THE MISINFORMATION CELL

Fighting Putin’s propaganda
Narrative response toolkit
President Putin is waging two wars which are mutually reinforcing. One with bombs and one with information. In seeking to pollute the information space with bad information, contradictory information and downright lies, Putin is blurring the lines of reality and making it harder for Ukraine to defend itself.

The Misinformation Cell is dedicated to supporting the Ukrainian people in the information war. Through a coordinated response we can arm the communications community and civil society with the information they need to fight back.

In this report you’ll find some simple narrative and content recommendations to fight Putin’s propaganda. Our Counter Narrative Campaign development (CoNaC) disinformation response strategy looks at disinformation not through the lens of facts vs lies, but as competing narratives. We fight stories that are built on deliberate distortions of reality with a better story: we build our counter-narratives on hope and truth.

Ukraine is already winning the information war with agility and creativity and there are journalists across the world working tirelessly and effectively to debunk disinformation. We do not seek to replace this ecosystem. Instead, our Propaganda Response Toolkit provides communicators in the PR and Communications industry, public sector, civil society and beyond with a one-stop-shop for narrative guidance and content recommendations. We hope our insights are also useful to journalists, editors, producers, policymakers, NGO and business leaders who play big roles in the information ecosystem. Our recommendations are not comprehensive – nothing is - but we hope it can add to our collective armoury. As narratives develop – so will our recommendations.

This is a call to action. We are crowd-sourcing intel and we are asking for you to share this far and wide. As the Head of Misinformation Cell, I’m willing to partner with anyone who is committed to this fight. Dark times call for us to put divisions aside and fight together for the common good.

If you can partner with us, either to crowd-source intelligence on disinformation spreads or to maximise distribution of our counter-narratives, then my door is always open.
To fight President Putin’s propaganda efforts, Lynn PR’s Misinformation Cell recommends that communicators focus on sharing:

- Displays of solidarity with Ukraine from across the world
- Content which emphasises Russia’s exclusion from the global community in sport, finance and culture
- Evidence of Russian barbarism and alleged war crimes
- Content that exposes Russia’s kleptocracy and the extreme unfairness and inequality over which Putin presides
- Stories of everyday heroes and human interest in Ukraine which users find relatable across the world (e.g. pets)
- Content about the Russian military which is embarrassing, displays lack of competence, or showcases their defeats
- Examples of Ukrainian military wins or acts of defiance
- Memes/content which ridicule President Putin by making him appear weak and isolated
- Content which displays Ukrainian joy, unity or optimism in the face of adversity
- Memes and content which emphasise Zelensky’s strength, resilience and connection with regular people, in contrast to Putin – who is out of touch.
Propaganda response toolkit

**Signals**
- Foreign leaders
  - Steven Segal
  - U.S aggression
  - Palestine
  - NATO enlargement
  - Donbass
  - Censorship
  - Denazification
  - Crushed car
  - Human shields
  - Zelensky far-right
  - Gen Hans Speidel
  - Military/cabinet meetings
  - Information war
  - Nuclear threat
  - Zelensky career
  - Ukraine demoralisation

**Core Narratives**
- Russia has global support
- Russia is a liberator
- Ukraine is committing atrocities
- Putin is powerful and dangerous
- Zelensky lacks support and unfit to lead

**Vulnerabilities**
- Western response isn’t united
- U.S has hawkish history
- There is a far-right presence in Ukraine
- Putin has dictatorial control
- Zelensky was a comic actor

**Counter Narratives**
- Russia isolated / Ukraine has global support
- U.S hawkish history
- David vs Goliath
- Ukraine fighting for democracy
- Putin losing control
- Zelensky man of the moment

**Content**
- Solidarity from across the world
- Russia global exclusion
- Every day hero stories
- Russian barbarism
- Kleptocracy
- Embarrassing Russian defeats/episodes
- Ukrainian wins
- Putin mockery / jokes
- Joyful content
- Zelensky memes

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Foreign leaders – The Kremlin published a series of announcements showcasing President Putin’s phone calls with leaders of some of the world’s most populous and influential nations. (1)

Steven Segal – [Debunked] U.S actor Steven Segal joining the Russian war effort. (2)

U.S military aggression – The U.S is responsible for most military aggression around the world. (3)

Palestine – The West’s support of Ukrainian self-defence but lack of support for Palestine demonstrates anti-Russia bias and evidence of hypocrisy. (4)

NATO enlargement – Russia’s response is proportionate to the threat posed by NATO. (5)

Donbass – [Disputed] ‘Ukrainian nationalists’ have committed violent crimes against the Russian speaking population of Donbass. (6)

Censorship – The U.S is mobilising Big Tech companies to censor accurate information disseminated by Russia (7).

Denazification – [Debunked] Ukraine is allowing neo-Nazis to commit ‘genocide’ and stoking Rusophobia on Ukrainian soil. (8)

Crushed car – [Disputed] Circulating video shows the Ukrainian military crushing the car of a civilian. (9)

Human shields – [Disputed] President Putin accused ‘banderites and neo-Nazis’ of using civilians as human shields like ‘terrorists’. (10)

Zelensky-far right links – [Disputed] Framing Zelensky as an ally of neo-Nazis. (11)

Gen Hans Speidel – Using a Nazi General who would go on to become a NATO General as evidence that the West are the successors to the Nazis. (12)

Military & cabinet meetings – Images of Putin meeting with military personal and high ranking officials. (13)

Nuclear threat – Inflating the threat of use of nuclear deterrent from Russia. (14)

Zelensky career – Ridiculing Zelensky for his time as a comic actor. (15)

Ukraine demoralisation – Attempts to frame the Ukrainian army as giving up and Russian victory as inevitable. (16)
The common stories that underlie this sample of signals:

- Russia has broad global support for its actions, and is being resisted by uni-polar centres of power in the West (U.S/NATO).

- Russia is not an aggressor, it’s a liberator of oppressed Russian people and is simply defending itself against the aggressive actions of NATO and the West.

- Ukraine is a defender of neo-Nazism, is committing atrocities against oppressed Russian people and defying international law in its attempt to uphold this evil system.

- Putin wields great power and influence, both within his country and across the world, and the West should be afraid of what he is capable of.

- President Zelenksy is a joke of a President, he doesn’t command the support or unity of the Ukrainian people.

The objective truths that the propaganda builds on:

- The response from NATO nations and the rest of the world has not been a fully united front. Countries are taking different approaches on sanctions, and some authoritarian/rogue states will support Putin.

- The U.S has been the leader of a unipolar world since the fall of the Soviet Union and has been embroiled in many foreign conflicts – some of which are seen as failures in the West (e.g. Iraq).

- There is a far-right presence in Ukraine – like there is in countries all over the world – and stories have emerged of acts of racism against black and brown people trying to flee Ukraine.

- President Putin has effectively turned Russia into a police state where he controls the media and the government, which does exacerbate the pre-existing dangers of war.

- President Zelensky was a comic actor so naturally there are clips of him behaving in a way that might be deemed ‘unpresidential’ by existing standards.
Counter narratives and deployable content

A sample of counter-narratives that can ‘inoculate’ audiences to Putin’s propaganda:

- By going rogue Putin has isolated Russia from the global community whereas Ukraine has widespread support from defenders of democracy.

- The war is a David vs Goliath situation, with Ukraine trying to defend itself from an imperialist bully. As in the story – with perseverance Ukraine will succeed.

- Ukraine is not just fighting for its own survival but for the survival of democracy over tyranny. Ukraine, despite its imperfections, is on the side of freedom and justice.

- Putin has catastrophically misjudged the situation in Ukraine and will ultimately fail in his broader goals. His position in the Russian government is no longer assured.

- Zelensky is the man of the moment and meeting it like a real leader. He’s displayed courage and determination, galvanising his country and the democratic world.

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Citations and acknowledgements

1. https://twitter.com/KremlinRussia_E/status/1497113768744079360
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