

The Weaponized Messaging of Target Populations: An Arrow in the Quiver of Gray Zone Antagonists

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Abstract

The term “gray zone conflict” refers to a form of coercive, competitive interaction between states or non-state actors that occurs in the space between normal diplomatic/economic competition and open, armed conflict. These hybrid, often ambiguous actions—such as cyberattacks, disinformation, proxy usage, and economic pressure—aim to achieve strategic objectives while avoiding direct, high-intensity warfare. Largely due to the proliferation and reach of social media, authoritarian nation state actors can now influence targeted audiences in foreign countries with weaponized messages intended to trigger emotional responses and influence voting. In recent years, for example, Vladimir Putin’s government in Russia has disseminated weaponized messages intended to exploit the sentiments of vulnerable target audiences in Romania, Ukraine, and Moldova,

influence electoral outcomes, and undermine national cohesion in those countries. Conducted by students in the Strategic Intelligence course, a capstone course for undergraduate students in their Intelligence Studies program, this study used open-source intelligence (OSINT) collection and structured analytic techniques to identify (1) what actors in Russia conducted these messaging campaigns, (2) what the intended goal of these campaigns were, (3) who the target audiences were, (4) what the target audience susceptibilities were, (5) what channels were used to deliver these message, and (6) what the outcomes of these messaging campaigns were.

Keywords: Disinformation, open-source intelligence, gray zone conflict, information warfare, hybrid warfare, international relations