Atlantic Council

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HEARING ON

Putin's Invasion of Ukraine and
the Propaganda that Threatens Europe

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Confronting Putin's Hybrid Wars in an Engagement Age

TESTIMONY BY

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Chairman Johnson, Ranking Member Shaheen, Members of the Committee, I am honored to appear before you today. As a Polish citizen, I was raised on a continent that was defined by the vision of a Europe whole, free, and at peace. A Europe in which the children of those who were once enemies became each other's best friends, and in which freedom, democracy, and tolerance have served as unifying forces during the longest era of peace and prosperity on the European continent. A Europe in which diversity laid the foundation not for bloodshed and violence, but solidarity and progress. This Europe has become a beacon of hope—an opportunity for a better future for the thousands who risk their lives as they seek to reach its shores, or remain steadfast in the face of oppression and injustice, just to inch closer to that dream.

But today this vision—which has long been a key US strategic goal—and the continent this vision helped define are being tested by forces that seek to undermine the Europe I grew up in. No geopolitical event has made that more clear than Russia's invasion of Ukraine last year. And, critically, it is not only Russian boots on the ground that challenge the vision of a Europe whole, free and at peace, but also a raging propaganda machine aiming to destroy the West's confidence in its ideals and accomplishments in Europe.

This Russian-led propaganda machine has become so effective that we, as the United States and Europe, have sleep-walked into the unimaginable: the armed annexation by one state of territory belonging to another, an act not seen in Europe since 1945. This propaganda machine is providing cover for a revisionist Russian leader to reverse the progress that the Western nations have made together in Europe over the past two decades, and create a Europe divided, dictated to, and at war.

"I can tell you outright and unequivocally that there are no Russian troops in Ukraine."[1] – These were the words of Vladimir Putin, and they were, outright and unequivocally, a lie.

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[1] http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/49261

In fact, Putin has been lying to his own people while Russian citizens and soldiers have been fighting and dying in a war of his own making. Thanks to the propaganda machine he has built; it has been possible for the Kremlin to deny any allegations of Russian involvement in Ukraine. Said Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov in January of this year: "If you allege [that Russian troops are in Ukraine] so confidently, present the facts. But nobody can present the facts, or doesn't want to. So before demanding from us that we stop doing something, please present proof that we have done it."[2]

When Western officials did indeed present strong evidence that Russian troops have been deployed in Ukraine, the Kremlin was quick to dismiss the evidence as "just images from computer games"[3] and has sought to discredit information released by NATO, the US government, and its European allies as a "smear campaign."[4] And for a long time the Kremlin succeeded, because today's information systems are also, unfortunately, hotlines through which ill-intentioned leaders can channel misinformation.

As we stumbled while Europe's borders were redrawn, a broader new reality was also emerging: We are no longer merely in an information age, in which narratives are shaped by one flow of information pushing against another and simply presenting the truth can discredit lies. Today, we are in **the engagement age** whereby the narratives we create are shaped by how we communicate with one another. Unlike the past, we have unprecedented power to access vast amounts of information that is now in citizens' hands, not to mention the power to create, engage with, share and most importantly discover this information freely. It is a new age that has brought the world and Europe itself closer together, and made it more open, but that is now being hijacked by less benevolent forces such as those of Mr. Putin.

Moscow has seized this new space through a concentrated and engaging propaganda campaign—hybrid information warfare if you will—with the aim of sowing confusion and encouraging or justifying the West's ambivalent response to Russia's aggression, now also in Syria.

Troll-shops and cutting-edge media factories in Russia work around the clock to engage and misinform their audience through flashy content. We know this, because all of us have seen the deceptive videos posted online by the outlet RT that today claims to be the most watched news network on YouTube with over 2 billion views.[5] And some of those who were tasked with the job of spreading lies 140 characters at a time, such as 34-year-old Lyudmila Savchuk, have come out providing us with a rare glimpse into what happens within these shops.[6]

This spreading of "digital breadcrumbs" is an attempt to undermine our Western narrative and values, and divide NATO and the EU, by exploiting divisions within both nations and communities.

But the engagement age has also reached Russia. In fact, the Kremlin has recognized the potential of this new age to the degree that it is concerned about its impact on its own people. Several weeks before Mr. Putin sent his troops—little green men as they were known—to Crimea and launched his propaganda assault on Ukraine, he first struck at home:

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[2] http://www.reuters.com/article/2015/01/22/us-ukraine-crisis-davos-poroshenko-idUSKBN0KU1TX20150122
[3] http://www.nbcnews.com/storyline/ukraine-crisis/kremlin-satellite-images-russian-troops-computer-games-n191771
[4] http://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-28492474
[5] https://www.rt.com/news/214723-rt-two-billion-youtube/
[6] http://www.voanews.com/content/russians-get-glimpse-of-internet-troll-factory/2846484.html

On January 24, 2014 the Russian equivalent of Facebook, the network VKontakte, with its 60 million daily users, was forcefully taken over from its former CEO Pavel Durov, by businessmen allied with Mr. Putin in an attempt to control the potential dangers of the engagement age to Russia's leadership.

But, while Mr. Putin is attempting to control the digital space, there are limits to the level of control that can be put on opportunities for the Russian people to engage with one another and to discuss what is actually happening in Russia.

This also provides us with new opportunities to challenge Mr. Putin's propaganda machine.

The desire to share and connect is a fundamental value shared by all. Hence, rather than rely on government information to expose Mr. Putin's lies, the Atlantic Council's report, 'Hiding in Plain Sight: Putin's War in Ukraine', collected and presented the facts that the Kremlin had been trying to hide by tapping into people's desire to share and engage: When we post selfies, videos, photos, tweets, and Facebook updates then we frequently leave so called "digital breadcrumbs" behind that are often publicly accessible and even entail geotags with the exact geographical details of where a crumb was created. Anyone can access these "digital breadcrumbs." But we of course don't take these face value, which why using innovative digital forensic research and verification techniques including geolocating we can differentiate between fact and fiction. This allowed us tell the true story of Russia's war in Ukraine.

This was no civil war. The evidence presented in 'Hiding in Plain Sight' makes clear that the conflict in Ukraine's east is a Kremlin-manufactured war, fueled by Russian equipment, fought by Russian soldiers, and directed by Mr. Putin.

Our team at the Atlantic Council was able to reveal numerous cases of Russian soldiers being sent to fight in Ukraine. One of them was Bato Dambayev of the 37th Motorized Infantry Brigade who, after participating in the fierce fighting in Donbas, returned home to the city of Buryita along the Russian-Mongolian border more than 4000 miles from the Ukrainian conflict. An ordinary Russian soldier, he had trained at large camp near the Russian city of Kuzminka from where he was sent across the border to fight in Ukraine. Like many of his friends, he documented his adventure by posting selfies and pictures along the way.

For a long time, the Kremlin has succeeded in setting the narrative for the Ukraine conflict, even managing to convince many that it is purely a civil war. But the story of Bato and thousands of others like him shows a different reality. The innovative methods used to show Bato's journey, are also the methods our colleague, award winning citizen journalist Eliot Higgins and his team at Bellingcat, used to uncover the Russian military brigade that is believed to have supplied the very BUK missile launcher that downed the civilian aircraft known as flight MH17.

But if we could expose Russia's war in Ukraine despite it being publicly denied by its leader, we asked ourselves, what potential did these methods hold for civil society leaders and journalists?

That's why we shared our findings with Simon Ostrovsky of VICE News. He was able to follow the journey of Bato and verify once again that these innovative digital forensic research methods and open source intelligence produce results. As we watched Simon standing in the very locations that Bato's selfies were taken, we recognized that one of the strongest means of protecting our

narrative against misinformation is equipping and training journalists with these new methods, to use in both their own countries and abroad.

We also produced this body of research for an even more compelling reason: If the international community cannot distinguish fact from fiction, or chooses not to do so in public, it is unlikely to coalesce around an effective strategy to support Ukraine and deter Mr. Putin.

Our experience taught us that:

1) The best antidote to misinformation in this hybrid war is clarity; to speak the truth but foremost to empower the public to reveal and communicate it clearly
2) Second, social media forensics and geolocation analysis are powerful tools:
   - Information once available only to intelligence agencies is now available to all. We do not need to engage in an information war, rather we need to empower civil society, journalists and citizens to distinguish between fact and fiction.
   - This matters: because it can help overcome the healthy skepticism that the public may have toward official government narratives.
   - This is the new reality of a world in which individuals and non-governmental actors play critical roles in the engagement era.
   - The best part is—you don't need to believe me or my co-authors—the methods we've used in our report are essentially a tool that we don't control.

This is the principle behind the concept of 'information defense' put forward by our colleague Ben Nimmo, a British specialist in analyzing information warfare. He argues that the key to defeating disinformation is to support media, academics and civil society in gathering information on areas of particular concern, so that they can debunk any disinformation as soon as it is released.[7] We therefor recommend expanding that support into the digital arena through concrete training programs and workshops for journalists, civil society leaders, and ordinary citizens, not only here at home but also in regions most effected by the propaganda war, so that they can navigate the engagement age more effectively and do so equipped with groundbreaking new digital forensic research methods.

This concept was proven in Syria, where colleagues such as the Bellingcat group and blogger Ruslan Leviev have spent four years building up an intelligence picture of the conflict from social media.[8] When Russia began bombing targets in Syria and claiming that they were from the Islamic State, it took Ruslan Leviev just hours to prove that the Russians were lying, and were in fact hitting the moderate opposition. Russia's claim that it is focusing on IS was shredded on the first day—leaving it without the diplomatic legitimacy that striking IS would give.

It is important to bear in mind that Mr. Putin has used the Ukrainian and Syrian crises first and foremost to consolidate his own authority at home, whipping up patriotic sentiment to paper over the Kremlin's own failures in governance while repressing civil society, independent media, and social networks.

Chairman Ed Royce rightly pointed out in his Wall Street Journal op-ed earlier this year, that Russia's propaganda machine, "may be more dangerous than any military, because no artillery can stop their lies from spreading and undermining US security interests in Europe"[9]—For that it is time that we put resources where they matter as we did in the Cold War, but with the

[7] http://www.li.com/events/information-at-war-from-china-s-three-warfares-to-nato-s-narratives
[8] https://www.bellingcat.com/news/mena/2015/09/07/are-there-russian-troops-fighting-in-syria/
[9] http://www.wsj.com/articles/countering-putins-information-weapons-of-war-1429052323?alg=y

understanding that a new era requires new thinking and new solutions: It is time that we don't blindly push information, but engage in the digital infosphere with our citizens so that they can play a role in distinguishing between fact and fiction. This requires empowering citizens to be part of the process and stopping those who otherwise attempt to blind.

Therefore, revealing Putin's deception of his own people is a key part of a strategy to end his aggression in Europe, by hitting him where he is vulnerable.

We must also demonstrate solidarity with those Russians who are courageous enough to take a stand against the lies of the Putin regime.

The first victims of Putin are the people of Russia, who deserve better.

Confronting Mr. Putin's aggression does not imply a confrontation against the Russian people. As the co-signers of the preface in our report 'Hiding in Plain Sight' point out: "We all share a common vision for a Europe whole, free, and at peace, in which Russia finds its peaceful place. But Mr. Putin's war in Ukraine threatens this vision and the international order."[10]

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[10] http://www.atlanticcouncil.org/publications/reports/hiding-in-plain-sight-putin-s-war-in-ukraine-and-boris-nemtsov-s-putin-war