The Lisa Case
STRATCOM Lessons for European states

by Jakub Janda

In January 2016, news media reported that a German girl of Russian origin had allegedly been raped by several migrants in Berlin. Although the story was disproved soon, it eventually yielded notable reactions, among them a Russian immigrants' protest march to the German Chancellery and accusations by Russia's foreign minister Sergey Lavrov. What had happened? This event clearly shows the risks posed to European countries by Russia's disinformation campaigns – especially in times of emerging right-wing populist parties throughout the European Union. Therefore critical lessons for national strategic communications have to be drawn.

The disinformation campaign of the Russian Federation and its proxies has been very active in EU member states at least since late 2013. While the most visible engagement is directed at Ukraine and the Baltic states, tangible cases created by this aggressive tool of the Kremlin's foreign policy have appeared even in the core EU member states. Moscow's strategic objective is sound and clear - to poison the internal cohesion of NATO and EU and to curb these two institutions' willingness to react to aggressive policies of the Russian Federation. Such disinformation campaigns aim at undermining the trust of European citizens towards their governments, mainstream political parties, mainstream media, or state institutions (such as the police) in general. The Kremlin shares this objective with many European far-right and far-left parties. Therefore, they form a practical coalition in order to support anything that crushes the political and media mainstream.

That is why basically every European state has at least several dozen quasi-Russian media projects operating in their national language. Some are openly funded by Kremlin-related entities; some only share parts of its views and behave naturally in (often indirect) support of it. The internet is of particular interest here. The respective websites usually mix several components of wider pro-Kremlin narratives. Some of them convey anti-Western messages (such as publishing fake stories on how the EU is a slave of the US in various forms), anti-establishment disinformation (such as fake or magnified stories of government failing to cope with migration or Muslims), while other material aims at supporting Kremlin policies to create a feeling that the Russian Federation is victim to Western domination and that the economic sanctions should be lifted.

Mainstream political and security analysts often ignore this phenomenon, believing that it has only a minor impact. Reality proves this approach incorrect. Practical examples serve well to get a grip on how exactly it works and how NATO and EU countries should defend their societies against such disinformation efforts.

The Lisa Case: What could a STRATCOM Team have done?

One of the most visible cases is a story from January 2016, when a 13-year old German girl of Russian origin named Lisa was allegedly raped in Berlin by several men of migrant origin. This fabricated story was supposed to fit into the current Kremlin narrative which stresses the inability of Europe to cope with the refugee crisis while implicitly communicating that Russia is the strong and stable power in comparison with the "weak" and "soft" Europe.

Since the German government was structurally unable to swiftly react to the unfounded allegations, the case got disproportionate national and international attention. For a better understanding of how the case unfolded and what could have been done if Germany had disposed of a rapid reaction capability in the field of media and communication (e.g. a national Strategic Communication [STRATCOM] team), the case will be summarized in the following simplified phases.

1. Monitoring and assessment

"The story about Lisa" was first reported by a minor website for Russian expats living in Germany. The young girl Lisa was reported to have been picked up by men of Middle East origin who offered her a ride home. Then, she was allegedly raped. If a German national STRATCOM team existed: At this moment, the case could have been detected as a potentially impactful story and governmental analysts would have followed its development. It would have been placed alongside dozens of other stories monitored, most of which eventually die out.

2. Coordinating the reaction

After she came home, a police investigation started. At first, the German police did not confirm the above-mentioned version of the story as the investigation proceeded. It got huge coverage by Kremlin-run Russian media, backfiring into German media space. If a German national STRATCOM team existed: After clearly realising that this case does have national importance, it would have told the specific police unit that their immediate action is needed. This does not mean that the investigation would be inappropriately hastened, but that additional police resources would be called to action due to the urgency of the situation for the public order.

3. Enhancing the spread of correct information via various sources

After several days, the police and the girl together with her family publicly and fully denied the "rape"-version of the story. Despite the fact that the Berlin state police published a complete denial of the story, most Russian government-controlled media that featured the issue did not correct it or remove it from their websites. If a German national STRATCOM team existed: It would have publicly spread the police investigation report outcomes, for example by asking the German Embassy in Moscow to produce a press release and press conference to correct the disinformation that kept going on.

Several days after it came out that the "rape"-version of the story was fictitious, a demonstration of Russian speakers in Berlin took place. If a German national STRATCOM team existed: Obviously, no action would have been taken against a legal demonstration. However, it could have pro-actively alerted local politicians to the official police report on the case so that they could have publicly questioned the cause for the demonstration.

Despite the fact that all sources proved this story to be untrue, the Russian Foreign Minister pointed to this case publicly, provoking the German Foreign Minister to react. If a German national STRATCOM team existed: It could have spread an extract of the police report in a media-friendly way, pointing to the timeline of this case, so that it would have become evident that the Russian Foreign Minister used false information.

The critical lesson: STRATCOM's key roles

In light of this so-called "Lisa case", there is a clear lesson to be learned. This threat is so dangerous and difficult to grasp that putting it into the bucket with other security threats and putting existing bodies within the state administration in charge of dealing with it is insufficient. Therefore, specialized bodies with several dozens of experts in various fields need tobe created as a matter of urgency. Hence, in each EU member state, a national STRATCOM team should be created. Such teams currently operate within the EU's European External Action Service (EEAS), in NATO and in some national administrations such as Britain or Latvia, although their scope tends to be limited to the field of foreign policy. Since cases like "Lisa" primarily threaten the domestic democratic order, STRATCOM should be established within the Ministries of the Interior. Foreign policy, national security as well as communication and media experts need to work alongside homeland security professionals. Such a capability must be free of diplomatic self-censorship. This body should directly connect strategic communications work to the heads of state at all levels. Policy makers must keep in mind that intelligence gathering mostly works for military purposes but hardly for any real-time engagement with the public. Hence the public battle for the hearts and minds might be lost.

A STRATCOM team could fulfil at least four key roles with respect to affecting national and international discourse. First, this team would react in real-time in order to monitor disinformation cases with a potential significant impact on the public or on national security. One of the problems in European administrations is that different state bureaus and offices often care only about information related to their narrow field of interest. Many governments lack an overarching entity which would have an objective to actively seek out potential high-impact disinformation in its national media, on social networks, and in media of selected states of specific interest. This practically means that the German STRATCOM (if it existed) would have alerted the police to react immediately to popular disinformation cases, such as the Lisa case. It could have also alerted responsible political leaders to the importance of the case in real time. Moreover, it would have seen the upcoming demonstrations based on proven disinformation and urged local authorities to stress the actual empirical basis of the case – for example, showcasing publicly the testimony of the girl where she admits that she lied and the alleged story never happened.

Second, STRATCOM teams would follow regular media coverage and in the case of serious disinformation cases, would provide the particular media outlet with additional information. For example, if it perceived disinformation on German activities in Ukraine, it would have asked the Ministry of Foreign Affairs or the German Embassy in Ukraine for specific information and send it to the particular TV station for correction. It would not push for a change, but only provide additional information where deemed necessary and leave it to the editors of the channel to decide whether or not to use it. It would not, in any case, create "its own propaganda" or censorship.

Third, this team would publish a regular overview of disinformation campaign trends and the way they are perceived by a politically neutral state security apparatus. A nationwide Disinformation Warfare Scale could be deployed similar to the terrorist alert scale which is already in use. The team could assume the role of an occasional informal speaker on behalf of the intelligence services, which cannot be communicative by definition.

Fourth, it would conduct research on this topic and coordinate with other STRATCOM teams. Governments need to know about the outcomes of disinformation campaigns and the particular causes involved. At the moment, this issue is being researched by scholars and non-governmental entities, but practical knowledge of measures and countermeasures is worryingly lacking among state entities.

Proposals for a European STRATCOM policy

Alongside establishing a national STRATCOM team, there are at least three specific policy measures most EU member states should put into practice. First, it is necessary to identify the disinformation campaigns as a very serious threat and to describe them precisely in the national strategy documents. A state can deal with any threat systematically only if it is described precisely and categorized in the strategic materials of the state. The influence of the Russian Federation and its disinformation campaign must be considered a top priority by the intelligence services.

Second, aggressive behaviour of the disinformation campaign orchestrated by the Russian Federation should be put on the foreign-policy agenda of key EU member states. The Lisa case provoked a prompt reaction by the German Foreign Minister, but only as an ad hoc and reactive move. If the Russian Federation constantly intervenes into domestic issues of individual EU member states, there is no reason why this topic should not be on the agenda of meetings between EU or nation-state officials with representatives of the Russian Federation. This is a perfect opportunity for the EU, as a projected global player, to act decisively using its political and economic power.

Third, there is an urgent need to promote robust civil society projects focused on myth-busting and fact-checking in their national language on a daily basis. Dozens of pieces of impactful pro-Kremlin disinformation are being disseminated in the public space every week and are persistently decreasing the citizens' trust in their democratic institutions. In Ukraine, the *StopFake.org* project has been initiated to counter Russian disinformation. Meanwhile, the current response to this threat among EU member states may be described as "too little, too late." States should support such activities alongside private foundations. The legitimacy of those projects must remain a key concern, since substantial state support could damage it in the eyes of the public.

The abovementioned measures represent the minimal response key European states need to immediately put into practice. If they fail to do so, disastrous societal and political implications will significantly change European societies in times to come as a consequence of targeted foreign policy tactics by an aggressive, autocratic regime. Increasing portions of the public will lose trust in their democratic regimes, in the free media and in political parties. Anti-establishment political powers with pro-Kremlin stances will continue to gain ground and public support, and even financial and media boosts from Moscow. Conspiracy theories, fabricated by a purposeful aggressive actor who aims to undermine the constitutional orders of our democratic states, will gain more traction. Mainly young people and the elderly will become even more concerned about the migration crisis as a result of exposure to fabricated disinformation stories.

This will make it almost impossible for European governments to find constructive policies to deal with migration and minority integration issues. Even more citizens will lose trust in the EU and NATO and the membership of their countries in those organizations. Meanwhile, the European response to Russia's aggressive actions in Ukraine and other areas of interest of Russian revanchism will weaken as its public legitimacy will deteriorate due to calls inspired by targeted disinformation. This is a course of action that European countries cannot allow without risking ruination in the long run.

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