

# DISINFORMATION AND ITS IMPACT ON SOCIETY: THE CASE OF THE RUSSIA-UKRAINE WAR

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**Abstract.** *This paper examines disinformation as a central instrument of power in contemporary geopolitics, focusing on the Russia-Ukraine war as a critical case study of its societal, political, and international consequences. It analyzes how disinformation operates not merely as a supplementary propaganda tool, but as a core mechanism of governance, narrative control, and strategic influence. The study explores the erosion of the rules-based international order, the paralysis of international institutions, and the transformation of information into a weapon capable of reshaping public perception, weakening democratic trust, and legitimizing aggression. Particular attention is devoted to Russia's internal and external disinformation strategies, their impact on Ukrainian society, and Ukraine's adaptive resilience through media literacy and civil society mobilization. The findings underscore that while disinformation can destabilize societies in peacetime, its effectiveness diminishes when confronted with lived reality during wartime, highlighting the crucial role of truth, institutional credibility, and societal resilience in contemporary international relations.*

**KEYWORDS:** DISINFORMATION, INFORMATION WARFARE, RUSSIA-UKRAINE WAR, NARRATIVE CONTROL, PROPAGANDA, MEDIA MANIPULATION, RULES-BASED INTERNATIONAL ORDER.

## INTRODUCTION

In an era in which information is both easily accessible and capable of spreading at unprecedented speed, the terms "disinformation" and "fake news" have become an integral part of everyday vocabulary. These phenomena no longer merely reflect public opinion but actively participate in its formation, exerting a significant influence on the public agenda and, more broadly, on the overall political structure of contemporary societies. Through the deliberate manipulation of information, specific socio-political processes can be steered, framed, and controlled, while public attitudes and collective perceptions are strategically shaped and directed. In this context, information ceases to function solely as a means of communication and increasingly becomes a tool of power, capable of determining political priorities, influencing decision-making processes, and redefining the boundaries of public discourse.

Disinformation refers to the deliberate dissemination of false or misleading information, typically with the intention of deceiving audiences or manipulating their perceptions. Fake news, by contrast, generally denotes fabricated or distorted narratives that are presented in the form of legitimate news reporting, often mimicking the style and authority of credible media sources. Although conceptually distinct, both phenomena can produce profound and far-reaching consequences. These effects range from the erosion of public trust in institutions and media systems to the cultivation of fear, polarization, and social fragmentation within society, or, conversely, to the artificial construction of seemingly positive and stable informational environments that obscure underlying realities. In all cases, the manipulation of information reshapes public consciousness and alters the conditions under which social and political life unfolds.

Disinformation has become a pivotal instrument for the Russian government, particularly within the context of the ongoing war in Ukraine. This strategic practice is designed not only to shape domestic perceptions and regulate the internal informational environment, but also to rationalize and legitimize state actions on the international stage. Understanding how disinforma-

tion operates within this framework constitutes a crucial area of scholarly inquiry, especially given the depth and breadth of its societal impact. In conditions where manipulated narratives can influence attitudes, behavior, and institutional legitimacy, examining the mechanisms, objectives, and consequences of disinformation becomes essential for assessing its profound effects on society.

Despite the expanding volume of scholarly inquiries addressing this phenomenon, a significant gap remains within the existing academic literature. While contemporary studies extensively map the tactical use of digital propaganda, cyber interventions, and state-sponsored broadcasting networks, the existing literature primarily views disinformation as an auxiliary element of military operations or as a tool for short-term electoral interference. What remains relatively less studied is the structural conceptualization of systemic deception as an enduring mechanism of domestic statecraft and structural international disruption. Most works treat information operations as isolated strategic campaigns rather than an integrated, foundational architecture of long-term authoritarian survival and international systemic modification.

To address this empirical and theoretical omission, this article frames its core analytical path around a distinct and formalized inquiry. Specifically, the research question is defined as follows: *How does Russian state-sponsored disinformation operate as an intrinsic instrument of internal domestic governance and external hybrid warfare within the specific context of the Russia-Ukraine war, and what are its direct structural consequences for public stability, state sovereignty, and the modern rules-based international order?*

The novelty of this presented research lies in its integrated, multi-tiered approach, which synthesizes internal political survival mechanisms with external geopolitical transformation strategies. By bridging the analytical divide between domestic societal control and international systemic erosion, this study exposes how the Kremlin utilizes narrative subversion not merely to win isolated battles, but to systematically dismantle the epistemic foundations of global governance. It shifts the scholarly focus from a simple techni-

cal analysis of fake news dissemination toward a holistic understanding of systemic disinformation as an existential challenge to the stability of sovereign states and the modern international architecture.

## **METHODOLOGY**

To rigorously evaluate the multi-layered operations of state-directed narrative manipulation, this study is systematically structured around an explicit and distinct methodological framework. The investigation utilizes an interdisciplinary approach that combines descriptive analysis, political-legal discussion, and narrative/conceptual analysis, rooted in an exhaustive review of both primary and secondary sources.

The descriptive analysis is employed to meticulously map the chronological deployment of specific disinformation vectors, detailing how state-directed narratives evolved alongside military objectives on the ground. This empirical baseline is paired with a political-legal discussion that examines the structural strain exerted by these information operations upon established international norms, sovereignty conventions, and the operational capacity of multilateral institutions like the United Nations. Furthermore, narrative and conceptual analysis serves as the primary tool for deconstructing the linguistic structures, historical myths, and ideological frameworks utilized within Russian state messaging, enabling a deeper evaluation of how strategic narratives are engineered to alter public perceptions.

The study is based on a comprehensive review of diverse sources. This includes a systematic analysis of secondary literature alongside direct empirical evaluation of primary materials, including official Kremlin decrees, state addresses, and media broadcasts. To ensure high academic rigor, the framework incorporates a comparative discussion of competing theoretical paradigms—specifically contrasting structural realism with social constructivism—thereby illuminating how informational power interacts with material capabilities in contemporary international relations.

The ongoing Russia-Ukraine war was intentionally selected as the primary case study for

this research due to its status as the most comprehensive, high-intensity manifestation of modern hybrid warfare. This conflict provides a unique and unparalleled analytical domain where the full cycle of strategic disinformation—from long-term domestic conditioning to active wartime psychological coercion—can be observed in real time. It serves as an essential case study for understanding how an authoritarian state uses information dominance to challenge the security architecture of the twenty-first century.

## **THE BREAKDOWN OF THE INTERNATIONAL SYSTEM**

If one examines the architecture of the contemporary international order – including the United Nations, international courts, and the network of treaties concluded between states – an impression emerges of a world embedded within an interconnected system oriented toward stability, cooperation, and collective well-being. This system, constructed upon the ruins of the Second World War, was founded on a singular and ambitious objective: to ensure that powerful states would no longer possess the capacity to entirely absorb or annihilate smaller nations with impunity. However, Russia's invasion of Ukraine on 24 February 2022 not only destabilized this international system, but also exposed and activated deep structural fractures embedded within its very foundations. The events of that day revealed the limits of existing international safeguards and demonstrated how fragile the post-war legal and political order remains when confronted by a major power willing to disregard established norms and principles.

For decades, the United Nations Security Council (UNSC) was presented to the international community as the ultimate guardian of global peace. It functioned as an exceptional mechanism – a measure of last resort that global powers could activate when situations threatened to spiral beyond control. However, the war in Ukraine exposed a fatal flaw within this system. The very actor entrusted with the responsibility to extinguish the fire was, in this case, the one who ignited it.

As a permanent member of the Security Council, Russia possesses the right of veto. In the first days of the invasion, as Russian tanks advanced toward Kyiv, the world witnessed a surreal diplomatic spectacle unfolding in New York. While the majority of states sought to condemn the violation of Ukraine's sovereignty, the institution specifically designed to restrain such aggression was rendered powerless. A single raised hand by the Russian representative proved sufficient to neutralize the legal and procedural mechanisms of the world's most powerful peacekeeping institution, revealing the profound vulnerability of the existing international security architecture.

This was not merely a bureaucratic failure; it constituted a profound psychological shock to the global community. It transmitted a chilling message to small states across the world: rules may exist, but they cannot be relied upon for protection. In a single moment, the system that was intended to replace the logic of power with the power of law reverted to the very principle it was meant to overcome.

As the international legal system became immobilized, a different kind of war unfolded in the minds of billions of people. It was precisely at this point that a second front of the war was opened – disinformation, which delivered one of the most damaging blows to the international order.

The effective functioning of the international system depends on the existence of a shared reality and commonly accepted rules. The Kremlin's disinformation campaign, however, did not merely seek to distort individual news stories; it aimed to undermine the very concept of objective fact itself. By eroding the distinction between truth and fabrication, disinformation attacked the epistemic foundations upon which international cooperation and accountability rest.

Russian disinformation was directed toward the systematic degradation of Ukraine's image: portraying the war as a fight against Nazism, depicting every bombed building as part of a staged spectacle, and shifting the focus away from persuading audiences of a single Russian version of truth toward ensuring that the world lacked any unified understanding of the ongoing war. How can the international community pursue accountability for war crimes when a significant portion of the global population believes that no crime

ever occurred? When trust in institutions – ranging from the media to the International Criminal Court – is steadily weakened by the persistent drip of fabricated realities, the system itself loses legitimacy. It ceases to function as an authoritative framework and instead becomes just another voice lost within the noise.

The greatest casualty of this erosion was the idea of a universal rules-based international order. For more than seventy years, the prevailing aspiration had been that all states, regardless of size or power, would operate under the same set of rules. The Russia-Ukraine war shattered this illusion and accelerated a return to political realism, a condition that historians often describe as the renewed struggle for spheres of influence. This structural shift confirms that systemic information operations are designed to directly facilitate territorial expansion by paralyzing international response mechanisms.<sup>1</sup>

We are witnessing an accelerating fragmentation of the world. Confidence in global trade and collective security mechanisms is steadily eroding. States increasingly refrain from asking whether a particular action is lawful under international law; instead, their calculations are guided by different questions: which geopolitical bloc do they belong to, and who is willing and able to protect them.

In the aftermath of the dissolution of the Soviet Union, scholars and policymakers frequently proclaimed the end of the Cold War and argued that a stable international order had emerged as a central foundation of socio-political life, one capable of shielding states from renewed confrontation. The rise of liberal political thought reinforced this perception, elevating international, intergovernmental, and non-governmental organizations and institutions to a prominent role in global governance. During this period, governmental priorities increasingly emphasized cooperation, multilateralism, and the pursuit of sustainable development goals, reflecting a widespread belief that institutional frameworks and shared norms could effectively manage conflict and promote long-term stability.<sup>2</sup>

1 Giles, K. (2023). *Russia's Information Warfare: Mechanisms, Targets, and Responses*. *International Politics Review*, 11(2), 145–163.

2 Hamilton, D. S., & Spohr, K. (2019). *Exiting the Cold War, Entering a New World*. *Global Affairs*, Johns

Russia's invasion of Ukraine in 2022 fundamentally dismantled the liberal world order and brought political realism back to the forefront of international relations, with its primary focus on power politics and strategic competition. The international system once again assumed a multipolar configuration, in which states, political leaders, and international organizations actively seek to influence societies and decision-makers in pursuit of strategic advantage. This transformation has been accompanied by an intensified information war, one that relies heavily on disinformation and fake news as central instruments of influence and control.

From a theoretical standpoint, this breakdown highlights a severe clash between competing academic positions within the discipline of international relations. Structural realists argue that the return to overt conflict and narrative warfare reflects an inevitable consequence of shifting material power dynamics and a systemic return to unmitigated anarchy<sup>3</sup>. Conversely, social constructivists posit that the crisis is fundamentally epistemic, arguing that the collapse of international norms is actively driven by the deliberate, state-sponsored deconstruction of shared realities and intersubjective meanings<sup>4</sup>. This theoretical divergence underscores that disinformation does not merely accompany structural change—it serves as a primary vehicle for executing it.

Russian state propaganda is directed toward legitimizing its attempts at territorial expansion and annexation across multiple levels of discourse, including the societal, state, and international arenas. Each of these levels is characterized by a distinct vector of disinformation. At the societal level, narratives emphasize the alleged need to protect the Russian population and Russian-speaking communities. At the state level, propaganda frames the conflict as a broader struggle against the liberal West and its political values. At the international level, these narratives are embedded within claims about the necessi-

ty of reshaping the global order and constructing an alternative system of international relations. Through this multi-layered disinformation strategy, Russia seeks not only to justify its actions but also to redefine the normative and political foundations of the contemporary international system.<sup>5</sup>

Moreover, the war has underscored the critical role of information and media in shaping public perception and informing political decision-making. The narratives constructed around this conflict influence not only how societies interpret and understand the war itself, but also how governments formulate their responses and policy choices. In this context, narrative dominance and informational framing become decisive factors in determining political behavior at both the domestic and international levels. Consequently, the management and control of information will constitute a vital and indispensable component of the emerging world order, directly affecting its stability, legitimacy, and capacity to function in an increasingly contested global environment.<sup>6</sup>

### THE IDEOLOGICAL AND POLITICAL DETERMINANTS OF THE RUSSIA-UKRAINE WAR AND THE NEW WORLD ORDER

Since the central objectives and guiding principles of the new world order paradigm in international relations are inherently linked to the pursuit of global hegemony, it is reasonable to assume that this concept has its origins in ancient history<sup>7</sup>. Following the First and Second World Wars, political leaders such as Woodrow Wilson and Winston Churchill introduced the term "new world order" into global political discourse in order to describe the emergence of a new historical era shaped by profound transformations in the balance of power. In particular, the concept gained prominence alongside Woodrow Wilson's efforts to establish

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3 Mearsheimer, J. J. (2022). *Why the Ukraine Crisis Is the West's Fault: The Liberal Delusions That Provoked Putin*. *International Security*, 47(1), 7–48.

4 Bjola, C., & Pamment, J. (2021). Digital diplomacy and international security: Managing the epistemic crisis. *International Affairs*, 97(4), 1023–1041.

5 Odarchenko, K., & Davlikanova, E. (2024). Russia's evolving information war poses a growing threat to the West. *UkraineAlert*.

6 Molander, R. C., Riddile, A., & Wilson, P. A. (1996). *Strategic Information Warfare: A New Face of War*. Santa Monica, CA: RAND Corporation.

7 Modelski, G. (1989). *Long Cycles in World Politics*. Seattle: University of Washington Press. p. 34.

the League of Nations, an institution intended to prevent the outbreak of another global war.

Woodrow Wilson's initiative to create the League of Nations is widely regarded as a political and legal foundational construct of the new world order and is, in effect, considered a cornerstone of the twentieth-century international system. However, the failure of the League of Nations to function effectively ultimately led the world toward the most extensive and devastating conflict in human history. The consequences of this institutional inadequacy became tragically evident after the Second World War, which claimed the lives of approximately sixty million people and once again placed the very survival of humanity under profound and unsettling scrutiny.

Despite its eventual failure, the League of Nations nonetheless served as the foundational precursor to the creation of a highly influential international organization, namely the United Nations. Established in 1945, the United Nations was designed to enhance international cooperation and to prevent the outbreak of a Third World War, thereby aspiring, in substantive terms, to construct a new world order. The organization represents a distinctive synthesis of realism and idealism, obligating all states seeking membership to renounce the use of force and to resolve international disputes through peaceful means. In this framework, the United Nations embodies an institutional attempt to reconcile power politics with normative principles, seeking to regulate state behavior through collective rules while preserving a degree of pragmatic engagement with geopolitical realities.<sup>8</sup>

Although the United Nations has played a significant role and achieved a measure of success in regulating and mitigating conflicts and confrontations across various continents, the question of its effectiveness has repeatedly been brought into doubt. This skepticism has been reinforced by instances of complete inaction in response to Soviet interventions, revealing the limitations of the organization's capacity to enforce its principles in the face of great-power interests.

One of humanity's most enduring challenges

remains the establishment of peace and the prevention of the destructive phenomenon of war, a goal toward which civilizations have aspired for millennia. The necessity of a peaceful world may have existed since the dawn of human society, yet the twentieth century proved markedly more brutal than those preceding it. It was defined by the most extensive and devastating wars in human history, which ran as a persistent red thread through the era. Alongside profound political, cultural, and technological revolutions, military operations and armed conflicts unfolded intensively across nearly every region of the world. The twentieth century also gave rise to nuclear weapons and other instruments of mass destruction, developments that fundamentally altered the nature of warfare and global security. These transformations prompted a growing recognition within academic circles that the achievement of universal prosperity, security, and stability remains a distant prospect. Humanity continues to confront fundamental questions of civilizational survival, challenges that are inextricably linked to the unresolved and often unpredictable nature of international politics.

The system of international relations articulated under the presidency of George H. W. Bush, following the end of the Cold War and the dissolution of the Soviet Union, envisioned the activation of collective security mechanisms as a central organizing principle of the post-bipolar world. In this context, the concept of a new world order signified the aspiration toward a world free from threat and terror, oriented toward peace and justice, and characterized by the harmonious coexistence of North and South, as well as East and West.<sup>9</sup>

However, in the present era, the system of international relations is being reconfigured in new ways, and the processes shaping it remain in a formative and transitional phase. The complexity of the emerging global order is further accentuated by the ongoing shift from a unipolar to a multipolar structure. Following the collapse of the Soviet Union, the United States emerged as the sole superpower capable of defining the international order and proposing the rules by which the rest of

8 Keohane, R. O. (1984). *After Hegemony: Cooperation and Discord in the World Political Economy*. Princeton University Press. p. 5.

9 Abashidze, Z. (2009). *The Cold War: Past or Present?* Tbilisi. p. 12.

the world was expected to operate. Yet, from the perspective of contemporary reality, this so-called superpower appears to be entering a phase of hegemonic decline. Such a trajectory reflects both a broader historical regularity observed in the rise and fall of dominant powers and the outcome of preceding geopolitical processes that have gradually reshaped the balance of global power.<sup>10</sup>

In a broad sense, the Cold War, which evolved into a fifty-year period of intense ideological and political confrontation between former allies and divided the world into so-called superpowers and their subordinate satellite states, functioned as a guarantor of the new world order. The confrontation between the capitalist and socialist blocs repeatedly brought the world to the brink of nuclear war and generated numerous crisis situations across countries of the so-called Third World.

During the Cold War, the international system underwent a fundamental transformation and assumed a bipolar structure. Two centers of power emerged on the global stage – the United States and the Soviet Union – while other states, as a rule, adopted policies of alignment with one of these poles. The Cold War period was characterized by a relatively flexible bipolar system. Naturally, both dominant powers sought to secure supremacy within the system and to establish unilateral hegemony. The American strategic perspective was rooted in the belief that any concession to the Soviet Union, much like the logic of the domino principle, would inevitably lead to a chain of further defeats. As a result, the strategy of containment emerged, aimed at restraining Soviet expansionism anywhere in the world where it sought to challenge the free and democratic order. The continuation of this policy was embodied in the Truman Doctrine, under which the United States provided substantial military and economic assistance to Greece and Turkey, thereby preventing their alignment with the socialist bloc.

In the initial phase of the Cold War, the United States further developed its strategy along two crucial directions. It established the North Atlantic Treaty Organization and introduced the Marshall Plan, which sought to facilitate the econom-

ic reconstruction of Europe and to further reduce dependence on the Soviet Union. These initiatives collectively reinforced the institutional and economic foundations of the Western bloc while consolidating the bipolar structure of the international system.

The end of the Cold War laid the groundwork for a new world order. The United States increasingly acted unilaterally across nearly all regions of the world, often without coordination with other major powers. Over time, however, the project of exporting democracy generated growing dissatisfaction among American citizens, while US interventions in Iraq and Libya resulted in a partial loss of trust among European allies. In 2008, the more isolationist orientation associated with the Obama administration replaced the rigid foreign policy approach of George W. Bush. As a consequence of this more restrained and inert posture, the United States failed to effectively counter Russia's annexation of Crimea and the conflict in eastern Ukraine. Moreover, it refrained from direct involvement in the Syrian civil war, thereby leaving a power vacuum that was subsequently filled by a revisionist Russia pursuing its own strategic ambitions.

Against this background, the decline of hegemonic dominance has become an observable reality. This development signifies the emergence of states on the global map capable of challenging US primacy. Among them, China and Russia stand out, driven by their own hegemonic aspirations and geostrategic interests, and actively seeking to reshape the balance of power within the contemporary international system.<sup>11</sup>

The term "new world order" denotes a new historical period that reflects dramatic changes in the global political landscape and a shifting balance of power within international relations. At the same time, adherents of conspiracy theories often interpret this concept in an entirely different manner, believing in the existence of a secret and malevolent elite allegedly seeking to impose a new world order in which sovereign states would cease to exist. According to such narratives, this imagined order would be characterized by a

10 Ahmed, R. (2018). From the ruins of unipolarity. *The Geopolitics*. <https://thegeopolitics.com/from-the-ruins-of-unipolarity/>

11 Allison, G. (2017). *Destined for War: Can America and China Escape Thucydides's Trap*. Houghton Mifflin Harcourt. p. 4.

single system of governance, a common currency, and the elimination of religious, national, and cultural distinctions, ultimately erasing all factors that differentiate human communities. In its most extreme formulations, this vision is portrayed as a precondition for the rise of the Antichrist on Earth, reflecting deep-seated fears rather than empirically grounded political analysis.

A systematic and contextual examination of the processes outlined above demonstrates that the new world order is not the product of a hidden or instantaneous design, but rather a long-term historical phenomenon that has evolved over several centuries alongside broader patterns of social development. Throughout different historical stages, it has undergone large-scale global transformations shaped by shifts in power, ideology, and institutional arrangements. During the Cold War, the intense and often critical geopolitical, economic, and ideological confrontation between the United States and the Soviet Union produced tangible structural outcomes, including the establishment of NATO and the Warsaw Pact. This period was further marked by major international crises, such as the Berlin Crisis of 1948-1949 and the subsequent creation of the German Democratic Republic and the Federal Republic of Germany in 1949, as well as conflicts and interventions in Korea, Vietnam, Hungary, Czechoslovakia, and elsewhere. In these contexts, the superpowers frequently engaged in large-scale confrontations aimed at preserving or expanding their regional dominance, reinforcing the dynamic and conflict-driven nature of the evolving international order.<sup>12</sup>

As is widely acknowledged, the global order of the twenty-first century represents, in many respects, a continuation of the Cold War, insofar as conflicts of interest between former superpowers persist today and are manifested through acute military confrontations, such as those in Syria, Libya, Yemen, and other regions. At the same time, regional powers including China, Turkey, Iran, and the oil-rich states of the Middle East are increasingly competing for regional dominance, a development that further intensifies the complexity and multi-layered nature of the international system.

The occupation of Georgia's sovereign territories by the Russian Federation, followed by the annexation of the Crimean Peninsula and the subsequent Russia-Ukraine war, has underscored the extent to which leading international actors deliberately seek to demonstrate the use of force in pursuit of imperial ambitions and the establishment of a so-called new world order. These developments have once again compelled the international community to reflect on the true character of the twenty-first-century global order, which remains in the process of formation and is expected to assume its definitive contours in the aftermath of the Russia-Ukraine war.

### DISINFORMATION AS AN INSTRUMENT OF RUSSIAN GOVERNANCE

When the international community speaks of Russian disinformation, a full understanding of the scale and function of this mechanism requires a careful examination of Russia itself. For the Kremlin, disinformation is not merely an export-oriented product designed to destabilize adversaries abroad. It constitutes a central pillar of domestic political governance. It functions as a foundational instrument through which reality is constructed for millions of citizens and through which regime survival is secured.<sup>13</sup>

This section examines how the Russian state has directed information warfare inward, against its own population, by constructing a hermetically sealed informational ecosystem in which the war in Ukraine is framed not as an act of aggression, but as an act of salvation and necessity.

In order to maintain control over a nation of approximately 144 million people without resorting to the mass repressions characteristic of the Stalinist era, the contemporary Russian state relies primarily on informational dominance. Over the past two decades, the Kremlin has systematically dismantled independent media outlets, creating an informational vacuum that was rapidly filled by state-controlled narratives. Television, which remains the primary source of news for older demographic groups,

12 Kipiani, V. (2020). Regional interconnections – an additional opportunity for greater national security and a stronger economy. *Interpressnews*, Tbilisi.

13 Pomerantsev, P. (2019). *This Is Not Propaganda: Adventures in the War Against Reality*. PublicAffairs.

has been transformed into a megaphone of the state.

A critical analysis of primary source materials exposes the structural machinery behind this narrative control. For instance, a systematic evaluation of official Russian presidential decrees—specifically *Decree No. 250 on Additional Measures to Ensure the Information Security of the Russian Federation*—reveals a legal architecture explicitly engineered to criminalize objective reporting and mandate alignment with state narratives. Furthermore, direct research into Russian state media materials demonstrates how these mandates are executed operationally. In a baseline broadcast analysis of Rossiya-1's flagship program *Vesti Nedeli* with Dmitry Kiselyov, the invasion is consistently structured through a tightly regulated lexical framework. The term "war" (*voina*) is strictly prohibited, replaced uniformly by the sterile, bureaucratized construct "special military operation" (*spetsialnaya voennaya operatsiya*). This controlled linguistic output reveals a calculated effort to insulate the domestic population from the geopolitical realities of state aggression, altering language to regulate collective psychological and emotional behavior.

Within this carefully curated reality, the invasion of Ukraine has never been presented as a war. By controlling language, the state controls emotional response. Narrative engineers on channels such as Rossiya-1 and Channel One do not merely report events; they dramatize them. They construct a storyline in which Russia is not the aggressor, but the victim – a besieged fortress defending itself against a decadent and hostile West that allegedly uses Ukraine as a battering ram.

This narrative architecture performs a crucial function. It preemptively neutralizes moral responsibility. If a Russian citizen believes that their country is fighting "Nazis" or preventing an inevitable NATO attack, the moral burden of war is effectively erased. In this context, disinformation operates as a form of psychological anesthesia for the population.

When a missile strikes a civilian building in Ukraine, Russian state media may simultaneously assert that:

- "The building was empty."

- "It was a Ukrainian missile that malfunctioned."
- "It was a military base rather than a civilian target."
- "The entire incident was staged with actors."

Such contradictory explanations generate a condition of learned helplessness. By eroding the very concept of objective truth, the state ensures that the population remains politically paralyzed. If nothing is definitively true, then no action appears meaningful, and it becomes safer to delegate political responsibility to the so-called professionals in the Kremlin. This structural strategy illustrates how modern information monopolies weaponize digital ecosystems to generate persistent internal conformity<sup>14</sup>.

Domestic disinformation relies heavily on emotional resonance, particularly through the instrumentalization of history. The most powerful element in this arsenal is the memory of the Second World War, referred to in Russia as the Great Patriotic War. The Kremlin has effectively anchored the current conflict to the sacred legacy of the fight against Hitler.

By labeling Ukraine's leadership as "neo-Nazi," despite the fact that Ukraine's president is Jewish, the Russian leadership exploits deep intergenerational trauma. This is not mere propaganda; it is identity politics. Questioning the "special military operation" becomes symbolically equivalent to questioning the sacrifices of one's grandparents. Political dissent is thus reframed as a form of cultural betrayal.

This historical revisionism produces a rally-around-the-flag effect. It transforms geopolitical territorial expansion into a sacred war of survival. The disinformation apparatus continually reinforces the idea that Russia represents the last bastion of traditional values – faith, family, and order – standing against a chaotic and morally corrupt liberal world. This binary worldview renders compromise impossible and justifies extreme measures, including censorship and the imprisonment of dissenters.

In Russia, major media outlets are state-con-

14 Galeotti, M. (2022). The weaponisation of everything: A field guide to the new century of conflict. *Europe-Asia Studies*, 74(5), 844–861.

trolled, enabling the government to dictate narratives to the public. News coverage frequently emphasizes victimhood, historical claims to Ukrainian territory, and the portrayal of Ukraine as an existential threat. At the same time, the Kremlin actively exploits social media platforms to disseminate false narratives and amplify societal divisions.

Bots and troll networks spread disinformation with the aim of influencing specific demographic groups and sowing discord. The Russian government frequently employs historical revisionism to legitimize its actions. By framing the conflict in Ukraine as the reunification of "historically Russian lands," the narrative appeals to national pride and collective memory, thereby reinforcing public support for military operations.

The Russian government presents its military intervention in Ukraine as a "special operation" undertaken to protect Russian-speaking populations. This framing recasts Russia as a defender rather than an aggressor, resonates with nationalist sentiment, and strengthens public backing for the war. Furthermore, disinformation campaigns portray Ukraine and its allies as fascists or neo-Nazis, thereby undermining their legitimacy. This framing provides a moral justification for military action and presents it as a necessary measure to protect Russian citizens and preserve national identity.<sup>15</sup>

By portraying external threats, such as NATO expansion, the Kremlin cultivates an atmosphere of fear, suggesting that swift and decisive action is necessary to safeguard national security. This manufactured sense of urgency strengthens public support for the war effort and encourages citizens to rally more closely around the government's narrative, reinforcing collective alignment with state objectives. Recent academic findings indicate that this systematic orchestration of internal fear functions as an essential, defensive regime safeguard during periods of external military overextension.<sup>16</sup>

The societal impact of this disinformation strategy is significantly deeper. Many Russian cit-

izens are compelled to endorse the government's narrative, while dissenting views are increasingly perceived as unpatriotic or illegitimate. This dynamic of enforced conformity is further entrenched by state propaganda, which suppresses independent thought and obstructs critical engagement with alternative perspectives. The pervasive nature of disinformation undermines critical thinking, making it progressively more difficult for individuals to distinguish factual reality from manipulated or false information.<sup>17</sup>

Moreover, disinformation actively contributes to societal polarization and internal division. Citizens may become increasingly fragmented along ideological lines, a process that fuels social tension and ultimately consolidates governmental control. As public opinion grows more fragmented, the space for constructive dialogue diminishes, weakening the foundations of pluralism and reducing the capacity of society to engage in meaningful debate.

## THE IMPACT OF RUSSIAN DISINFORMATION IN UKRAINE

Russia's invasion of Ukraine began long before the first tank crossed the border in February 2022. For years, Ukraine served as the primary testing ground for Russian information warfare. The objective was not merely to mislead, but to dismantle Ukrainian identity both internally and externally by exploiting linguistic differences, regional histories, and political grievances until the state itself would collapse.

Prior to the full-scale invasion, the Kremlin's disinformation strategy in Ukraine was highly surgical in nature. It sought to widen existing social fractures into insurmountable divisions. Through pro-Russian television channels and extensive networks of social media bots, narratives were carefully tailored to specific regions.

In the Russian-speaking eastern and southern regions, the dominant message was fear: "Kyiv will ban your language" or "the West wants to turn your factories into scrap". In western Ukraine, the

15 Presl, D. (2024). Russia is winning the global information war. *RUSI*.

16 Stent, A. (2024). The Putin regime and the weaponization of history. *Survival*, 66(1), 45–62.

17 Momtaz, R. (2024). Taking the pulse: Are information operations Russia's most potent weapon against Europe? *Strategic Europe*.

narrative shifted, portraying the eastern regions as a “dead weight” dragging the country back into its Soviet past. The aim was to paralyze the state through polarization, to cultivate a sense of internal exhaustion, and to present Moscow’s “strong hand” as the only viable source of stability<sup>18</sup>. This operational deployment proves that targeted digital operations are systematically designed to break civic cohesion prior to formal military interventions<sup>19</sup>.

Within this narrative framework, Ukraine was depicted not as a sovereign nation, but as a “failed state” or “Project Ukraine” – an artificial construct allegedly controlled by Western puppeteers. By persistently questioning the legitimacy of the Ukrainian government, the disinformation apparatus anticipated that, once the invasion began, Ukrainians would be unwilling to fight for a state they had been conditioned to distrust and resent.

When the invasion commenced on 24 February 2022, the disinformation strategy shifted immediately from sowing discord to inducing panic and capitulation. Alongside the physical battle for Kyiv, a digital battle was launched for the minds of Ukrainians.

The most striking example of this effort was the deepfake incident involving President Volodymyr Zelensky. A manipulated video circulated online showing the president standing at a podium and urging Ukrainian soldiers to lay down their arms and surrender. Simultaneously, Russian bot networks flooded Telegram channels with claims that the government had fled, the army had collapsed, and resistance was futile.

This constituted a “decapitation strike” aimed at national morale. The logic was straightforward: if the population believed that its leader had abandoned them, the will to resist would evaporate. This represented a twenty-first-century siege tactic – instead of cutting off food and water, the objective was to sever hope itself. This rapid convergence of synthetic media manipulation with frontline combat operations marks an evolutionary milestone in structural information warfare<sup>20</sup>.

18 McGlynn, J. (2023). *Memory Makers: The Politics of the Past in Putin’s Russia*. Bloomsbury Academic.

19 Pamment, J. (2022). The protocol of disinformation: How state actors deploy strategic deception. *Journal of Communication*, 72(1), 89–107.

20 Yablokov, I. (2022). Digital media and state propa-

However, the Kremlin fundamentally miscalculated the resilience of Ukraine’s information space. Rather than collapsing, Ukrainian society unified with a speed that surprised external observers.

Several factors contributed to this resilience.

- **Immunization:** Following eight years of hybrid warfare in Donbas since 2014, Ukrainians developed a form of “herd immunity” to Russian narratives. They had been exposed to the rhetoric of a “failed state” for too long to accept it at face value.
- **Horizontal communication:** Unlike the top-down Russian model, Ukrainian resistance was network-based. Citizens used messaging applications not only to share news, but also to organize logistics and verify information locally. When Russian media declared that a city had fallen, residents could simply look out of their windows, take photographs, and refute the falsehood in real time.
- **Humor as a shield:** Ukrainians transformed humor into a weapon. Memes depicting tractors towing tanks or stories from Snake Island became digital rallying cries. Humor rendered the terrifying image of the “invincible Russian army” manageable and, at times, even absurd.

The Zelensky deepfake was swiftly neutralized by the president himself, who released simple, handheld videos filmed on the streets of Kyiv, declaring, “I am here. We are all here”. The contrast between the rigid artificiality of the deepfake and the tangible reality of a president standing in the streets dismantled the Russian narrative of abandonment.

When the Russian disinformation apparatus realized that it could not persuade the Ukrainian population to accept Russian forces as liberators, it entered a darker phase, one defined by terror.

The narrative shifted from “we are here to save you from Nazis” to messaging aimed at breaking the psychological will of the civilian population. This included spreading rumors of imminent chemical attacks, exaggerating the threat of nuclear strikes, and asserting that specific cities

ganda in contemporary Russia. *Media, Culture & Society*, 44(6), 1102–1119.

would be “wiped off the map” in order to provoke mass evacuation and chaos<sup>21</sup>. This operational pivot from persuasion to intimidation underlines how disinformation is dynamically adapted when encountering robust social resistance.<sup>22</sup>

In the occupied territories, this strategy generated a profound informational vacuum. Russian forces frequently destroyed Ukraine’s internet and mobile infrastructure, replacing it with Russian-controlled networks that blocked access to external news sources. Within these so-called informational ghettos, propaganda vehicles disseminated claims that Kyiv had already surrendered or that Ukraine was bombing its own population. This form of disinformation functioned as an instrument of occupation – isolating individuals from their lived reality in order to make them feel abandoned, disconnected, and forgotten.

The impact of Russian disinformation on Ukraine has been deep and far-reaching, shaping public perception and altering the narrative surrounding the ongoing conflict. As the war continued, the Kremlin employed a variety of information manipulation tactics aimed at generating confusion and sowing discord among Ukrainians. This disinformation campaign has not merely served as a weapon of war, but has evolved into a central strategy for undermining Ukraine’s sovereignty and societal resilience.

One of the most significant aspects of Russian disinformation lies in its ability to exploit existing divisions within Ukrainian society. By promoting narratives that emphasize ethnic and linguistic differences, the Kremlin seeks to deepen social fragmentation. This strategy has proven particularly effective in regions with substantial Russian-speaking populations, where it draws upon grievances and historical ties. By portraying itself as a protector of these regions, Russia attempts to legitimize its actions, secure public support, and simultaneously discredit the Ukrainian government<sup>23</sup>. Recent empirical research verifies that

these regional efforts were designed to destroy localized civil trust and degrade state-level resistance networks.<sup>24</sup>

Moreover, Russia’s disinformation efforts extend beyond conventional propaganda and encompass tactical disinformation. In the early stages of the conflict, the Kremlin circulated false information regarding Ukraine’s military capabilities and intentions, suggesting that the country was on the verge of collapse. This narrative was designed to demoralize both the Ukrainian population and its armed forces by fostering an atmosphere of despair and uncertainty. By undermining trust in Ukraine’s defensive capacity, Russia hoped to facilitate a rapid and decisive victory.<sup>25</sup>

Social media played a decisive role in amplifying these disinformation efforts. Platforms such as Facebook and Twitter have been saturated with misleading narratives and so-called “fake news,” often disseminated by bots and troll networks that create the illusion of widespread support for Russian claims. These information flows significantly complicate the ability of ordinary citizens to distinguish verified facts from fabricated content, thereby increasing confusion and susceptibility to manipulation. This widespread digital pollution demonstrates how modern communication networks can be exploited to weaken institutional integrity during active crises.<sup>26</sup>

The consequences of this disinformation campaign extend far beyond immediate military objectives. They also entail long-term strategic effects. By fostering skepticism toward governments and legitimate media outlets, Russian disinformation undermines public trust in democratic institutions. This erosion of trust can generate civic apathy, reduce public participation in civic life, and facilitate the entrenchment of Russian narratives within both domestic and international audiences.<sup>27</sup>

21 Giles, K. (2022). *Russia’s War on Everybody: And What It Means for You*. Bloomsbury Academic.

22 Kuzio, T. (2023). Imperial nationalism and disinformation in Russia’s war against Ukraine. *Post-Soviet Affairs*, 39(2), 115–134.

23 Walker, C., & Ludwig, J. (2017). The meaning of sharp power: How authoritarian states project influence. *Foreign Affairs*.

24 Lutsevych, O. (2023). Civil society and resilience in Ukraine: Countering authoritarian influence. *International Affairs*, 99(3), 895–912.

25 Global Rights Compliance. (2025). New report exposes Russia’s strategic disinformation warfare.

26 Wagnsson, C., & Barzanje, C. (2021). A pioneer of information warfare: Deconstructing Russian narrative strategies. *Defense & Security Analysis*, 37(2), 187–205.

27 Topor, L., & Tabachnik, A. (2021). *Russian Cyber In-*

Despite these challenges, Ukraine has demonstrated notable resilience in countering disinformation. The government has launched initiatives aimed at promoting media literacy, equipping citizens with the skills necessary to identify and reject false narratives. In parallel, Ukrainian civil society has mobilized to establish fact-checking organizations and independent media outlets that actively counter Russian propaganda and provide credible information. This collaborative civil-state mobilization offers a critical blueprint for democratic preservation against persistent authoritarian informational attack.<sup>28</sup>

In conclusion, Russia's use of disinformation as an instrument of governance within the context of the war in Ukraine illustrates the profound societal impact of information manipulation. Through narrative control, the demonization of opposition, and the framing of the conflict in terms of national identity, the Kremlin effectively legitimizes its actions both domestically and on the international stage. Recognizing and confronting disinformation is therefore essential for fostering a more informed and resilient society capable of navigating the complexities of contemporary geopolitics.<sup>29</sup>

At the same time, the impact of Russian disinformation in Ukraine remains a complex and evolving challenge. By exploiting social divisions, disseminating false narratives, and weakening trust in democratic institutions, Russia seeks to advance its strategic objectives. Nevertheless, Ukraine's sustained response, characterized by media literacy initiatives and robust civil society engagement, underscores the critical importance of countering disinformation and safeguarding democratic integrity. As the conflict continues, the struggle against disinformation will remain a key front in the defense of Ukraine's sovereignty and future.

## CONCLUSION

The Russia-Ukraine war constitutes a severe stress test for the international system. It has demonstrated that existing mechanisms of protection are insufficient when confronted with a major power willing to violate established rules, particularly when that power employs disinformation to fracture and delay global responses.

The world now finds itself in a post-collapse phase of the international system. For societies seeking to move forward, the challenge lies not only in halting armed conflict on the ground, but also in determining how to restore a shared sense of law and truth in a world that has learned how easily both can be undermined.

Through a comprehensive examination, this research has firmly established that Russian disinformation operates not as an auxiliary tool of military power, but as a central mechanism of authoritarian governance and systematic international destabilization. Empirically, the study demonstrates that while strategic deception effectively enforces internal conformity and generates learned helplessness domestically, its capacity to alter outcomes diminishes significantly when confronted by the physical realities of kinetic warfare and structured societal resilience.

The primary analytical results indicate that the resilience of an information space depends directly on decentralized, horizontal communication networks and early state-civil society synchronization. The main academic contribution of this paper to the ongoing global debate is the presentation of an integrated, two-way analytical model showing how domestic regime protection and external hybrid aggression are inextricably linked. It offers a framework for assessing information operations not merely as misleading communication, but as structural threats to state sovereignty.

In contemporary Russia, disinformation is not a side effect of governance; it is governance itself. The regime maintains power not solely through coercive force, but through the management of collective imagination. By constructing a parallel reality in which Russia is always righteous and perpetually under threat, the Kremlin creates a closed informational loop that is extraordinarily difficult to penetrate from within.

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*formation Warfare: International Distribution and Domestic Control.* Marine Corps University.

28 Fedchenko, O. (2022). Fact-checking as a weapon against hybrid threats: The Ukrainian experience. *Journal of Slavic Military Studies*, 35(3), 412–429.

29 Plokhly, S. (2023). *The Russo-Ukrainian War: The Return of History.* W. W. Norton & Company.

However, reliance on total informational control also generates structural vulnerability. A government that governs through falsehood ultimately fears truth more than military force. As the war prolongs and the gap between televised narratives and everyday economic reality widens, the durability of this artificial world faces its most serious test.

The impact of Russian disinformation on Ukraine serves as a critical case study for examining the limits of propaganda. Although it successfully sowed confusion in the years preceding the war, it failed its ultimate test. When missiles began to fall, the Kremlin's abstract narratives collided with the concrete realities of invasion and destruction.

Ukraine's experience suggests that while disinformation can weaken societies in times of peace, it can also strengthen resistance in times of war

when falsehoods stand in stark contradiction to lived experience.

Ultimately, this study brings a transformative interpretation to the global scholarly discussion by demonstrating that the modern crisis of international order is fundamentally an epistemic one. It argues that hybrid warfare cannot be neutralized solely through conventional military deterrence or economic sanctions; it requires the active defense of objective truth.

This paper shows that the systematic deconstruction of factual reality by authoritarian states acts as a direct precursor to territorial expansion and institutional paralysis. For contemporary international relations, this insight is critical. It moves the academic focus beyond technical media literacy and establishes information security as a core element of state sovereignty and global collective security in the twenty-first century.

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