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RUSSIA'S PROPAGANDA WAR ABOUT SYRIA

HOW PRO-KREMLIN TWITTER ACCOUNTS MANIPULATE THE WEST

Moscow is keen to exploit the conflict in Syria in its information war against the West. Russian messaging on Syria is meant to help expel Americans from the country. It is also aimed at discrediting the liberal ideas that have long defined the West.

Since Russia directly entered the Syrian war in 2015, the Kremlin has been keen to exploit Syria for domestic propaganda purposes. Most importantly, Moscow seeks to portray its involvement as proof that Russia's great power status has finally been restored. By shifting Russians' focus to Moscow's foreign policy adventures, the Kremlin also attempts to distract its citizens from serious domestic problems, chiefly the dire economic outlook for the country.

Yet the war being waged in Syria not only chimes with the Kremlin's domestic propaganda goals, it is also a dominant motive in the disinformation war with which Moscow is targeting the West. In this regard, most public attention has been paid to Moscow's aggressive

attempts at globally discrediting the White Helmets, the volunteer organisation engaged in rescue work in Syria.

Yet Russian messaging about the war in Syria is much more nuanced. This is apparent in data harvested by the Alliance for Securing Democracy (ASD), a transatlantic initiative housed at the German Marshall Fund of the United States. Since summer 2017, the ASD has been monitoring pro-Kremlin Twitter accounts linked to influence operations in the United States (via its Hamilton 68 dashboard) and in Germany (via its Artikel 38 dashboard). Data collected for this article from both dashboards over the past six months reveal that in contrast to other topics promoted by the pro-Kremlin networks,

stories and narratives related to Syria are often Russian-produced, with RT (Deutsch) and Sputnik (Deutschland) being referenced particularly often. The data also suggest that Russian-linked Tweets intended for Western audiences rely on two primary messaging tactics.

First, the narratives promoted support Russia's more immediate goals in Syria, most importantly the goals to undermine Western engagement in the country and to increase Russia's (and Bashar al-Assad's) leverage over the conflict resolution.

The stories and headlines promoted in pro-Kremlin Tweets are clearly aimed at increasing pressure on the Americans and their allies to abandon their engagement in Syria. Syria, these stories claim, is

mostly restored to normality, suggesting that the only impediment to lasting peace is the continuing US military presence. One story recently pushed to the pro-Kremlin network's US audience claims that the Syrian peace process is essentially being stymied by the Americans, who harbour radical militants in their garrison at al-Tanf, from which jihadists then launch attacks.

By amplifying reports about the military advances of Assad's and Vladimir Putin's troops, the Russian-linked Tweets seek to generate the impression that there is no alternative to Assad – and certainly none to talking to Moscow. Stories promoted by the networks that describe the “rhythm in which the Syrian army and Russian forces [...] progress its irreversible military victory [*sic*]” thus buttress Putin's desire to control any peace process and to avoid Assad's removal at all costs.

Yet the messaging tactics deployed by pro-Kremlin accounts include a second, more long-term thread in Russia's information war against the West: using Syria to broadly discredit Western stabilization efforts in foreign countries, sow doubt about the motives for Western foreign engagement, and subvert the very idea of humanitarian interventions and aid – all

despite the fact that the West is neither officially engaged in a “stabilization mission” nor in a “humanitarian intervention” in Syria.

To this end, the narratives pushed by the networks shrewdly exploit pre-existing resentments about Western interventionism among audiences. Most importantly, the networks draw parallels with America's war in Iraq, recycling motives that may easily arouse anti-American sentiments, including the US lust for oil and fabricated evidence used to justify foreign occupation. In sum, their messaging suggests that the war in Syria is not the result of a domestic revolution but was stoked by the West. Rather than fight terrorists, the West launched a “war of aggression” against the legitimate Syrian regime. By allying with terrorists to topple Assad, the US and its allies inflicted serious harm upon Syrians, “unleashing” a “wave of terrorism” against which the Syrian regime is now defending its people.

Pro-Kremlin Tweets suggest that in order to help the West realize its plans “to control the oil-rich Middle East” Western media disguise the occupation as a “humanitarian intervention”, fabricating evidence of atrocities that the Syrian regime allegedly committed against its own people. In response

to the massacre of civilians in Eastern Ghouta, one recently promoted story referred to “a disgusting, emotive propaganda game over the Syrian war” played by the West, accusing it of falsely blaming Assad and the Russians. Other headlines designed to discredit Western media reporting include “Syria: The absurdities of Western war propaganda” and “The Guardian journalist who takes ‘afternoon tea’ with ISIS and survives”.

Among the most prominent conspiracy theories fed by pro-Kremlin Tweets is the claim that Americans fund and equip Syrian terrorists, employing headlines like “US orders Al-Qaida to attack Syrian troops in Idlib” and “Bombshell report confirms US coalition struck a deal with ISIS”.

By feeding these interrelated narratives, Moscow hopes to upend patterns of Western foreign engagement (in Syria and elsewhere) that the Kremlin loathes. Just as importantly, it is intent upon undermining Western societies' commitment to the liberal ideas that have long defined the West. /