NATO STRATEGIC COMMUNICATIONS CENTRE OF EXCELLENCE

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INVITATION TO TENDER

ANALYSIS OF RUSSIAN INFORMATION OPERATIONS OUTSIDE OF THE WESTERN INFORMATION ENVIRONMENT

To be supplied to the NATO Strategic Communications Centre of Excellence (NATO StratCom COE)

Revision	Version 1
Release Date	**15 February 2024**
Issuer	Mr. Mario Nicolini, Senior Expert, NATO StratCom COE
Service providers Response date	**18 March 2024** submitted via e-mail tender@stratcomcoe.org by 23:59 hrs (Eastern European Time zone: UTC +02:00).

Invitation to Tender for the Analysis of Russian Information Operations outside of the Western Information Environment

You are kindly invited to submit a project proposal to provide research on Russian information operations outside of the Western information environment.

By participating in this tender you are indicating your acceptance to be bound by the guidelines set out in this document. Please acknowledge safe receipt of this letter within two working days and your confirmation of your intention to tender within seven working days, both via e-mail to: Mario.Nicolini@stratcomcoe.org.

To simplify exchange of information regarding this Invitation to Tender (ITT) please nominate a Bid Manager and relevant phone and e-mail address contact details.

The NATO StratCom COE reserves the right to disqualify and reject proposals from service providers who do not comply with these guidelines. All questions should be submitted in writing to the e-mail: Mario.Nicolini@stratcomcoe.org.

Please direct any questions regarding the ITT content or process to Mr. Mario Nicolini. You should not contact other NATO StratCom COE personnel unless asked to do so by the appointed NATO StratCom COE representative.

The NATO StratCom COE makes no obligations in any way to:

(i) pay any service provider for an ITT response;
(ii) award the contract with the lowest price proposal or any service provider; or
(iii) accept any ITT information received from service providers not covering the full set of requirements; or
(iv) include service providers responding to this ITT, in any future invitations; or
(v) any other commitment to service providers whatsoever.

I look forward to receiving your response.

Yours sincerely,

Mr. Mario Nicolini
Senior Expert, Operational Support Branch
E-mail address: Mario.Nicolini@stratcomcoe.org

Whilst care and attention has been exercised in the preparation of this document, it remains subject to contract, and all warranties, whether expressed or implied by statute, law or otherwise, are hereby disclaimed and excluded.

These limitations are not intended to restrict continued business discussions between the NATO StratCom COE and service providers.

Any proposal received by the NATO StratCom COE is subject to contract with the NATO StratCom COE.

Table of Contents

1. Introduction

1.1. The NATO Strategic Communications Centre of Excellence (NATO StratCom COE), based in Riga, Latvia, contributes to StratCom capabilities within the Alliance, the Allied nations, and Partners. The NATO StratCom COE designs programmes to advance StratCom doctrine development, harmonization and implementation, conducts research and experimentation to find practical solutions to existing challenges, identifies lessons from applied StratCom during operations, and enhances training and education efforts and interoperability.

1.2. NATO StratCom COE is running a tender to conduct analysis of Russian information operations outside of the Western information environment.

1.3. The contract will be awarded within two weeks after the announcement of the winner. The contract shall be completed by **31 December 2024**.

2. Background

In the war against Ukraine, Russian narratives are spreading and resonating in Latin America, Africa and Asia. There is a need for more detailed descriptions of the tactics, methods, and actors used by Russia and China framing the West and Western agendas to adversely influence perceptions in third nations. NATO StratCom COE's broad horizon focus requires a more structured analysis of specified countries outside of the Western information environment, particularly those currently or emerging as highly relevant targets of Russian information operations.

3. Requirements

3.1. The project aims to provide an assessment of Russian information operations outside of the Western information environment, especially related to the war in Ukraine, and the possible ramifications for Western countries in the short to medium term (1-3 years), focusing on a set of case studies. The work should provide practical support to public communicators of NATO member nations, Partners, and stakeholders in third countries in order to educate decision-makers and select audiences on Russian disinformation efforts and effects; enhance resilience capabilities; and enable the ability to promote the international rules-based order, values and interests, as well as to mitigate, counter and disrupt malign foreign influence.

3.2. The main output will be an analytical study which will seek to answer the following research questions:

A. Concerning Russia's information operations:
   1) To which audiences is communication targeted?
   2) Which Russian narratives are resonating in the countries concerned, and why (i.e. what current or historical issues may be causing audience resonance with the narratives)?
   3) Who are the main actors of communication?
   4) What are the identifying characteristics of assessed or observed deliberate information operations?
   5) What tactics, techniques and procedures are used in these operations?
   6) What are the observable effects of these operations?
   7) Is there any evidence of Chinese information operations, and if so, can evidence of convergence in Sino-Russian information operations be identified?

B. Concerning Western strategic communications:
   1) Which narratives compatible with Western values and interests are working in the countries concerned?
   2) Which are the most amenable audiences, and why?
   3) Who are influential and credible actors communicating such narratives and themes, who may be considered as potential allies?

C. What are the short- to medium-term (1-3 years) ramifications for Western countries in terms of:
   1) Voting in international bodies including the UN Security Council and UN General Assembly.
   2) How have Russia, China and pro-Sino-Russian actors in the region framed critical national issues in their favour? *Issues to be defined by further research.*
   3) Local perceptions of deployed UN, NATO, EU forces and international military assistance in Sahel, Western Africa and South/Southeast Asia.

3.3. The deliverables include the following:

3.3.1. In cooperation with the NATO StratCom COE and its partners, review the common methodology developed in 2023 to analyze the information environment applicable to a wide range of case studies from Asia, Africa, and Latin America (please see Annex 1). This line of effort should consider lessons learned from the application of the methodology in 2023 and tested methods applied by government institutions, international organizations, and the private sector.

3.3.2. Produce case studies based on the common methodology as described in 3.3.1., focusing on critical national issues in India, Indonesia, Ivory Coast, Niger and Burkina Faso. Country-based research should highlight regional and subnational connections if Russia exploits international or subnational (e.g. tribal) approaches in the region. Each case study should be approximately 5 000 – 6 500 words in length, excluding references, footnotes, and appendices.

3.3.3. Develop conclusions and policy recommendations.

3.3.4. Develop an executive summary based on the research report of around 2 000 words in length.

3.3.5. Deliver briefing(s) of the key findings of the research to cross-government stakeholders and civil society actors as relevant organized and funded by the NATO StratCom COE.

3.4. The research should be published by the NATO StratCom COE on its website and possibly in printed form.

3.5. NATO StratCom COE is looking to contract one service provider to implement all deliverables listed above. The service provider must provide all parts (paragraph 3.3.) of the research. The service provider is encouraged to partner or subcontract with experts and/or NGOs in the countries or regions covered by the report in order to analyse and interpret data, conduct interviews (as relevant), and disseminate the outputs.

3.6. The service provider is expected to actively solicit and integrate inputs by the NATO StratCom COE and its partners by applying a fully transparent and inclusive process throughout the project period. This may include overseeing additional contributors in order to ensure, in particular, the application of the common methodology and the overall coherence of the output.

3.7. The NATO StratCom COE suggests the employment of advanced information environment monitoring tools, which allow analysis in local languages.

3.8. The service provider is expected to participate in a review process of the submitted report and incorporate feedback from the NATO StratCom COE into the work, and offer suggestions and data for graphs, illustrations and supporting material for the final publication of the report.

3.9. The service provider should be prepared to travel (or connect virtually should the pandemic situation prevent travel) in order to present the outcomes of the research at events organised and funded by the NATO StratCom COE, including but not limited to:
   A. Workshop in June 2024 (date tbc);
   B. Workshop in October 2024 (date tbc);
   C. Briefing of the key findings of the research (date tbc);
   D. Exact details will be clarified during Contract negotiations.

3.10. The service provider is expected to submit the analytical study in academic English language, providing appropriate referencing, following the NATO StratCom COE style guide. The NATO StratCom COE is responsible for the English language editing as necessary, the layout, and the printing of the publication as decided.

3.11. The service provider is expected to provide relevant data sets produced in the research process (for example, data collected through analytical tools, documents, publications, interviews, surveys, etc.).

3.12. The service provider is expected to facilitate the application of the methodology in further research, including by other stakeholders, and participate in a potential methodology review in 2025 as decided by NATO StratCom COE.

4. Reporting (timings approximate)

4.1. Meeting to clarify and confirm the approach, scope, research objectives and delivery process as soon as the tender has been awarded (via videoconference or other means).

4.2. Reviewed methodology for review and comments by May 31, 2024.

4.3. Review of top critical national issues in each country concerned based on initial data collection with a recommendation of which to select for research by May 31, 2024.

4.4. Initial draft of the report (including raw data) by September 30, 2024.

4.5. Final report delivered for review and comments by November 15, 2024.

4.6. NATO StratCom COE may request progress updates throughout the project period.

5. Tender Submission

5.1. The tender submission should consist of:

5.1.1. A brief written proposal (around 5 pages) for the delivery of the work (see parts 3.2 and 3.3 in Requirements). The proposal should be based on the common methodology produced in 2023 (please see Annex 1). It should outline a conceptual approach toward conducting the analysis of the large nations of India and Indonesia to deliver the required results; an overview of what data would be collected by what information environment analysis tool; and how data would be managed and owned. Describe the information environment analysis tools the service provider intends to use in producing the report, and include links to previous research using such tools if available.

5.1.2. A total budget for the full proposal and a budget breakdown, in EUR (with VAT and without VAT; other tax must be clearly specified for each budget position, marked as zero where not applicable). Provide budget estimates for each output, indicating the costs for:
   A. Methodology review;
   B. Case studies of India, Indonesia, Ivory Coast, Niger, and Burkina Faso – include individual breakdown per country;
   C. Conclusions and policy recommendations;
   D. Executive summary;
   E. The budget should include milestones for suggested payments.

5.1.3. Copy of service provider's Certificate issued by the national Commercial Register or a national Register covering other types of legal entity (for example, civil society organisations). If that is not applicable (for example, the Service provider is an individual), please provide an explanatory statement and a different form of a document confirming your identity and, if possible, a permit to engage in a commercial activity.

5.2. Evidence of experience working with international customers or participation in international projects of a similar nature concerning Africa and Asia, and strategic communications. The following information is required for the service provider to be eligible for selection:

5.2.1. Statement of previous relevant work experience from the last three years, e.g. links to publicly available sources.

5.2.2. Profile of key personnel working on the Contract delivery providing evidence of their skills and experience. The service provider should indicate the roles of the personnel working on the Contract delivery and the approximate time allocated to different phases.

5.3. Information regarding persons or entities that the service provider may choose to sub-contract for work on the Contract delivery (company or person's name, other relevant credentials, e.g. company registration number, website address, contacts, etc., and a short company profile or person's biography).

6. Timetable

General	
Confirmation of bid	Please confirm you have submitted your bid by notifying Mario.Nicolini@stratcomcoe.org
Deadline for submission	**23:59 hrs (Eastern European Time zone: UTC +02:00) on 18 March 2024**
Contract implementation period	**Upon agreement**
Questions	Questions arising from this document should be addressed to Mr. Mario Nicolini until 8 March 2024 at the latest
Full contact details	Mr. Mario Nicolini, Mario.Nicolini@stratcomcoe.org, +371 28 7878 51

7. Respondent Instructions

7.1. A written proposal is required that complies with the indicated requirements (see Section 5. Tender Submission). The proposal should be submitted electronically using an official email of the entity, in PDF format (and Word/Excel format by request).

7.2. The file(s) should be submitted to: tender@stratcomcoe.org by 23:59 hrs (Eastern European Time zone: UTC +02:00) on **18 March 2024**.

7.3. Submissions after the deadline will not be considered.

7.4. The service provider is expected to supply the required information or state clearly any reason for being unable to do so.

7.5. Any assumptions used in preparing responses should be clearly stated. Any appropriate supporting documents (brochures, demo videos, presentations) should be included.

7.6. If any of the requested documents in section 5 (Tender Submission) is not submitted, the Contract Award Committee has the right to exclude the service provider from further participation in the procurement.

7.7. Questions relating to clarification of the ITT will only be accepted in writing to NATO StratCom COE representative. Likewise, all responses from the Centre will be written and may also be made available to other service providers (subject to confidentiality). In the event that any answer materially affects the ITT specification, an amendment of the original requirements will be sent to all service providers. The NATO StratCom COE will attempt to answer any questions within two working days of receipt of that request; otherwise it will respond within that timescale notifying the service provider of the estimated time to obtain the information.

7.8. The NATO StratCom COE reserves the right to modify the provisions of this ITT at any time prior to the scheduled date for written responses. Additional scope and requirements can be added. Notification of such changes will be provided to all service providers.

7.9. Should the service provider wish to propose a deviation from the specification please ensure that you clearly identify and highlight where appropriate in your response.

7.10. All information supplied in this tender to date, any further information supplied during the tender process will remain confidential and available only to the Contract Award Committee members.

8. Tender Assessments

8.1. Evaluation Criteria and Process. A set of evaluation criteria has been prepared by the NATO StratCom COE for the evaluation of every submission. At each stage an initial evaluation will consider whether or not every instruction and requirement contained within the ITT has been fulfilled.

8.2. Evaluation criteria is based on “best value”, an objective assessment by the Contract Awarding Committee as to who offers the best combination of price and service. The following is considered, in order of no significance:

8.2.1. Cost and budget breakdown;

8.2.2. Quality of service provision (based on the evidence provided);

8.2.3. Previous experience with conducting similar projects; developing analysis of open source data; and qualifications on Africa and Asia, and strategic communications of the key personnel working on the Contract delivery;

8.2.4. Experience of cooperation with government institutions and/or international organisations;

8.2.5. Level of compliance with the requirements, reporting and deliverables of the ITT.

8.3. The service provider is reminded that through the process the NATO StratCom COE will continually assess all contact with the service providers' organizations including compliance to the process and presentation. The NATO StratCom COE reserves the right at its sole discretion to disqualify without further consideration any submission that does not satisfy this basic requirement.

8.4. The NATO StratCom COE reserves the right to modify the scope of this tender, after receiving the bids, to include price estimates.

9. Decision Announcement to Participants

The NATO StratCom COE reserves the right to control the format and content of any such announcement, and to limit it in any way believed by the NATO StratCom COE to be appropriate (which includes the right to not provide any explanation).

10. Contract Details

Contractual and payment details are subject to negotiation with the selected service provider.

INVITATION TO TENDER FOR ANALYSIS OF RUSSIAN INFORMATION OPERATIONS OUTSIDE OF THE WESTERN INFORMATION ENVIRONMENT

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The following text outlines the common methodology applied to the case studies conducted in 2023. For research purposes in 2024, it is expected that this methodology will be reviewed and subsequently applied to further case studies, consistent with the provisions of the Invitation to Tender to which this document is attached. In instances where parameters of research in 2024 differ from those of 2023, such as the selection of case studies or the Research Questions, the Invitation to Tender takes precedence.

The research took the recognised methodology of case study research, analysing "a phenomenon occurring in a bounded context".[1] These phenomena were significant themes within the selected countries. However, if other significant political ramifications were evident, the case studies highlighted those, such that they were examining the best thematic narratives to follow to answer the research questions. All results were validated through triangulation of various sources and methods including digital data collection and analysis; reviews and cross-referencing with existing research; and Key Insight Interviews (KIIs).

The research followed an empirical inductively based mixed method exploratory sequential design[2], whereby, for each country, a literature review identified relevant case studies and informed the design of questions for the KIIs which subsequently informed the quantitative examination of the relevant geographic and temporal digital space by providing on the ground perspective of critical timeframes and events.

This methodology was critically reviewed by the COE community of interest, including through an in-person workshop held in June 2023 and a period for comment and review later that month. After adjustments, the final methodology was submitted and approved in late June.

Research questions (RQs)

A. Concerning Russia's information operations:

1. To which audiences is communication targeted?
2. Which Russian narratives are resonating in the countries concerned?
3. What are the current and historical circumstances of those affected countries likely to be creating a receptive environment to Russian narratives?
4. Who are the main actors of communication?
5. Can targeted operations be identified?
6. What tactics, techniques and procedures are used in these operations?
7. Are local media manipulated and instrumentalised and how?
8. What are the effects of these operations?

B. Concerning Western strategic communications:

1. Which narratives compatible with Western values and interests are working in the countries concerned?
2. Which are the most susceptible audiences?
3. Who are the actors of communication, and can be considered as potential allies?

C. What are the short- and medium-term (1-3 years) ramifications for Western countries in terms of:

1. Voting in international bodies including the UN Security Council and UN General Assembly.
2. How have Russia and pro-Russian actors in the region framed the cost-of-living crisis in their favour?
3. How have Russia and pro-Russian actors in the region framed critical national issues in each country?
   a. Egypt – The cost-of-living crisis.
   b. Mali – Security and regime stability.
   c. Kenya – Traditional values and moral decay.

[1] Huberman, M. and Miles, M. (1994). 'Data management and analysis methods', in *Handbook of qualitative research*, ed. by Norman K. Denzin and Yvonna S. Lincoln. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
[2] Creswell, J. and Plano Clark, V.L. (2011). *Designing and Conducting Mixed Methods Research*. 2nd edn. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.

d. South Africa – The emerging multipolar world order and South Africa's place within it.
e. United Arab Emirates – Sanctions and unilateral Western economic measures.

Limitations

As specified in the proposal, the literature review and KIIs were largely conducted in English only. This initially limited the sample pool of potential interviewees to English speakers only. However, given limitations on the number of English speakers in Mali, several interviews were conducted in French.

The data collection and analysis used translation software to translate online social media content in the dominant languages of the specific country. However, such translation might have missed certain nuances. Thus, it was highly unlikely that this software produced highly accurate results for large documents or interview transcription. This created an information gap that limited insight and foresight into the issues being studied under this methodology.

The methodology also had limited scope for on-the-ground research beyond KIIs, which limited the ability to monitor oral media beyond secondary source research. It was likely that this impacted the levels of insight into the select countries, all of which typically had limited independent funding in media and a rich oral tradition that translated to the contemporary information environment.

The data collection and analysis were unable to access closed messaging platforms (e.g., WhatsApp and Telegram). Preliminary secondary source research indicated that such platforms played a critical role in the sharing of information and the spread of disinformation in the selected countries. Being unable to monitor them left an information gap that could only be filled by on-the-ground researchers who could access these platforms or contact those on them directly.

The list of research questions was extensive. The resources allocated to this research did not allow for a definitive examination of all of the RQs. Although the desk research and KIIs attempted to address all of the RQs, qualitative reporting required a degree of inference regarding causality, making key assumptions. Where such inferences were made, they were made explicit in the research report.

Literature review

The literature review was conducted in English or used pre-translated sources only, to establish insight into Russian and Western relations with each country and historical grievances within them, existing information environments in each of the select countries, and Russian information operations. This provided important context to inform the research and identified critical information gaps. The literature review was also used to establish definitions that anchored analysis going forward.

In brief, definitions for this methodology are:

- **Information Influence Operations (IIOs) –** the organised attempt by one or more actors to achieve a specific effect among a target audience, often using illegitimate and manipulative behaviour. IIOs draw on communicative tactics such as fabrication, false identities, malign rhetoric, symbolism, and technological advantages to exploit vulnerabilities in the information environment.[3] Can be applied at a strategic narrative level or a tactical targeted level.
- **Propaganda** – Information systematically disseminated by an organisation of actors with the purpose of influencing perceptions in favour of the actors' political narrative. Comes in the shades of **White, Grey and Black.** White is favourable facts. Grey is misleading information (or 'cherry-picked') or from a disguised source to increase its authenticity. Black is outright lies or falsehoods usually disseminated from a disguised source.[4]
- **Disinformation** – False or misleading information spread intentionally by an actor or actors to influence perceptions. Often but not always from a disguised source.[5]
- **Misinformation** – False or misleading information that is spread unintentionally, by error or by mistake.[6]

[3] Pamment, J. and Smith, V. "Attributing Information Influence Operations: Identifying those Responsible for Malicious Behaviour Online". NATO Stratcom CoE, July 19, 2022
[4] Guth, D.W. (2009) 'Black, white, and Shades of Gray: The Sixty-year debate over propaganda versus public diplomacy', in *Journal of Promotion Management*, 14(3–4), pp. 309–325. doi:10.1080/10496490802624083.
[5] Rich, M. and Kavanagh, J. (2018) 'Truth Decay: An Initial Exploration of the Diminishing Role of Facts and Analysis in American Public Life'. RAND
[6] Ibid.

- **Conspiracy theory** – Information that attempts to explain the ultimate causes of significant social and political events and circumstances with claims of secret plots by two or more powerful actors.[7]

Through the literature review, the research methodology was refined through an extensive examination of the **'**Theory of Reflexive Control' (ToRC, see below)[8], aspects of which form a core methodology for modern Russian information operations. Where such inferences were made, they were made explicit in the research report.

This enhanced our understanding of the Kremlin information tactics, techniques, and procedures (TTPs) and how they are scaled from specific events and social groupings all the way to a nation or region-wide level.

The analysis of the ToRC and Kremlin TTPs were further informed by existing research on Russian information operations. This included direct translated sources such as Messner's theory of 'subversion warfare'; Panarin's theory of 'information warfare'; Dugin's theory of 'net-centric warfare'; and Gerasimov's theory of 'New Adaptive Approach to the Use of Military Force'. It also included Western studies of Russian information warfare, including Thomas Rid's 'Active Measures' and previous research by the NATO StratCom COE.

Case studies

Case studies were selected to examine, and thus be representative or typical of specific, phenomena, namely Russian IIOs. Case studies were chosen via literal replication, not sampling, logic, as in, they were selected so as to have, not similar study characteristics, but rather similar, albeit contextually different, predicted results.[9] The initial set of countries were selected based on their international importance and to represent a cross-section of critical national issues pertinent to Russian information operations, which include food insecurity (Egypt, Mali, Kenya), energy security (UAE), trade & investment relationship with Russia (Mali, Egypt, UAE), military aspects (Mali), and political relevance to the West and Ukraine. Also considered was the political regime of the countries concerned and stability of government.

The selection of the proposed case study themes outlined in Table 1 below has been based on initial discussions at the COE's workshop held in June 2023, secondary source research and digital analysis. With a focus on energy and food security-linked phenomena, we also prioritised themes where we may see the greatest likelihood of Russian information operations activity and competing narratives.

Table 1: Case Study themes

Country	**Themes**
Mali	Security and Regime stability
Kenya	Traditional values and moral decay
Egypt	Cost of living crisis
South Africa	The multipolar world and South Africa's place in it
United Arab Emirates	Sanctions and unilateral Western economic measures

KIIs and qualitative analysis

The KIIs were conducted in English and French and then transcribed for subsequent thematic coding analysis (TCA).[10] They were limited to five per country, (due to time scarcity) unless exceptional circumstances. The selection criteria for potential interviewees included their recent, relevant academic or journalistic output, their political, security

[7] Douglas, K.M. et al. (2019) 'Understanding conspiracy theories' in *Political Psychology*, Vol. 40(1), pp. 3–35. doi:10.1111/pops.12568.
[8] Vasara, A. (2020) "Theory of Reflexive Control: Origins, Evolution and Application in the Framework of Contemporary Russian Military Strategy". National Defence University, Helsinki
[9] Yin, R.K. (2009) *Case Study Research: Design and Methods*. 4th edn. SAGE
[10] Saldana, J. (2021) *The Coding Manual for Qualitative Researchers*. SAGE

communications and/or media specialist knowledge, their local, cultural background and their recent proximity to the geographical area of study. The latter were included as we wished to maximise ground-truth via interviewees with deep and recent experience on the ground, rather than academics far removed from those circumstances, spatially and temporally.

All interviewees were informed of the scope of the research and their consent sought. Further, their consent to be credited in the final research paper was established. However, for security reasons or otherwise, several interviewees wished to remain anonymous. This will be honoured and a list of those interviewees consenting to being named will be made available separately.

The KIIs were in the format of semi-structured questions over 45-60 minutes, conducted over VOIP systems (Teams, Zoom). Multi-case study protocol ensured that certain questions were common across all interviews, regardless of case study, with other questions designed for the specific case study context.

Digital data collection and analysis

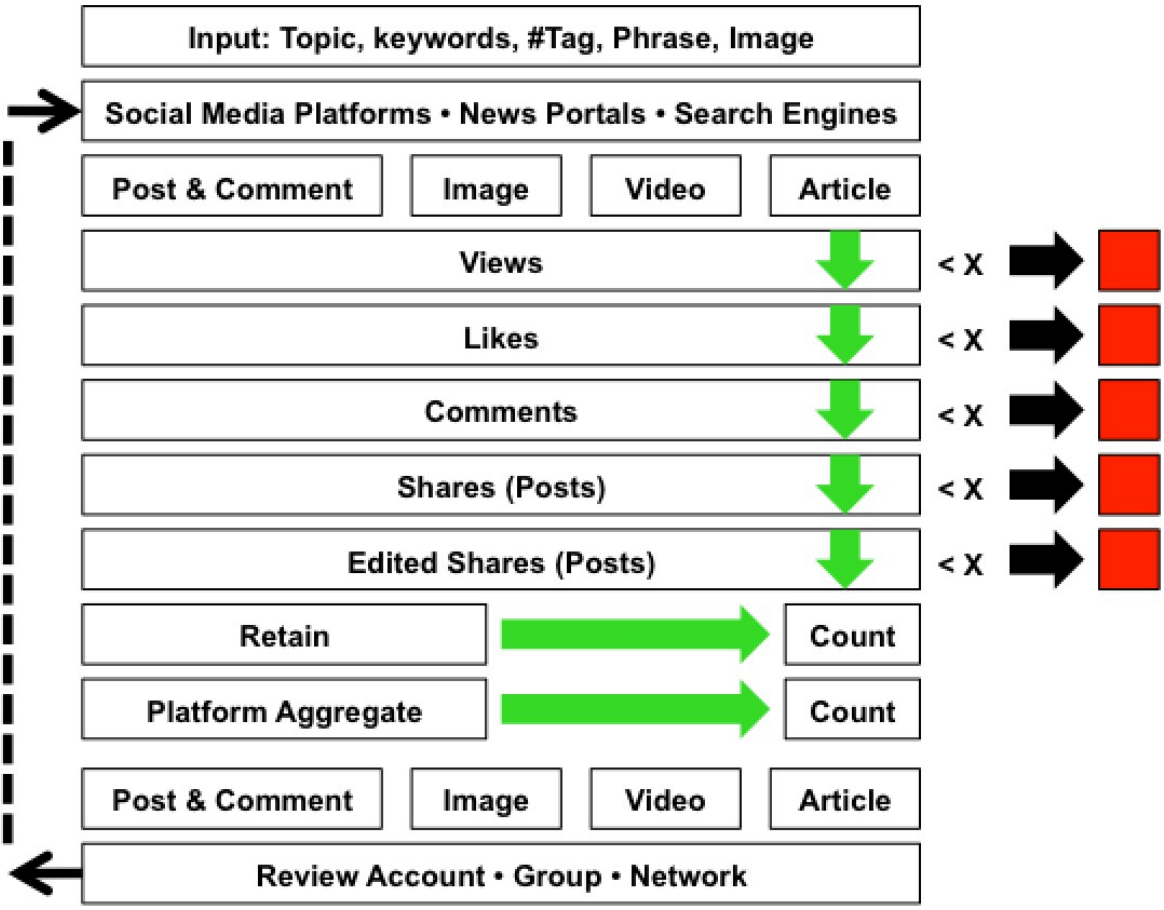
Our approach has differed for each of the core social media platforms and associated large content and news providers that deliver content engagement. The commonality of cause has been combining the views and reach with their associated output in text, image and video formats across these platforms into a comparable dataset.

We focused on the time window of 1 January 2022 until 1 September 2023. This covers the build-up of the Ukraine conflict and through 18 months of the war. All digital media was searched for within the date parameters. For relevance, we used the following parameters: Region, Country, City. Names, Keywords, #HashTags. Once this dataset was established, we sorted by Views, Shares (Posts), Comments and Likes. Our process involved seeking out the source-point and then cascading through the time stamps and collating accounts and organisations that participated in significant engagement.

This has enabled us to centre the analysis around each of the five countries. Our approach uncovered that the largest content metric (be it text, image or video) was produced mostly outside of each country and amplified inside the country concerned. Unsurprisingly the largest media companies and social media 'influencers' from around the world featured heavily in source material prior to in-country engagement. This approach takes into account the larger diaspora and interested parties across the wider communities worldwide, as none of these analysed search terms remain isolated within the borderless internet. Material reviewed and analysed within the original source from outside of a country was discovered through the process of targeted search profile terms and subsequent engagement using the parameters described above.

The analysis of all material and the presentation of significant material was based on the following metrics; Views, Shares (posts), Re-edited Posts, Comments and Likes. This enabled us to filter out the material that might be seen as interesting, spicy, or relevant, but which had no significance in volume and did not engage within the public space. Engagement was our first priority, once the material was extracted, we applied three core data visualisations: (i) Sentiment Analysis (ii) Word Cloud (iii) Emoticon Usage. Visually we have limited this to something that can be readily viewed and understood. We focused on short statements and questions that had garnered a motivational response (engagement) through Comments. These were collected and collated from sources that represented that question or statement. These were then custom analysed through bespoke software and output through a Word Cloud for the Top 100 words, and Parliament Graphs for the Top 10 Emoticons by volume per statement/question.

Figure 1 – Digital data scrape process



The approach we have taken has demonstrated that conversations coalesce around a topic that is often personal to the audience, resonates with the personality and is personality driven. Leaders and not countries and their perceived collective personalities drive the traffic and engagement; Putin before Russia, Zelensky before Ukraine. This played out in the keywords, hashtags and engagement.

Unsurprisingly humour and subversion receive the strongest engagement. Something that individual large-scale global influencers have understood and exploited to the maximum. The most effective social media asks the question, poses an opinion and often delivers the answer. Controversy drives traffic, 'clout' and therefore financial gain for all concerned. Outside of the region media companies and social media influencers drive the conversations. Politically motivated influencers from another geographical region can, and do have both immense sway and, are often used and amplified for nefarious purposes. The unintended consequences of an ideological viewpoint in one country is being utilised by regimes to support their own narrative elsewhere. This is another definition and demonstration of the 'Useful Idiot'. The social media platforms vary widely in their suppression of content, accounts of individuals and organisations. With rulesets operating for different countries, often based on national laws and operating requirements and through other ideological and political policy reasons are enforced by the source country, mostly driven by the USA.

Parliament graphs have been used to display the percentage of Emoticon usage as a response in-line or as a response to a question, statement or theme posed within social media. Using the full Emoji Unicode TF8 sets, Emoticon and Emojis have been pattern matched and merged to produce a consistent dataset to run. A simple counting metric was used to generate percentage usage for each Emoji within the analysed comments.

The comments were collected against questions or statements that resonated along the same line of enquiry. This data was collected from all the major social media platforms. The Parliament Graphs do not ensure any analysis of weighting that is used within the Sentiment Analysis, this is purely usage. It is clear to all that the standard three Emojis of; Grinning Face, Grinning Face with Smiling Eyes, Face with Tears of Joy, are used most heavily. These three represent the universal

response to agreement and are often used in an ironic way to a statement. As such contextualisation is important when analysing for Sentiment. It is also worth noting that both Mobile Devices and the tools provided by the social media companies to respond within a Post use a frequently/most frequently used display for the Emoji used by the individual responding. This also generates a positive reinforcement loop for most frequently used Emojis. As such it is worth reviewing the smaller percentages on each Parliament Graph to see more 'nuanced' responses to the questions and statements posed. We restricted the displayed datasets to the Top 10 for both display purposes and because the data often reduced dramatically to an equal weighted number of dozens of minor used Emoticons further down the usage list. The data analysed for each Question, Comment Group was not less than 1,000 individual Post responses, and as many as 100,000 responses.

RESEARCHING RUSSIAN IIOs: REFINING THE METHODOLOGY

Russian Information Influence Operations (IIOs) have become a growth interest topic among policy makers, practitioners of information resilience, and the general public since the advent (and weaponisation) of social media and as part of the wider study of Russian *gibridnaya voyna* (hybrid warfare). This growing interest in IIOs has yielded positive results in terms of increased resilience and awareness. But, it has also led to the term being redefined and politicised across Western literature as part of the growing interest in hybrid warfare, disinformation, misinformation and malinformation. It is therefore necessary to define what we mean by 'IIOs.'

IIOs are defined by the NATO Strategic Communications Centre of Excellence as systematic campaigns by one or more actors to achieve a desired effect using a range of online and offline measures, often using illegitimate and manipulative behaviour 'drawing on communicative tactics such as fabrication, false identities, malign rhetoric, symbolism, and technological advantages to exploit vulnerabilities in the information environment.'[11] However, this definition is not complete, as it implies that such operations exclusively utilise disinformation tactics (a.k.a. black propaganda). But states frequently utilise a blend of propaganda 'shades' (white, grey and black) in their operations. Therefore, this methodology has chosen to expand the definition to include factual information that is beneficial to the disseminator (white propaganda), while acknowledging it frequently comes from a disguised source, as well as misinformation (a.k.a grey propaganda) and the desire to create a cumulative effect on attitudes and behaviours. They can be applied at a strategic narrative level or a tactical targeted level.

IIOs seek to exploit vulnerabilities in the public information sphere. And one of the most common vulnerabilities across the international community is the rise of conspiracy theories as everyday explainers for events.[12] This is particularly true in areas of lower media literacy and with lower levels of trust in government, which was a common factor to varying degrees among the selected countries of study. It was therefore appropriate for the methodology of this study to further define 'conspiracy theories.' By conducting a smaller literature review of several authoritative works on conspiracy theories and public consumptions of them, this methodology arrived at Douglas et. al.'s definition that they are 'information that attempts to explain the ultimate causes of significant social and political events and circumstances with claims of secret plots by two or more powerful actors.'[13]

ANALYSIS USING THE 'THEORY OF REFLEXIVE CONTROL' (TORC)

The Kremlin has always assigned special importance to 'information-psychological operations.'[14] with reference to them in both the 2015 National Security Strategy and 2016 Information Security Concept.[15] According to former KGB Maj. Gen. Oleg Kalugin, information operations, rather than intelligence gathering, were the 'heart and soul of Soviet intelligence.'[16] Western information operations are continuously held as responsible for the Soviet Union's collapse by Russian observers,[17] and the so-called 'Gerasimov Doctrine' cited information as a key component of full-spectrum warfare. While primarily a document on military strategy that focuses on measures outside of the traditional military spectrum as a

[11] Pamment, J. and Smith, V. "Attributing Information Influence Operations: Identifying those Responsible for Malicious Behaviour Online". NATO Stratcom CoE, July 19, 2022

[12] Uscinski, J., Enders, A., Klofstad, C., Seelig, M., Drochon, H., Premaratne, K., & Murthi, M. (2022). "Have beliefs in conspiracy theories increased over time?". *PloS one*, *17*(7), e0270429. https://doi.org/10.1371/journal.pone.0270429

[13] Douglas, K.M. et al. (2019) 'Understanding conspiracy theories', in *Political Psychology*, 40(S1), pp. 3–35.

[14] Abrams,S. (2016) **"**Beyond Propaganda: Soviet Active Measures in Putin's Russia" in Connections: The Quarterly Journal, 15(1), pp 5-31 and Fridman, O. "The Russian Perspective on Information Warfare: Conceptual Roots and Politicisation in Russian Academic, Political, and Public Discourse" Defence Strategic Communications Vol 2 (2017), NATO Stratcom CoE, and Krieg, A. (2023). *Subversion: The Strategic Weaponization of Narratives*. Georgetown University Press, p. 197

[15] Office of the President of the Russian Federation. "Doctrine of Information Security of the Russian Federation". December 5, 2016

[16] Office of the President of the Russian Federation. "Russian National Security Strategy". December 31, 2015

[17] Kello, L. (2017). *The Virtual Weapon and International Order*. Yale University Press.

complement to military operations (and therefore out of the scope of this report), it is nevertheless indicative of the centrality of IIOs in the Russian mindset. However, while Gerasmiov's paper attracted much attention in the West, the prior resurgence in Information Warfare literature went remarkably unnoticed until the Crimea crisis of 2014. This report analysed three prominent Russian works on the subject highlighted in Fridman's authoritative work on Hybrid Warfare: Evgeny Messner's theory of 'Subversion Warfare.'; Igor Panarin's theory of 'Information Warfare'; and Alexander Dugin's theory of 'Net-centric warfare'.[18]

In the twentieth century, Messner highlighted the shift in warfare from direct military force to manipulating a nation's will through propaganda. This required a blend of 'propaganda by deed', 'propaganda by word' and 'offensive' and 'defensive' propaganda'.[19] He also coined the term 'psycho-reconnaissance' to understand the target's socio-cultural context for effective manipulation.[20] Messner also argued that peaceful and aggressive relations were inseparable, implying the necessity for ongoing IIOs.

Though Messner's anti-communist views led to his work being overlooked in Soviet Russia, it has gained prominence in Putin's Russia, particularly in the context of modern IIO theory. His ideas resonate in the works of Dugin and Panarin, although the latter two take a more detailed approach to strategic influence.

Igor Panarin, a political scientist in the Russian Military Academy of Science, aligns with Messner by viewing the informational domain as a critical battleground throughout history.[21] Panarin broadens the scope by defining three parallel stages of information warfare:

- 'Collection, aggregation and exchange of information on adversaries and allies for the purpose of conducting active actions.'[22]
- 'Infiltration of negative commentaries and disinformation into the informational domain of the adversary' as well as countering any attempt by the adversary to combat it or receive factual information.[23]
- Informational defence – blocking the adversary's attempts to do the same.

He views IIOs not only as a means to enhance national power but also as a defensive strategy against perceived Western information warfare targeting Russia.[24] Moreover, Panarin argues that information warfare is not exclusive to the military domain; it extends across civilian economic, financial, and diplomatic spheres.

Panarin primarily emphasises exploiting various facets of national power to influence adversaries' decision-making processes through the manipulation of 'social objects', categorising them into groupings of 'large' such as state-level such as social classes and professions, 'medium' such as commercial industries, organisations and military units, and 'small' such as families, small military units, neighbourhoods etc.

Similarly, Dugin argues that 'reality is secondary to the virtual' due to the fact 'reality itself only becomes real after reports about it appear in the informational dimension.'[25] He extends Messner and Panarin's theories by targeting not only institutional networks but also demographic groups. Dugin advocates for the manipulation of 'natural networks,' such as minorities, through 'agents of influence' and global systems like international institutions and media to propagate favourable narratives.

Fridman succinctly summarises that Dugin's net-centric warfare aims to influence networks to promote specific ideas for political goals. Dugin's theory was adopted to the Command and Control Research Group, which promoted it as a method of enhancing military combat power.[26] However, Dugin sees it as transcending military application, altering the world's political, economic, social, cultural, and anthropological landscape in the ongoing struggle between Eurasian and Atlantic cultures.

[18] Fridman, O. (2018) *Russian Hybrid Warfare: Resurgence and politicisation*. Oxford University Press.
[19] Ibid, p. 61
[20] Ibid, p. 69
[21] Ibid, p. 85
[22] Ibid, p. 86
[23] Ibid, p. 86
[24] Ibid, p. 89
[25] Ibid, p. 78
[26] Alberts D.S., Garstka, J.J. and Stein F.P. (2000), "Network Centric Warfare". DoD C4ISR Cooperative Research Program p.88.

Ultimately, Messner's observations on modern warfare heavily influenced later thinkers like Dugin and Panarin, who expanded and detailed the strategies and stages of information warfare, encompassing its use for both offensive influence and defensive protection in the global geopolitical landscape that are evident in modern Kremlin IIOs.

Despite Russian assertions that the West is the original practitioner and even expert on information operations, study of the subject has only entered the popular public domain in the West relatively recently.[27]

One of the first things to note regarding Western literature on Russian information operations is an apparent focus on simplicity, or even a lack of strategy, especially in the internet age. Instead, most of the prominent literature focuses on the operational (campaign) and tactical level.

One of the most popular understandings of Russian IIOs (specifically its use of propaganda) is Paul and Matthews's 'Firehose of Falsehood' model, in which Kremlin propaganda is defined by its 'high number of channels and a shameless willingness to disseminate partial truths or outright fictions'. The benefit of this model is that the appearance of multiple sources endorsing the same argument is more persuasive than a single source, especially when within the target's social group. Likewise, repetitiveness creates an illusory effect of truth via a natural tendency by people to use frequency as a metric for truth when confronted with masses of information. Furthermore, removing the obstacle of establishing facts allows the Kremlin to create first impressions, which are resilient to change. Especially when presented through 'peripheral cues' like a professional format.[28]

An equally popular conception is that when confronted in its IIO activities or other malign operations, the Kremlin engages in a simple but effective formula of rebuttal, dubbed by Ben Nimmo as the '4 Ds':[29]

- Dismiss – either by denying the allegations on the ground or denigrating the accuser.
- Distort – misrepresenting information to align with the overarching narrative.
- Distract – launching counter accusations about separate topics to the one being discussed (often in the form of 'whataboutism').[30]
- Dismay – conveying the belief that any opposition to Russian objectives or that achieving objective truth is a hopeless endeavour.

Others have since added a fifth D: Divide - messages designed to create conflict between subgroups and widen divisions within a community.[31] This material is often presented in a manner as to gain an emotional reaction. Content that angers, disgusts or shocks is more likely to be engaged with according to psychological literature.[32] Likewise, this material also focuses on an entertainment factor, which increases its chances of being shared and gaining positive interactions,[33] as well as achieving a lasting impression on viewers even if untrue.[34]

These narratives are typically disseminated via several methods.

1. **Front organisations** – a seemingly independent entity or group that conceals its true affiliations and aims, serving as a tool in propaganda campaigns. Typically, a front organisation presents itself as separate from the entity it represents or serves, often adopting a benign or relatable facade to gain trust and influence. These fronts are strategically created or manipulated by a controlling entity, such as a government or special interest group, to disseminate propaganda or advance specific agendas. Front organisations engage in activities that appear altruistic or aligned with community interests, allowing them to infiltrate social, cultural, or political spheres.

[27] This surge in interest can largely be attributed to the 2014 Crimea crisis, Kremlin informational support of the Assad regime in Syria, and its interference in the 2016 US presidential election campaign. Consequently, recent literature on IIOs is consistently intertwined with literature on Kremlin IIOs.
[28] Paul, C. and Matthews, M. (2016) "The Russian "Firehose of Falsehood" Propaganda Model". RAND
[29] Corp. S. "Combatting Disinformation with the Four D's". Center for Academic Innovation, University of Michigan, March 8, 2022
[30] Cambridge Dictionary "whataboutism", Cambridge University, n.d.
[31] ADTAC Disinformation Inventory. "The 5D's (dismiss, distort, distract, dismay, divide)". ADTAC, n.d.
[32] Berger, J., & Milkman, K. L. (2012). What Makes Online Content Viral? In *Journal of Marketing Research*, 49(2), pp. 192-205.
[33] Ibid.
[34] Known as the sleeper effect. See Wadwha, P. "Beware of the Sleeper Effect" and Paul, C. and Matthews, M. (2016) "The Russian "Firehose of Falsehood" Propaganda Model". RAND, p.6

2. **Agents of influence** – individuals strategically positioned to promote specific ideas, messages, or agendas within a target audience or society. Their role in propaganda campaigns involves subtly shaping public opinion or decision-making by spreading information, narratives, or ideologies that align with the propagandist's goals. These agents often exploit their credibility, connections, or authority in various domains, such as media, academia, politics, or social groups, to gain trust and influence over the targeted population. By appearing as independent sources or trusted figures, agents of influence can effectively sway opinions, provoke reactions, and foster an environment conducive to the propagandist's aims, all while maintaining a facade of impartiality or autonomy. These can include 'entrepreneurs of influence'[35] or 'useful idiots'[36] and cynics.[37]

3. **Information laundering** – RT and Sputnik play a critical role in this form of dissemination. Either by directly producing propaganda content that is then provided to local organisations free of charge or bringing in social media commentary (often linked to pro-Kremlin inauthentic networks) to legitimise a narrative.

4. With the advent of social media, the employment of **sockpuppet profiles** (fake accounts posing as an individual established to manipulate online discussions)[38] and **bot networks** (semi-automated or automated programs that use the normal functions of communications platforms to amplify an existing message)[39] also play an increasingly significant role in dissemination.

In Western literature, Kremlin IIOs are viewed as prioritising quantity over consistent quality messaging. Rid observes that [Kremlin?] IIOs in the digital age have become more active, sacrificing control for increased output and relying on societies to spread propaganda.[40] Rory Cormac emphasises the trade-offs between reach and deniability, highlighting the outsourcing and limited control in IIO strategies.[41] While this suggestion of a 'throw it out and see what sticks' approach to Kremlin IIOs is debatable, what is undenied in Western literature is these operations' effectiveness. The West faces challenges countering these threats while preserving free speech and determining the best deterrent strategy. In his book *Subversion,* Dr Andreas Krieg goes as far to say that 'Russia provides the most sophisticated case study for how states weaponise narratives in an effort to subvert the opponent's information-psychological stability'.[42] And even sceptics like Rid who suggest that usually the impacts of IIOs are overstated acknowledge that the perception of them is such that it helps 'expand and escalate that very threat and its potential'.[43]

Many scholars have successfully utilised these commonalities to create research frameworks for identifying Kremlin TTPs within IIOs. However, these commonly focus on vague outputs like 'winning the information war' or 'muddying the water' rather than the ultimate effects of influencing attitudes, behaviours and, ultimately, decision-making. These risk creating misconceptions that Kremlin IIOs are unguided or lack a strategic goal beyond chaos. Considering our research questions focus not just on narratives but also on opinion and decisions to engage with Russian narratives over Western ones, we chose to utilise an existing Soviet concept (since revamped in modern Russian IIO strategies), which focuses on creating a cumulative impact on decision-making through information inputs: the Theory of Reflexive Control (ToRC).[44]

First established by Dr. Vladimir Lefebvre in the 1960s and then built on by V. Druzhinin and D. Kontorov, the ToRC is a methodical framework for shaping perceptions of target audiences via information inputs to create voluntary decision-making (a 'reflexive action') in the target (or 'agent') that is favourable to the practitioner.[45] It encompasses not only the logical processing of information (including information systems), but also psychological, emotional, and cultural frameworks within which decisions are made.[46]

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[35] Defined as people who invest their own money or social capital to build influence abroad in hopes of being rewarded either financially or the reinforcement of their own narrative. See Laruelle, M and Limonier, K. "Beyond "hybrid warfare": a digital exploration of Russia's entrepreneurs of influence" in *Post-Soviet Affairs, Vol 37(4)*, July 17, 2021

[36] Defined in Oxford English dictionary as a person perceived as propagandizing for a cause—particularly a bad cause originating from a devious, ruthless source—without fully comprehending the cause's goals, and who is cynically being used by the cause's leaders. The term was often used during the Cold War to describe non-communists regarded as susceptible to communist propaganda and psychological manipulation.

[37] Differs from a useful idiot by not necessarily believing in the narrative they espouse. For example, Tucker Carlson, the Fox News pundit who has parroted Kremlin talking points, has been revealed in leaked communications to not believe the narratives he puts forward. See Rubin, O. "What Fox News hosts allegedly said privately versus on-air about false election fraud claims". ABC News, April 24, 2023

[38] Butts, M. "Bot, Troll or Sockpuppet and The Sharing Question". Medium, February 22, 2018

[39] RoBhat Labs. "Identifying Propaganda Bots on Twitter". Medium, October 31, 2017

[40] Rid, T. (2020). *Active measures: The Secret History of Disinformation and Political Warfare*. Profile Books. p. 7

[41] Cormac, R. (2022). *How To Stage a Coup: And Ten Other Lessons from the World of Secret Statecraft*. Atlantic Books. p. 77

[42] Krieg, A. (2023). *Subversion: The Strategic Weaponization of Narratives*. Georgetown University Press.

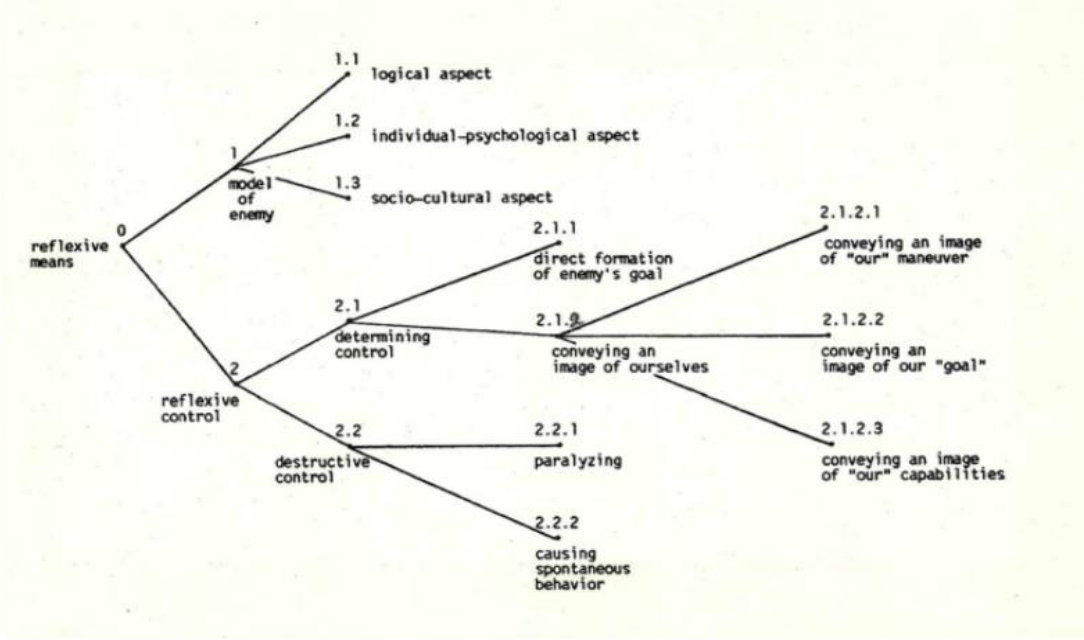
[43] Rid, T. (2020). *Active measures: The Secret History of Disinformation and Political Warfare*. Profile Books p. 434

[44] Giles, K. and Seaboyer, A. (2019) "The Russian Information Warfare Construct". Defence Research and Development Canada, pp. 28-42

[45] Lefebvre, V.A. (trans. Lefebvre, V.D.) "Reflexive Control: The Soviet Concept of Influencing an Adversary's Decision Making Process" in *Science Applications,* 1984.

[46] Giles, K. and Seaboyer, A. (2019) "The Russian Information Warfare Construct". Defence Research and Development Canada, p. 2

Figure 2 – Original concept of the Theory of Reflexive Control



As detailed in the above diagram,[47] the ToRC begins with a 'model of the enemy' – this is an overall profile of an individual, group or state that acts as the target audience (similar to Messner's concept of psycho-reconnaissance). It includes detailed psychological, structural, cultural, and emotional contexts in order to understand the best choices of information input to achieve the desired reflexive action. The information input chosen will then be determined by the desire to create a destructive action or determining action. Information inputs will target cultural, psychological and/or emotional issues and contain narratives most likely to gain traction with the target audience and produce desired outputs. These outputs can include information pressure, which can encompass: (1) tailored information or narratives designed for a select group that may be more vocal or have more influence in decision-making; (2) a 'firehose of falsehood'[48] designed to cognitively overload individuals and groups; or (3) conveyance of a desired 'image' of what the practitioner is doing, what their goal is, and what the potential responsive options are.

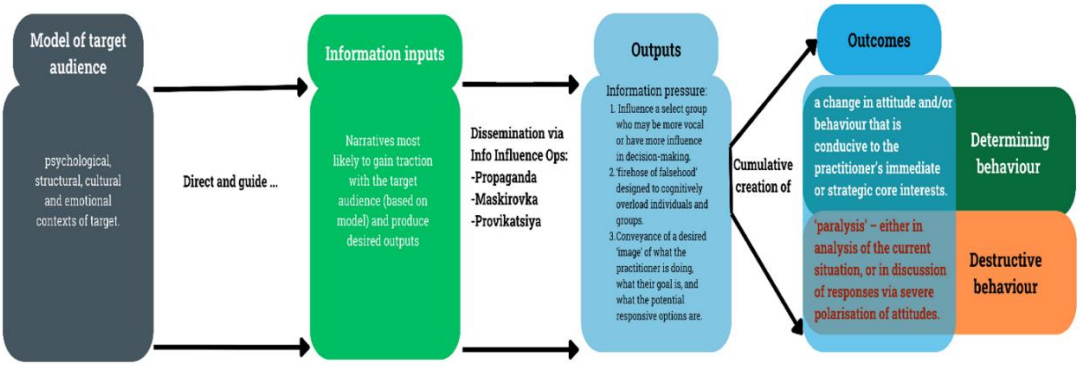
This process aims to achieve several behavioural outcomes: either those falling under 'determining action', such as a change in attitude and/or behaviour that is conducive to the practitioner's immediate or strategic core interests; or destructive actions, primarily 'paralysis,' either in analysis of the current situation, or in discussion of responses via severe polarisation of attitudes. The primary difference between determining and destructive actions should therefore be viewed as being based on the severity of the impact.

The ToRC was first analysed by Western practitioners in the 1980s.[49] Consequently, it can be broken down even further based on existing literature and technological changes in the 21st Century. For instance, Kasapolgu rightly recognises the presence of *maskirovka* (masquerade, i.e., deception, such as the disguise of Russian special forces during the illegal annexation of Crimea in 2014),[50] but it can be legitimately argued that this is only one of three overlapping (and often concurrent) concepts underneath the umbrella of the ToRC. In the effort by the practitioner to deliver calculated informational inputs, it can engage not just in *maskirovka,* but also *provokatsiya*[51] (provocation, such as false-flag attacks), and *informatsiya voyna* (taken in this context as the application of white, grey and black propaganda to manipulate information systems and cognition). In the context of the 21st Century, inputs and activities can constitute a range of online and offline activities, but heavily utilise social media.[52] A further benefit of the ToRC is its flexibility of scale. As Kasapolgu highlights, the 'insidious merit' of the ToRC is how it can be applied at an operational, tactical and/or

[47] Davis, C. "Paper – Evolution of Russian Information Warfare". SOF News, May 5, 2023
[48] Paul, C. and Matthews, M. (2016) "The Russian "Firehose of Falsehood" Propaganda Model". RAND
[49] Chotikul, D (1986) "The Soviet Theory of Reflexive Control in Historical and Psychocultural Perspective: A Preliminary Study". Naval Postgraduate School, Monterey
[50] Moore, C. "Russia And Disinformation: Maskirovka". Centre for Research and Evidence on Security Threats, March 18, 2019
[51] GlobalSecurity.org "FSB Operations" GlobalSecurity.org, n.d.
[52] Giles, K. and Seaboyer, A. (2019) "The Russian Information Warfare Construct". Defence Research and Development Canada, pp. 28-42

strategic level.[53] But in a non-military context, this can be utilised to observe its usage at an individual/community, regional, and policymaking/national level. Therefore, this report adapts the existing framework to accommodate the larger scale and methods the ToRC now operates in (Figure 3).

Figure 3 – Theory of Reflexive Control research framework



APPLICABILITY TO RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The ToRC has been the subject of increased scrutiny in the West since the Crimea Crisis. But remarkably, it has rarely been used as a guiding framework to understand and analyse ongoing Russian IIOs. This is largely because it has traditionally been viewed through a military lens. But as Giles and Seaboyer attest, it is not a purely military discipline.[54] Indeed, it can be argued that according to Russia's own texts on information warfare, the ToRC cannot be viewed as separate from non-military operations precisely because information warfare is considered both a peacetime and wartime activity. Therefore, it is entirely legitimate to adapt the ToRC as a framework for analysing Kremlin IIOs. At the same time, this is not a foolproof framework. The entire point of IIOs and the ToRC in the 21st century is to create changes that will not always be readily apparent. Nevertheless, by adopting the framework in our study, we were better able to understand the likely target of information inputs (in terms of historical, cultural, and psychological fault lines), the target audiences, and intended outputs and outcomes. This can also act as a further guide for measurements of a 'successful' IIO.

There is significant debate as to how one measures the success of IIOs, or even if you can measure impact at all. According to Jamieson's study of the 2016 US presidential campaign, they were critical in getting Trump elected by shifting perceptions of Clinton and Trump.[55] Whereas Rid sees the overall impact as 'impossibly hard to measure by design'.[56]

In his seminal work on subversion, Dr Andreas Krieg focuses on 'mobilisation' – to what extent the attitudes, decisions and behaviours produce real action.[57] He suggests five levels of impact according to this metric ranging from 1 (low impact) to 5 (high impact):

1. Social media discourse among genuine users.
2. Offline civil-societal discourse involving conventional media.
3. Policy-relevant discourse between experts and policymakers.
4. Nonvirtual civil-societal mobilisation (e.g. protests and riots).
5. A strategic shift in policy making.

However, this cannot be applied to all systems at the same level. In democracies freedom of expression and assembly (and therefore protest) are guaranteed. But in more authoritarian systems, such as several of the selected countries in this study, the public space is tightly controlled, making public protests much less likely. Therefore, we settled on "reach" and "penetration" as metrics of success.

[53] Kasapolgu, C. "Russia's Renewed Military Thinking: Non-Linear Warfare and Reflexive Control". NATO Defence College, November 25, 2015, p.5
[54] Giles, K. and Seaboyer, A. (2019) "The Russian Information Warfare Construct". Defence Research and Development Canada, p. 10
[55] Jamieson, K.H. (2018) *Cyberwar: How Russian Hackers and Trolls Helped Elect a President*. Oxford University Press
[56] Rid, T. (2020) *Active Measures: The Secret History of Disinformation and Political Warfare.* Farrar, Straus and Giroux
[57] Krieg, A. (2023). *Subversion: The Strategic Weaponization of Narratives*. Georgetown University Press, p. 137

Reach quantifies the total number of users exposed to a campaign, regardless of whether they are part of the target audience or not.

Penetration specifically looks at the percentage of the target audience that has been reached, and how many have shared or engaged with that content, indicating the level of adoption or engagement within that group.

Both metrics are important to understanding the aimed impacts of IIOs in the 21st century. While reach indicates the potential reach and visibility of a campaign, penetration provides insights into the campaign's effectiveness in engaging and influencing the intended audience. In the context of our work this is especially important as the penetration is about mainstream media and influencers and how they respond and amplify material that may be misinformation or disinformation. This further fits within Russian concepts of IIOs[58] and the ToRC. Although it is almost certain that any immediate destabilising actions would be welcomed by the Kremlin, multiple studies note that the Russian approach is marked by strategic patience with the aim of creating a fragmented information environment, which leads to the desired destructive reflexive actions of cynicism and apathy or withdrawal into bias-confirming sources. This leads to further polarisation and the desired strategic outcome of 'paralysis' or actions that are designed to align with the constructed 'images' the Kremlin projects. For instance, a favourable 'image' of Russia leads to potential demonstrations supporting alignment with Russia or at least acquiescence to it. This is summarised by former KGB Chief Yuri Andropov's belief that exposure to disinformation was similar to cocaine: 'a little bit every so often won't hurt, but if you start to use it every day, you become a different man all together.'[59]

[58] Ibid, p. 198

[59] Canadian Security Intelligence Service. (2018). "Russia, the West and the geopolitics of disinformation" in *Who Said What? The Security Challenges of Modern Disinformation*. CSIS