

THE DISINFORMATION NATIONS: KIDNAPPING OUR CITIZENS, CORRUPTING OUR OFFICIALS, STEALING OUR STUFF

By Alar Karis, President of Estonia

People succumb to totalitarian rule once the line between truth and lies no longer exists, the political philosopher Hannah Arendt wrote in her *Origins of Totalitarianism*.

This idea is as relevant today as it was in 1951, when Arendt's book was published. Despite the lessons we should have learned from history, erasing the distinction between fact and fiction, between truth and lies is what still allows authoritarian regimes to undermine democratic principles and defend unjust wars.

My country, Estonia, has a terrifying example of how this works right next door. Russia's President Putin believes that Ukraine is not a nation and that the Ukrainian people do not deserve a state. He believes that Russia possesses an imperial privilege to coerce its neighbors to do Moscow's bidding. War and genocide are the tools that he is using to make the reality match his imagined truth.

Those acts have been enabled by a web of lies, spun for decades by the country's leaders. Shaken by post-Soviet instability, the Russian people acquiesce to a grim social contract: an increase in prosperity and stability for renouncing their right to participate in decisions, to hear the truth, to distinguish between fact and fiction. Just when a democratic light began to shine in Russia, it was snuffed out. When Russian political debate and civic participation vanished, Russian society spiraled into autocracy and the nation became a perpetrator of genocide. With unimaginably high costs to itself and other nations, Russia became a disinformation nation.

There is a lesson here for democratic nations and

aspiring democracies alike. We must make sure that our people are able to distinguish between fact and fiction, between truth and falsehood. We must make it a priority to defend the space in which civic participation and debate happens, and to teach our children the skills of critical thinking early on. Democracy is built on a free exchange of ideas and can be maintained only if citizens understand and execute their civic responsibilities.

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Another aspect of a healthy democratic culture that so spectacularly failed to materialize in Russia is understanding and making sense of one's own history. Despite the efforts of organizations such as Nobel Peace Prize winner Memorial, the Russian nation never came to terms with the atrocities committed against Estonians and other nations. As a result, Russia never shed its imperialist and colonial character. Many laughed when Stalin was declared by a 2021 Levada-Center poll among Russians to be the most outstanding figure of all time. Reverence for Stalin demonstrates the truth of the adage "Those who don't know history are doomed to repeat it." It is being repeated now, as we speak.

Russia has also been continuously conducting information warfare against friendly, neutral, and hostile foreign countries alike. The objective is simple – to change the views and behavior of foreign audiences in Russia's national interest. Attempts have been made to distort electoral processes and to undermine confidence in democratic governments through hack-and-leak

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operations and by weaponizing social media. Everything from fake Facebook profiles to buying off prominent spokespeople and creating English language news channels to spread lies are part of Russia's systematic and organized psychological operations.

Worryingly, we also see countries that support and amplify each other's narratives to further their own agendas. At the start of Russia's invasion of Ukraine, Chinese media repeated false claims of the presence of U.S. biological weapons in Ukraine. Likewise, Chinese media services were spreading Russian disinformation of atrocities committed by the Ukrainian government against people in the Donbas.

Additionally, conflict and food insecurity, lack of employment and economic opportunities in the more vulnerable regions of the world are abused by Russia to advance its malignant influence and spread disinformation, demonizing the U.S. and Europe.

Disinformation efforts by Russia and its allies extend to different fields. During the COVID-19 pandemic, Russia attempted to portray the coronavirus vaccines developed in the West as dangerous and ineffective, calling them "monkey vaccines." The reasons here were not just political but also business related – the Russians and the Chinese wished to gain advantage in distributing their own vaccines.

I am sure that the Russian people will have to face the truth one day. On that day, Russia will have a real future as a nation. Until then, we must cut through the web of lies and hold the Russian leadership accountable for everyone. It doesn't matter whether disinformation is spread through social media or the official spokespeople of the Kremlin or by the person who calls himself the President of Russia. If we want to defend democracy and maintain security, we must make sure that the truth will stand.

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