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# ANALYSIS OF KREMLIN DISINFORMATION CAMPAIGN AFTER THE POISONING OF ALEXEI NAVALNY

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**About the Authors**

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## ABSTRACT

This article analyses the disinformation campaign launched by Russian state-owned media after the poisoning of Alexei Navalny, comparing its key elements with findings from discussions held at the NATO StratCom COE in 2016 and from relevant literature, to develop a better understanding of the Kremlin's long-term pattern of communications that further its strategic objectives domestically and internationally. We systematically analysed the disinformation campaign both quantitatively and qualitatively using the 'A2E model', adapted from an analytical framework created in 2019 by the Transatlantic Working Group. We concluded that familiar strategies designed to neutralise Western criticism and 'fog the news', such as projecting multiple alternative narratives, flooding the media with large numbers of articles, and inviting pro-Kremlin 'experts' to comment, were still being employed in 2020. We show how Russian state-owned media generate narratives to debunk evidence, deny responsibility, discredit opponents, and distract domestic and international audiences—a '4D framework' for disinformation. This research into the Kremlin's strategic communications is timely and necessary as it reveals the Kremlin's practice of using disinformation, not only in military contexts, which have been better studied, but also as analysed here, to cover an assassination attempt.

## INTRODUCTION

The Russian Federation has a number of strategic goals that it hopes to advance through its use of disinformation, including restoring Russia to great power status, preserving its sphere of influence, protecting Putin's government, and enhancing its military effectiveness.[1] While there is much discussion of Russian disinformation focused on specific case studies, the conversation about how these fit within the Kremlin's strategic objectives has been limited.[2] Recent analyses have focused on immediate and tactical methods, and the possible intentions behind

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1 Kasey Stricklin, 'Why Does Russia Use Disinformation?', 29 March 2020. [Accessed 16 July 2021].
2 Geir Karlsen, 'Divide and Rule: Ten Lessons about Russian Political Influence Activities in Europe', *Palgrave Communications*, Volume 5, N°19 (2019). [Accessed 9 July 2021]

various disinformation campaigns,[3] rather than on the interpretation of how and why they are used in the long-term. These questions are becoming increasingly important, especially considering new high-profile events. Most recently, Kremlin disinformation campaigns have been extended to cover and 'support' assassination attempts, such as the recent poisoning of Russian opposition leader and anti-corruption activist Alexei Navalny.[4] This paper analyses the disinformation campaign launched by the Kremlin in the aftermath of the Navalny poisoning and compares current findings to previous findings regarding Kremlin information activities to determine which elements can be considered part of Russia's long-term communications strategy.

On 20 August 2020, while flying back to Moscow from Tomsk in Siberia, Alexei Navalny suddenly lost consciousness, necessitating an emergency landing in the city of Omsk, where he was taken for treatment. A day later, amid speculation about a possible poisoning attempt, Omsk doctors gave a press statement announcing that Navalny had suffered a metabolic disorder and no poisonous substances had been found. On 22 August, after some initial delays, the Kremlin agreed to a request from Navalny's family and his team to transport him to the Charité hospital in Berlin, Germany. A few days later, the hospital issued a press release indicating a high probability that Navalny had been poisoned. On 2 September 2020, the German government reported the results of the German Bundeswehr laboratory, confirming that Navalny had been poisoned by the Novichok nerve agent—the same substance used two years previously in an attempt to kill former GRU[5] agent Sergei Skripal.

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3 For case studies of Kremlin media disinformation, see: Ulises A. Mejias and Nikolai E. Vokuev, 'Disinformation and the Media: The Case of Ukraine and Russia', *Media, Culture and Society*, Volume 39 Nº7 (2017): 1027–42; Christopher Paul and Miriam Matthews, 'The Russian "Firehose of Falsehood" Propaganda Model: Why It Might Work and Options to Counter It', (Santa Monica, CA: *RAND*, 2016).[Accessed: 9 July 2021]; Tolz, Vera, Stephen Hutchings, Precious N. Chatterje-Doody and Rhys Crilley, 'Mediatization and Journalistic Agency: Russian Television Coverage of the Skripal Poisonings', *Journalism* (2020): 1–20; Edward Deverell, Charlotte Wagnsson, and Eva-Karin Olsson, 'Destruct, Direct and Suppress: Sputnik Narratives on the Nordic Countries', *The Journal of International Communication* Volume 27, Nº1 (2021): 15—37.
4 Edward Lucas, *The New Cold War: Putin's Threat to Russia and the West* (Bloomsbury, 2014); Peter Pomerantsev, *Nothing is True and Everything is Possible: Adventures in Modern Russia* (New York: Faber & Faber, 2017).
5 GRU is an initialism for Glavnoye Razvedyvatel'noye Upravleniye [Главное разведывательное управление], the foreign military intelligence main directorate of the General Staff of the Armed Forces of the Russian Federation.

Regardless of these discoveries, the Russian state neither supported the German medical findings nor admitted responsibility for the poisoning attack; the official position of the Kremlin remains that Navalny suffered from a 'metabolic disorder'. President Vladimir Putin himself stated that: 'If Russian special services wanted to kill him, they would have "finished it".'[6]

The poisoning attempts against former intelligence officer Sergei Skripal in 2018 and Alexei Navalny in 2020, were followed by extensive and well-rehearsed disinformation campaigns launched by the Russian State-owned Media (RSOM). Both campaigns were designed to deny and 'neutralise' evidence of Russian state involvement in the assassination attempts, whilst promoting a more favourable perception of Russia, both domestically and internationally, and demeaning Western official government narratives. This article takes the poisoning of Navalny as a case study to help develop a better understanding of the Kremlin's information activities that seek to further strategic objectives domestically and internationally, especially following high-profile events that incriminate the Russian state. Our analysis builds upon insights from closed-door discussions that took place in Riga at the NATO Strategic Communications Centre of Excellence (StratCom COE) in May 2016.[7] This summary contains key insights from academics and experts and thus provides a good reference for comparison with more recent findings regarding Kremlin information activities. The article at hand answers the research question: Which elements of the disinformation campaign launched by Russian state media in response to the poisoning of Alexei Navalny can be considered part of the Kremlin's overall communication strategy?

We examined 1186 articles related to the poisoning of Alexei Navalny published in Russian state-owned media over a three-week period between 20 August 2020 and 9 September 2020. Due to the involvement of both

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6 Mary Ilyushina, Laura Smith-Spark and Jennifer Hansler, 'Putin says if Russia wanted to kill opposition leader Navalny, it would have "finished" the job', *CNN*, 17 December 2020. [Accessed 30 March 2021].
7 Gregory Simons and Antti Sillanpää, 'The Kremlin and Daesh Information Activities', (Riga: NATO Strategic Communications Centre of Excellence, 2016).

Russia and Germany in the Navalny case, we analysed two domestic RSOM outlets—*Ria Novosti* and *TASS*—and two German-language RSOM broadcasters—*RT Deutsch* and *Sputnik Deutsch*. To structure our results, we used a conceptual framework previously developed for analysing cases of disinformation on social and mainstream media. The framework, which we call the 'A2E model',[8] breaks down and systematises the analysis of disinformation along five principal vectors, which, when taken together, facilitate the construction of a comprehensive 'full-spectrum' view of any disinformation case, but especially when the case engages both media and social media assets. The five vectors are: (A = Audience) the audience that has been targeted with disinformation; (B = Behaviour) the behavioural signatures of the disinformation campaign; (C = Content) the content used and its underlying motivation; (D = Dynamics) the dynamics of how and when the material was published and consumed; (E = Effects) the effects the disinformation campaign appears to have had online and *offline*.

Comparing the Navalny case to the Kremlin information activities discussed in the 2016 StratCom proceedings we found an overall continuity and consistency of method across all five categories in the A2E model: (A = Audience) RSOM articles are geared towards audiences already receptive to alternative viewpoints about Western politics and society and toward those who maintain a favourable view of Russia and Putin; (B = Behaviour) RSOM published at least eleven different versions of events in a variety of media in a tactical attempt to 'fog' the information environment and disrupt Western narratives, rather than prioritizing one particular interpretation; (C = Content) the content of the narrative variations can be categorised according to the intent behind each narrative—to debunk, deny, discredit, and distract—a 4D framework; (D = Dynamics) RSOM sought to publish and distribute a large number of articles rapidly and at critical moments (immediately

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8 The A2E analytical framework was inspired in part by Camille François, 'Actors, Behaviors, Content: A Disinformation ABC Highlighting Three Vectors of Viral Deception to Guide Industry & Regulatory Responses', A working paper of the Transatlantic High Level Working Group on Content Moderation Online and Freedom of Expression, *Graphika and Berkman Klein Center for Internet & Society at Harvard University*, 20 September 2019. [Accessed 30 March 2021].

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after the poisoning and immediately following the Novichok revelations), resulting in high viewership and engagement; (E = Effects) while effects are difficult to measure,[9] it can be deduced that the Kremlin used its anti-Navalny information campaign to 'set the scene' for the subsequent imprisonment of Navalny and to justify retaliatory measures against the West.

The next section reviews and summarises existing literature on Russian strategic communications and Kremlin disinformation activities. Section three describes the methodology used to collect and analyse the data, section four summarises the results, section five presents a further discussion of our findings, and we share our conclusions in section six.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

Strategic communications involves 'the use of words, actions, images, or symbols to influence the attitudes and opinions of target audiences, to shape their behaviour in order to advance interests or policies, or to achieve objectives'[10] in the interests of a nation or a political community. Rather than simply projecting short-term tactical goals, strategic communications implies a more holistic approach targeted at the 'long-term shaping and shifting of significant discourses in societies'.[11] This also comes with the recognition that any long-term effect must compete in a continually changing, noisy, and contested information environment.[12]

The boundaries of the discipline of Strategic Communications are not clearly defined and often cross-pollinate with studies of Propaganda, Active Measures, Information Operations, Psychological Operations, and Public Diplomacy amongst others.[13] Despite conceptual overlaps, strategic communications must be understood as a tool of grand

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9 Natascha A. Karlova and Karen E. Fisher, 'A Social Diffusion Model of Misinformation and Disinformation for Understanding Human Information Behaviour', *Information Research* Volume 18 N°1 (2013): n. pag.
10 James Farwell, *The Art of Strategic Communications* (Washington, DC: Georgetown University Press, 2012), pp. xviii–xix.
11 Neville Bolt, 'Foreword', *Defence Strategic Communications*, Volume 6 (Riga: NATO Strategic Communications Centre of Excellence, 2019), p. 4.
12 Ibid., p. 7.
13 Neville Bolt and Leonie Haiden, *Improving NATO Strategic Communications Terminology* (Riga: NATO Strategic Communications Centre of Excellence, 2019), pp. 21–22.

strategies.[14] In other words, while public diplomacy, propaganda, and information operations can contribute to long-term strategic communications efforts, they can also be targeted at more short-term and tactical objectives that do not necessarily relate to national policy goals.

While Russia does not recognise or use the term 'strategic communications', the Kremlin's information strategy exhibits many of its features. Russian president Vladimir Putin has increasingly referenced the security of the country's information domain as a vital priority. Russia's 2015 National Security Strategy and its 2016 Information Security Doctrine have extended the conventions of national security policy discourse into the domain of information by citing foreign-originating information flows and cyber-attacks as a potential threat to the country's stability.[15] These documents imply that information security has grown increasingly important in view of the fact that communication technologies are used 'by some countries' in order to 'achieve the geopolitical goals [by] resorting to manipulation with public opinion and history falsification'.[16] Both strategic documents cite measures intended to strengthen Russian national interests in the information sphere.

In addition to securing its information space against perceived threats from foreign countries, the Kremlin also makes use of more controversial offensive methods. An analysis of forty annual reports from fifteen intelligence and security services in eleven Western countries, covering the period 2014–18, found an overwhelming consensus that Russia has been targeting the West through a variety of methods using mainstream and social media in an attempt to set its adversaries against each other in 'a divide and rule approach'.[17] These activities are seen as 'long-term efforts to ensure Russian political interests and achievement of the country's

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14 Raphael Camargo Lima, 'Strategic Communications as a Tool for Great Power Politics in Venezuela,' *Defence Strategic Communications*, Volume 6 (Riga: NATO Strategic Communications Centre of Excellence, 2019). [Accessed 30 March 2021]
15 The Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation, 'Doctrine of Information Security of the Russian Federation', 2016 [Accessed 30 March 2021]; Russian Federation, 'On the Russian Government's National Security Strategy', [Full text translation], December 2015 [Accessed 30 March 2021].
16 Russian Federation, 'National Security Strategy', Article 21.
17 Karlsen, 'Divide and Rule'.

objectives',[18] reminiscent of the 'active measures' [*aktivnye meropriyatiya*] used in Soviet times, 'both in the wide spectrum of methods employed and in the scale and intensity of influence activities'.[19] These activities support three main strategic objectives: regime security for Putin's government, the predominance of Russia in its near abroad, and world-power status for Russia, which entails pursuing the long-term objective of weakening and destabilising the West and Western alliances while projecting a favourable image of Russia internationally.[20]

In addition to 'strategic communications', this paper invokes two other key concepts: 'disinformation' and 'active measures'. Disinformation refers to *intentionally* misleading information, as opposed to misinformation, which relates to *unintentionally* incorrect information,[21] misguided or erroneous information,[22] or unintentionally inaccurate information.[23] The term disinformation is a translation of the Russian word *dezinformatsiya*, which can be traced back to Stalin and the Soviet Union. Before his defection to the United States in 1969, Ladislav Bittman, a former high-ranking intelligence officer in the Czechoslovak Intelligence Service, defined *dezinformatsiya* citing the Great Soviet Encyclopaedia of 1952 as 'the dissemination (in the press, radio, etc.) of false information with the intention to deceive public opinion'.[24] Contemporary definitions of the term maintain the notion of intentionality, for example: information that aims to sow confusion and proliferate falsehoods,[25] news stories deliberately designed to weaken adversaries,[26] and intentionally incorrect information.[27] However, both 'old school' and contemporary formulations agree that disinformation is a more complex and nuanced

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18 Ibid., p. 5.
19 Ibid., p. 12.
20 Ibid.
21 Alice Marwick, '<u>Why Do People Share Fake News? A Sociotechnical Model of Media Effects</u>', *Georgetown Law Technology Review* 474 (2018).
22 Garth S. Jowett and Victoria O'Donnell, *Propaganda & Persuasion*, Sixth ed. (Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE Publications, Inc., 2014).
23 Caroline Jack, <u>*Lexicon of Lies: Terms for Problematic Information*</u>, (Data & Society Research Institute, 2017).
24 Ladislav Bittman, *The KGB and Soviet Disinformation: An Insider's View* (Washington, DC: Pergamon-Brassey's, 1985), p. 49.
25 Peter Pomerantsev and Michael Weiss, *The Menace of Unreality: How the Kremlin Weaponizes Information, Culture and Money* (New York: Institute of Modern Russia, 2014).
26 Jowett and O'Donnell, *Propaganda & Persuasion*.
27 Marwick, '<u>Why Do People Share Fake News?</u>'.

phenomenon than simply being incorrect information.[28] Accurate information may be conveyed but shrouded in half-truths, exaggerations, and biased interpretations.[29]

In this article we use the term 'disinformation narratives' to refer to messages published in state-funded news articles that are intentionally designed to foster a biased or misleading version of a story. In the case of Russian state-media, such narratives are often associated with core themes that appear consistently in Russia's communications efforts. We will explore how state-funded disinformation narratives are constructed and disseminated using a variety of disinformation methods and techniques of influence.

Major General Oleg Kalugin, retired KGB (*Komitet Gosudarstvennoy Bezopasnosti*, i.e. the Russian Committee for State Security)[30] operative, saw disinformation as a critical component of Russia's overall Active Measures Strategy.[31] 'Active measures' is a Soviet term for active intelligence operations designed to influence world events so as to further Soviet geopolitical goals. Some of the main goals included weakening the West, driving wedges into Western alliances (particularly NATO) and sowing discord among the Allies.[32] Various methods have been used to achieve these ends, such as creating front organizations, establishing opposition parties, supporting criminal and terrorist organizations, and spreading disinformation through official and unofficial channels in order to sow discord within a targeted audience.[33] Soviet active measures were not necessarily designed to persuade an audience to think in a specific way, but rather to 'muddy the waters', to confuse and distort information spaces around particular topics leaving the public unsure

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28  Kate Starbird, Ahmer Arif, and Tom Wilson, 'Disinforming as Collaborative Work: Surfacing the Perspiratory Nature of Strategic Information Operations', *Proceedings of the ACM on Human-Computer Interaction*, Nº127 (2019): 1–26.

29 Thomas Rid, *Active Measures: The Secret History of Disinformation and Political Warfare* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2020).

30 KGB is an initialism for Komitet gosudarstvennoy bezopasnosti [Комитет государственной безопасности], translated into English as Committee for State Security. The KGB's successors are the secret police agency FSB (Federal Security Service of the Russian Federation) and the espionage agency SVR (Foreign Intelligence Service).

31 Aristedes Mahairas and Mikhail Dvilyanski, 'Disinformation—Дезинформация (Dezinformatsiya)', *The Cyber Defense Review*, Volume 3 Nº3 (Fall 2018): 21–28.

32 Ibid.

33 Ibid.

of what to believe and how to react.[34] Active measures were supported by a dedicated apparatus that focused on producing and disseminating disinformation to bring about a 'new era in which distortion concisely and purposefully taints the natural flow of information throughout the world'.[35] One can observe, that while they did pursue tactical objectives, Soviet active measures were primarily designed in service of strategic goals that worked towards major long-term political change.

To determine whether the Kremlin has been 're-laundering' Soviet strategies for information activities,[36] we compare key findings from the results of our analysis of the Navalny case in 2020 with observations from closed-door discussions that took place in Riga, Latvia in 2016 where four main questions were considered: (1) How are Kremlin communications and messages constructed and disseminated? (2) Are the Kremlin's methods for information operations changing? (3) What audiences do the Kremlin's messages appeal to? and (4) What can the West do to improve their response to such information activities?

The 2016 StratCom proceedings are relevant to our study for two reasons: (1) The field of participating experts was international and drawn from both academia and military affairs; their observations of Russian information activities were consistent with the broader literature and expert opinion on the subject at that time.[37] (2) The discussions were held at a significant juncture when new allegations about the Kremlin's information activities around the world were beginning to emerge, notably the covert use of social media trolls and bots in coordination with more public Russian media campaigns in

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34 Pomerantsev and Weiss, *The Menace of Unreality.*
35 Ladislav Bittman, *The Deception Game: Czechoslovak Intelligence in Soviet Political Warfare* (New York, Syracuse University Press, 1972), p. 20.
36 The contributors cited in 'The Kremlin and Daesh Information Activities' use the term 'information activities' as a collective description when referring to the different types of communications and messages (pp. 6–7) by the Russian state and DAESH, including the promotion of false or misleading information (pp. 27–28).
37 See the annual reports of 2016 and 2017 for Germany's *Federal Office for the Protection of the Constitution* both of which observed that the Kremlin uses state-owned media amongst other tools to project a biased version of events and promote Russian interests externally: Bundesamt für Verfassungsschutz, 'Studierende, Wissenschaftlerinnen und Wissenschaftler im Visier Russischer Geheimdienste [Students and Scientists in the Sights of Russian Secret Services], 2016 and 'Arbeitsschwerpunkt der Spionageabwehr: Cyberangriffskampagne', 2017. [Accessed 30 March 2021].

attempts to influence the 2016 US presidential elections[38] and other elections in European countries.[39]

Several conclusions from 2016 to be of interest. First, that the Kremlin had been able to exploit societal vulnerabilities, especially in the West, by targeting segmented or fringe audiences, particularly amongst younger populations. This observation was supported by extensive literature discussing how the Kremlin has targeted far-left and far-right movements, greens, anti-globalists, and financial elites, with the intention of exacerbating divisions and creating an echo chamber of Kremlin support.[40] Second, in order to take advantage of emerging opportunities the Kremlin has employed flexible messaging techniques, strengthening and diversifying 'traditional' narratives regarding threats from the West against Russia and Western propaganda and censorship, and instilling the idea that Western countries are facing deeply rooted social problems. Journalists and researchers such as Peter Pomerantsev, Edward Lucas, and Ben Nimmo have argued that the aim of Russian media is not to provide a sole, unified narrative, but rather to create many clashing narratives in order to confuse different audiences with different messages.[41] Third, that the anti-Western narratives propagated by the Kremlin were simultaneously coupled with others constructing a robust 'Russian identity'—a favourable image of Russia that is very different from how it is presented in the West.

The current article seeks to contribute to the understanding of Russian information activities by comparing these insights from 2016 to the findings from our analysis of the domestic and international disinformation campaign launched by the Kremlin in the aftermath of

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38 Office of the Director of National Intelligence, 'Disinformation: A Primer in Russian Active Measures and Influence Campaigns Panel 1', 2017. [Accessed 30 March 2021].

39 Andrew Dawson and Martin Innes, 'How Russia's Internet Research Agency Built its Disinformation Campaign', *The Political Quarterly* (2019).

40 Pomerantsev and Weiss, *The Menace of Unreality*; Weiss, Andrew S., 'With Friends Like These: The Kremlin's Far-Right and Populist Connections in Italy and Austria', *Carnegie Endowment For International Peace*, 2020. [Accessed 30 March 2021]; Lóránt Gyori and Péter Krekó, 'Don't Ignore the Left! Connections Between Europe's Radical Left and Russia', *Open Democracy*, 13 June 2016. [Accessed 30 March 2021]; Dmitry Adamsky, 'Christ-loving Diplomats: Russian Ecclesiastical Diplomacy in Syria', *Survival* Volume 61 Nº6 (2019): 49–68.

41 Edward Lucas and Ben Nimmo, *Information Warfare: What Is It and How To Win It*, CEPA Infowar Paper Nº1 (2015). [Accessed 3 July 2021]; Thornton, Rod, 'The Changing Nature of Modern Warfare', *The RUSI Journal*, Volume 160 Nº4 (2015): 40–48. [Accessed 3 July 2021].

the poisoning of Alexei Navalny. We explore the disinformation tactics and techniques deployed in today's strategically polluted information environment using the A2E model. We hope this multi-dimensional model will be useful for structuring future research in strategic communications[42] and Russian disinformation.[43]

## DATA & METHODOLOGY

The article is informed by an in-depth qualitative and quantitative analysis of news stories covering the Navalny poisoning published online by four Russian State-owned Media outlets: two domestic Russian-language news agencies—*Ria Novosti* and *TASS*; and two German-language outlets—*RT Deutsch* and *Sputnik Deutsch*—during the period from 20 August 2020 (the day Navalny was poisoned) to 9 September 2020 (a week after the German government announced that the nerve agent Novichok had been used). We searched the four outlets using the embedded search functions for articles mentioning the key words 'Navalny' for the Russian and 'Nawalny' for the German outlets, obtaining a total of 1186 articles. Table 1 shows that five time more articles were published in the domestic media *Ria Novosti* and *TASS* than in *RT Deutsch* and *Sputnik Deutsch*.[44]

Due to the very large number of publications, a sample of 220 articles—three randomly chosen articles per outlet per day[45]—was extracted from the larger database of 1186 articles and subjected to an in-depth qualitative analysis. The sample included articles that contained both disinformation and factual reporting. While most contained disinformation (defined above as intentionally false or misleading information), particularly a denial of evidence showing Russia's involvement, the articles analysed displayed a strategy of 'diversifying' messages and 'mixing' disinformation

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42 Katerina Tsetsura and Dean Kruckeberg, *Strategic Communications in Russia: Public Relations and Advertising* (Routledge, 2020).
43 See Bittman, *The KGB and Soviet Disinformation*; Pomerantsev and Weiss, *The Menace of Unreality*; Rid, *Active Measures*.
44 *Sputnik Deutsch* underwent a rebranding on 8 December 2020. The well-known brand name 'Sputnik' was changed to 'SNA' (Sputnik News Agency) and the web address changed from 'de.sputniknews.com' to 'snanews. de'. All articles previously published by Sputnik were deleted in this rebranding effort. However, they were archived by the Way Back Machine.
45 Some outlets published fewer than three articles on certain days, in which case only the available articles were included in the sample.

| Outlet Name | Ownership and language of publication | Number of Alexei Navalny-related articles published in the period between 20 August and 9 September 2020 |
|---|---|---|
| Ria Novosti | Domestic, Russian language, state-owned | 739 |
| TASS | Domestic, Russian language, state-owned | 264 |
| Russia Today Deutsch | International, German language, state-owned | 76 |
| Sputnik Deutsch | International, German language, state-owned | 136 |

Table 1. Overview of the four Russian media outlets analysed in this article

with factual reports, especially when those facts were non-consequential for the overall disinformation narrative. Observations of both Soviet and contemporary information activities show that to be effective disinformation must build on a kernel of truth—a piece of plausible and verifiable information.[46]

Recognising that the Kremlin's disinformation campaigns are frequently multi-faceted, we chose an 'A2E model'[47] to structure and organise our results in broadly comparable terms across five vectors:

A = Audience—Describing/evaluating the audience targeted by a particular disinformation campaign, and mapping, whenever possible, the relative distribution of audience vulnerabilities and engagement with disinformation content. A study of the intended audience can help to identify groups for which deceptive information might be especially

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46 Bittman, *The KGB and Soviet Disinformation*; Rid, Active Measures.
47 François, 'Actors, Behaviors, Content'.

salient and who might be particularly receptive to such messaging. We performed a quantitative analysis of readers' reactions in the form of comments logged on to articles in *RT Deutsch* and in the form of comments, 'likes', and 'dislikes' logged on to articles in *Sputnik Deutsch*.[48] In addition, we classified the content of these articles as 'pro-Russian' (e.g. articles citing Russian sources and propagating pro-Kremlin narratives) or 'anti-Russian' (e.g. articles containing Western countries' criticism of Russia). We also performed volumetric analysis of viewership for *Ria Novosti* (the only source that displayed viewership metrics on its website) to scale audience 'readership' over the three-week period.

B = Behaviour—Identifying and evaluating the 'behavioural signatures' of the actors who author, disseminate, or amplify false or distorted information. While this has previously been done in profiling 'fake' social media accounts,[49] our analysis employs Grounded Theory Methodology (GTM)[50] to identify repeating behavioural signatures, such as specific techniques of influence, that overlapped across articles in our database. The GTM approach was suitable in our case as it is a flexible methodology that allows researchers 'to discover or construct theory from the data, systematically obtained and analysed using comparative analysis'.[51] We also performed comparative analysis on a random selection of the remaining 966 articles (those not included in the initial sample of 220).

C = Content—Using qualitative empirical analysis to determine how deceptive material has been constructed and to identify the logic/ motivation behind each alternative narrative. We analysed the content published by the four RSOM outlets, two in Russian and two in German, to identify the most common narratives and then categorised our findings following the GTM approach as described above.

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48 A similar quantitative analysis was not possible for *Ria Novosti* and *TASS* because neither outlet displays readers' reactions.
49 Dawson and Innes, 'How Russia's Internet Research Agency'.
50 Barney G. Glaser and Anselm L. Strauss, *The Discovery of Grounded Theory: Strategies for Qualitative Research* (New York: Aldine de Gruyter, 1967).
51 Ylona Chun Tie, Melanie Birks and Karen Francis, 'Grounded Theory Research: A Design Framework for Novice Researchers', *SAGE Open Medicine* Volume 7 (2019).

D = Dynamics—Identifying how deceptive material is transmitted: is disinformation especially influential at particular moments in an emerging timeline and is it enabled by particular communications networks? We analysed (1) the volume of articles appearing in the four media channels and (2) the distribution of viewership or engagement metrics (comments, 'likes', and 'dislikes' logged onto articles) wherever these were available.[52]

E = Effect—Measuring the influence of disinformation campaigns. Although the ability of the current state of the art to measure influence is limited, this study incorporates some degree of interpretative assessment to identify where disinformation activities may have been especially consequential.

## RESULTS

In this section, we describe in greater detail the results of our analysis for each of the five A2E vectors.

### Audience

Our analysis suggests that the Kremlin aims to influence three key target audiences: (1) those already receptive to alternative viewpoints about Western politics and society; (2) those who hold favourable opinions of Russia and Putin; and (3) those who do not belong to either group one or group two and lack a clear understanding or formulated opinion of Russia's relations with the West. All of these groups can likely be influenced by inducing sufficient doubt so as to make it difficult for them to distinguish between true reports, 'fake news'/disinformation, and conspiracy theories.

Our quantitative analysis of audience reactions to articles appearing in the German-language RSOM confirm our observations regarding these target groups. The three articles appearing in *RT Deutsch* that received the greatest number of comments were about: (1) the German

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52 While *Ria Novosti* logs viewership metrics on its website, *TASS*, *RT* and *Sputnik* do not. Thus, only viewership metrics for *Ria Novosti* were qualitatively analysed. In addition, *RT* and *Sputnik* log metrics for 'likes', 'dislikes', and 'comments', while *Ria Novosti* and *TASS* do not.

government and German politicians accusing Russia and Putin of trying to poison Navalny with Novichok (485 comments, published 02.09.20);[53] (2) German politicians demanding sanctions against Russia (425 comments, published 25.08.20);[54] and (3) Charité's clinical tests indicating that Navalny was poisoned (403 comments, published 24.08.20).[55] An analysis of the comment section in *RT Deutsch* revealed that audience engagement was high when Germany was presented as an 'aggressor' against Russia.

Similarly, the articles appearing in *Sputnik Deutsch* that attracted the most engagement were about: Charité's clinical tests indicating that Navalny was poisoned (246 comments, published 24.08.20; 199 comments, published 24.08.20);[56] and an article about a Facebook post by a Middle East expert raising a number of questions about Navalny's poisoning such as why Putin allowed Navalny to be transported to Germany if he wanted him dead and why he would use an infamous poison for a 'secret' murder (221 comments, published 09.09.20).[57]

The majority of readers engaging with *Sputnik Deutsch* tended to 'dislike' articles containing anti-Russian content and 'like' articles containing pro-Russian content. Moreover, articles about Germany being involved in the Navalny case typically received many dislikes. The articles that generated the greatest number of dislikes related to: (1) German politicians calling for sanctions against Russia (753 dislikes, published 23.08.20);[58] (2) Germany not handing over evidence of Navalny being poisoned with

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53 "Wer jetzt noch an Putins Unschuld glaubt": Erste Reaktionen auf "Nowitschok-Vergiftung" Nawalnys ["Who still believes in Putin's innocence": First reactions to "Novitschok poisoning" of Navalny]', *RT Deutsch*, 2 September 2020. [Accessed 30 March 2021].

54 'Der Täter steht schon fest: Deutsche Politiker fordern weitere Sanktionen gegen Moskau wegen Nawalny [The culprit has already been determined: German politicians are calling for further sanctions against Moscow over Navalny]', *RT Deutsch*, 25 August 2020. [Accessed 30 March 2021].

55 'Berliner Charité: Alexei Nawalny wurde laut klinischen Befunden vergiftet [Berlin Charité: According to clinical findings, Alexei Navalny was poisoned]', *RT Deutsch*, 24 August 2020. [Accessed 30 March 2021].

56 'Charité: Klinische Tests von Nawalny weisen auf Vergiftung hin [Charité: Navalny's clinical tests indicate poisoning]', *Sputnik Deutsch*, 24 August 2020. [Accessed 25 November 2021]; 'Nawalny vergiftet—und Punkt? Wofür Cholinesterase-Hemmer aus Charité-Statement stehen [Navalny poisoned—and period? What cholinesterase inhibitors from the Charité statement stand for]', *Sputnik Deutsch*, 24 August 2020. [Accessed 25 November 2021].

57 "Warum sollte Putin…?"—Jürgen Todenhöfer wirft heikle Fragen zum Fall Nawalny auf [ "Why would Putin …?"—Jürgen Todenhöfer raises sensitive questions about the Navalny case]', *Sputnik Deutsch*, 9 September 2020. [25 November 2021] (e.g. why Putin allowed for Navalny's transport to Germany if he wanted to kill him, or why Putin should have used the same poison again for 'secret' murder).

58 'Nawalnys Erkrankung: Deutsche Politiker fordern Sanktionen gegen Russland [Navalny's illness: German politicians are calling for sanctions against Russia]', *Sputnik Deutsch*, 23 August 2020. [Accessed 25 September 2021].

Novichok (719 dislikes, published 08.09.20);[59] and (3) Germany stating that Navalny had been poisoned (505 dislikes, published 24.08.20).[60] In contrast, articles with pro-Russian topics generated many likes. The article attracting the most likes was the previously mentioned *Sputnik Deutsch* article about the FB post (1284 likes, published 09.09.20). [61] The article with the next highest number of likes described Lukashenko's television statement claiming a wiretapped call between Warsaw and Berlin revealed that Angela Merkel's announcement that Navalny had been poisoned was a fake (1050 likes, published 03.09.20);[62] the article attracting the third highest number of likes was about a German politician stating that the German government's position on Navalny's poisoning was a 'pitiful hypocrisy' (893 likes, published 03.09.20). [63] These findings potentially reveal a pattern that can be used to predict which German-language RSOM articles are most likely to attract a high number of comments, and which will provoke negative sentiment (dislikes outweigh likes).

According to previous research, 'likes' express appreciation of content, whereas 'dislikes' express disapproval of content.[64] Although clearly establishing such correlations is a complicated task, our analysis suggests the audience for German-language RSOM tend to 'like' pro-Russian articles. Correspondingly, any reporting about Germany being involved in the Navalny case or Western countries discussing sanctions against Russia tended to attract an exceptionally high number of dislikes and negative comments. However, it is difficult to determine whether the online reactions are organic and genuine, and inauthentic and manipulated in some way.

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59 '"Nowitschok": Befund zu Nawalny an Russland übergeben? BMVg und Charité antworten Sputnik ["Novichok": Report on Navalny handed over to Russia? The Federal Ministry of Defence and Charité answer Sputnik]', *Sputnik Deutsch*, 8 September 2020. [Accessed 25 November 2020].

60 ' "Schwerwiegender Verdacht eines Giftanschlags": Regierungssprecher äußert sich zum Fall Nawalny ["Serious suspicion of a poison attack": Government spokesman comments on the Navalny case]', *Sputnik Deutsch*, 24 August 2020. [Accessed 25 November 2021].

61 "Warum sollte Putin…?", *Sputnik Deutsch*, 9 September 2020. [Accessed 25 November 2021].

62 'Lukaschenko: Warschau-Berlin-Gespräch abgefangen—Erklärung über Nawalnys Vergiftung gefälscht [Lukashenko: Warsaw-Berlin conversation intercepted—declaration about Navalny's poisoning falsified]', *Sputnik Deutsch*, 3 September 2020. [Accessed 25 November 2021]

63 'Berlin kommentiert Fall Nawalny—Lafontaine spricht von "erbärmlicher Heuchelei" [Berlin comments on the Navalny case—Lafontaine speaks of "pathetic hypocrisy"]', *Sputnik Deutsch*, 3 September 2020. [Accessed 25 November 2021].

64 M. Laeeq Khan, 'Social media engagement: What motivates user participation and consumption on You-Tube?', *Computers in Human Behavior* Volume 66, Issue C (2017): 236–47.

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As readers' reactions were not registered for articles appearing in the Russian-language outlets *Ria Novosti* and *TASS*, we compared our insights regarding the two German-language outlets to our analysis of viewership metrics for *Ria Novosti* and found a similar pattern. While Navalny-related articles generally attracted an exceptionally high viewership (30,273,243 views across 720 articles), it is noteworthy that the most deceptive pro-Kremlin articles generated the highest number of views. For example, the most-viewed *Ria Novosti* article in our database (1,177, 242 views)[65] stated that 'the [Kremlin's] main working diagnosis is a "metabolic disorder" that caused a sharp drop in blood sugar'. This claim is still regarded as the Kremlin's official version of events.

### Behaviour

Following the GTM approach, three 'behavioural signatures' emerged from our analysis of the four RSOM outlets, indicating a coordinated communications strategy. Immediately following Navalny's collapse on 24 August 2020, the Kremlin media: (1) pivoted from their previous (strategic) disregard of Navalny to mounting a full-on information campaign; (2) generated and disseminated multiple alternative interpretations of events to 'fog', or confuse, the information environment; (3) and began to publish an overwhelming number of articles to 'swamp', or overwhelm, the information environment.

**Breaking the silence**. The Kremlin has been infamous for largely ignoring leading opposition figure Alexei Navalny. Russia-watchers have observed that where his challenger is concerned, President Putin maintains a 'policy of silence'. He makes an effort never to mention Navalny by name, but instead uses various condescending epithets, such as 'this gentleman'. [66] Kremlin spokesman Dmitry Peskov and other members of Putin's circle follow his example. However, with Russia implicated in the attempt to poison him, ignoring Navalny was no

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65 Немецкие врачи назвали причиной болезни Навального отравление [German doctors say poisoning is the cause of Navalny's illness]', *Ria Novosti*, 24 August 2020. [Accessed 30 March 2021]
66 Carl Schreck, ' "Voldemort Of Our Time": At Putin Press Conference, Navalny Seen As "He Who Must Not Be Named"', *Radio Free Europe*, 14 December 2017.

longer possible or desirable. The new priority had to be managing and influencing the public perception of the Kremlin's antagonist and the claims being made about what happened to him. While both Putin and Peskov continued to avoid mentioning Navalny by name, the poisoning case led to an explosion of reports in the RSOM, thus giving him all the media visibility the Kremlin had been sidestepping for years.

**'Fogging' the news**. During the three-week period of study, the RSOM outlets in question constructed and disseminated at least eleven main narrative accounts of the Navalny poisoning, many of which included various narrative variations and sub-narratives. This strategy is less about persuasion and more about damaging the credibility of Western narratives by 'fogging' the information space. Multiple 'possible explanations' of the poisoning that contradicted the findings of the official German investigation were widely circulated. These included counter-narratives, in the form of denials and contradictions, and alternative narratives, in the form of conspiracy theories.

**'Swamping' the news**. Immediately following the incident, all four RSOM outlets began generating large volumes of articles covering the poisoning. *Figure 1* shows that the domestic propaganda outlet *Ria Novosti* published by far the highest number of articles related to Navalny (more than 70 articles on certain days), followed by *TASS*, the other domestic outlet. The German-language RSOM outlets published fewer articles but kept up a consistent pace so that during the three-week period following the poisoning three to five Navalny-related articles appeared on most days with up to 18 articles at certain junctures. *Figure 1* shows an overall correlation of publication dynamics between the two domestic outlets and the two German-language outlets. For example, all four outlets show an initial peak in volume, as the media story around Navalny unfolded on 21 August, only to subside for a few days and then rise again on the 24th—the date Berlin Charité publicly announced that Navalny had been poisoned. The largest peak was registered at the beginning of September 2020 when the German Bundeswehr laboratory confirmed the Novichok finding.
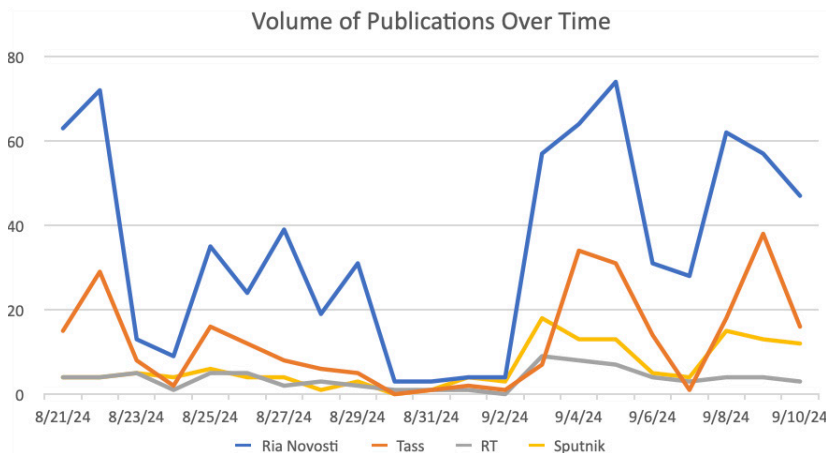
Figure 1. Volumetric graph of publications over time across the four outlets: RT Deutsch, Sputnik Deutsch, Ria Novosti, and TASS

## Content

Following the GTM approach, a qualitative analysis of the 'content' appearing in our article dataset revealed four categories of repeating narratives and counter-narratives, each designed to serve a strategic purpose—to debunk, to deny, to discredit, or to distract. *Table 2* summarises the results of the coding process and quantifies how often these four types of narratives were identified across the 220 articles analysed. A single article often contained more than one narrative.

**Debunking.** The Kremlin media sought to *debunk* evidence of poisoning, especially anything implicating Russia. In the week following Navalny's transfer to the Charité hospital, German authorities and German doctors began releasing their own medical findings, which clearly contradicted those of the Omsk doctors and the Russian government's official narrative. In an attempt at damage control, the Kremlin media began to publish articles that 'identified gaps' in the story, detailing various alleged inconsistencies in the German medical investigation in an attempt to sow doubt about its findings.

| Outlet | No. of articles | Debunk | Deny | Discredit | Distract | Factual Reporting/ No Narrative |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Ria Novosti | 63 | 45 | 27 | 24 | 38 | 3 |
| TASS | 52 | 18 | 11 | 21 | 11 | 15 |
| Sputnik Deutsch | 49 | 11 | 22 | 22 | 10 | 9 |
| Russia Today Deutsch | 56 | 29 | 25 | 26 | 31 | 5 |
| Total | 220 | 103 | 85 | 93 | 90 | 32 |

Table 2. Results of coding process for the 220 sampled articles

To boost the credibility of their 'evidence', the RSOM employed the familiar technique of citing Kremlin-friendly political or scientific 'experts'. For example, *Ria Novosti* cited Professor Igor Molchanov, the Russian Ministry of Health's chief specialist in anaesthesiology and resuscitation (a Kremlin employee), who questioned whether detecting 'substances affecting cholinesterase'[67] five days after Navalny fell ill was at all possible:

> After five days, it's out of the realm of fantasy to determine that he was injected with drugs that affect cholinesterase.
>
> Professor Igor Molchanov, cited in *Ria Novosti*, 24 August 2020 [68]

. . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . .
67 Cholinesterase is an enzyme that helps the body break down and utilise acetylcholine, an important neurotransmitter necessary for muscle contraction throughout the entire body, among other functions. Disruptions to this physiological process can lead to severe muscle contractions, spasms, paralysis, and even death.
68 'Эксперт усомнился в возможности выявить найденные у Навального вещества [Expert doubts the possibility of identifying substances found in Navalny]', *Ria Novosti*, 24 August 2020. [Accessed 30 March 2021]

**Denial.** Both Kremlin domestic and German-language media *denied* Russian involvement in the poisoning. Accusations were brushed off using various sub-narratives, for example: insisting that there is no conclusive evidence proving Russia's guilt; attesting that neither Putin nor the Kremlin had a motive to kill Navalny; and emphasising Russia's 'good will' and readiness to be team-players and collaborate in the investigations (unlike their Western partners).

> Above all, it is not credible to imply that Moscow has a motive for taking revenge on a 'traitor".
>
> R*T Deutsch*, 30 August 2020[69]

> I think we are returning to those times that I would like to leave behind to be honest, the times of unsubstantiated statements, lack of facts when discussing serious issues. I wish these times did not come anymore, but I have some kind of constant feeling of déjà vu.
>
> Foreign Ministry Spokesperson Maria Zakharova cited in *Ria Novosti*, 2 September 2020[70]

**Discreditation.** The RSOM sought to *discredit* the German government and German media and to devalue their statements. The discreditation technique was based on three sub-narratives:

(a) attributing the accusations to German (and Western) Russophobic prejudice:

> […] the presumption of innocence does not apply to Russians. Isn't that racism?
>
> *RT Deutsch*, 27 August 2020[71]

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69 'Die Jagd auf "Kreml-Kritiker" und Ex-Spione: Russlands "Sündenregister" im Faktencheck [The hunt for "Kremlin critics" and ex-spies: Russia's "register of sins" in a fact check]', *RT Deutsch*, 30 August 2020. [Accessed 30 March 2021]
70 'В МИД прокомментировали заявление об отравлении Навального "Новичком" [Foreign Ministry comments on statement about Navalny "Novichok"poisoning]', *Ria Novosti*, 2 Sentember 2020. [Accessed 30 March 2021]
71 '"Um Alexei Nawalny zu würdigen": Jürgen Trittin will Immobilien "korrupter Russen" beschlagnahmen ["To pay tribute to Alexei Navalny": Jürgen Trittin wants to confiscate real estate from "corrupt Russians"', *RT Deutsch*, 27 August 2020. [Accessed 30 March 2021]

> The world information environment of recent days, with
> its aggressive-hysterical Russophobia, clearly resembles
> the events of 2014–2015, when the West launched an anti-
> Russian campaign of a planetary scale and insane intensity.
>
> *Ria Novosti*, 7 September 2020[72]

(b) attributing the accusations to Germany's covert intentions to use the case for its own political benefit, notably imposing more sanctions on Russia:

> BRD's statement about the 'poisoning' of Alexei
> Navalny with a substance from the Novichok group is a
> provocation dictated by political motives.
>
> GRU Colonel Alexei Kondratyev cited in *RIA Novosti*, 2 September 2020[73]

> The current, broad-based disinformation campaign
> clearly shows that its creators are not concerned about
> Alexei Navalny's health or clarifying the real causes of his
> hospital stay, but rather aim to mobilize sanctions.
>
> Russian Foreign Ministry cited in *RT Deutsch*, 9 September 2020[74]

(c) attacking Western media outlets for what they characterised as biased and politicised reporting, or 'political propaganda'; meanwhile, Russian media was presented as objective and reliable:

> The vast majority of German journalists follow this
> Western conspiracy theory. Only a few media show
> anything of balance.
>
> *RT Deutsch*, 5 September 2020[75]

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72 'Запад готов к войне на самоуничтожение [The West is ready for a war of self-destruction]', *Ria Novosti,* 7 September 2020. [Accessed 30 March 2021]
73 'Сенатор назвал провокацией новое заявление ФРГ о ситуации с Навальным [Senator calls new statement from BRD about the Navalny situation Navalny a provocation]', *Ria Novosti,* 2 September 2020. [Accessed 30 March 2021]
74 'Russisches Außenamt zum Fall Nawalny: "Breitaufgestellte Desinformationskampagne" gegen Moskau [Russian Foreign Office on the Navalny case: "Wide-ranging disinformation campaign" against Moscow]', *RT Deutsch,* 9 September 2020. [Accessed 30 March 2021]
75 '"Typische Zeichen einer Feindbildwahrnehmung"—Hannes Hofbauer zur Nawalny-Medienberichterstattung ["Typical signs of the perception of an enemy"—Hannes Hofbauer on Navalny media coverage]', *RT Deutsch,* 5 September 2020. [Accessed 30 March 2021]

The Russian media are more objective because they rely on
the test results carried out by the doctors and do not allow
themselves to speculate.

*RT Deutsch*, 24 August 2020[76]

**Distraction.** The final technique was to deflect attention from the
accusations against Russia by *distracting* target audiences with various
conspiracy theories. One such conspiracy theory suggested that Navalny
could have poisoned himself.[77] Another theory suggested that the alleged
poisoning was an attempt by the CIA to interfere in Russia's domestic
security by creating political tension.[78]

## Dynamics

An analysis of 'dynamics' tracks the timing and transmission of deceptive
material. The timing of the publication of propaganda communications
is crucial for those seeking to influence online communities[79] because
first impressions persist, even after new evidence has been provided
to discredit them.[80] A deliberate and timely spreading of rumours and
conspiracy theories can create long-lasting impressions, which then
selectively bias the interpretation of subsequent information.[81]

The Kremlin's network of RSOM was already in place to enable the
dissemination of large volumes of targeted messages immediately
following crucial developments in the timeline of the investigation. By
reacting with agility, the RSOM were able to attract high viewership and
engagement at strategic moments. *Figure 2* shows viewership metrics for
*Ria Novosti* articles and *Figure 3* shows engagement metrics (comments,

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76 '"Wenn in Russland etwas passiert, ist Putin schuld"—Die Causa Nawalny und der deutsche Hochmut "If
something happens in Russia, Putin is to blame "—The Navalny case and German arrogance]', *RT Deutsch,* 24
August 2020. [Accessed 30 March 2021]
77 'Vergiftung, Hintermänner, Geld: Im Fall Nawalny mangelt es an Transparenz—auch bei diesen Fragen [Poi-
soning, backers, money: there is a lack of transparency in the Navalny case—even on these issues]', *Sputnik Deutsch,*
26 August 2020, [Accessed 25 November 2021]
78 '"Unbegründete Beschuldigungen" inakzeptabel: Moskau antwortet westlichen Ländern im Fall Nawalny ['
"Unfounded accusations" unacceptable: Moscow responds to western countries in the Navalny case']', *Sputnik
Deutsch,* 25 August 2020. [Accessed 25 November 2021]
79 Leonard W. Doob, 'Goebbels' Principles of Propaganda', *The Public Opinion Quarterly*, Volume 14, N°3 (1950): 419–42.
80 Nicholas Difonzo and Prashant Bordia, 'Rumors Influence: Toward a Dynamic Social Impact Theory of Ru-
mor', in A. R. Pratkanis (ed.), *The Science of Social Influence: Advances and Future Progress*, Frontiers of Social Psychol-
ogy series, (New York: Psychology Press, 2007), pp. 271–95.
81 Ibid.

likes, and dislikes) for articles published by *Sputnik Deutsch*. In both cases, we see an increase in viewership and engagement dynamics in the initial stages of the investigation, when Navalny first went into hospital, and a second significant spike on 2 and 3 September 2020, when the German government announced that the nerve agent Novichok had been used against Navalny. Higher viewership metrics correlate with a higher volume of articles (see *Figure 1*), indicating that RSOM efforts to 'bombard' their audiences with a pro-Kremlin version of events may have been successful.
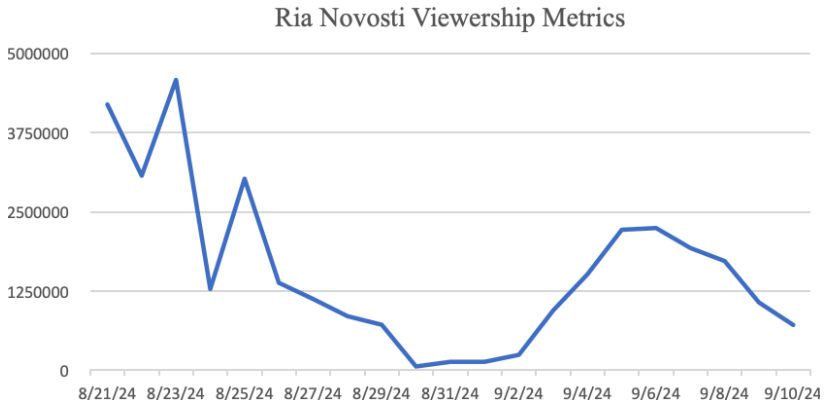


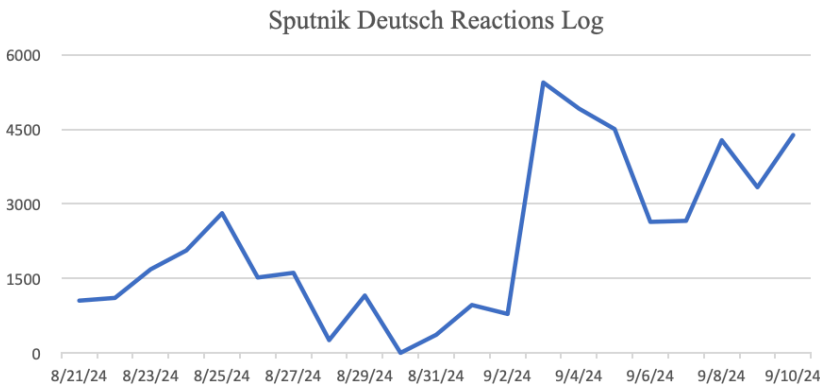Figure 2. Viewership Metrics for Ria Novosti articles—from 20.08.2020 to 9.09.2020



Figure 3. Reaction Log for Sputnik Deutsch articles—from 20.08.2020 to 9.09.2020

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## Effects

Assessing the impact and effects of a disinformation campaign run across multiple channels and platforms is difficult as it is virtually impossible to establish metrics for success.[82] The disinformation campaign appears to have been intended to sow doubts about whether Navalny was actually poisoned and to call into question evidence implicating Russian military intelligence.

One way of gaining insight into public opinion is through survey analysis. Respondents to a survey carried out in Russia by the Levada centre from 21 to 23 December 2020[83] gave three versions of the event: 30% believed that there had been no poisoning or that the incident had been staged by Navalny himself—this version of events correlates with the Kremlin's narrative that Navalny had suffered a 'metabolic disorder'; 19% of respondents believed that the poisoning was a foreign special services provocation; and only 15% spoke of the possibility that the Russian government had attempted to eliminate a political opponent.[84] We can assume that by presenting multiple narratives and thereby 'fogging' the information environment, Kremlin assets had some degree of success in inducing confusion.

## DISCUSSION

A comparison of our findings with the findings of the NATO StratCom COE discussions of 2016 empirically show that certain key narratives and methods of influence were still being used by the Kremlin in 2020, albeit in a different context and responding to different events. The results are summarised in *Table 3* and discussed below.

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82 Karlova and Fisher, 'A Social Diffusion Model', n. pag.
83 The sample was comprised of 1617 people aged 18 or older. The survey was conducted as a telephone interview (CATI) on a random sample (RDD) of personal phone numbers and landlines. The answer distribution is below 2.4%.
84 Levada-Center, 'Navalny's Poisoning', 1 February 2021. [Accessed 9 July 2021]

| Characteristics of Kremlin Information Activities | Present in 2016 | Present in 202 |
|---|---|---|
| Use of Russian state owned media | Present | Present |
| Exploit Audience Vulnerabilities | Present | Present |
| Project a Perceived Reality | Present | Present |
| Master narratives e.g. 'Russia as a victim' | Present | Present |
| Publish Large Volumes of Articles at Strategic Moments | Not explicitly covered | Present |
| Leverage Specific Points in Time to Spread Narratives | Present | Present |

Table 3. Comparison of Riga observations in 2016 to this study's findings from 2020

The results of our study point to an overall consistency and continuity in the methods and narratives of the Kremlin's disinformation campaigns, making future analysis of such campaigns more predictable, at least in the context of the aftermath of high-profile events in which the Russian state is implicated. More importantly, our results suggest that these methods and narratives are part of the Kremlin's strategic communications methodology and not simply ad hoc tactical exercises. They are used repeatedly both domestically and internationally and are designed to achieve more or less the same long-term societal shifts each time they are used.

Our study confirmed that many of the same narratives and techniques discussed in Riga in 2016 were being used in the aftermath of the Navalny poisoning in 2020. Here we identify six recurring features of Kremlin disinformation campaigns and theorise the strategic value of each.

## 1.  The Kremlin's disinformation campaigns are commonly disseminated through Russian state-owned media.

Both our study and the 2016 StratCom proceedings found that the Kremlin's disinformation campaigns exploit an extensive network of media outlets that are owned directly by the Russian state. Western intelligence services have observed that these well-resourced media outlets are funded by and loyal to the government and regularly disseminate its strategic communications.[85] *Strategically, maintaining a network of media outlets that act in concert ensures that disinformation and other targeted messaging are reflected and amplified within a specially constructed media environment.*

## 2.  The narratives they promote target specific audiences and exploit societal vulnerabilities.

Participants at the 2016 StratCom proceedings observed that within the global information environment, 'there are competing sets of opposing value- and norm-based arguments working to win the hearts and minds of global audiences'.[86] 'In the current highly politicised information environment, the Kremlin has been able to exploit societal vulnerabilities and project alternative narratives intended to resonate within certain segmented audiences.'[87] Our analysis of comments and reactions to the RSOM articles published after the poisoning of Navalny suggests that the Kremlin continues to employ selective targeting to further 'divide and rule' European audiences. We have demonstrated that the content published by *RT Deutsch* and *Sputnik Deutsch* achieved a level of resonance with readers (observations can be made only with regard to the engagement of 'active' readers willing to react to article content on a public forum, but we cannot know the private reactions of 'passive' readers as they cannot be measured). The positive reception (measured by number of 'likes') of pro-Russian articles and the negative reception (measured by number of 'dislikes') of articles reporting on Western actions suggest that *RT* and *Sputnik* are addressing an already 'converted'

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85 Karlsen, 'Divide and Rule'.
86 Simons and Sillanpää, 'The Kremlin and Daesh', pp. 7—8.
87 Ibid., pp. 8–9

audience with established anti-Western worldviews or pro-Russian biases. *Strategically, this practice is designed to amplify Europe's internal divisions— an observation echoed in the recent intelligence reports of several European states.[88]*

## 3. The Kremlin projects multiple versions of reality to obscure disadvantageous truths, often with a view to distract and confuse.

The 2016 StratCom proceedings emphasised that a key aspect of manipulation involves projecting a 'perceived reality', rather than seeking to discover or agree upon what is true. Our study has empirically demonstrated that not one but at least eleven 'perceived realities', in the form of convenient stories and conspiracy theories, were disseminated by the Kremlin in the aftermath of Navalny's poisoning. The RSOM circulated a wide range of overlapping or contradicting narrative variations in an attempt to 'fog' or pollute the flow of information. Kremlin outlets do not emphasise one version of events over another, but rather seek to intrigue, distract, and/or confuse, leaving readers in what Pomerantsev dubs 'Kremlin-controlled virtual reality'.[89] On multiple occasions, the Kremlin media sought to distract readers by deflecting attention away from uncomfortable accusations of Russia's guilt and towards multiple conspiracy theories suggesting Western involvement. The tactic of 'shifting focus and attention away from areas where they are losing or vulnerable' was one of the most-used techniques of influence employed by RSOM after the poisoning of Navalny. *Strategically, 'constructed realities' can be employed for damage control, as in the Navalny case, and also more generally in service of Russia's long-term objectives, such as undermining Western organisations (e.g. NATO and the European Union) and Western countries, and legitimising Russia's aggressive foreign policy.*

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88 Karlsen, 'Divide and Rule'.
89 Pomerantsev and Weiss, *The Menace of Unreality.*

## 4. Most of the narratives promoted by the Kremlin reflect long-standing strategic master narratives.

The 2016 StratCom proceedings concluded that while the Kremlin has been flexible and creative in coming up with new and distracting stories, the roots of most of these can be traced back to a handful of well-rehearsed 'master narratives', including the portrayal of Russia as a victim of Western discrimination. In more recent years, especially since 2014 and the events in Crimea, 'Russia as victim' and 'Russophobia' narratives have become the Kremlin's go-to excuses whenever faced by a new round of allegations.[90] In the Navalny case, the Kremlin media sought to explain the accusations of poisoning as German 'Russophobia' and anti-Russian 'prejudice' rooted in German culture. *Strategically, narratives that position Russia as a victim are particularly important as they can be used as a pretext for Russian aggression under the disguise of proactive 'self-defence'.*

## 5. Disinformation is disseminated at a rapid pace designed to 'neutralise' the flow of information from Western outlets.

Our analysis revealed that, in the three weeks following Navalny's poisoning, the RSOM were disseminating the Kremlin's 'perceived realities' at a pace of at least several articles per day. Publishing large volumes of articles that either promote pro-Russian narratives or focus on contentious social issues faced by Western countries,[91] is a tactic used repeatedly by the Kremlin; this has been observed by other researchers as well.[92] Social-psychological studies have shown that intensity and repetition of messages can result in greater acceptance.[93] The 'illusory truth effect', whereby people rate statements as more truthful, valid, and believable when they have encountered those statements previously, than when the statements are new to them, is also well documented.[94] Thus, we conclude that the

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90 Peter Dickinson, 'From the Azov Sea to Washington DC: How Russophobia Became Russia's Leading Export', Atlantic Council website, 1 December 2018. [Accessed 30 March 2021].
91 Simons and Sillanpää, 'The Kremlin and Daesh', p. 12.
92 Paul and Matthews, 'The Russian "Firehose of Falsehood"'.
93 Robert Boleslaw Zajonc, 'Feeling and Thinking: Preferences Need No Inferences', *American Psychologist* Volume 35 (1980): 151–75; Philip G. Zimbardo, and Michael R. Leippe, *The Psychology of Attitude Change and Social Influence* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1991).
94 Paul and Matthews, 'The Russian "Firehose of Falsehood"'.

relentless flow of articles put out by the Kremlin media is intended to boost the salience of their messages, ensuring that audiences are constantly reminded of 'the [perceived] truth'. *Strategically, flooding the news with distracting/ confusing articles reduces the influence of Western narratives, especially within Russia, but also anywhere receptive audiences can be reached.*

6. **Disinformation is disseminated at crucial inflection points in an event timeline.**

Confirming the messaging dynamics mentioned in 2016 StratCom proceedings, our empirical data highlights that the Kremlin was exceptionally diligent in following the developments of the Navalny investigation so that it could respond quickly to unfolding events, sending out messages to domestic and international audiences. We find that this tactic of seeking to be the first to influence an audience (or at least to reach audiences as early as possible) and leave long lasting impressions, could have been a major factor in the ability of Kremlin media to generate considerable viewership for their outputs. *Strategically, this practice improves the Kremlin's chances of creating a lasting first impression, controlling the narrative, and increasing its persuasive power.*

Finally, whilst the effects of these recurring features of the Kremlin's disinformation strategy are difficult to measure directly,[95] recent data from Russia provide some insight. Survey analysis carried out in 2020 and 2021 by the Levada Centre show that a higher percentage of Russians surveyed believe Alexei Navalny either staged the poisoning himself or was actually poisoned by Western intelligence services (49%), than entertain the idea that he was targeted by the Russian government (15%).[96] Although this is not enough to establish a cause-effect relationship between the Kremlin's disinformation activities and public opinion, the survey results indicate that the narratives identified in our study as part of the Navalny disinformation campaign resonated well with certain more susceptible segments of the Russian domestic population.

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95 Simons and Sillanpää, 'The Kremlin and Daesh', p. 5.
96 Statista, 'What Russians Think About Navalny's Poisoning', 5 October 2020; Levada-Center, 'Navalny's Poisoning'.

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## CONCLUSION

In recent years, Kremlin disinformation campaigns have been of significant academic and policy interest. General observations regarding Russian information activities were summarised in discussions that took place in Riga in 2016. This article tested empirically the observations of the 2016 StratCom proceedings against data collected in the aftermath of one of the most recent Kremlin assassination attempts—the poisoning of Alexei Navalny—to determine which disinformation elements might be considered as part of Russia's long-term communications strategy. We performed an in-depth qualitative and quantitative analysis on 1186 articles from two domestic Russian and two foreign German-language RSOM outlets and structured our results with the help of a conceptual framework—the 'A2E Model'. This model, designed for the systematic investigation of cases of disinformation on mainstream and social media, allowed us to classify the key aspects of this particular disinformation campaign and thus facilitated longitudinal comparisons.

Most of the highlighted Russian disinformation activities described in 2016 were still being used by the Kremlin in 2020. This consistency and continuity of disinformation methods and narratives suggest they are used to further the Kremlin's long-term strategic objectives, and thus should be discussed in the context of Russian strategic communications, akin to their Soviet alternative— 'active measures'. We observed the continued projection of various counter-narratives and alternative explanations in large numbers, designed both to 'neutralise' Western reports and also to confuse and distract domestic and international audiences. This practice supports the Kremlin's perceived long-term objective to 'divide and rule', aimed especially at foreign populations but also employed domestically.[97] Western intelligence services, for example in Germany, Sweden, and Estonia, have observed that Russia, as a large power, could more easily deal with a multi-fragmented Europe.[98]

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97 Karlsen, 'Divide and Rule'.
98 Ibid.

Second, the Kremlin has managed to remodel previous 'master narratives', specifically those related to anti-Western sentiment, Western imperialism, and Russian victimhood, for application in drastically different new situations. The strategic re-purposing essentially confirms the Kremlin's ability to amplify old grievances and reaffirm more traditional strategic goals, while carrying out a new disinformation campaign such as post-event 'damage control'. This article has empirically evidenced how such tactics were used to debunk evidence, to deny responsibility, to discredit opponents, and to distract domestic and international audiences.

However, the disinformation campaigns launched by the Kremlin after 2016, following the poisonings of Sergei Skripal and Alexei Navalny, also perform a specific 'complementary function' in terms of when and how disinformation campaigns are used by the Russian state. On the one hand, the Kremlin is expanding and re-purposing its information activities to support active measures around the world. The disinformation campaigns following the events in Ukraine are often discussed in the context of military conflict and 'hybrid warfare', but the recent assassination attempts should be investigated as an extension to the Kremlin's covert intelligence operations. On the other hand, even though two instances of poisoning have been attributed to the Kremlin in recent years, this tactic is not a new phenomenon. During the Cold War, Soviet disinformation was integrated with other active measures, including assassination and other so-called wet operations.[99] The recent use of similar tactics requires attention.

Future research can extend our results by investigating other cases and by looking at whether these observations hold for other languages and countries to get a broader picture of the reach of Russian disinformation campaigns worldwide.

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99 Bittman, *The KGB and Soviet Disinformation.*

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