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## The danger of Russian disinformation



*The European Union flag is displayed between two soccer club banners on the Royal Post Office, the seat of the office of the president of Madrid. (Gerard Julien/Agence France-Presse via Getty Images)*

by [Anne Applebaum](#) and Edward Lucas

Fifteen years ago, the idea that foreign disinformation might be a problem for European countries seemed ludicrous. Free media looked as triumphant as free markets; Western television and newspapers had comfortable funding and big audiences. But the business model that once supported media across the continent, indeed all across the West, no longer works. Much Western journalism is poorly resourced, and the proliferation of information has made it harder for people to judge the accuracy of what they see and read.

At the same time, authoritarian regimes, led by Russia but closely followed by China, have begun investing heavily in the production of alternatives. Because national media is often weak, it has become far easier for channels such as [RT](#) (formerly Russia Today) and [Sputnik](#) (a Russian “news” agency) to establish credibility in smaller European markets. But even in larger countries, the Russian use of social media as well as a huge range of online vehicles — “news” websites, information portals, trolls — are beginning to have an impact. Chancellor Angela Merkel tasked Germany’s spy agency with investigating the Russian use of propaganda in Germany after [a fake story](#) about a girl allegedly raped by a refugee blew up into a major scandal, thanks in part to a concerted Russian online effort.

The messages have little in common with Cold War propaganda. Russia does not seek to promote itself, but rather to undermine the institutions of the West, often using discordant messages. RT pumps out scare stories about migrants, and also portrays the West as racist and xenophobic. Russian-backed websites promote conspiracy theories — 9/11 was an “inside job,” Zika was created by the CIA — while ridiculing the excellent Western investigative journalism that revealed the ties among Russian politics, business, organized crime and intelligence.

These messages, which are picked up and used by both far-left and far-right political parties across Europe, chime with Kremlin foreign policy goals. The European Union is a particular target, and no wonder: The E.U. has been instrumental in weaning the continent away from dependence on Russian gas and in dismantling the corrupt and exploitative Russian gas-export model in Eastern Europe. NATO, which belatedly is coming to grips with the real threat that Russia poses to some of its members, is regularly cast as an aggressor.

Some countries are waking up to this, especially those that have been hardest hit. The invasion, occupation and dismemberment of Ukraine in 2014 was preceded by a highly effective propaganda blitz that fomented confusion in Russian-speaking areas and blinded both Ukrainians and Westerners to what was really going on. In response, Ukrainian organizations such as [StopFake](#) began to expose and ridicule Russian propaganda. A major project designed to teach “media literacy” has also been launched. A debate about the role that public broadcasters might play in reestablishing trusted sources of information in Ukraine has begun.

There have been broader attempts to tackle the problem. [The European Endowment for Democracy](#) (a much smaller counterpart to the [National Endowment for Democracy](#)) has carried out a comprehensive analysis of the Russian-language media, its reach and its impact. The [European External Action Service](#), the E.U.’s foreign-policy arm, compiles weekly disinformation bulletins, tracking the activities of the Kremlin’s myth-makers. NATO countries have set up a small center, based in Latvia, that responds to Russian disinformation as well.

But so far, the United States has failed to invest seriously in understanding or pushing back against this problem. There is no modern equivalent to the [U.S. Information Agency](#), an organization dedicated to coping with Soviet propaganda and disinformation during the Cold War. Although there has been some extra funding for U.S.-backed foreign broadcasters such as [Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty](#), they cannot provide a complete response.

Partly because the U.S. media market is so vast, there is still little understanding of how disinformation campaigns work here either. There is certainly no public analytical database of what Russia says, when and where. Nobody — even in the Western intelligence community — compiles transcripts. Nor do we know which elements of the Russian message are effective, who believes them and why. It's high time we learned, because other countries, notably China, are beginning to use some of the same techniques. Fifteen years ago, the free press seemed unchallengeable; 15 years from now, we may find ourselves, as Ukraine did two years ago, the targets of disinformation campaigns we are unprepared to fight.

*Anne Applebaum, a Post columnist, and Edward Lucas, a senior editor at the Economist, are this week launching a counter-disinformation initiative at the Center for European Policy Analysis, where they are, respectively, senior vice president and senior adjunct fellow.*

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