A Few Observations About State-Centric Online Propaganda

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ABSTRACT

This paper presents a few observations about pro-Kremlin propaganda between 2015 and early 2021 with a dataset from the East Stratcom Task Force (ESTF), which is affiliated with the European Union (EU) but working independently from it. Instead of focusing on misinformation and disinformation, the observations are motivated by classical propaganda research and the ongoing transformation of media systems. According to the tentative results, (i) the propaganda can be assumed to target both domestic and foreign audiences. Of the countries and regions discussed, (ii) Russia, Ukraine, the United States, and within Europe, Germany, Poland, and the EU have been the most frequently discussed. Also other conflict regions such as Syria have often appeared in the propaganda. In terms of longitudinal trends, however, (iii) most of these discussions have decreased in volume after the digital tsunami in 2016, although the conflict in Ukraine seems to have again increased the intensity of pro-Kremlin propaganda. Finally, (iv) the themes discussed align with state-centric war propaganda and conflict zones, although also post-truth themes frequently appear; from conspiracy theories via COVID-19 to fascism—anything goes, as is typical to propaganda.

CCS CONCEPTS

• **Security and privacy** → **Social aspects of security and privacy**;

KEYWORDS

Propaganda; disinformation; misinformation; fake news; information security; hybrid warfare; information warfare; conflict zones

1 INTRODUCTION

This paper answers to recent calls [1, 43] to advance research on institutional responses to propaganda by providing a few quantitative observations and an accompanying discussion about the countermeasures taken by the ESTF. It was set in 2015 by the European Union as a response to Russia's propaganda activities during the early conflict in Ukraine [12]. Thereafter, the main activity of

the task force has been to debunk propaganda, unintentional inaccuracies, and other information disorders. While the ESTF still explicitly limits itself to pro-Kremlin messages, it acknowledges that this "*does not necessarily imply, however, that a given outlet is linked to the Kremlin or editorially pro-Kremlin, or that it has intentionally sought to disinform*" [10]. The focus on Russian propaganda and the accompanying acknowledgment are important for framing the paper's scope. The term state-centric serves to clarify this focus. This term (or some variation thereof) is often used in the Internet governance literature to describe cooperation arrangements and actions by nation states and their alliances, as opposed to arrangements and actions by non-state stakeholders, such as companies, non-governmental organizations, and standardization bodies [35]. In the present context the term excludes propaganda activities taken by domestic actors, such as political parties and interest groups. Six addition points should be further taken into account, as follows:

(1) Due to the metaphorical Hobbesian anarchy of international relations, and, by extension, the so-called cyber space [35], at least all major powers can be reasonably assumed to participate in some propaganda activities in the cyber space [45].

(2) A response to state-sponsored propaganda is often state-sponsored counterpropaganda, and take note that "*propaganda against propaganda is just another propaganda*" [25]. The risks associated with counterpropaganda are also well-recognized; it may easily turn against itself by altering the perceptions of domestic audiences, among other things [19].

(3) Analogously to offensive cyber (in)security operations, state-sponsored propaganda in the cyber space is carried out through different covert actions [23], and, therefore, like with cyber attacks, attribution of these activities is difficult.

(4) State-sponsored propagandists—or their superiors, or both of them—are educated and trained well; they may be affiliated with armed forces or intelligence agencies, or both; they have sufficient resources and set strategic goals; and so forth.

(5) The history of the ESTF has been closely related to the concept of hybrid warfare. The concept is difficult to define, but, in essence, it refers to the use of both conventional and unconventional, or kinetic and non-kinetic, means of warfare. The latter means include cyber attacks and propaganda, among other things. In this regard, there is a large body of academic literature on the different national perceptions of information security, information warfare, cyber security, cyber war, and related concepts. A common presumption in this literature is that Russian understanding of the terms differ from those used in Europe and the United States [15, 19].

(6) Due to the earlier points, normative stances should be avoided in academic propaganda research. Regarding this paper, it should be acknowledged that the case studied refers to a state-sponsored organization explicitly designed to counter

state-sponsored propaganda. In this sense, the few observations presented are biased; only one voice is being heard. Nor does the paper make claims about whose information is correct and for what reasons; what strategic goals are involved; how much resources are used; and so on. To summarize and underline: the ESTF and its activities have raised controversies about alleged politicization and normative stances [47], but the present paper takes no part in these broader debates.

Given these brief introductory remarks, the following research questions are contemplated and tentatively answered:

(1) Given the ESTF's data, how much of the propaganda can be roughly estimated to be targeted for domestic consumption?

(2) Recently, there have been claims and concerns that, in Europe, Russian propaganda mainly targets Germany [9]. These provide a sufficient motivation for the second research question: how heavily different countries have been hit by Russian propaganda, as handled and attributed by the ESTF?

(3) Given a tentative answer to the second question, have there been any longitudinal changes in the spatial dimension?

(4) What themes are generally present in the propaganda?

There is not much to say about the structure. But to follow the conventions nevertheless: Section 2 briefly summarizes the research background on propaganda. The empirical showdown occurs in Section 3. Results and other things are discussed in Section 4.

2 BACKGROUND AND RELATED WORK

The golden age of academic propaganda research was during the Cold War. The stimulus had been given earlier, however. In the United States, for instance, it was the aftermath of the First World War that prompted a newly founded interdisciplinary interest on propaganda research. Initially led by figures such as sociologist Paul Lazarsfeld, the interest led to many well-funded, methodologically oriented, and practice-focused research programs that were later continued by other well-known figures, such as critical theorist Theodor Adorno and communication scholar Harold Lasswell [1, 29]. Lasswell's work in the 1930s also resulted a definition:

> "*Let us be clear about the meaning of propaganda. Propaganda may be defined as a technique of social control, or as a species of social movement. As technique, it is the manipulation of collective attitudes by the use of significant symbols (words, pictures, tunes) rather than violence, bribery, or boycott. Propaganda differs from the technique of pedagogy in that propaganda is concerned with attitudes of love and hate, while pedagogy is devoted to the transmission of skill.*" [25, p. 189]

Here, the underlying emphasis of propaganda as a technique applies well to the present day where "*significant symbols*" are widely disseminated on social media and other online platforms. But, of course, symbols have always been an important part of propaganda. Consider the illustration in Fig. 1 as an example; it was donated to the City of Helsinki in Finland by the City of Moscow about six months before the Berlin Wall came down. The example is not by accident. When considering the history in Europe, it was also a controversy over a sculpture in Estonia that, in 2007, prompted a propaganda campaign and a set of state-sponsored cyber attacks,

which, in turn, later spurred the early cyber security initiatives in the European Union [37]. Even moving the location of "real-world" symbols—let alone tearing them down—thus still carries relevance in propaganda activities. Today, however, online symbols are what provide an effective and cost-benefit-cheap propaganda alternative.

Figure 1: "The Last Rites of Finnish Communism" (a.k.a. World Peace; Helsinki; Oleg Kirjuhin; author's personal collection)

Propaganda research can be seen as a psychology of ideology [40]. Given widespread political polarization in contemporary democracies, the underscoring of emotions—the "*attitudes of love and hate*"—indeed seems fitting for this particular "*technique of social control*". With these ingredients and an agency of three actors ("*the enemy, the ally, and the neutral*"), according to Lasswell, the strategic goal of a propagandist is to intensify the attitudes propagated, reverse any hostile attitudes, and attract those who remain indifferent [24]. Thus, the academic framework for propaganda research was well-established already well-before the Second World War. The academic propaganda research continued throughout the Cold War. But while the amount of papers published on propaganda has continued to steadily grow, at some point researchers started to perceive it merely as a historical topic [44]. The arrival of the so-called "post-truth" era in the 2010s changed the perceptions.

Currently, propaganda is implicitly studied under the labels of misinformation and disinformation. The former refers generally to unintentional adoption or amplification of misleading information. Disinformation, in turn, is commonly defined as a malicious use of "*false, inaccurate, or misleading information designed, presented and promoted to intentionally cause public harm or for profit*" ([13, p. 2]; for other definitions and taxonomies see [14] and [21]). Again, the definition underlines both the techniques and the strategic goals. Thus, arguably, even though seldom explicitly spelled, disinformation research is propaganda research. Sure: it can be argued that disinformation differs from propaganda because it tries to distort reality itself instead of relying on persuasion [5, 8], but, then again, it can be also argued that distortion of reality is merely another form of persuasion [46]. The intention to deceive is a distinct characteristic of disinformation [42], and intention is always present also in propaganda. Actually, throughout the history, propaganda has been cloaked with various alternative concepts, particularly by those involved in propaganda activities [6, 27]. Although these terminological nuances do not matter for the purposes of the few quantitative observations presented, propaganda can be argued to be a better term than disinformation due to the state-centric focus.

In addition to terminological similarities, there are methodological parallels between "classical" propaganda research and the more recent disinformation research. It was again Lasswell who, in the 1960s, pioneered content analysis, defined broadly as "*systematic empirical studies of the messages transmitted in a process of communicacation*" [26, p. 57; original misspelling]. Today, content analysis of propaganda uses both qualitative and quantitative methods. On the qualitative side, discourse analysis has been a common way to analyze the significant symbols in propaganda content [31]. On the quantitative side, topic modeling serves a similar function for content analysis [39], as does—given that propaganda is "*the politics of the heart*" [45]—sentiment analysis [34]. But what is more fundamental and thus interesting is Lasswell's classification of communication flows in a society into a value-institutional framework.

This framework contains eight layers: *power* (i.e., politics), *enlightenment* (e.g., science), *wealth* (i.e., economics), *well-being* (e.g., health), *skill* (e.g., education), *affection* (e.g., family), *respect* (e.g., classes), and *rectitude* (e.g., ethics) [26]. There are two reasons why the framework is fundamental for propaganda research. First: the strategic goals of propaganda differ between a layer and another layer. The paper's focus is on power and politics, and, due to the state-centric focus, specifically in power politics between states. But given the freedom of thought, it would be easy enough to pick a different perspective and another layer. Propaganda against enemies, in favor of allies, and for persuasion of indifferent; the poor and the economy layer; tobacco, the pandemic, opioids, and the health layer; racism and the respect layer; and what have you. Though, second, what remains difficult for any propagandist, including a state-sponsored one, is that the layers evolve at different paces.

Figure 2: "Riding on the Waves of the Digital Tsunami" (Helsinki; unknown artist; author's personal collection)

A basic premise from sociology, institutional economics, and related fields needs to be repeated; even changing the play of the game (i.e., at the power layer) can take years, but changing things at the rectitude layer takes hundreds of years or more [48]. In other words, values, norms, and institutions change only slowly. For a propagandist they are often lamentably resilient. But, eventually, changes at the power layer drift onto the other layers. Currently, it is the tsunami of digital information and epistemic inequality that is changing communication that is changing institutions [18, 51]. Like many politicians (cf. Fig. 2), state-sponsored

propaganda largely rides on the waves caused by the tsunami. These waves have prompted numerous ideas about countermeasures beyond counterpropaganda. The literature offers many options; these range from the so-called whole society approaches, which may include states' intelligence apparatuses [20], media literacy and literature skills [36], fact-checking [50], regulation [5, 11], collaboration between governmental agencies and online platforms [32], sustainable business models for journalism [33], and other things, to various semi-manual or fully computational solutions, including classification [22], content moderation [42], network analysis [41], and many other things. But do these fix the problem? Time will tell, but the current foresight from academia and elsewhere seems pessimistic. Why? The current interaction between the distinct value-institution layers is a major source feeding the pessimism.

In particular, the dependencies and interactions between the power, enlightenment, wealth, and skill layers constitute a big problem, the core of which is in the information tsunami's relation to media systems. To better understand this kernel, one should ask a simple but fundamental question: What is the antithesis of propaganda? For Lasswell it was deliberation [24], and it is deliberation against which the tsunami's waves have hit hard. Deliberative democracy requires a well-functioning media system. However, the political economy of propaganda—the interactions between media systems and political systems—has largely been neglected in recent research [1]. A historical perspective is again needed; democracies have been in a similar situation several times after the invention of radio and public broadcasting in the 1930s, but national responses have diverged each time [17]. Here, the 1930s provides a good parallel for the present day—yet not because of the political events but because of the historical transformation of media. The deteriorating trust in media in the face of propagandists all over the world was a grave concern back then [3]. Today, there something eerie to read melancholic memoirs about that time, such as the one that ends in:

> "*But I do urge that these possibilities exist, and that those who care for literature might turn their minds more often to this much-despised medium, whose powers for good have perhaps been obscured by the voices of Professor Joad and Doctor Goebbels.*" [30]

Finally, it should be emphasized that the ESTF's early efforts were largely related to countering war propaganda. As any analysis of any war should presumably reveal, it is precisely war that makes state-centric propaganda shine its bleakest luminescence. War propaganda is almost always both directed to home consumption and manufactured for export [3]. For the former audience, the persuasion of those indifferent is a common goal; here, the words hate and enemy often manifest themselves concretely. As the history again eagerly testifies, sometimes wartime propaganda escalates into extreme measures involving humiliation, dehumanization, and even torture [27]. Regardless of the measures taken, as said, war propaganda is usually carried out by well-resourced and well-educated specialists. But often also rank-and-file amateurs take part with solemn but almost poetical propaganda of their own: "*Those who kill for pleasure are sadists / Those who kill for money are mercenaries / Those who kill for both are RECON / WE DEAL IN DEATH*" [16].

3 RESULTS

The dataset is based on the propaganda cases handled and countered by the ESTF. These were simply retrieved from the task force's website in 6 April, 2021. In total, $n = 11,397$ propaganda cases are present, spanning a period from January 2015 to March 2021. The required quantification was done from the meta-data associated by the ESTF with these cases. As there is not much more to add about the dataset, its collection, and its processing, the dissemination of the results can proceed immediately. One, two, three, launch.

One, Fig. 3 shows the most frequent languages used in the propaganda accounted by the ESTF. Most of it was in Russian, which, partially, supports an assumption of domestic targets. Through, it should be underlined that pro-Kremlin propaganda often specifically targets Russian-speaking minorities in Europe. For instance, about 34% of Latvians, 30% of Ukrainians and Estonians, and 8% of Lithuanians speak Russian at home [7]. The countries associated have also been under a specific radar by the ESTF and other related organizations [38]. Although English was the second most frequent language, it is interesting to note the relatively large amounts of propaganda written in Spanish, Czech, and Arabic. Indirectly, this observation aligns with the recent arguments that academic propaganda research has had a too narrow attention, mainly concentrating on the United States and, perhaps to a lesser extent, Europe [1].
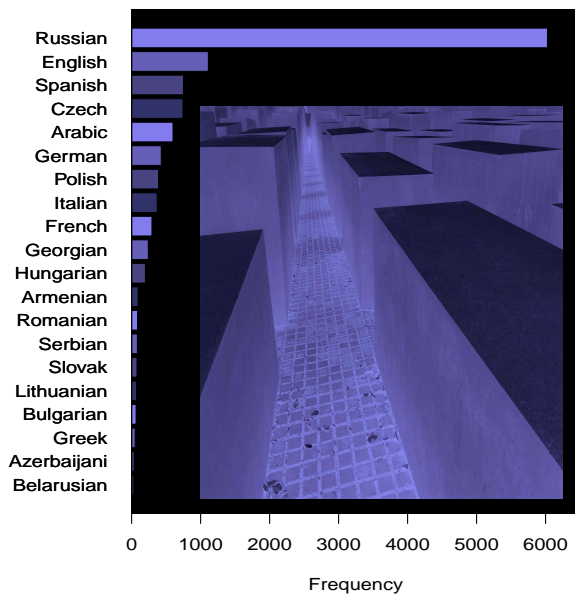

Figure 3: Top-20 Languages Used in the Propaganda

Two, the illustration in Fig. 4 further indicates that much of the pro-Kremlin propaganda has discussed Russia according to the ESTF's data. This observation again hints about domestic as well as foreign audiences. After Russia, the most discussed countries were Ukraine and the United States, respectively. Within Europe, Germany, Poland, and the EU were the most frequent targets of discussion, although, as can be seen, all European countries have been discussed in the propaganda. A further noteworthy observation from the figure is the relatively common mentions of other conflict
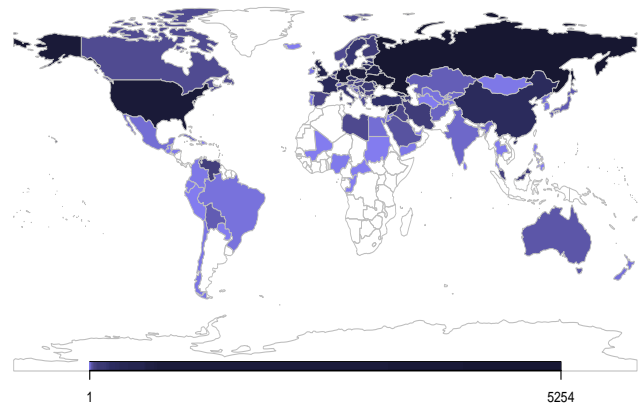

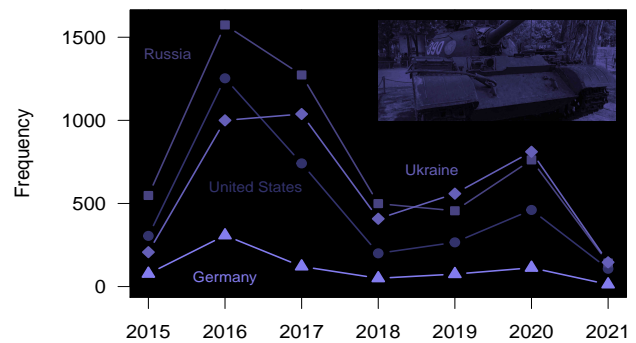Figure 4: Countries Discussed in the Propaganda

Figure 5: Annual Trends of Four Countries Discussed

regions, including Georgia and Syria in particular. In terms of longitudinal trends, most of the per-region mentions peak around 2016 during which the tsunami's tidal waves first truly hit the shores. As can be further concluded from the illustration in Fig. 5, the surge has since decreased in its intensity. However, the increasing hostility in the Russia-Ukraine relations has also increased the propaganda references to these two countries after circa late-2018. Although only early 2021 is covered in the dataset, the longer annual trends indicate no particular increase in propaganda discussing Germany.

Three, the breakdown of the most common keywords in Fig. 6 reinforces the point about the propaganda's emphasis on conflict zones, defense, and military affairs. Likewise, the earlier points about propaganda and counterpropaganda are supported by the frequent addressing of anti-Russian sentiments, whereas keywords such as conspiracy theories, COVID-19, extremism, and historical revisionism generally coincide with the post-truth topic. Although many states supposedly use these post-truth themes in their propaganda, there are some nuances; among these is historical revisionism that has been typical to Russian neoconservatism [28]. Furthermore, as could be expected, the themes vary from a country to another. Take Finland as an example: the most frequent topics are the NATO, historical revisionism, the Second World War, and the EU, although there are also mentions of some populist Finnish
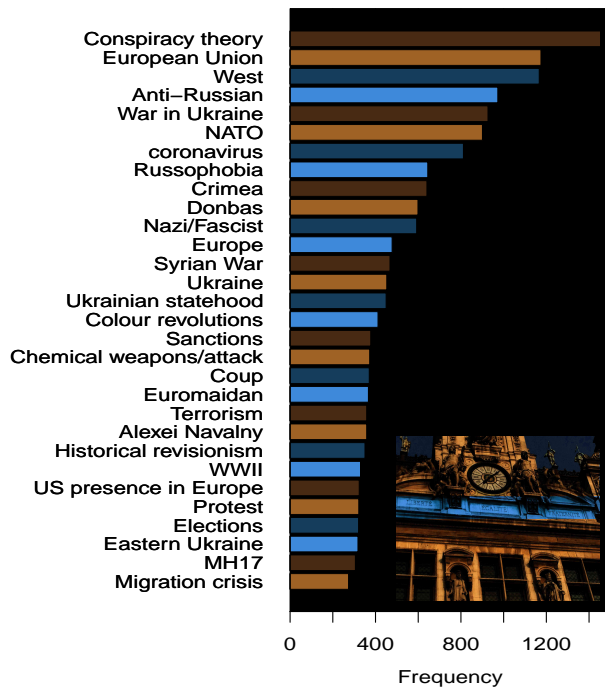
Figure 6: Top-30 Themes Discussed in the Propaganda

politicians, journalists [2], and associated state-sponsored propagandists. Take the theme of conspiracy theories as another example: here, the most frequent countries discussed are the United States (by a large margin), Russia, Ukraine, Belarus, and the United Kingdom, in the order of listing—which does not correlate with the overall ranking of countries and regions discussed. Each to their own.

4 DISCUSSION

So what is sensible to say based on the observations presented? Some things seem clear. Among these is the digital tsunami that caused the waves on which most current propaganda surfs, whether state-sponsored or something else. Another is the misconception that things like conspiracy theories would be merely organically spreading misinformation originating from the fringes of the cyber space. Instead, some of them belong also to the conventional toolbox of well-educated, state-sponsored propagandists. If pedagogy is the transmission of skill, as it was for Lasswell, a basic lesson about human emotions, among them love and hate, would thus be the first advice for a future propagandist, as it would have been in the 1930s.

What else? As was expected, much of the pro-Kremlin propaganda, according to the task force's data, seems to be targeted for domestic consumption as much as produced for export. There are no reasons to expect that propaganda from other capitals would be much different. Otherwise, sure, there are differences; according to the ESTF, Russian propaganda is largely about war propaganda addressing both "hot" and "cold" conflict zones. This observation supports the notions about hybrid warfare, which, however, is nothing novel from a historical perspective. What is new is that what is old is often forgotten, misunderstood, or manipulated; or perhaps

this is old as well. But in terms of international relations, what is historically new is the world's inevitable interconnectedness also in terms of information in the open Internet. Data, information, knowledge, and propaganda; it does not seem to matter. When one country becomes a hotbed for one, other countries tend to follow. When it is propaganda, they tend to also share the same hangover.

Generalizability of the observations presented is the most notable limitation. In other words, it is difficult to say whether these truly reflect Russian propaganda in general. As said, the ESTF itself supposedly has a certain barycenter of its own, but, more generally, sampling is a known problem in propaganda research [40]. Another known problem is an impulse-response type of an analysis [41]. The same applies to the case at hand; it is difficult to say anything about how successful the task force has been. Furthermore, the ESTF's current reactive whack-a-mole model makes evaluation difficult, including any assessment over whether a more proactive model would be plausible [4]. It can be left as a further exercise to contemplate what a proactive model might look like—presently, it suffices to note that the whole fact-checking paradigm may be doomed. To understand why, one should return to the earlier definition and its emphasis of social control. To gain such control, epistemology is not a concern; anything goes for a propagandist as long as it helps to advance the cause of control through the public opinion [49]. Another point is that the waves from the tsunami are tidal waves against which any debunking effort runs short on time and resources. In this regard, sufficient resourcing and staffing for the ESTF have also raised critical questions previously [43, 47]. So, given these limitations, the earlier discussion with the literature, and the observations presented, is there a hope for an improvement? A tentative answer from the parallel 1930s seems again appropriate:

> "*There are no indications to encourage a hope that this propaganda war between nations will cease; there is every reason to believe that it will become more intense. It is a vicious game at which nations can play only by poisoning the minds of each other's nationals.*" [3, p. 430]

Finally: As interesting the results and the ESTF case may or may not be, there is a more important question at hand. To motivate it, consider again the two Figures 1 and 2. Again: neither one has been chosen by accident. Pause for a moment to think: Why? Dot dot dot: for many thinkers, the first figure symbolizes the ending of an era. It symbolizes the end of the Cold War and the bipolar world order. In more polemical terms, it symbolizes the triumph of liberal democracy over communism during *that* era (Fukuyama). In still polemical terms, it symbolizes the end of the *short* but extreme twentieth century (Hobsbawm). But whichever polemic one chooses, one still arrives to the latter figure. There is even a *shorter* time period in-between what the figures symbolize. Now, it was argued in Section 2 that values, norms, and institutions are resilient. Then: How can it be that so much has changed during this shorter period than the "short" previous century? Technology and the information tsunami were the answers implicitly contemplated in this paper. But while these may explain today's enemies, allies, neutrals, loves, and hates—the propaganda of the early 21st digital century, the explanation still seems partial. To proceed, it seems sensible that all eight value-institution layers discussed should be addressed.

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