goal was to keep the connection between post-Soviet states to Russia where it would become a regional hegemony (Gel'man, 2023). Some of the main methods that were actively implemented were military presence, support of the frozen conflicts, political influence campaigns and disinformation. This is relevant to the research question, as it showcases how Russian hybrid warfare strategy was shaped from the early stages, and how it prevented some of the states from potential integration with the West. The overarching goal of influencing the near abroad in this period was dictated by those domestic developments I outlined earlier. Because of the political chaos, economic poverty and absence of self-identification, Russian leadership under Yeltsin expanded similar praxis in the region. Thus, three most notable methods of the hybrid warfare strategy in near abroad policy were utilization of unresolved conflicts, reinforcing authoritarian practices and disinformation dissemination.

First method in the 1990s was Russian preservation of the frozen conflicts in neighbouring states. Besides being involved in domestic military operations such as the First Chechen war, Russian strategy sought to contribute to the neighbouring conflicts in a hope to establish military presence and centres of power to use it as a leverage in the future. As the dissolution of the Soviet Union brought more nationalistic moods in several regions, it created an opportunity for Russian leadership to exploit those instabilities. In line with realist theory and the state's pursuit of power, Russia's contribution to territorial disputes aimed to maintain prolonged disorder, thus exercising influence. Russian intervention was apparent in Nagorno-Karabakh, Abkhazia and South Ossetia and Transnistria:

- Nagorno-Karabakh was a conflict between Armenia and Azerbaijan that eventually escalated into a war in 1992-1994 where the Russian role was to keep the territories under a controllable level of instability. The unresolved status of the

territorial dispute provided an opportunity for influencing both Armenia and Azerbaijan and creating a strong dependence on Russian military and financial aid in the Nagorno-Karabakh region (Nilsson, 2024).

- Abkhazia and South Ossetia were autonomies within the Georgian Republic during the USSR period, but after the dissolution of the Union, the rise of the nationalist movement developed into the movement of the separation from Georgia. The situation escalated into civil war in 1991-1992 and eventually Abkhazia and South Ossetia became self-proclaimed entities with their own government, unrecognised by the international community but supported by Russian military, economic and political backing. Russia initially supported separatist movement in the 1990s and later took control over peace negotiations in the region allowing it to have a military presence (Nilsson, 2024).
- Transnistria (territory on a border between Moldova and Ukraine) had similar history - local authorities proclaimed independence during Soviet Times in 1990; after Moldova gained independence, civil war outbreak with the ceasefire agreement signed in Moscow in 1992 with the establishment of independent entity in Moldova's territory with the Russian military presence (Nilsson, 2024).

Method of supporting separatist movements in neighbouring states was a strategic tool for Russia to maintain influence. By doing so, it maintained an image of those countries being politically unstable and polarized, hoping to prevent them from integration with the West, specifically to NATO as territorial disputes are a big stumbling block. The existence of those regimes that the Kremlin had control over, allowed Russia to continuously pressure local governments and spread disinformation. Hybrid warfare strategy, although underdeveloped, already showed signs of its opportunistic nature - by exploiting societies in the vulnerable moments, it was able to penetrate them from within and expand its power (Nilsson, 2024).

Second method of hybrid warfare was reinforcement of authoritarian practices. As Russia wanted to maintain close ties with post-Soviet states, it used hybrid means that would secure loyalty of other nations' leaders to Russian elites. Early example of this influence was when president of Kazakhstan Nazarbayev dismissed the parliament in 1993 and 1994, changed the presidential constitutional rights that prolonged his term and increased his influence; he then served as a president until 2019. In a similar way, president of Belarus Lukashenko extended the role of his presidential capacities in the 1996 constitution referendum which consequently led to the disbanding of the parliament; he remains first and only president of

Belarus until now. These two examples signalize the early involvement of Russian hybrid influence in the post-Soviet region (Gel'man, 2023). By supporting authoritarian-leaning regimes, the Kremlin ensured the existence of loyal leadership that would assist Moscow's interests. Established in the 1990s connections would continuously contribute to the realization of Kremlin's plans, e.g. central Asian presidents would help with promoting pro-Russian presidential candidate Yanukovych in 2004 in Ukraine or Belarusian president Lukashenko would allow Russian military to attack Ukraine from the northern border in 2022. According to neoclassical realism, the decision for authoritarian promotion was brought because of the combination of domestic variables and systemic pressures. Domestic variable was Russian internal perception about the danger of the democratization process of other post-Soviet states that would challenge Russian stability, when systematic pressures were sudden independence of new fifteen states and unipolarity of the global order. Authoritarian loyalty to the Kremlin in neighbouring states served as a stabilizing tool for Russia's foreign policy strategy and internal regime security.

Both involvement in frozen conflicts and support of authoritarian regimes were accompanied by disinformation campaigns. Russia spread certain narratives and myths that would justify Russian foreign policy decisions and inspire elites from other states to act accordingly. Specifically, to explain the violent events of the 1993 political crisis, two narratives were created to target domestic, near abroad and international audiences with a goal of validation of the constitution changes that gave Yeltsin limitless power. First narrative stated that the events were caused by a power struggle between reformers and counter-reformers (parliament) who were representatives of the old leftover institutional system of the Soviet Union, which led to the reformers victory. Second narrative targeted justification of violence as it portrayed Yeltsin's decisions as of a strong leader who is saving the country from the potential civil war. As Malinova writes, first narrative wasn't accurate since the competitiveness of the parliament was not possible during the Soviet times due to the single party rule, so the parliament didn't only consist of old elites; moreover, political groups inside the parliament were reform-minded but disagreed with Yeltsin's methods of their implementation and opposed his striving for power. The second narrative was inaccurate because the risk of the civil war was rather triggered by Yeltsin's disproportionate use of force compared to the attack aligned with parliament militant groups a day before (Malinova, 2021).

Created myths were half-truths aimed to shape public opinion with a goal of strengthening the image of the president and legitimizing the new constitution. The myths

contributed to the preexisting desire for the “strong hand” that was leading Russian society before (Sidorov, 2022). Already then, the potential for Russian authoritarian development was secured as the new constitution declared Yeltsin’s legacy as a winner of the 1993 political crisis and established his overwhelming rights as a president with simultaneously reduced power of the parliament (Sidorov, 2022). Dissemination of those narratives through oligarch-controlled media outlets, Yeltsin’s approach to the 1993 political crisis, along with the idea of decreasing the power of parliament - that was an obstacle to the overarching power of the leader - was attractive. Thus, it convinced other leaders such as in Kazakhstan or Belarus that those actions were possible. It shows that Russian hybrid influence was operating not only through direct confrontation or coercion but also with more covert tactics such as spreading of the authoritarian governance model that would be loyal to Russian interests or helping to support those political elites who would act in support of the Russian national interests.

In the 1990s disinformation narratives also targeted the population in Russia. Although state propaganda wasn’t centralized yet, information chaos was present due to the constant battles between oligarchs who became owners of most media outlets and TV stations in Russia. Yeltsin used some of those oligarchs’ support, especially during his election campaign in 1996. Crucial features of Russian society were built during that time: rise of criminal oligarchy, an authoritarian political system and moral degradation caused by poverty and anxiety made the development of the civil society slow and vulnerable towards the disinformation. As mentioned earlier, ethnic groups in the peripheries of the post USSR began the process of national self-identification that was portrayed in Russian media as dangerous and militant (Michlin-Shapir, 2021). Sidorov argues that many prejudices and bias Russians formed about Chechens and anyone from the Caucasus Mountain region were exploited to justify the violence in the First and Second Chechen Wars (Sidorov, 2022). Dangers of nationalistic movements in other post-Soviet states became a main component of the disinformation strategy Russian leadership started to implement towards its own population. It also helped justify the need for a strong leader who would protect Russian society from these threats and legitimize authoritarian methods of governance.

Foreign Policy Towards the US

After 1991, the Cold War was over, and a new unipolar international system led by the USA was established. This period can be described as full of hope for a better future with the new states accepting the suggested Washington order. From the American perspective, the

result of the Cold War was beneficial as the USA left as a winner - wealthy and influential superpower. However, new challenges appeared including the Gulf War, Bosnian War, rise of Al-Qaeda, and new ways of terrorist attacks that swept the US in the late 1990s (Abrams, 2016). Those threats changed the priorities of the USA and diverted its attention from the East, meanwhile, new capitalist Russia emerged with problematic developments in a way.

Russian internal developments together with its hybrid influence in the near abroad formulated a special way of how Russian elites viewed the United States and its Western influence. “West” as a concept gained its political affiliation during the Cold War, as an opposition to the “East” as before the definition was rather cultural (Sherr, 2013). The Growing Soviet threat after 1945 encouraged the US to get involved in the European security system. Thus, many would expect that after the fall of the Berlin wall in 1989 and the USSR’s dissolution in 1991, the differences between the West and the East would disappear. Instead, it gradually re-emerged, since Yeltsin’s policy didn’t contribute to the proper development of democratic and liberal institutions, quite the contrary, turned the Russian course towards authoritarianism (Sherr, 2013). Mindset in Western democracies was built around collective decision-making while simultaneously keeping the national interests as a core. The hope was that newly emerged Russia would move in this direction. However, the rise of oligarchy, violent suppression of the 1993 political crisis, constitutional changes, involvement in the First Chechen War, military support to the separatist groups in Moldova, Georgia, Armenia and Azerbaijan brought doubts about the success of the “second Russian revolution” (Sherr, 2013).

In 1992, two years before NATO raised the question of enlargement, Russian new military doctrine was built without calling any official names. Nevertheless, it was obvious that the defensive strategy was built around the threat from the USA and NATO. Russian foreign policy aimed to get a closer connection to NATO, meanwhile NATO had more gradual changes in strategy, so Russian expectations turned in a condition. Yeltsin’s 1993 appeal to get the UN and other leading states to allow Russia to have special power as a peacemaker on the territory of the former USSR was not met. Western reluctance to allow Russia to do so was rooted into the suspicion that Russian ambition is not the establishment of stability but projecting influence and consequently securing the means of destabilization, like events in Moldova or Georgia have shown. Nevertheless, Yeltsin demanded that the Federal Counterintelligence Service (later FSB) have the right for conducting intelligence operations abroad which in 1995 was preserved in a law (Sherr, 2013). However, Russia didn’t use those hybrid warfare operations against the USA during this period. Since the breakup of the USSR brought many new

obstacles to the formulation of a new Russian state, it had a different focus. Nevertheless, some efforts to apply foreign policy pressure were initiated, specifically political manoeuvring in 1994 and foundation for the future disinformation narrative about American expansion politics in 1999.

Russian political elites wanted American recognition as a regional hegemony in the post-Soviet sphere. Instead, the USA gave a powerful voice to Poland, Baltic States and other Eastern European actors that felt threatened by Russia. In 1994, after the unsuccessful attempt of Yeltsin to integrate Russia into NATO, he ordered his military to restore order in the region of Chechnya in hope of creating an image of a strong authority. However, this move, and use of force only reinforced the stereotype of Russia being unpredictable. NATO's bombing of Yugoslavia in 1999 led to even bigger discontent from the Russian side. It caused Russian elites but also the public to perceive America as one that imposed its will on those who didn't belong to the Western alliance and monopolized the use of force (Goldgeier & Itzkowitz Shiffrinson, 2023). Those two events signalled to Moscow that the promise of being included in the European security zone had been broken. In result, failed transition to democracy in Russia and American insincere politics towards the Russian elite both led to the clash between the states that worsened over time. In this period, the relations between them remained unpredictable, marked by alternating periods of tensions and cooperation. Countries kept their stereotypes about one another, Russia proving its unpredictable nature and military aspirations in 1993 political crisis and First Chechen War in 1994, while the USA got involved in the Yugoslav War in 1999 despite Russian protest.

In conclusion, during the period from 1991 to 2000 Russian hybrid warfare strategy against the USA is underdeveloped as the state's priority was to survive and establish stable economy and political system. However, hybrid threats, including use of disinformation narratives, was actively implemented in near abroad policy. It correlates with the neoclassical realism since domestic factors like Yeltsin's ambition of power control, rise of oligarchy elites and absence of the national idea together with systemic pressure of losing its superpower status and growing strength of the unipolar hegemony of the USA, determined Russian foreign policy – it aimed to reestablish lost after 1991 influence over the post-Soviet states. Techniques that Russia used in domestic and near abroad disinformation strategy served as a testing ground that later expanded towards the USA.

Stage two: Evolving Hybrid Strategies under Putin (2000-2013)

Domestic Dynamics

The end of Yeltsin's presidential term came with an unexpected set of events - in 1999 four apartment blocks were blown up in Moscow, Buynaksk, and Volgodonsk. All the previous anxieties of the population disappeared when more than 500 people were killed and more than 1000 were injured as a result of the attacks. The Russian official's assessment concludes a Chechen involvement; however, no evidence was ever presented to support this claim (Satter, 2016). In any case, Russia was already engaged in a war in Chechnya since 1994, actively fighting insurgents in Dagestan, and was in urgent need of a scapegoat to avoid domestic criticism and unify public opinion. Built on the previous bias, most Russians considered the bombings a war waged by Chechen terrorists. The shock after the bombings was a perfect environment for a strong leader to step up and fight the injustice while avenging the murders of the innocent Russian victims. Many opinions were voiced about the truth behind the terrorist attacks. Satter writes:

“The mystery of who bombed the apartment houses in 1999 has never been solved. To the extent that there is evidence as to the perpetrators, it points not to Chechen terrorists but to the Kremlin leadership and the FSB” (Satter, 2016, p.2).

Towards the end of Yeltsin's presidency, his declining health negatively affected his popularity, thus with his encouragement, a new presidential candidate Putin came to power. His stance on an issue and bravery of fighting the terrorists by waging Second Chechen War helped him to gain population support and in 2000 he was officially elected as the second president of post-Soviet Russia. With a quick change with prime minister Medvedev from 2008 to 2012, he continued his long way as a national leader until now. He was capable of uniting the population under the premise of his strong leadership that would help the country to recover from the poverty and anxiety of the 1990s. Putin's domestic policy was built on the foundation that Yeltsin laid in his term, however with some important changes. I will describe which elements of the inner politics changed, how they altered foreign policy and developed hybrid strategy. This periodization I will divide into two stages: before and after the 2008 financial crisis, as some important shifts have happened. I then will analyse each period's domestic changes and outline the disinformation strategy in the end.

Period before 2008

First period was described as a “golden decade” since it was the biggest and longest prosperous development of Russia in its post-Soviet history. Status of Russia in the world has increased, growing financial capabilities and growing role in the global economy led Russia to the status of an energy superpower (Dutkiewicz et al, 2016). In relation to the research question, domestic variables in this period altered not only Russian perception of the West but also introduced a more coordinated state-controlled disinformation strategy. I could identify three significant domestic changes: Putin’s return of the strong state apparatus, consolidation of the national idea and gradual restriction of free media.

To start with, in his first term as a president, Putin consolidated power in the context of appointing his network to the positions of big influence. The system was built on *siloviki* I have mentioned earlier, meaning security elites. Gradual rise of *siloviki* became an important feature of Putin’s Russia. Former or current representatives of force institutions like Federal Security Department (KGB successor), Ministry of Defence, Foreign Intelligence Service, Main Intelligence Directorate (successor of GRU) and other “power guys” could be found not only in the law-enforcement institutions but also in the ministries of culture, economy, transport etc. Trusted people of Putin have occupied all spheres of Russian society. As Kryshtanovskaya wrote in 2006, almost 80 % of Russian elite leaders had some connections with security services, which led to the creation of the “neo-KGB state” (Abrams, 2016, p. 17). By 2008, more than 30% of the ruling elite were *siloviki* who were loyal both to Putin and the regime. It’s during his first term the core of *siloviki* was already formed including Lavrov (currently Minister of Foreign Affairs), Shoygu (Minister of Defence of Russia from 2012 to 2024), Naryshkin (currently director of the Foreign Intelligence Service), Sechin (currently CEO and president of Rosneft), Patrushev (secretary of the Security Council of Russia from 2008 to 2024) and others. *Siloviki* as former servants of the military and security services during the Soviet Times, were raised on anti-Western narratives, thus they brought this perception to the core of the foreign policy of Putin who never hid his KGB past, and on the contrary used it for his advantage (Shekhovtsov, 2018). Their influence wasn’t as prominent until 2004 since the Russian economic integration with the West offered many opportunities to the Russian elites, but after the Orange Revolution in Ukraine in 2004, their views shaped the decision-making regarding foreign policy. Thus, in relation to neoclassical realism, Putin consolidated elite rule even further than it was before, creating a scheme where elites would stir the country’s direction

both internally and externally. They also came to the implementation of more sophisticated hybrid methods I will describe later.

Second domestic change was the consolidation of the national idea. Putin, unlike Yeltsin, had a better understanding of a necessity to unite his population with a national ideology. He aimed to reconnect the Russian modern state with its Soviet legacy. One of displays of it was the introduction of a new version of the national anthem – returning to the Soviet Union’s hymn with changed lyrics in 2000. Later, together with the anthem, a new national emblem and three-colour national flag were adopted into law. These symbols represented imperial and post-Soviet Russian history that Putin was proud of. By reconnecting Russians with their past, he restored the sense of self-identity and security, making them appreciative of Soviet history and Soviet victory in the WW2 (Michlin-Shapir, 2021). Russian economic rise, its ability to stand up to the USA and military victories in Chechnya brought a sense of confidence to the common Russians, meanwhile the feelings of loss and inferiority, poverty and uncertainty of the 1990s went away. All those factors contributed to the unification of national pride and identity. Putin’s gain even more popularity since he was perceived as the one that helped Russia to rise and regain the status of a superpower. He was able to consolidate all segments of the population: liberals got market growth and integration into the global economy, patriots and nationalists got the restored imperial ambitions, communists got the Soviet-era symbols back (Dutkiewicz et al, 2016). From a neoclassical realist perspective, this illustrates how domestic dynamics influence foreign policy strategy, as it was vital for Putin to unite various segments of populations under his rule to maintain elitist privileges and gain national support for the assertive foreign policy. Public opinions were formed in a certain way: after a troublesome period of the 1990s under the weak presidency of Yeltsin, Putin became a national leader who managed to provide stability; he became a figure not only political but societal and national who could handle any challenge (Dutkiewicz et al, 2016). Thus, with the support from the population, Russian leadership was capable of implementing new hybrid methods of disinformation abroad.

Third important internal characteristic became media freedom oppression. Gradually, the vast majority of media outlets became consolidated under the Kremlin's agenda, where the only platform that stayed relatively free was the internet. Putin took the power from the oligarchs who owned most media outlets in the 1990s and returned it to the state, starting the process of de-politicization of the press. Yeltsin’s era of media was described as a power battle between oligarchs who used their media assets against each other while Yeltsin was dependent

on their help. Putin's era brought a change as he saw a state as a core of a national identity where mass media played the biggest role. Specifically, TV channels assisted Putin in his rise to power, so he quickly seized control over them (Slavtcheva-Petkova, 2018). During Putin's first presidential term, he created a system of control where the government appeared to be a democratic state, but its institutions only imitated the functions of a real democracy. Mass media control became an important point of the establishment of this dynamic. Gusinsky, who owned critical channel NTV and Berezovsky who owned ORT (later "Channel One" – the biggest propagandistic state channel) were crushed by Putin for their disloyalty. Step by Step Putin has established a regime where a state would oversee the majority of the mass media channels. He sent a message to the oligarchs – you can keep your assets as a reward for your loyalty to the regime, moreover if you are loyal – there is no limit on your wealth (Shekhovtsov, 2018). Later, he would use this wealth for financing different strategic projects such as Russkiy Mir Foundation in 2007 (Slavtcheva-Petkova, 2018).

Free journalism was also under attack; criticism of the regime would put your life in danger. Scandalous story happened in 2006 when Russian journalist and Putin's critic Anna Politkovskaya was murdered. She was known for openly criticizing Putin for his autocratic tendencies and criminal leadership, but international attention was brought to her for the reporting on the two Chechen Wars where she revealed the cruelty of Russian military methods and their terrorizing of innocent civilians. The International Federation of Journalists published a report declaring that the death of Politkovskaya contributed to the Russian reputation as one of the deadliest countries for journalists (International Federation of Journalists, 2009). Report published in 2006 by the Committee to Protect Journalists ranked Russia "as the third most deadly country in the world: over the previous 13 years 47 journalists had been killed for their work there" (International Federation of Journalists, 2009, p.3). During the period until 2009, Putin made sure to take any chance from the opposition to gain voice (Dutkiewicz et al, 2016).

Period after 2008

Main domestic developments I could identify during this period were further consolidation of power under Putin and opposition repression. To start with, the 2008 global economic crisis brought an abrupt end to the golden era. The crisis lasted until 2012 and revealed that the old model for stability and growth was not working anymore. In 2008 President Medvedev was appointed as the legal term of Putin came to an end. Medvedev sought a solution for fixing instability in the West. He aimed to restore security by implementation of education, army and police reforms and by fighting corruption and

allowing political liberalization (Dutkiewicz et al, 2016). Government was forced to search for new methods for development and failure of most reforms weakened the image of the leadership. In the end of his term Medvedev didn't run for the second time and instead became a head of *Vserossiyskaya politicheskaya partiya "Yedinaya Rossiya"* (from Russian - United Russia party) – the one whose overwhelming power he tried to limit before. The party played the central role in the political system of Russia and Putin's support as it held its position as the ruling party that held a majority of seats in the State Duma and legitimized any Putin's decisions.

Meanwhile, nationalistic moods, that were previously condemned by the Russian elites and characterized only the periphery of the Russian state neighbourhood, are now getting popular in the Russian centre as well - nationalist rallies became regular in Moscow. Xenophobic narratives against Chechens and Caucasians that the state exploited before now backfired into mass protests triggered by the case of murder of Russian football fan by Dagestani nationals in 2010 (Dutkiewicz et al, 2016). Nationalist march led to the broader demonstrations against the fraudulent election result to the State Duma a year later in and continued until presidential elections in 2012. The authorities then used some of the hybrid methods to suppress the opposition. Those tactics were a combination of media manipulation and polarizing opposition. By manipulation media, Russian leadership was able to disorient and divide the opposition. It created controversies and exploited vulnerable topics such as LGBT-rights, religious beliefs and nationalistic disagreements, which diverged attention from the real goal which was overthrowing Russian corrupted political scheme. This hybrid method of polarizing and distracting targeted audience will be applied in foreign policy later. From a neoclassical realist point of view, Kremlin's use of these divisive measures can be explained as elite struggle for power – they want the regime to survive disregarding the national concerns, similar as in the previous period under Yeltsin, it is vital for them to control the opposition to project their perceptions onwards. As a result, disoriented opposition withdrew, protests didn't succeed, and Putin was reelected for his third term in 2012.

Disinformation narratives

Successful consolidation of power despite the financial crisis of 2008 and suppression of the opposition despite the mass protests in 2011-2012 was possible because of the strong disinformation strategy the Kremlin started adopting in its domestic policy. Population was still afraid of the return of the 1990s days of instability and uncertainty and believed that only the strong hand of the national leader would help Russia survive. Putin used that fear to create

a certain image about him for the goal of gaining support. Narratives that were created in this period became a pillar for future justifications of Russian actions abroad. Those narratives emphasized national identity and military power, anti-West and anti-Caucasus segments and conservatism.

The first narrative was based on a new national ideology that was based on nationalism and connection to the previous status as a superpower. Although the leadership was previously criticizing nationalistic movements in other post-Soviet states, in the case of Russia, nationalism was justified due to the special role of Russia as a peacekeeper of the region. Following the logic of neoclassical realism, leadership's perceptions of a state's relative power in the world dictates the foreign policy choices. Accordingly, the more relative power Russia has gained during the golden decade the more ambitions it has grown in its position in the international setting. Consolidating the population under the governing control would enable its policy in the best way possible. So, a new national idea became wrapped around military power as a core of the national identity, the Russian role of a peacekeeper in resisting adversaries. As military intervention in Chechnya really helped Putin in the beginning of his presidential career, he exploited that idea further. By creating an image of an enemy (anyone who is in a disagreement with the regime) as cruel and unpredictable, it served as a national consolidation of the population who trusted their leadership to deal with foes (Michlin-Shapir, 2021).

This is where the second narrative appeared - Anti-Western and anti-Caucasian segments were pillars of Putin's initial campaign; however, it wasn't just Putin's imposition - he rather used the existing anxieties of the society. Rhetorics about NATO's bombing of Yugoslavia in 1999 and alleged Chechen attacks made the military power appeal already popular, Putin just secured national ideology. Sidorov argues that the reasoning behind the absence of mass protests against the Chechen wars are due to the Kremlin's constant justification of the usage of the military to protect its inner national interests. Military promises to be strong and not to fall into peace negotiations without achieving the goals first, constantly and systematically destroying civilian villages and towns, both inside Russia and abroad. Despite the waves of refugees from Chechnya and exposure of civilian casualties, none of the major Russian politicians condemned the events as well as the Russian population didn't oppose it. Another narrative of defending the war in Chechnya is the comparison to the NATO's actions in Kosovo, however, as Sidorov writes, as the world discovers the methods of the Russian warfare, this comparison is not legitimate (Sidorov, 2022).

The last narrative was built in addition to the national idea of military power and anti-Western statements. Any criticism of the government of Putin himself was declared as an anti-Russian agenda. During 2011-2012 opposition protests were described by a regime as pro-American agents who were working against Russian national interests (Shekhovtsov, 2018). As a result of the unsuccessful protests, opposition was demoralized and came back to the internet, emigrated or withdrew from politics. Since the elections were won, Putin's strategy transformed into playing in conservative political unity. It made the polarization between the liberal minority and conservative majority even worse (Dutkiewicz et al, 2016). Patriotism became a new important part of national ideology with respect for transitional values and institutions. Norms such as homeland, traditional family, army, Russian language and Orthodox Church became an opposition to the Western multiculturalism, LGBTQ+ rights and feminism (Dutkiewicz et al, 2016). This narrative was important both internally and externally. In domestic perspective, conservatism helped to validate the importance of a strong central state:

“He asked the Russian people to give up some of their freedoms and unite behind him so that he could stabilize Russia and lead it to success”

(Michlin-Shapir, 2021, p. 92)

It also served as evidence for ordinary Russians that the state wasn't isolated, that Russia in reverse became a center of the conservatism that attracted European and American political parties and leaders. Appeal of Russian conservatism was indeed reaching some audience abroad. As an example, “Conservative Friends of Russia” was an initiative established in 2012 and included members of a Conservative Party of the UK (Ajir & Vaillant, 2018). However, this feature would evolve considerably in the next phase of disinformation strategy.

Near Abroad Influence

In 2004 major Eastern Enlargement in the EU happened, admitting several post-Soviet and former Eastern Bloc countries - Latvia, Estonia, Lithuania, Poland, Hungary, Slovakia, and the Czech Republic. In the same year, the second wave of post-Cold War enlargement to NATO admitted Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania and Slovakia to the NATO membership, meanwhile Hungary, Poland and Czech Republic have already been members since 1999. Ukraine and

Georgia were moving in this direction as well, marked by 21st NATO Summit statement about future admission of the states to the Alliance. This gradual integration of Eastern and Central European States to the West brought anxiety to Russian leadership. Many scholars identified the significance of the events of 2004 Orange Revolution in Ukraine and 2008 Russo-Georgian War. Russian involvement in those events not only changed future foreign policy approaches but also Russian perception of the United States, which escalated the tensions between two and ultimately led to the adoption of a new hybrid warfare strategy against the US. For this reason, I will examine those two episodes and how they contributed to the development of the Russian disinformation strategy against the USA.

2004 Orange Revolution

Starting with Ukraine, 2004 Orange Revolution was a part of “colour revolutions” which were protest movements across post-Soviet states that attempted to overthrow established authoritarian regimes that were rooted in corruption and fraud. Political trajectory of Ukraine was following almost the same steps as Russia: first Ukrainian president Kuchma allowed the rise of oligarchs during the 1990s who he used for political and financial support, he increased his power capabilities and decrease the role of the parliament, was corrupt and oppressed free media (Åslund, 2009). Thus, the choice of the new president would determine the future of the Ukrainian state development: either it would follow a path of democracy towards the West or into the authoritarian regime Yeltsin and Putin have created in Russia. The obvious presidential candidate Yanukovych, appointed by Kuchma as his successor, - was corrupt, had strong pro-Russian views and in general wasn't a popular figure. He competed against the well-liked leader of opposition candidate Yushchenko.

The Kremlin took many initiatives to influence the elections by using hybrid tactics. One method was the promotion of Yanukovych - Russian propaganda efforts invited Russian political advisers to appear on the Russian and Ukrainian television to support Yanukovych and criticize Yushchenko. Even Putin personally was taking part in the campaign for pro-Russian candidates in his talks and visits, and also by using the Russian Orthodox Church to endorse pro-Russian president's linking to the similar religious affiliations of Ukrainians and Russians (Åslund, 2009). Moreover, on September 5th, the opposition leader Yushchenko was poisoned, resulting in severe facial disfigurement which he, luckily, survived. To this day there is no clear answer who stands behind the attack, but Yushchenko among other Ukrainian officials and experts are sure of the Russian involvement, which the Kremlin didn't admit (Åslund, 2009). However, by that time it became a known hybrid warfare tool used by the

Kremlin to remove political opposition by physical elimination, as I described in the previous chapter, - the murder of Poltkovskaya among other critical journalists is a notable example. Moreover, in 2006 a former Russian spy who became a British citizen Alexander Litvinenko was fatally poisoned which the European Court of Human Rights found Russian responsibility for (BBC, 2021). As American investigative reporter Jason Leopold wrote in 2024:

“Prominent critics of the Kremlin, and Putin in particular, seem to have a terrible habit of dropping dead under very suspicious circumstances. Some fall out of windows, bludgeon themselves to death, are poisoned or are said to have committed suicide in ways that defy logic” (Leopold, 2024).

As expected, Yanukovych won in a fraudulent election which triggered mass protests. Putin, among other Central Asian presidents congratulated Yanukovych, while the Russian State Duma published a resolution with a deep concern for the radical opposition forces forming in Ukraine (Åslund, 2009). Meanwhile, White House of the USA declared support for the re-election on the basis of a fraud which caused various Russian spokespersons to blame American interference in Ukrainian domestic politics. In the end, protests led to the re-elections and win of Yushchenko – opposition leader with pro-Western affiliations (Shekhovtsov, 2018). The Orange Revolution ended successfully which according to Åslund was possible due to a few components including well-organized opposition under the leadership of Yushchenko, independent media’s consolidation of protesters and strong NGOs and student organizations (Åslund, 2009). Positive result of the Revolution disturbed Russian leadership. Longstanding suspicions about Western intervention in what Russia thought was its zone of influence became a key worry for Russian elites. As Putin and his cohort of *siloviki* that came to power in the 2000s never overcame the feeling of loss after the end of the Cold War, westernization of the neighbouring states was perceived as a continuation of decreasing power of Russia (Shekhovtsov, 2018). Apart from the imperialistic connotation that Russians and Ukrainians are the same accidently divided nations, the success of 2004 put a threat to the survival of Putin’s regime. If Russians and Ukrainians are the same, it meant that Russians were capable of following the footsteps and organising themselves into a mass protest that would eventually overthrow the established by Putin’s rule. Moreover, if Ukrainian society was starting the processes of democratization along the Western standard – Russians could do that too, that would lead to the collapse of Putin’s anti-West rhetoric that was gradually becoming a national

idea (Shekhovtsov, 2018). Thus, Russian leadership implemented many initiatives in its domestic policy to disable the components that made the Orange Revolution successful. As they believed it was Western soft power that perpetrated Ukraine among other colour revolutions states, domestic and near abroad policy would gradually become more anti-West and relations between Russia and led to the gradual decline in relations between the USA and Russia.

One of the initiatives to resist the “Orange threat” was creation of a new subdivision called Presidential Directorate for Interregional Relations and Cultural Contacts with Foreign Countries. According to the Russian journalists, the goal of this establishment was to stop the processes of colour revolutions from spreading. The refusal of the Kremlin's acknowledgement of the political affiliation of the neighbouring nations rooted in Russia's desire to control Eastern Europe. The influence over those territories would bring American recognition and would return Russian historical role in global order (Dutkiewicz et al, 2016). In line with neoclassical realism, as the relative power of Russia grew, Russian leadership got more ambitions about its role in the region. Hence, more aspiration in dominating the near abroad brought the adoption of a hybrid warfare strategy – including spread of authoritarian practices, opposition assassinations and use of disinformation.

2008 Russo-Georgian War

In the case of Georgia, it also went through the colour Rose Revolution in 2003 which brought Georgian leader and later president Saakashvili to power. As mentioned in the previous chapter, after the USSR collapse, Georgia's two autonomous entities - Abkhazia and South Ossetia - declared their wish for independence, although without any recognition. Russian interest in Georgian territories was undeniable when new leader Saakashvili aimed to reintegrate territories of Abkhazia and South Ossetia with the backing from the US (Oganjanyan, 2012). Military confrontation happened in 2008 between Georgians, Russians and Ossetians which ended with Russian recognition of those two entities as independent and brought mass destruction, additional territorial loss, human losses and financial crisis to Georgia. The war was the first Russian foreign war after 1991 which led to the Western concerns about Russian ambitions for influence in the region (Oganjanyan, 2012).

The Russian goal in its confrontation with Georgia was to ensure the presence of the Russian military in Georgian territory, consequently disturbing its Western orientation. After the fast win of 2008, Russia emphasized its interest in returning to the sphere of post-Soviet

states as a regional hegemon by using more aggressive means such as military confrontation and hybrid warfare tools (Bzishvili, 2020). Aimed to revive its former power and to become an equal opponent to the US and NATO, Russian leadership utilized foreign policy as a consolidator of the society. As Putin introduced the connection of modern Russia to the past victories of the USSR, he reclaimed the position of Russia according to its historical role. Thus, the goal of restoring the country's glory through the foreign policy became a main objective of the state's national interest (Lange-Ionatamishvili et al, 2021). Consistent with neoclassical realism, this behaviour is a way for the leaders to instrumentalise domestic actors in exercising its foreign policy, as more and more ordinary Russians adapted this ideology internally and were ready to project it outwardly when needed. Constant foreign interventions Russia was conducting abroad didn't necessarily benefit Russian citizens, but played into the elite's goals and perceptions, as their view of the international system is rooted into the fear of American hegemony. Thus, under those systematic pressures, Russian national interest was rooted in disrupting neighbouring countries' integration with the West.

Russian actions in Georgia in 2008 also became significant because the way of conducting the war adopted tools of hybrid warfare for the first time. Russia has used a combination of hybrid methods such as cyberattacks and disinformation operations to support its military actions. It sought to expose Georgia's vulnerability and undermine its national security which in turn encouraged Georgia to strengthen the integration process to the EU and NATO. Hence, from the Russian perspective Georgia became a battleground for confronting the West. To win in this information contest, the hybrid strategy was to control the information inside Georgia but also to justify Russian actions abroad. Methods of information dominance have improved significantly since the wars in Chechnya - this time the Kremlin attempted to get American support through the alleged similarities of how the US treated campaigns in Iraq or Afghanistan with how Russia was dealing with Georgia. To achieve this, the Kremlin crafted and spread strategic disinformation narratives (Bzishvili, 2020). Those narratives included portrayal of Russia as a peacekeeper, claiming Georgian links to terrorism and protection of the Russian oppressed minorities. Message about the Russian peacekeeping mission was framed as a response to the alleged Georgian aggression against the population of South Ossetia. Initial target group for this narrative was Russian speakers near abroad, and later the broader international community. Myth about Georgian terrorist affiliation came from Russian claims of hidden in Georgia Chechen rebels, which Georgian leadership denied, meanwhile American government also reacted strictly negatively to those statements. From this story, an

additional narrative emerged, asserting the need of protecting Russian people and Russian peacekeepers in Abkhazia and South Ossetia who in their allegations were discriminated against by Georgians. Russian spokespersons blamed Georgia for war crimes and aggression, positioning Russia's actions as self-defence (Kerikmäe, et. al, 2010). However, Saakashvili was able to appeal to the West much better and framed his search for help in the context of withstanding Russian imperialistic ambitions. This shaped international perception about the war and showcased that the control over information space and cyberspace is strategically vital (Deibert et al, 2012).

The most important lesson for Russia in the Russo-Georgian War was the loss of the information front which brought international condemnation over Russian actions. Western media interest in the war was undeniable, and Saakashvili used it – he quickly became popular among the press with his fluency in English, strong PR campaign and western education, meanwhile Russian leadership of Medvedev and Putin was reluctant to engage with the Western media (Oganjanyan, 2012). End of the war brought a new perspective – the Kremlin was ready to enhance its methodology of conducting war by adopting new hybrid warfare methods to reinforce new geopolitical reality according to Russian vision.

Foreign Policy Towards the US

The economic integration of Russia into the Western system fostered strong ties with American elites. Putin was convinced that the relations with the West were established according to the Kremlin's preferences, as he believed that the Western values are double faced since they serve as a disguise for acting in the same way that Russia acts (Dutkiewicz et al, 2016).

By turning the blind eye to all the non-democratic, corrupt practices in Russia, as well as assisting Russian ruling elites in laundering money in Europe, Western leaders not only emboldened those who were involved in these practices but also created a very specific image of the West among the ruling Russian elites (Shekhovtsov, 2018, p. 75).

However, NATO's intervention in Yugoslav war Russians saw as a threat which damaged the image of the West and the USA in the eyes of Russian elites and population. More obvious decline in their connection began since the developments in 2004 Ukraine in 2008 and Georgia. As conspiracy theories are often used by authoritarians to create connection between

events for a narrative creation, Orange Revolution in 2004 in Ukraine among other colour revolutions in Georgia (2003), Kyrgyzstan (2005), Belarus (2006), Moldova (2009), and even in Russia (2011-2013) were described as imposed from the West agenda strategy. Russian interpretation of the hybrid warfare was used to describe American imposition in the Russian zone of influence. Russian elites saw the developments of the revolutions as a part of a well-planned and executed strategy of the USA to establish control over the targeted states and turn their direction away from Russia. In case of Russian protests – opposition to the regime was portrayed as a pro-American force that sought to undermine national interests of Russia (Farwell, 2019). 2004 Orange Revolution which partially was successful because of the Western support, specifically from the USA and the EU, was perceived as a breach in the informal agreement between Russia and the USA (Dutkiewicz et al, 2016). The Kremlin was convinced that the Revolution was imposed on Ukraine from the Western agenda. As the Western soft power won in 2004, a new task was to develop a toolkit to oppose American influence (Shekhovtsov, 2018). This stage of the disinformation strategy evolution was attempting to test some of the methods Russia has implemented earlier towards post-Soviet states and domestic population. I could characterize those efforts in the two categories: using vulnerabilities of other states for Russian advantage and creating ideology in opposition to the West.

Opportunistic nature of Russian hybrid warfare strategy

To start with the first category, measures of dealing with the terrorist attacks and conducting war in Chechnya were justified with the US “war on terror” concept, however Russian war with Georgia in 2008 brought different consequences from the international community. Famous 2007 Munich speech of Putin at the 43rd Munich Security Conference criticized the role of the USA in the unipolar system that was established after the end of the Cold War and opposed NATO expansion in the zone that Russia thought was its natural zone of influence. As a result, at the 20th NATO Summit Germany’s Chancellor Merkel, France’s President Sarkozy and UK’s Prime Minister Brown dismissed the offer of the Membership Action Plan in the Alliance to Georgia and Ukraine as it would be a provocation to Russia. However, the statement about potential membership of both countries in the future was made. Using the opportunity, Russia waged a war on Georgia in 2008 occupying the territories of Abkhazia and South Ossetia (Sherr, 2013). Two self-declared republics have been officially recognized by Russia as separate states. For Russian leadership, having a NATO country on its border together with the Black Sea was something they couldn’t allow (McLaughlin, 2020).

From a position of neoclassical realism, authorities' aggressive measures towards Georgia can be explained through the perspective of both systematic pressures and domestic variables. Concern about NATO's expansion contributed to the fear of losing its sphere of influence in the region, which elites view as another breach of informal agreement they had with the West. This external threat served as a distraction where leadership could justify further centralization of power and authoritarianism as a method of defensive foreign policy. This approach echoed similar development from earlier where in a turmoil of instability of the 1990s Russia was able to deploy its military bases in the frozen conflict zones. This proves that the Russian approach is opportunistic and searching for covert asymmetrical methods of conducting war and establishing power during the moments of uncertainty.

So, as a result of the 2004 Orange Revolution and 2008 Russo-Georgian War, Russian leadership's perception of the US changed significantly. The pressure from the hegemony of the USA brought anxieties to the Kremlin, therefore it started developing a new hybrid warfare strategy to challenge the US and avert near abroad states from American influence. From the Russian perspective, information technology was a method that the West has been actively using against Russian interests, specifically in 2004 and 2008. Global information space was seen as a threat to Russian sovereignty - any critical piece of media was identified as biased, pro-American and discriminatory (Ajir & Vaillant, 2018). Russian perception was that Western propaganda efforts contributed to the activities like colour revolutions, Arab Spring and protests in Russia but also targeted traditional values with a goal of weakening Russian status. As Russian relative power still wasn't strong enough to oppose the USA in conventional ways, the asymmetric responses helped it to establish dominance with low cost, high impact tactics such as information dominance methods. Besides disinformation campaigns, those also include lobbying of Western society and state-controlled media outlets diffusion of false narratives among Western societies which I will outline next (Ajir & Vaillant, 2018).

Rise of the asymmetrical methods: anti-American sentiment

In 2013 "Gerasimov Doctrine" became a term many western academics and military experts used to describe Russian hybrid warfare strategy. Some scholars say it has opened a new chapter of the understanding of warfare and given an insight on Russian take on international security, however, others would claim that "doctrine" was simply reinvention of the old Soviet propaganda machine. Nevertheless, Chief of the Russian General Staff Gerasimov's doctrine, first introduced in 2013, provided with the numbers of definitions that West used for narrating the Russian threat and counteracting it. This doctrine sets out that the

tactical application of hybrid warfare is opportunistic. Seeding chaos is the main feature of this doctrine – just like in Soviet military tradition, it seeks to blur the line between war and politics (Polyakova et al, 2021). The Gerasimov doctrine claimed that wars are no longer declared, and non-military methods are a prime example of a new form of warfare. Although the opportunistic nature of hybrid warfare strategy was now fixed in the Russian military doctrine, moments of instabilities don't appear in a vacuum. To exploit those moments as strategically as possible, the Russian preparatory phase is arguably even more crucial - it makes sure that at the critical moment, the affected population is divided, fragmented or demoralized to react effectively. That is why asymmetrical methods of hybrid warfare gradually became so important. Some of those tools were implemented earlier – separatists support in Nagorno-Karabakh, Transnistria, South Ossetia and Abkhazia; cyberattacks on Estonia in 2007 and on Georgia in 2008; political interference – support of authoritarian regimes in Central Asia and Eastern Europe. In this period, tactics against the USA were primarily disinformation campaigns.

In 2007 Russkiy Mir Foundation (from Russian – “Russian World”) was established. It was created to reevaluate the importance of public and cultural diplomacy to Russia's foreign policy. The colour revolutions in Georgia and Ukraine proved to be successful also because of the Russian lack of attractiveness even in the post-Soviet space. The New Foundation's task was to promote Russian culture and language among post-Soviet states specifically (Koval & Tereshchenko, 2023). The concept of the Russian World raised an important question of what is the determinant of belonging to this concept as a community – usually, the main criteria are linguistics and religious affiliation which allowed it to target Russian speaking communities and orthodox Christians. The foundation served as a mechanism of promoting traditional values and with the rising power of Putin became a tool for governmental propaganda disguised as cultural diplomacy efforts (Koval & Tereshchenko, 2023). The Foundation opened Russian centers rapidly and all over the world: in 2008 in Armenia, Tajikistan, Kyrgyzstan, Kazakhstan, Japan, Belgium, USA, Estonia; in 2009 in Bulgaria, Hungary, Latvia, China, North and South Korea, Lithuania, the United Kingdom, Ukraine, Serbia, Mongolia, Poland, Moldova, Israel, Slovakia, Germany, Greece; in 2010 in Cuba, Turkey, the Netherlands, Finland, Vietnam, Montenegro, Italy, etc. The number of Russian centres that were opened until 2013 worldwide was 95 (Annual reports on the activities of the Fund “Russkiy Mir”, 2008-2013). In states that Russia counted in its natural zone of interest centres were promoting closer connections with Russia due to shared historical, linguistic and religious affiliations; in foreign states centres

were improving Russian image, promoting Russian perception of history and justifying Russian presence in its near neighbourhood. Another tool for disinformation diffusion became educational programmes – to impose the common values myth and shared history narrative; linguistic exchange – to spread the usage of language and therefore stop compatriots abroad from integration; support of networking exchanges – to create allies outside of the Western world influence; media outlets – to spread narratives needed for Kremlin among Russian-speakers. Although the activities of the Foundation were initially presented as cultural initiative, they gradually transformed into the tool of Russian disinformation (Koval & Tereshchenko, 2023). Building on neoclassical realist assumptions, utilization of domestic actors is aiming to enable policy deployment abroad. By using academics, scientists and historians, Russian leadership was able to promote needed agenda among targeted groups in more than 95 centres all around the world.

Besides Russkiy Mir Foundation, disinformation narratives were spread through the exchange programs, the appeal to those Western academics who are somehow more vulnerable towards the propaganda of the USSR nostalgia, agents of influence, recruitment of Western scholars and imposing Russophile views on history (Kuzio, 2023). By sustaining the “great victory” myth about Soviet role in WW2 and historical myth about closeness between Eastern European states with Russia, disinformation strategy was able to implement modern history myths about Russian interference in Georgia and Ukraine as a response to NATO’s enlargement (Kuzio, 2023). Another important component of the informational influence campaign was the appeal to conservatism. Rise of the traditional values rhetoric became apparent in the aftermath of the failed Medvedev’s attempts of modernization and sought to unite Russians under the authoritarian rule. Later, it became a method of gaining support from the right-wing parties in the West. Russia positioned itself as a global leader of international conservatism. When the support was gained, Russia turned it towards domestic population and used as a justifying of the global support of current regime:

In other words, for Putin, Europe and the West in general were decadent, plagued by same-sex marriages, moral crisis, failing multiculturalism and disrespect for the rights of the majority, that is the main narratives of the Western far right (Shekhovtsov, 2018, p. 85).

In conclusion, with Putin's rise to power, domestic developments affected national interests that were focusing on patriotic feelings and strong foreign policy abroad. As the period from the 2000s was a significant improvement for Russian political and economic systems since the 1990s, relative power of Russia grew. New leadership with a head of Putin brought Russian historical role back to the agenda, now aimed at restoring previously lost power by influencing the near abroad and challenging unipolar hegemony of the USA. Already losing its influence among post-Soviet states that either integrated to the EU and NATO or were following the westernization direction, Russia started implementing more covert operations. Hybrid warfare strategy was in the developing state, new doctrine of war was introduced, slowly preparing the West for the future of the Russian approach. Georgia in 2008 became a first ground for Russian adaptation of non-military methods to support military force, and it wasn't successful. Georgian affiliations towards the West only grew stronger, meanwhile the international community condemned Russian recognition of independence of Georgian territories. Since then, Russian hybrid tactics needed to be more thoughtful and strategic, as post-Soviet states were desiring further integration with Europe, Russian new strategy was to reinforce its authority in the region and slowly degrade the picture of the US among the regions.

Stage three: Hybrid Warfare as Grand Strategy (2014-2025)

Domestic Dynamics

Beginning of 2014 brought great international attention to Russia – in February 2014 Olympic games were held in Sochi. Hoping to bring the prestigious image of Russia to the world, Russian leadership was aiming to impress international guests:

For President Vladimir Putin, the games have been a matter of pride. He has entrusted the country's top businessmen with Sochi's key projects. He himself is spending increasing amounts of time in the southern Russian city, hosting world leaders at his luxurious presidential palace (Vasilyeva, 2013).

In the previous phase of domestic dynamics, I outlined how strong foreign policy and military victories became the core of a new national ideology for Russians. After the protests of 2011-2012, opposition repression and Putin's return to power for his third presidential term, the issue of decline in public trust appeared. As Yeltsin used the First Chechen War in 1996, as Putin used the Second Chechen War in 1999 and the Russo-Georgian War in 2008,

opportunity for interference appeared again in 2014. Protest rallies in neighbouring Ukraine triggered the impeachment of pro-Russian president Yanukovich who despite the fraudulent scandal of 2004 was elected as a president in 2010 and refused to sign the integration deal with the EU in 2014. Yanukovich fled to Russia, meanwhile in the territory of Ukrainian Autonomous Republic of Crimea mysterious *zelyonye chelovechki* (from Russian – “little green men”) appeared. At first Russia denied its involvement in the arrival of masked men who wore unmarked military uniforms, however later Putin admitted Russian involvement and a referendum under the Russian occupation was held in March and resulted in declared independence of the Republic which later joined Russia. Russia also supported separatist movements in Donetsk and Luhansk, which led to Donbas war. Conflict stayed frozen until 2022 with a full-scale Russian invasion that occupied around 20% of Ukrainian territory as of March 2025 (Deep State UA, 2025).

As the polls showed, Putin’s approving rating became higher in 2014 after the military campaign in Ukraine (Levada Centre, 2014). In 2023 The Kyiv Independent published statistics stating that reportedly up to 800,000 Russians have moved to Crimea since occupation in 2014. Later, in 2022, reportedly almost three quarters of the Russian population supported the war with Ukraine, experiencing positive emotions such as pride and trust (Radio Liberty, 2022). Those results are not surprising when tracing which national ideology the Kremlin has been promoting among the Russian population for years. Russian historical role and previous superpower status, national ideology built of patriotism and military victories, centre of opposition to the US and the West – all those narratives became incorporated in Russian society (Slavtcheva-Petkova, 2018). Previous domestic developments including censorship of the free media, changes to constitution and repression of opposition led to not only acceptance of Russian foreign policy but approval of it. Classic realist concerns that Russia adopted were the fear of unipolar world order led by the US and potential NATO expansion which together with relative power capacity Russia accumulated over the years pushed it to radical resolutions to reestablish its place in the anarchic system of international relations. Internal developments included elitist perceptions of Ukraine’s integration to the West as a threat to Russia, imperialistic affiliations to restore Russian historical legacy and gaining population support that would distract it from domestic problems. Developed since 2013 military doctrine adopted an opportunistic approach to warfare which in combination with the increasing use of asymmetrical tools contributed to the strategic development of a disinformation campaign. The

analysis suggests that since 2014, this strategy has been actively implemented not only in foreign policy towards near abroad but also targeting much wider audiences.

In the domestic context, the main goals for the Kremlin's disinformation remained similar to the previous phase, but more intensified. Further consolidation of Putin's power, complete control over opposition and stronger anti-American and anti-Ukrainian sentiment. Hybrid methods for the achievement of those goals included total repression of the press, demolishing of the opposition leaders and escalation of state control.

To start with press freedom, the situation worsened significantly after the events of 2014. Last independent channels were shut, while main TV channels have been exploited for promoting disinformation narratives to support military actions of Russia. The Kremlin's efforts regarding Ukraine were understood through the context of national pride ideas. That is also when anti-Western segments in Russian media became more and more radicalized because Western leaders and media condemned Russian actions and revealed their illegal nature. Previous Russian security and anti-terrorism laws have now been used to threaten media organizations from coverage of compromising materials, especially about the conflict with Ukraine (Slavtcheva-Petkova, 2018). Since 2002 Russia has been using anti-extremist legislation as a getaway to censorship and state control of the media. It helped to ban and criminalize any historical publications that were not in alliance with the Soviet and state-sponsored agenda. By 2017, more than four thousand publications have been banned, those include any critical books that challenged perspective on a Soviet State and Russian historical narratives (Kuzio, 2023). Moreover, initially implemented in 2012 "Foreign Agents Law" expanded to the new act in 2022. Now "foreign agent" label could get almost any media outlet for the claims of alleged foreign influence. It started targeting civil society, including human rights, non-governmental and nonprofit organizations. Until today Russian authorities use the law to sentence political opposition, prosecute people and use censorship of war law meaning that any criticism of the war started would lead to criminal responsibility. Like that, journalist and activist Maria Ponomarenko was sentenced to six years of imprisonment for sharing a post on social media about the bombing of the Drama Theatre in Mariupol, Ukraine with charges of spreading false information about the Russian military (Amnesty International, 2022).

Unfortunately, the Russian opposition met a similar fate. In 2014, the most prominent leader was Boris Nemtsov who was one of the few Russian politicians that brought attention to Russian war crimes in Donbas War and human rights violations in Crimea. He hoped that

his pro-Ukrainian rhetoric would help to consolidate the Russian liberal minority against the cruel foreign and domestic politics of the Kremlin and consequently attract more people to join the opposition. Moreover, during the 2004 Orange Revolution, he was the only public figure in Russia who fully supported opposition leader Yushchenko (Makarychev & Yatsyk, 2018). Besides that, Nemtsov also tried to mobilize the support from the international leaders, he visited the USA regularly where he talked about Russian aggressive policies towards Ukraine. Nemtsov believed that Ukraine's success would bring more strength to the civil society of Russia and consolidate its fight for democracy. He was killed in February 2015. Zaur Dadayev, a former officer of the Chechen security forces who at the time was serving in a unit under the control of Ramzan Kadyrov, the Head of the Chechen Republic, was found guilty of carrying out the fatal shooting together with four other individuals of Chechen origin who were convicted accomplices (Osborn & Reiter, 2017).

Military success of the Second Chechen War of 1999-2000 resulted in the creation of another authoritarian regime loyal to Putin led by the Kadyrov family. By destroying the opposition in Chechen Republic and bringing authoritarian loyalists to rule, the Russian elite established a secure elite partner that would overlook the interests of its people but would put a priority for their and the Kremlin's interests. In 2024 Russian journalists Badanin and Maglov published a historical investigation where they examined the role of Kadyrov's family in the region, emphasizing allegations of Kremlin's sponsorship, political assassinations (including Nemtsov) and other various crimes (Proekt, 2024). Chechen Republic that went through the terrors of two wars with Russia, continues suffering under the cruel management of Kadyrov. The Kremlin's appointment of loyal to the regime leader helped Russia to avoid more rebellion movements in the region, allowing it to concentrate its potential military power somewhere else. It also allowed political assassinations to happen without a trace of Kremlin's involvement. Even Chechen dissidents who managed to flee the Republic were not safe; individuals such as Umar Israilov, Amina Okuyeva, and Sulim Yamadayev—all known for their criticism of Ramzan Kadyrov—were assassinated, illustrating the extended reach of repressive tactics beyond Chechnya's borders (Walker, 2019).

It is also worth mentioning Alexei Navalny – who for many was the last hope for Russian opposition. He was firstly poisoned in 2020 and later died in prison in 2024. He gained popularity as an anti-corruption activist whose online investigations revealed schemes of Kremlin's highest ranked governors including Putin and Medvedev. Despite his pro-democratic activities in Russia, among some neighbouring states he is remembered differently

– through the perspective of his imperialistic rhetoric (Kaminskaite, 2025). Nevertheless, his mysterious death in prison left no doubts about the complete control and terror Russia's leadership was now implementing towards its own people.

In conclusion, domestic developments of Russia's leadership decisions in the period from 2014 until today escalated from familiar military campaigns to boost Putin's popularity to total control over any critical opinion about the regime or its foreign policy. According to the realist theory, Russia's radical approach to the freedom of media and opposing the processes of democratization are rooted in the strategic goal of keeping the security of the state by any means. However, as neoclassical realism claims, Russia's internal worry more about the regime's survival is more vital than the survival of the state. Leaders' perceptions about Russian historical role and external threats indeed influenced foreign policy approaches. As the elite's mindset was manifested during the Cold War, many of the views revived from that time. Russian society became the first target of Russia's test of the hybrid warfare tools and specifically disinformation campaigns. Main disinformation narratives since 2014 became anti-Ukrainian and anti-American segments.

Near Abroad Influence

Opportunistic nature of Russian foreign policy appeared again in 2014, when during the chaos of events of the Revolution of Dignity in Ukraine, Russia seized and occupied Crimea and supported separatists in the Eastern regions of Donetsk and Luhansk. Asymmetrical methods of hybrid warfare were implemented actively during and after the events. Russia started implementing grand hybrid warfare strategy – leadership adapted all the lessons from previous phases but also drew inspiration from the Cold War Era. The covert nature of the hybrid tools used in 2014 disoriented the West, meanwhile Ukraine in its post-revolution chaos couldn't react properly. Strategy of Russian foreign policy consisted of a combination of military and nonmilitary methods of warfare. Among others, the most prominent tools inspired by the Soviet doctrine were *maskirovka* (from Russian “disguise” or “masking”) consisting of *zelyonye chelovechki* and *dezinformatsiya* consisting of the denial of military presence and claiming newly established “Kyiv regime” illegitimate (Borch & Heier, 2024). As journalist Luke Harding wrote in 2014 for “The Guardian”:

In fact, the “little green men” – undercover Russian soldiers who seized Crimea – come straight from the KGB playbook. Putin’s actions in Ukraine follow a classic KGB doctrine known as “active measures”. The phrase encompasses disinformation, propaganda, political repression and subversion. The goal, then as now, is to weaken the west, create divisions between Nato member states, and to undermine the US in the eyes of the world, especially the developing world (Harding, 2014).

Operations in Crimea and Donbas resulted in a success for Russia – while in the period of political instability and change of power in Ukraine, it used this opportunity for military intervention. By creating territorial disputes and supporting separatist movements, Russian leadership repeated the scenario it used before – in 2008 Georgia and 1992 Moldova which allowed the deployment of Russian military bases, contributed to the states’ instability and restricted their future cooperation with the US and NATO. Same strategy was implemented in Ukraine in 2014. However, as experience has shown, Russian open war with Georgia in 2008 brought international backlash, thus with Ukraine, military strategy adapted to attack covertly by creating a distraction and confusion. Although, West reacted negatively to the annexation, the response wasn’t united – due to the fear of military escalation and remaining economic interests. Russia kept its power and wasn’t excluded from the European or American diplomatic efforts:

“The lack of strong and unified Western sanctions convinced the Kremlin leader that Russia could win a geopolitical battle over Ukraine with the United States” (Goldgeier & Itzkowitz Shiffrinson, 2023, p.156-157).

Only after the full-scale invasion in 2022, Europe and the West became more united in cutting diplomatic, economic and cultural ties with Russia. However, over time some of the European and American leaders started showing more interest in renewing relations – including Slovak Prime Minister Fico, Hungarian Prime Minister Orbán and recently elected President of the United States Trump. Since 2022 Russia keeps using hybrid non-military tools to support military actions against Ukraine which include disinformation, cyberattacks and political and cultural subversion. The strategy also aims to divert Western support from Ukraine by promoting disinformation narratives. It is deeply related to the research question of this paper,

because often disinformation narratives target America as an enabler of the Ukrainian “regime”. One of the examples of it was published in a report called “Terrorist Crimes Committed by the Kiev Regime” which has an entry “Ukraine's involvement in the terrorist attack at the Crocus City Hall in Krasnogorsk” where it claims that “Intelligence of the Ministry of Defence of Ukraine was directly connected with the massacre in Krasnogorsk”. The terrorist attack happened inside the concert hall in 2024 resulting in killing 144 people and injuring 551. Although ISIS has claimed responsibility for the attack, Russian leadership didn’t want to lose opportunity of blaming Ukraine and its supporters for the attack (CNN, 2024), (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation, 2024):

The events of 22 March 2024 clearly show that the Kiev regime and its foreign supervisors have no moral or ethical constraints. Europe and the US make no secret that they are using the Ukrainian side to their own interest. They continue to blatantly supply weapons, explosives, military hardware and intelligence to Ukraine so it could organize and carry out acts of terrorism, training for saboteurs and terrorists (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation, 2024).

After 2014 Russian hybrid warfare strategy goal in near abroad remained the same – promote its influence in the region. However, now it started targeting much wider audiences and using more advanced tools. Gerasimov extended the military doctrine in 2019 by introducing two concepts: “limited action” and “active defense” (Polyakova et al, 2021). *Limited action* refers to justifying Russian military interference in a nearby neighbourhood since it is used to counter perceived threats to Russian interests. *Active defense* is the implementation of active measures with a goal of withstanding those external threats (Polyakova et al, 2021). It meant that the military confrontation is accompanied by information influence operations, which create disinformation narratives to paralyze foreign actors to take any measures in the conflict. This methodology was later used in 2022.

To achieve the goal of maintaining influence Russian foreign policy strategy expanded their targets to Central and Western Europe and took a course of undermining the image of the USA and other Western governments and institutions. By destroying the credibility of American hegemony, it would present Russia as a better alternative. This is a culmination of Russian national interest that was gradually constructed over more than 30 years since its independence from the USSR. To understand current Russian foreign policy objectives, it is

necessary to apply neoclassical realist foundations with hybrid warfare strategy. 2014 success in Ukraine became a turning point which accelerated Russian leadership's perceptions about its role in the world and changed its approach to international relations which grew more ambitious and determined. The leadership, largely composed of *siloviki* (former KGB agents), developed their perceptions during the Cold War. Their assessment of the state's military capacity and national ideology was shaped by a Cold War-era Soviet mindset. Their perception of the American threat in nearby states together with the systemic pressures of balancing the power in the emerging multipolar world order shaped their foreign policy strategy. Military doctrine of 2013 and experiences from Chechen Wars and Russo-Georgian War brought a new approach to the conduction of war – adoption of the non-military asymmetrical tool even during peace. Hybrid warfare strategy focused on blurring the line between war and peace and the main method of the strategy became dissemination of disinformation to sow chaos, divide communities and promote Russian hegemony. How does Russia spread disinformation? Rogers & Tyushka suggest a three-step strategy: to distort European perceptions of reality, remove the European connection from the West, and fill the vacuum with false narratives to create confusion:

“The easiest way to disarm an opponent's ideological arsenal is to deny them the advantage of accessing their own arsenal, while simultaneously ensuring continuous and unimpeded access to it yourself” (Rogers & Tyushka, 2017, p.49).

Dissemination of disinformation narratives are carried out through the social and mass media. The aim is to turn the adversary's citizens' opinions and make them believe in the false narratives beneficial for the Kremlin. This helps to create polarization and conflict in the opponent's society. The method of *reflexive control* is adopted from the Soviet toolkit - a tactic that a state can use to manipulate an unaware adversary's opinions and encourage them to make damaging decisions (Snegovaya, 2015). Often, this strategy is not aiming to create a certain narrative but rather spread confusion and chaos to undermine which media can be trusted. The territorial coverage has significantly expanded since 2014 and therefore strategies of targeting states became more sophisticated.

Biggest target remains the same from the previous eras – European states with big Russian-speaking minorities such as Moldova, Belarus, Ukraine, Latvia, Estonia and

Lithuania. It exploits the narrative of Russian compatriots and encourages them to build closer self-identification with Russia instead of the state of residence. Here is also where *Russkiy Mir* plays the central role, which I will examine later. Other targets are “Slavic brotherhood” nations of Slovakia, Poland, Czech Republic, Serbia, Macedonia and Bosnia and Herzegovina. It reinforces the narrative of the Slavic unity concept that is based on the ideas of the common historical and ethno-linguistic backgrounds. Besides targeting states, strategy also appeals to certain groups of people and institutions. “*Ostalgie*” which exploits the “good old days” in the period before 1989 among the former communist bloc in East Germany. It targets left-wing parties with a pro-Russian segment, not only in Central and Eastern Europe but wider European Arena such as Germany, France, Greece, Spain and Italy. Often Russia positions itself as an anti-rhetoric which opposes US hegemony, EU and NATO alliances, immigration and liberalism, and targets those far-right parties who share similar values. Last target can be found anywhere, as Russian media presents itself as an alternative information source which exploits the “there is no objective truth” narrative and creates conspiracy theories and rumours (Bokša, 2019).

State-run media like RT or TASS slowly lost their popularity among foreign audiences as they lost their credibility, meanwhile social media platforms gradually gained popularity for consuming news. Hence, disinformation strategy adopted to this change and moved to the internet media outlets and social media. As an example, the 2015 refugee crisis was exploited by disinformation tactics which contributed to the decline of the EU support in Central and Eastern European countries (Bokša, 2019). However, the biggest threat it entails is contribution to the low trust in objectivity and traditional media platforms which makes activities of trolls and bots more effective. Part of the disinformation strategy Russia executes is not built on promoting believable or persuasive narrative. Simply by spreading multiple false narratives, it aims to sabotage the objective truth. This way Russia exploits one of the biggest advantages of the liberal democracies – credibility of the source. By undermining trust in all sources, it demolishes the advantage of trustworthiness (Giles, 2016). Especially after the second term of Putin, Russian domestic policy was focused on war – Soviet victory in the Second World War has been re-glorified, neglecting all the brutality this win brought on member states, but also the clash between the liberator Russia and fascist West emerged.

In conclusion, Russian hybrid warfare started in 2014 developed into a full-scale war in 2022. Since active implementation of disinformation campaigns in its policy towards the near abroad started, measures and scope of those significantly grew. The goal of foreign policy

became an establishment of influence in Eastern and Central Europe by appealing as an alternative to Western hegemony. Methods vary from military confrontations to supporting authoritarian regimes. Some of the main narratives of disinformation are reinforcements of historical myths, Russia as a conservatism center and moral supremacy over the West.

Foreign Policy Towards the US

Similarly to the near abroad strategy, the approach to the foreign policy to the USA changed after 2014. Russia blamed the USA for interference in Ukrainian domestic policies and the USA led the effort of sanctioning Russia after aggression against Ukraine. Meanwhile, NATO-Russian relations almost ceased to exist keeping minimal channels for political and military communication (NATO, 2024). Prior to 2022 relations between Russian and the US declined step-by-step with proxy war in Syria in 2015 and Russian meddling in presidential elections in 2016. However, a full-scale Russian invasion in 2022 became a final factor in the demolition of good relations between two states. Besides American support for Ukraine, Russia was also blamed for its aggressive measures towards its neighbours and wider communities of the NATO alliance:

Russia seeks to establish spheres of influence and direct control through coercion, subversion, aggression and attempted annexations. It uses conventional, cyber and hybrid means against NATO member countries and partners. Its coercive military posture, rhetoric and proven willingness to use force to pursue its political goals undermine the rules-based international order (NATO, 2024).

Intensified after 2014, the Russian approach of handling foreign relations with the USA can be described as "anti-hegemonic strategy" (Rogers & Tyushka, 2017). Recognizing the relative weakness of the military power Russia has compared to America and NATO, its foreign policy adopts an approach which seeks to undermine Western-led liberal order. This strategy combines Soviet methods of *dezinformatsiya* and *reflexive control* with modern hybrid tools like information and narrative warfare. Essentially, this is when the Russian disinformation strategy against the USA has evolved completely. Because the lessons from the Soviet military practices of the Cold War were adopted in a contemporary context of technological development, disinformation became a main feature of Russian foreign policy

towards the USA. Moreover, this strategy's nature can be described as "spoiler" since it is aiming at diffusing negative narratives about current unipolar world order. It is not seeking to promote Russia as a better option but aims at presenting Russian authoritarian led order as the only alternative to the Western hegemony of the USA (Rogers & Tyushka, 2017). This agenda finds supporters among the populist and radical European parties but also makes people question the credibility of the existing global system and Western capacity of handling external threats. The strategy puts the responsibility of Russian actions on the West and US (NATO is encircling Russia etc.) which can lead to a paralysis of the values and norms that the Western world order has provided. The gradual disintegration of European values, limitation of preparedness and self-doubt is what Russian anti-hegemony strategy against the West is seeking (Rogers & Tyushka, 2017). The general outcome for the hybrid warfare strategy is the weakening of the democratic elements American hegemony has to offer. The methodology of it is covert and aims to divide the global public and later change their perceptions by using disinformation tactics (Rogers & Tyushka, 2017). In this new strategy Russian leadership adopted previous methodology. First, exploitative tendencies of taking advantage of the periods of instability (1992, 2014). Second, dividing societies by utilizing existing disagreements (2011-2012). Thirdly, by supporting regimes with authoritarian tendencies (1990s-2000s). How does Russia implement those tools and which disinformation narratives and methods it uses?

As I mentioned in the theoretical framework, the digital era of media contributed to the changes in journalism and media consumption. Russian disinformation strategy took this into consideration and modernized its Soviet tools. Animosity of the internet, low cost of producing false narratives online and potential range of targeted audiences made internet activities the biggest method of disinformation diffusion. As traditional media and state-owned Kremlin channels are not particularly popular, interfering with American audiences was possible through social media. In 2013 *Agentstvo internet-issledovaniya* (from Russian Internet Research Agency) was founded. It became the most famous "troll factory" that later, since 2015 will play a big role in dividing American society. Troll factories could create fake social media profiles and groups, create separate websites and online blogs to spread disinformation. In the period from 2015 to 2017 IRA organized more than 120 events via Facebook that were seen by over 300.000 people. Overall, only with Facebook engagement, IRA trolls were able to expose nearly 130 million Americans to the circulation of Russian disinformation. Estimated by the US Senate Select Committee on Intelligence, in 2017 Twitter had 37.000 Russian

accounts whose tweets were seen over 300 million times (Cosentino, 2020). The Troll Factory was exploiting vulnerabilities of American society and using them for polarization.

Fragmentation of the West is a real problem that also becomes an opportunity for Russia to exploit it. Both the EU and the US suffered from increasing polarization and democratic backsliding across the last years. Already problematic processes are convenient for Russian manipulation, especially in the spheres of elections: when not involved in a direct meddling in electoral process, Russia still is using all possible means to affect the voters by altering their opinions about candidates (Polyakova et al, 2021). Polarization of American society contributed to the circulation of disinformation and in some cases unintentional misinformation which was a great opportunity for Russian troll factories. Moreover, modern Western societies experience more mistrust in main governmental institutions, therefore because of the legitimacy problem of modern democratic societies, alternative methods of governance are getting popular (Cosentino, 2020). The spread of the conflicting narratives became a significant feature of the disinformation strategy as it aimed to confuse people from differentiating truth and lies. The Internet became an alternative to the traditional media, thus Russian disinformation strategy was to attack social media with pollution of confusing information, fake news and conspiracy theories. Divisions in society were appearing in political polarization, opinions about immigration, gender rights and systematic racism. Gradual mistrust in institutions brought a vacuum that Russian trolls were capable of filling with its agenda - exactly as anti-hegemonic strategy theory suggests.

However, the biggest popularity the IRA got was for its hybrid tools during the presidential elections of 2016. Between 2013 and 2018, IRA trolls performed influence operations all over the USA. Russian oligarch Prigozhin with close ties to Putin was founder and sponsor of IRA, together with Trump's associates' connections with Russian elite, suspicion grew (Cosentino, 2020). Disinformation campaigns prior to the elections included dissemination of false information about presidential candidate Clinton and mobilizing citizens through the fake grassroots movements accounts. Trolls used social media platforms like Facebook, Twitter, YouTube and Instagram to promote the campaigns. The end up goal was to support Trump candidature to the position of the president, simultaneously polarizing the public opinions about sensitive topics. Polarization in political opinions leads to the circulation of malicious content (Goldgeier & Itzkowitz Shiffrinson, 2023). In the aftermath of the first presidential debate in 2016, hashtag "#TrumpWon" became the first trending hashtag in the world, however the origin of it was estimated as coming from Saint Petersburg, Russia. The

goal of the covert disinformation strategy is to influence targeted audiences without their realization of being under the influence of a foreign actor. This is a classic example of *reflexive control* – by exploiting internal disagreements they deepened the polarization and distracted from authoritarian tendencies of Trump. Flooding of the fake news and conspiracy theories are effective, but what adds even more weight to it is the usage of “useful idiots” – a term often used when talking about Russian disinformation methods – to gain more legitimacy it is using aware or now aware local actors who help the narratives to spread. For instance, Trump’s statement about the 2016 elections being a fraud helped at promoting the Russian narrative about fundamental issues with democratic elections. Moreover, many of Trumps’ expressions were either taken directly from the Russian source or more often from the sources that are receptive to Russian disinformation (Polyakova et al, 2021). Moreover, he reaffirmed this narrative once more when he wasn’t elected for the second term in 2020 – two months after his defeat a heavily armed crowd of his supporters stormed the U.S. Capitol, which describes as an attack on democracy and the rule of law (American Oversight, 2023). Same year, Russian report “Human rights situation in certain countries”, citing the Chinese sources stated that “the 2020 US election can be seen as the culmination of a two-decade period of decline in faith in the basic building blocks of democracy” (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation, 2021).

Russian support for regimes with authoritarian tendencies proved to be true in the case of Trump. Furthermore, before Trump’s second run as a president, Russian preferences didn’t change. The anonymous official from the Office of the Director of National Intelligence stated that Russia “through social media and other means has begun trying to influence specific groups of U.S. voters in battleground states, promote divisive narratives and denigrate specific politicians” (Landay & Goudsward, 2024). After Trump was re-elected, he continued his autocratic rule. As an example, his administration cut funding for Yale University’s Humanitarian Research Lab, which had investigated the deportation of Ukrainian children to Russia. Moreover, the US has withdrawn from a multinational group whose goal was the investigation of the leaders responsible for Russia’s invasion of Ukraine, including President Putin. In addition to these, Reuters reported that several US national security agencies no longer participate in a coordinated effort to counter Russian cyberattacks and disinformation (Ahmadi, 2025).

To summarize, the Russian disinformation strategy against the USA was finally established in 2014. All those disinformation campaigns proved to be low cost and high

rewards; therefore, Russia will continue to misuse political division for its domestic goals. Russian destabilizing efforts are targeting flaws of democratic societies, helping to create a narrative that democracy is chaotic while authoritarianism is stable (Polyakova et al, 2021). Since 2014 Russian hybrid interference in USA domestic policy is undeniable. Relations completely broke down after 2022, but now with newly elected president Trump, maybe the ties between the states will be reconnected. Nevertheless, superpowers like Russia will continue to use asymmetrical tools of hybrid warfare to challenge Western hegemony.

Conclusions

This paper aimed to explore the complexity of numerous of topics – it discussed Russian hybrid warfare, investigated domestic development of Russian society, examined Russian relations to the near abroad and Western states. In a framework of my theoretical approach, analysis was structured in a way to easily track the direction of Russian hybrid warfare against the USA. So now, I can answer the question - How has the Russian disinformation strategy against the USA evolved since the Cold War? Firstly, to show the development:

- During the period of the Cold War, Soviet strategy used *aktivnye meropriyatiya* – covert tactics including disinformation, imposing control of media abroad and spreading of false stories and *refleksivnoye upravleniye* – conversion of targeted actors to act against their own interests. Disinformation was a core for both tools. Soviet foreign strategy used hybrid warfare methods since nuclear confrontation would be lethal. Specifically, though visual media, American portrayal was extremely negative, militant and close to fascism.
- First stage of evolution from 1991 to 2000 was characterized by the testing of hybrid tools near abroad by maintaining frozen conflicts in Nagorno-Karabakh, Abkhazia and South Ossetia and Transnistria and supporting other authoritarian regimes, primarily in Central Asia. Disinformation strategy against the USA is underdeveloped, but the strategy is being tested abroad.
- Second stage from 2000 to 2013 was marked by gradual adoption of hybrid tools, implemented against Russian opposition in 2011-2012, Orange Revolution in 2004 Ukraine and the 2008 war with Georgia. Proved successful only in dividing Russian opposition. Loss of information war with Georgia. Relations with the US have worsened since its support for Eastern Europe liberalization.

- Third stage from 2014 until now is featuring a grand hybrid warfare strategy which now escalated and was implemented actively against the USA. Disinformation strategy was aiming at polarizing the society of America and undermining trust in democratic governmental institutions. “Anti-hegemonic strategy” aimed to damage the perception of the US by other states. Here, the strategy implemented Soviet tools in combination with modern technologies.

Empirical findings of this paper support the neoclassical realist perspective on foreign policy. Indeed, the process of development of the disinformation strategy against the USA was caused by domestic variables and systemic pressures. Russian leadership’s perceptions about internal interests and external threat significantly shaped the decision of using non-military asymmetrical methods to challenge the Western hegemony. From a realist perspective, superpowers are always in a state of competition and it's important for the leaders to protect their interests by any means, even when those means are not seen as moral by the public. Adoption of hybrid warfare in Russian foreign policy proved that, according to realism, the state will constantly attempt to change the power balance for its benefit.

Secondly, to answer the research question: Russian disinformation strategy against the USA evolved through a gradual development of Russian domestic interests and growing systematic pressures. The evolution of this strategy implemented its geopolitical objectives without the military confrontation with the West. However, the limitations of this paper created some gaps in my analysis. Russian involvement in the Middle East, Global South and Africa is another important component of Russian growing ambitions. Effectiveness of Russian disinformation efforts is difficult to evaluate, especially during recent events. However, the fact that Trump was elected for the second term of presidency is a warning sign about the slow rise of authoritarian regimes. It’s unknown what the future holds and what consequences the American president will bring to the world. The fact is that the global order is receiving an additional authoritarian leader at the time of war in Europe. Therefore, understanding of prolonged historical continuities of Russian disinformation strategy and its adaptive character to the modern technological provide critical insight about its persistent relevance and evolving character.

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