The Decline of Russian Disinformation

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A week into Europe's new war, with fighting still raging in Ukraine, it remains far too early to predict what course the conflict will ultimately take. Yet it's already clear that, because of it, Moscow is losing its ability to shape global opinion. That's because Russia's extensive propaganda machine, which has been so effective at fostering political tensions in the West in recent years, has at long last become the subject of sustained attention.

On February 27, European Commission president Ursula von der Leyen announced that the European Union would move to ban Russian propaganda from airing within its borders. "We will ban the Kremlin's media machine in the EU. The state-owned *Russia Today* and *Sputnik*, and their subsidiaries, will no longer be able to spread their lies to justify Putin's war," von der Leyen said. European officials are also getting serious about Russian online propaganda, and have begun urging Google and YouTube to amend measures and terms of service to better counter Moscow's disinformation.

These moves mark a historic shift. For years, European nations—particularly those in Eastern Europe—have struggled under a veritable avalanche of Russian disinformation. It's an effort that "builds on Soviet Cold War-era techniques, with an emphasis on obfuscation and on getting targets to act in the interests of the propagandist without realizing that they have done so," according to a 2016 study by the RAND Corporation. And while its methods of dissemination have varied (ranging from social media messaging on Facebook and Twitter to television broadcasts in multiple languages), the objectives of this approach have been clear and consistent: to obscure the truth, to undermine trust in democratic institutions and to bolster support for autocracy at the expense of the West.

Until now, the Western response has been disjointed at best. In recent years, more and more European nations have raised the alarm over the spread of Russian-generated "fake news." Last year the G7 nations announced plans to erect a "rapid response" mechanism to counter Russian propaganda. But there has been little substantive movement since. While a number of nations (like Latvia) have established "strategic communications" centers to deal with disinformation, the continent still lacks a unified effort.

In the U.S., meanwhile, Congress has charged the State Department's Global Engagement Center (GEC) with monitoring and responding to Russian (as well as Chinese and Iranian) disinformation. But to date, the GEC has done little to address the problem beyond tracking the activities of outlets like *Sputnik* and *RT*. And overall, there is little coordination between Western governments on best practices for identifying, marginalizing and responding to Russia's media falsehoods.

All of that may soon change, however. In her comments on February 27, von der Leyen stressed that European states have begun "developing tools to ban [Russia's] toxic and harmful disinformation in Europe." What those tools are remains to be seen, but Russia's efforts to shape European—and broader Western—political discourse are now drawing attention in Brussels, where fighting the propaganda war has become a major priority.

Russian propaganda is failing elsewhere as well. At least one television provider in neighboring Kazakhstan has already blocked Russian stations from airing, declaring itself to be "against war and against war propaganda." As the conflict drags on, other countries within Russia's traditional geopolitical orbit are likely to follow suit.

Where does all this leave Moscow? Its propaganda outlets are still busy spinning the Kremlin's preferred narrative and parroting Russian president Vladimir Putin's claims that Ukrainians are "drug addicts," "Nazis" and "cowards." Today, however, they're increasingly doing so *within* Russia itself, as their access to foreign publics, even Russian-speaking ones, is cut off. In other words, the audience that Russia's propaganda can reach, let alone influence, has begun to shrink precipitously.

For that, Russia's propagandists—and Western leaders—have Vladimir Putin to thank.

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