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KREMLIN WATCH PROGRAM
Kremlin Watch is a strategic program of the European Values Think-Tank which aims to expose and confront instruments of Russian influence and disinformation operations focused against Western democracies.

Abstract
This white paper is focused on the effects of pro-Russian disinformation during Operation Dragoon Ride 2015 (ODR ‘15) and assesses counter-disinformation strategies for NATO convoys. ODR ‘15 was a combined US Army and NATO convoy from the Baltics through Poland and Czech Republic, largely in response to Russia’s annexation of Crimea. According to media reports, several significant opposition protests against the exercise were being organized in the Czech Republic. Partially because of amplified negativity regarding the convoy in social and mainstream media, the Czech populous overwhelmingly supported the convoy and very few protesters were visible. This white paper also explores subsequent Atlantic Resolve/Saber Strike operations with respect to trends in pro-Russian disinformation attempts and US/NATO-countering strategies.

Keywords
Disinformation, Dragoon, Media, Political Extremism, Czech Republic, Russia, American Convoy, Atlantic Resolve, Saber Strike

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Acronyms and Definitions List

3/2CR  
3rd Squadron, 2nd Cavalry Regiment. Stationed/Headquartered in Vilseck, Rose Barracks, Germany

Atlantic Resolve  
Operation Atlantic Resolve includes ongoing efforts in response to Russia’s actions in Ukraine, mainly the annexation of Crimea and the War in Donbass. All US efforts in support of NATO fall under the umbrella of Operation Atlantic Resolve

BCT  
Brigade Combat Team: the basic deployable unit of maneuver in the US Army. A BCT consists of one combat arms branch maneuver brigade and its assigned support and fire units.

BIS  
Bezpečnostní informační služba (Security Information Service)—the Czech equivalent of the FBI in the United States

Bot  
A software application that runs automated tasks (scripts) via the Internet.

CEE  
Central and Eastern Europe

ČSVZ  
Czechoslovak Soldiers in the Reserve (Českoslovenští vojáci v záloze)

ČTK  
Česká tisková kancelář

Cyborg  
Cyborgs are accounts nominally controlled by human users that are, on occasion, taken over by bots or otherwise exhibit bot-like or malicious behavior. Cyborgs only display bot-like behaviors sometimes.

Disinformation  
False information deliberately and often covertly spread (as by the planting of rumors) in order to influence public opinion or obscure the truth.

DoD  
Department of Defense (usually referring to the United States)

Dragoon  
Dragoons originally were a class of mounted infantry, who used horses for mobility, but dismounted to fight on foot. Now used to define a Soldier in 2CR.

DSSS  
Workers Party of Social Justice (Dělnická strana sociální spravedlnosti)

EDI  
European Defense Initiative- successor program of the European Reassurance Initiative.

ERI  
European Reassurance Initiative. A program that was initiated in June 2014, about three months after the annexation of Crimea by the Russian Federation, by the White House to increase the US presence in Europe for security purposes.

EU  
European Union

EUCOM  
United States European Command; one of ten Combatant Commands of the United States military, headquartered in Stuttgart, Germany.

HzPD  
Movement for Direct Democracy (Hnutí za přímou demokraci)

HQ  
Headquarters
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Acronym</th>
<th>Description</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>KSČM</td>
<td>Communist Party of Bohemia and Moravia (Komunistická strana Čech a Moravy)</td>
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<tr>
<td>LTG (R)</td>
<td>Lieutenant General (Retired)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Misinformation</td>
<td>Misinformation differs slightly from disinformation and is defined as “incorrect or misleading information. In the case of this study, misinformation is often the result of [media outlets, people in social media, people in society, etc.] unwittingly spreading disinformation.</td>
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<tr>
<td>NATO</td>
<td>North Atlantic Treaty Organization</td>
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<td>ODR '15</td>
<td>Operation Dragoon Ride (occurred 21 March -01 April 2015)</td>
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<tr>
<td>ODR II</td>
<td>Operation Dragoon Ride II (began May 27, 2016)</td>
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<td>PAO</td>
<td>Public Affairs Office</td>
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<td>PM</td>
<td>Prime Minister</td>
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<td>RT</td>
<td>Russia Today (Russian state-backed media outlet)</td>
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<td>SEO</td>
<td>Search Engine Optimization: the process of maximizing the number of visitors to a particular website by ensuring that the site appears high on the list of results returned by a search engine.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Stryker</td>
<td>Interim Armored Vehicle Stryker is a family of eight-wheeled armored fighting vehicles</td>
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<tr>
<td>Troll</td>
<td>A troll is an online persona that exhibits malicious behaviors yet operated by humans.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Troop</td>
<td>Company-sized elements are called &quot;troops&quot; within some Army branches</td>
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<tr>
<td>TTP</td>
<td>Tactics Techniques and Procedures</td>
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<tr>
<td>USAREUR</td>
<td>United States Army Europe, formally United States Army Europe and Seventh Army, is an Army Service Component Command of the United States Army. It is responsible for directing US Army operations throughout the United States European Command Area of Responsibility.</td>
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INTRODUCTION

Operation Dragoon Ride (ODR '15) was a 3rd Squadron of the 2nd Cavalry Regiment (3/2CR) US Army convoy in support of Atlantic Resolve. It occurred from 21 March 2015 until 01 April 2015, and traversed from Estonia through the Baltics, Poland, and the Czech Republic. Media in the Czech Republic was somewhat negative regarding the operation, especially at the beginning, so much so that most people (Czech populous, US Soldiers, NATO staff, and outside observers) thought there were going to be massive protests when the convoy reached the Czech Republic. However, the perception of the opposition in the media was completely overestimated due to the effects of Russian and alternative media disinformation and in the end, alleged opposition elements largely failed. Although the disinformation attempts were somewhat successful in that they achieved the desired end-state of deception (convincing society that Czechs were insecure about their support of the West), the public reaction to this very deception is what led to the overwhelming turn-out of Czech support of the convoy's passage. Ultimately, the exercise was extremely successful in all of its intended purposes and was a positive experience for the large majority of participants. Nevertheless, events of ODR '15 highlighted the effectiveness and strategic capabilities of Russian and pro-Russian disinformation. US/NATO attempts to combat these disinformation efforts changed quite significantly as a result of ODR '15 for subsequent and similar operations. This paper will discuss the lead-up and events of ODR '15 and focus on the legacy of the operation in terms of Russian disinformation tactics and the mitigation of disinformation campaigns for NATO exercises in Central and Eastern Europe.

1 Operation Atlantic Resolve includes ongoing efforts in response to Russia’s actions in Ukraine, mainly the annexation of Crimea and the War in Donbass. All US efforts in support of NATO fall under the umbrella of Operation Atlantic Resolve.

2 It is necessary to define some of the aforementioned terms up front, as they will be used periodically within the context of this research. Merriam Webster Dictionary defines disinformation as “false information deliberately and often covertly spread (as by the planting of rumors) in order to influence public opinion or obscure the truth” (Merriam-Webster 2018a). Misinformation differs slightly from disinformation and is defined as “incorrect or misleading information” (Merriam-Webster. 2018b). In the case of this study, misinformation is often the result of [media outlets, people in social media, people in society, etc.] unwittingly spreading disinformation. Thus, disinformation is the original source of “false/fake news” and any subsequent distributor who knows the information is false, while misinformation is the dissemination of disinformation unwittingly. In this study the two terms will be used together as dis/mis-information.
The events of Operation Dragoon Ride 2015 highlighted the effectiveness and strategic capabilities of Russian and pro-Russian disinformation.
METHODOLOGY

The author conducted research on this topic using three main methods:

1. General research of publications, articles, and blogs available online about ODR ‘15 and subsequent, but similar operations. Examples of subsequent operations included those under US Army Europe’s (USAREUR) Operation Atlantic Resolve Umbrella such as 4/2 CR’s Exercise Dragoon Crossing, which began September 13, 2015 and crossed the Czech Republic and Slovakia, bound for Hungary and Romania; and 2CR’s Operation Dragoon Ride II (ODR II) which began May 27, 2016 from Vilseck, Germany through Poland and into the Baltics. These efforts allowed the author to gather essential information about the operations, understand sentiments held by a variety of political and social groups (including those generating or spreading disinformation), create a timeline of events to include media and public reaction to said developments, as well as collect previous analysis on ODR ‘15, associated media, and Czech right-wing extremist groups from informed sources.

2. Research and analysis of articles regarding ODR ‘15 and other operations in known Russian disinformation websites as well as pro-Russian (alternative) media outlets and Facebook pages that had relevant commentary on the operations. This allowed the author to better understand the pro-Russian and disinformation message being pushed in the Czech Republic and other countries before and during the operations.

3. Personal interviews with over 60 people who all participated in ODR ‘15 and or other Atlantic Resolve operations in some way, whether directly, or had influence from a position at a higher headquarters element. The author also held interviews with experts from academia. In doing so, the author gained essential, previously unpublished, personal accounts of the operation from a wide spectrum of individuals who all played some role in Atlantic Resolve Operations.
The international community was shocked and awed by Russia’s audacious, and in many minds, illegal annexation of the Crimean Peninsula in March 2014. The world was further baffled/enraged/unnerved when Russia continued its interference in Ukraine’s political affairs and supported Ukraine’s separatist rebels in the far east of the country. How could Vladimir Putin be so bold? After the most paranoia-inducing, globally pervasive, and potentially catastrophic cold war human kind has ever seen, much of the world breathed a sigh of relief when the Soviet Union collapsed. Moreover, the Soviets declared defeat a mere 25 years ago, and as its successor, Russia was expected to “behave,” at least for a few generations. Yet with Russian influence creeping back into Eastern Europe, and Moscow’s less-than-subtle moves in Ukraine, all appearances point to a resurgence of a strong and powerful Russia.

ODR ’15 was a US-led Army tactical exercise in early 2015 through Eastern and Central Europe, which began almost one year after the Crimean annexation. The main tactical element of ODR ’15 was carried out largely by the 3/2 CR, which is based in Vilseck (Rose Barracks), Germany. However, many other US military, NATO, host nation, and ambassadorial/state department elements were necessary for the convoy’s planning and eventual success. The convoy involved the transfer of military equipment and personnel from the Baltic states across Poland and the Czech Republic to Germany, following a major USAREUR annual training operation, Operation Atlantic Resolve. From 21 March to 1 April 2015, a convoy of armored fighting vehicles containing an entire Squadron of troops augmented by various necessary elements from higher echelons (which totaled roughly 520 troops and 120 vehicles), trekked across 1,836 kilometers and through six allied countries (EUCOM 2015). Routes from the various Troop starting locations differed, with Iron Troop starting near Tallinn, Estonia; Lightning Troop beginning near Vilnius, Lithuania; and Killer Troop originating near Drawsko Pomorskie, Poland. Nevertheless, they all returned via road to their Vilseck garrison after maneuvers and exercises in Poland, Estonia and Lithuania. According to various media outlets, “several significant” opposition protests against the exercise were allegedly organized by a coalition of civil society groups prior to the unit’s passage through the Czech Republic.

In response to opposition hype in the media, the change of European security climate after the annexation of Crimea, 3 and also in response to Czech President Zeman’s apparent “sympathies” (Soldatkin and Lopatka 2015) to the Kremlin, 4 Czech citizens came out in droves to support the convoy. Most Czech observers and supporters of ODR ’15 went to see the convoy’s passage for one or more of the following reasons: 1) they genuinely supported NATO; 2) they were interested in seeing the equipment or the Soldiers (many families with children fell into this category); 3) given the elevated media stage, they realized the strategic importance of public sentiment perceptions, and wanted the world to know that the majority of Czechs do not support Russia; 4) they were interested in seeing what all the excitement (in the media) was about. It is believed that reasons three and four account for the majority of the support in the Czech Republic, that

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1 After the Crimean Crisis (Feb-Mar 2014), many in the international community came to the realization that Putin’s Russia was not intending to “play fair” within internationally set boundaries. As such, many Czechs noticed more astutely the Russian “sticky fingers” in Czech politics, economics, and society, and understood potential future ramifications.

2 Early in March 2015, Czech President Miloš Zeman announced his plan to participate in Russian President Putin’s commemoration of the seventieth anniversary of the end of World War II in Europe. Zeman was the only EU head of state that participated in the military parade in Moscow on May 9th, 2015. At the time ODR ’15 was underway, media coverage in the Czech Republic about Zeman’s planned meeting with Putin was prevalent, and the Czech President was under a lot of domestic and international scrutiny for the decision, especially because Putin has annexed the Crimean Peninsula only one year prior. Czech citizens who generally did not want their country to appear to support Russia were critical and upset with his decision (Havlíček 2015).
ironically\(^5\) dwarfed the support seen in any of the other five countries along the convoy's route. There were an estimated 30,000 Czechs, possibly more, in total along the routes and at Prague/Pilsen celebration events. An estimated 95-99% of those who attended events or came to see the convoy were supporters or neutral\(^6\) observers. Partly because the numbers of protesters were initially overstated or inflated through social/mainstream media and partly because of the massive amounts of people supporting the convoy, the protests either did not materialize or were suffocated, and in the end were nearly non-existent.

**Opposition-Motivated Supporters**

It is important to discuss the opposition groups that attempted to obstruct or protest the convoy in order to understand the tie between alternative groups and Russian or pro-Russian sentiments. The opposition to ODR '15 that materialized before and even in some cases during the convoy's travel through the Czech Republic was mostly extremist and pro-Russian (which is typical of the far-right position in the Czech Republic) (Vejvodová et al. 2017), but overall did not have a negative effect on the convoy's receipt by Czech society. According to the BIS: "Right-wing extremists showed some interest in protesting against the American military convoy travelling via the Czech Republic from March 29 to April 1, 2015. The media paid considerable attention to the event and a number of right-wing extremist groups aimed to capitalize on that. However, the public largely ignored these activities of right-wing extremists" (BIS 2016: 11). The author, however, disagrees with the last sentence in the above quote. The public did not ignore the activities, instead the public neutralized them. Czech society was indeed influenced by the right-wing extremist groups' public histrionics, but the extremist groups' threats and assertions inspired the opposite of their desired result.

It was because of the media attention focused on these right-wing extremist entities and their dramatic declarations that a large number of Czechs came out to show their support or interest in the convoy. The rampant media attention that suggested that there was an impending threat of mass, ostensibly pro-Russian, opposition was being reported in the news caused regular Czech citizens who wouldn't necessarily participate in a military or political event to come out to show their support or at least witness the convoy's passage. The basic premise some Czech interviewees told the author is "the world was watching because of all the media attention the convoy had garnered in the Czech Republic and we knew that the operation and its receipt in our country had become a big deal. We didn't want anyone to think our country supports Russia. That's why I and many others went to see the convoy" (P., L. 2018; T., M. 2018; Š., O. 2018; S., M. 2018c; and various others interviewed who intimated similar sentiments). Such an attitude leads to the conclusion that though not all Czechs are fully supportive of the US and NATO, if forced to choose, the vast majority would pick alignment with the West over alignment with Moscow.

\(^5\) This is ironic because ODR '15 was originally not planned to travel through the Czech Republic. In fact, the symbolism of the operation was intended to reassure the Baltic countries more than any other NATO member.

\(^6\) It is likely that even Czechs who would prefer neutrality over membership in NATO made up a large presence of the "non-opposition" crowd during ODR '15's passage through the Czech Republic. For more on Czech foreign policy sentiment, see (Janda et al. 2016), wherein 4 out of 10 Czechs surveyed claim would prefer "neutrality to the membership in NATO," the year after Dragoon Ride occurred.
"The world was watching because of all the media attention the convoy had garnered in the Czech Republic and we knew that the operation and its receipt in our country had become a big deal. We didn’t want anyone to think our country supports Russia” (several interviewees).
Opposition Elements Present

There were 10 major/known opposition elements that were trying to organize groups to protest against the convoy within the Czech Republic. The groups included the "No to Brussels—National Democracy" group led by Adam B. Bartoš, the "Friends of Russia" group led by Jiří Vyvadil, the Communist Party of Bohemia and Moravia (Komunistická strana Čech a Moravy—KSČM) led by Josef Vondruška, the "Stop Church Restitution" group led by Lenka Procházková, the "No to Bases" group (Ne základnám) led by Eva Novotná, the "Tanks, No Thanks" campaign led by Dana Feminová, World Without Wars Organization, the Workers Party of Social Justice (Dělnická strana sociální spravedlnosti—DSSS) led by Tomáš Vandas, the "Movement for Direct Democracy" (Hnutí za přímou demokracii—HzPD) group, and the Give Peace a Chance campaign. Then there were anonymous entities that were not necessarily protesting the convoy, but instead were attempting to elicit information from the Dragoons in the convoy. In subsequent years, Czechoslovak Soldiers in the Reserve (Českoslovenští vojáci v záloze—ČSVZ) led by Marek Obrtel and Martin Zapletal became major protestors of annual US/NATO convoys. According to the news agency Česká tisková kancelář, abbreviated to ČTK, there were no more than two dozen protestors at the most prominent protest, on 30 March at Ruzyně Barracks in Prague (Wirnitzer 2015b).

Hybrid Strategy Application to ODR '15

Reaction to ODR '15 in the Czech Republic was one of several major Russian and pro-Russian disinformation operations conducted as a part of an overarching Russian hybrid strategy aimed against the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) and the European Union (EU) in 2015. Indeed, the most important element to understand about Russian hybrid strategy is its ultimate goal: to weaken NATO and the EU internally by weakening the member states and their allegiance to the organizations (W., J. 2018). Hybrid conflict is defined by the Bezpečnostní informační služba (BIS) as a complex use of military and non-military instruments, ranging from strict hierarchy structure to a state of chaos. This includes the use of history, espionage, military operations, guerilla, economy, organized crime corruption, politics, information warfare, etc., and it also takes advantage of tools often proscribed by counterpart(ies), such as freedom of speech (which played a significant role in the argument of the Czech opponents of ODR '15) (BIS 2018: 6-8). Various individual mechanisms of the hybrid strategy may only serve as a way to distract from another component and create chaos—the BIS perceives disinformation websites as only one part of this Russian hybrid strategy system. Disinformation websites are largely incorporated as elements of said distractions; Russia uses these to mask its interests and other significant activities. According to the 2015 BIS report, “The internet played a significant role in promoting right-wing extremism and in enabling communication between individual groups. The role of Facebook was growing, and this social media site became more prominent than standard websites of individual groups” (BIS 2016: 12). As such, not only were right-wing extremists able to capitalize on social media—especially Facebook—to accomplish their desired end states, pro-Russian disinformation agents were able to masquerade as accomplices behind the right-wing extremist campaigns in order to influence the media and society as a whole. This phenomenon was actuated during ODR’15 using the increasingly popular hybrid strategy of mis/dis-information, its tools (including bots, trolls, and cyborgs), and its effects.8

7 Furthermore, though there is no proven direct link between alternative media outlets, such as those evident in the Czech Republic, and the Kremlin, many alternative outlets indeed promote the Russian agenda, and Russia is able to incorporate this into its hybrid strategy (Smoleňová and Chrzová 2017).

8 A bot is a software application that runs automated tasks (scripts) over the Internet (Dunham and Melnick 2008: 2). A troll is an online persona that exhibits malicious behaviors yet operated by humans (Broniatowski et al. 2018). Cyborgs are accounts nominally controlled by human users that are, on occasion, taken over by bots or otherwise exhibit bot-like or malicious behavior (Chu et al. 2012: 811). Cyborgs only display bot-like behaviors sometimes (Broniatowski et al. 2018). All of these elements typically operate in large numbers and may be created/hired by a state or non-state actor to achieve a certain goal or set of goals.
The most important element to understand about Russian hybrid strategy in Central and Eastern Europe is its ultimate goal: to weaken NATO and the EU internally by weakening the member states and their allegiance to the organizations (W., J. 2018).
According to a 2015 Atlantic Resolve Social Media Environment Baseline Assessment, which analyzed social media activity related to Atlantic Resolve during the month of May 2015, “Russians are increasingly using networks of fake profiles to inject social media platforms, to include Facebook and Twitter, with pro-Kremlin rhetoric. Typically, much of the activity of the fake or ‘bot’ account is automated, allowing a single user to manage hundreds of profiles” (Takacs 2015: 15). The study describes how Twitter bots operate to push a certain message designed to alleviate public protest that might otherwise impede Russian state goals. According to the report, “associated metadata confirms that the vast majority are bots” (ibid: 15). This type of activity in social media not only injects pro-Kremlin disinformation and propaganda, it also manipulates increased levels of reachability of said messages. “In part, search engines return results based on the popularity and frequency of a specific keyword or phrase. Bot networks can game Search Engine Optimization (SEO), resulting in the bot-created or bot-pushed content moving higher in search results for a specific topic” (ibid: 15).

This same scenario occurred on Twitter and especially Facebook during ODR '15, as described during an interview with a former EUCOM Digital Media Chief. Bots, trolls, and cyborgs were amplifying negative opinions of the USAREUR convoy operation through non-human or troll-manufactured posts on EUCOM and other NATO-related sites during the ODR '15 operation (W., J. 2018). Having battled bot, troll, and cyborg tactics in previous positions, the former EUCOM Digital Media Chief was able to identify the cause, theorized the political source of the disinformation (Russia) and was able to identify the physical location of the actors (off shore locations in Africa and Southeast Asia that without an external influencer would otherwise be completely disinterested in ODR’15) (ibid). She was also able to mitigate the strategic and political fallout of the active disinformation being propagated by changing Facebook page settings on her EUCOM and other NATO pages in order to reduce the presence of algorithmically-replicated posting language (ibid). Thanks to her expertise, a more negative social media narrative of ODR '15 was avoided.

Furthermore, a sophisticated technical case study about bot activity on Twitter during ODR '15 was completed by a team of experts for NATO’s Strategic Communications Centre of Excellence (Stratcom COE). The team concluded that “the 2015 Dragoon Ride exercise case study shows a more complex bot network, where sophisticated methods were required to identify dissemination behavior…the seeders of information to the bots were not easily identified. Instead a small number of bots were coordinated to seed the information; individually they were not very influential but collectively the profoundly impacted the dissemination of propaganda” (Agarwal et al. 2017, 106). This study further proves the use of artificial social media activity (i.e. bots, trolls, and/or cyborgs) to influence media and society during ODR '15.

Increased visibility on the pages/posts with lots of negative comments in Social Media (1) caused real people (as opposed to bots) on Facebook, especially those in Central and Eastern Europe (CEE), to see and believe that there was a lot of dissent among society regarding US and NATO in a very sensitive part of the world (in terms of Russian influence). (2) sowed doubt among these same real people about their own opinions towards the US and their government’s participation in NATO, and (3) bled into other social media as well as mainstream media outlets. Thus, the fabricated “protestors” on the FB sites corroborated claims made by RT, Sputnik, and other pro-Russian media outlets, which also in turn increased the tendency of “normal” media outlets to believe the anti-US/NATO mass-opposition rhetoric. To some extent, the bots and trolls achieved their goal: to find weak points in the society, exploit them, and amplify them in order to polarize the people (Ellick and Westbrook 2018). Russia has used tactics like this since the end of WWII (ibid). Though the specific tactics have changed over time, the same types of strategies are used to create societal fractures and rifts in democratic societies today (W., J. 2018).
The best way to counter disinformation, according to many expert interviewees on the topic, is to broadcast the truth as much as physically possible. With regard to military operations this includes designing a structured social and mainstream media platform that is connected and nested at all levels (Combatant Command all the way down to the junior Soldier level (H., B. 2018); elevating the value of Public Affairs Operations (PAO) elements, which means incorporating support teams at the lowest levels (i.e. Company/Troop levels in this case) integrated with the main effort/mission goals (C., M. 2018a&b; S., M. 2018a); allowing Soldiers to post command-approved messages in reference to NATO missions on social media with their private phones, using their own profiles or handles (M., J. 2018); and tweeting with a central theme name with association to higher mission name (i.e. #DragoonRide linked to #AtlanticResolve or #StrongEurope) (P., R. 2018; W., J. 2018; Takacs 2015). The goal of all of these applied tactics is to promote the broadcasting of truthful and accurate messaging to the people affected by NATO operations, while simultaneously preempting disinformation agents before they have a chance to disseminate their alternative agendas. This will be discussed in further detail in the following section with relevant to subsequent Atlantic Resolve convoys.
LESSONS LEARNED AND CHANGING TACTICS
TECHNIQUES AND PROCEDURES (TTP)

It is perhaps most important to recognize some of the valuable lessons learned from ODR ’15 as well as document observed changes in disinformation Tactics, Techniques, and Procedures (TTPs). Since ODR ’15, 2CR and other US and NATO elements continue to conduct similar operations every year, often moving through the Czech Republic and/or Poland en-route to maneuver north into eastern Poland and the Baltics, or south into Hungary, Romania, and Bulgaria. After ODR ’15, the next Dragoon Ride, known as ODR II, began 27 May 2016. This time, all of 2CR participated in the operation. This has since become an annual exercise, usually conducted in late spring or early summer, now known as Saber Strike or Saber Guardian (Bunn 2016).

Instead of an independent “Dragoon Ride” operation, or the subsequent and somewhat similar convoys the following years conducted by 2CR like Dragoon Crossing or ODR II, the convoys are tied into “Saber Strike” or “Saber Guardian” USAREUR operations. Saber Strike is an annual international exercise held since 2010 by USAREUR, focused on the Baltic States. The exercise spans multiple locations in Lithuania, Latvia and Estonia and involves approximately 2,000 troops from 14 countries. Exercise Saber Guardian is a similar annual exercise that began in 2017 in Hungary, Romania and Bulgaria, and involves more than 25,000 service members from over 20 NATO and other partner nations. Both training events present the opportunity for US Army Europe, NATO, and participating nations to build readiness and improve interoperability under a unified command, executing a full range of military missions to support the security and stability of the Baltic and Black Sea Regions. According to USAREUR, “it is deterrence in action.” In this context, these operations have a goal of practicing TTPs while reassuring NATO allies and deterring Russian intervention (EUCOM 2018).

Many interviewees who participated in multiple Atlantic Resolve and Saber Strike/Guardian convoys suggested that the disinformation and intelligence activities that were likely performed or orchestrated by Russians were actually observed in greater quantity in later iterations. As such, several Soldiers interviewed indicated that disinformation agents and pro-Russian opposition elements learned from ODR ’15 how to better pursue their goals in destabilizing the US and NATO convoys (R., J. 2018a; D., S. 2018; P., R. 2018). The 2CR Intelligence Officer discussed a few specific examples, “During the second Dragoon Ride, some of the actions witnessed in greater number included individual antagonizers/elicitation attempts at multiple locations, hacking of cell phones used by Soldiers, and strange or malicious text or social media messages sent to Soldiers or spouses of Soldiers. For example, after ODR II had already began, a spouse might get a message, saying ‘I know where your husband is and he is in trouble.’ Or elicitors would call a spouse and ask about specific locations of the convoy. These tactics were clever because they caused family members to reach out to Soldiers, which at the very least took the Soldier’s mind off of the mission” (R., J. 2018a). The intelligence officer and other Soldiers noted that disinformation in the media was also more prolific in operations after ODR ’15 but did not provide concrete examples of their observations.

9 In this sense an elicitation attempts included spectators asking very pointed personal or mission-related questions in order to gather information about a person or piece of technology, or to elicit a particular, likely emotional response to disrupt or impede the mission.
Dichotomies in Mission Execution and Impacts on Countering Disinformation

In analyzing disinformation trends and the techniques used to attempt to combat them with regard to US/NATO exercises, two very different general countering techniques become apparent, at least at the tactical level (i.e., in convoys conducted since ODR 2015). One practice generally embraces the active use of messaging, including those that contradict disinformation outlets, and the other technique, conversely, advocates maintaining a lower profile, largely in an effort to avoid becoming the target of disinformation stories. Though these two techniques are by no means mutually exclusive, they are very different. Both can be effective depending on the desired goals or outcomes. Primary application of the first technique was seen in ODR '15 and even to a large degree in ODR II, however the gradual shift to use of the second technique started shortly after ODR 2016 (ODR II). This change can be attributed to several intertwined factors: leadership, mission intent, host nation appetite (for convoy thoroughfare/publicity), and experience in being the subject of disinformation operations during tactical convoys.

The first technique, “active-messaging” was used specifically in ODR ‘15 under LTG Hodges, USAREUR commander from 2014 until 2017. The mission intent in 2015, as explained by General Hodges, himself was four fold: in the wake of Russia’s annexation of Crimea (1) to show NATO partners that the US was willing to put forth the muscle to defend them, (2) in a similar vein, to show Russia that NATO would be protected in the event of Russian “adventurism” into a NATO state, (3) to conduct a “scouting” mission from a logistical perspective— test roads and routes in preparation to defend against a possible Russian attack in the Baltics, and (4) to send a message to policy-makers in the US that more troops, training, and military might was needed in CEE to ensure integrity of NATO and its partner states (H., B. 2018). LTG Hodges discussed how he developed the concept of ODR ‘15. He described five specific key pillars that drove success during the very high-profile tactical convoy that was Dragoon Ride ‘15. Using these key strategies, he strove to make the 30,000 US Troops stationed and operating in Europe look and feel like a 300,000 troop-strong economy of force:

1. “Power Down,” meaning, responsibility should be pushed to the lowest levels, and in some cases junior leaders would be responsible for missions that would typically be expected of individuals several ranks above, or 10-15 years their senior (ibid).

2. US military forces in Europe would need to rely heavily on reserve and guard forces, especially those who are able to perform support to combat functions, to augment active duty elements already assigned to Europe. Specifically, intelligence, signal/communications, military police, and logistics units would need to help augment US European Brigade Combat Team forces. ERI and EDI funding would help pay for these reserve and guard elements (ibid).

3. A Mission Command Element, or Division Headquarters element from the continental US would need to be effectively integrated to help command and control additional “augmentee” elements and help train and integrate NATO partner military elements (ibid).

4. US elements would need to incorporate NATO allies every step of the way, to include sister services, partner nation militaries, as well as US State Department/Embassy elements. Going forward, this step would/will be key in order to bolster NATO and enable strategic defense of Eastern and Central Europe against an increasingly aggressive Russia (ibid).

5. Finally, US and NATO defense forces would need to maintain a dynamic presence—meaning a moving, visible, capable, and professional force in order to deter Russian adventurism in the Baltics and potentially elsewhere (ibid). This, according to LTG(R) Hodges, also included the necessity of employing PAO-type forces in abundance (at also at the lowest levels) in order to broadcast NATO activities to foreign and domestic audiences alike (ibid). All of the above elements proved to be influential in the success of Dragoon Ride. However, the importance of the media messaging played an extremely critical role in ODR ’15 and went on

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10 European Reassurance Initiative. A program that was initiated in June 2014, about three months after the annexation of Crimea by the Russian Federation, by the White House to increase the US presence in Europe for security purposes.

11 European Defense Initiative- successor program of the European Reassurance Initiative.
to influence the conduct of future Atlantic Resolve missions.

Once again, because ODR ’15 was a NATO response to Crimea, the mission-intent behind the operation necessitated that the convoy be a very public, limelight event, which is why LTG Hodges decided to apply the above described five pillars. General Hodges was also quite public affairs-oriented and wanted to make good use of this capability to project ODR ’15 as a response to the Crimean annexation. Accordingly, ODR ’15 incorporated focused, preemptive PAO messaging to include press-releases before mission commencement and after mission completion to discuss the US military objective in the convoy. ODR ’15 also placed a very high emphasis on conducting numerous static displays, command meet-and-greets, public commemorations, and even a concert (in Prague), as well as other high-profile events that were covered by the press. ODR II largely utilized some of these same strategies.

Principally because of the high-profile public messaging from the US/NATO side, large scale pro-Russian disinformation operations were lodged against these convoy operations to minimize, detract from, and muddy the true mission objectives of the operation. Though US/NATO elements tracked and tried to counter disinformation attempts, using some of the tactics described in subsequent sections, they were not always successful in “setting the record straight” after disinformation agents had spread falsehoods about ODR ’15 mission objectives or execution. In large part because of the arguable success of disinformation operations (which is admittedly very difficult to counter at the tactical level), several countries, including the Czech Republic lost some willingness to host large scale US convoy events. Disinformation surrounding ODR ’15 caused both public protest as well as positive responses to opposition protests. Public agitation, positive or negative, can be troublesome for the political environment. Furthermore, no matter how carefully-planned a convoy operation is, some inconvenience is inevitable to the host nation (be it as small as traffic delays or as significant as property damage). As such host nation appetite in CEE for large, public NATO convoys has dwindled since ODR ’15.

Thus, as annual Atlantic Resolve convoys became common, the propensity for these missions to be high-profile, attention-grabbers seemed to become less-common. As previously discussed, this was a result of a mixture of new mission-intent, changes/understanding of disinformation tactics, host-nation desire, and leadership personalities. Once ODR ’15 achieved General Hodges’ stated goals, predominately the strategic international political symbolism for Russian and NATO states, it was perceived that there was a reduced need for (re)-sending the same message using the same means as ODR ’15. The mission-intent of these annual (or more frequent) Atlantic Resolve tactical convoys moved from holding a symbolic meaning (i.e. representation of NATO solidarity, response to the annexation of Crimea), to focusing on small-unit tactics and mission-readiness (thus no need to hold a massive public display like what was necessary to complete the mission of ODR ’15).

The reaction to disinformation is also a clear factor in limiting the publicity of Atlantic Resolve tactical convoys. Interviewees admitted that the higher-profile a convoy was, the more disinformation attempts occurred, and as a direct result, the more stimulated the general public became about said operation. At this point, without a 100% solution to reducing disinformation and its effects, contemporary tactical leaders must take into account second and third order effects of convoy operations in conjunction with desired end state when deciding how an operation will be conducted (i.e., high versus low profile). In other words, based on the statements of some current 2CR leaders, sometimes the best way to combat disinformation surrounding an operation is to reduce the attention on it, thus negating the likelihood or even the ability of the disinformation agent to spread his or her ill-intended message (X., X. 2019 a, b, and c).

As discussed above, willingness of partner countries to host high-profile convoy events have also factored heavily in the decision to take a “smaller footprint” approach to contemporary Atlantic Resolve convoys. For example, during 2CR’s 2018 iteration of Saber Strike, at the suggestion of the Czech government, the convoy maneuvered through the Czech Republic overnight. According to several interviewees, this recommendation was made as a result of reaction of Czech society to previous convoys, which were largely influenced by pro-Russian disinformation.
Detailed Suggestions for a Counter-Disinformation Strategy

In addition to the discussion of the two general strategic approaches to dealing with disinformation in Atlantic Resolve convoy operations (one high-profile and the other espousing a more discreet approach), interviewees also discussed detailed potential US and NATO TTPs that have been and/or could be leveraged in the future under any type of strategic anti-disinformation approach. These detailed techniques might be employed, for example, in order to better combat disinformation attempts and other active measures (such as bot and troll activity). Among interviewees, the common theme to neutralizing disinformation centered around being transparent, honest, and open (H., B. 2018; P., R. 2018; M., J. 2018; W., J. 2018; and others).

A former 2CR Commander offered, “let Soldiers use their phones to post on social media and tell the story in their own way” (M., J. 2018). Just a few years ago, posting anything to social media about a military mission would likely be frowned upon. Now that the use of disinformation is a political tactic, militaries must change the way they operate. In this example, a Brigade Combat Team (BCT)-sized element like 2CR can contain thousands of Soldiers. If Russian or pro-Russian entities are utilizing bots and trolls to manipulate the sociopolitical environment, then endorsing Soldiers to tell their version of a story like ODR ’15 on their personal social media accounts (within an approved framework that seeks to reinforce the truth while safeguarding sensitive information), might serve to significantly curtail bot and troll activity.

EUCOM’s former Digital Media Chief noted that an effective strategy for successful contemporary public affairs campaigns is aligning on a tagline. She endorsed this method during ODR ’15, and it helped to change the social media narrative about the operation. In ODR 15’s case, it needed to be a hashtag. She recommended spray-painting #Dragoonride on Strykers and other logistics trucks (W., J. 2018). This type of ornamentation is most certainly not a norm for military vehicles, and it was indeed a controversial suggestion that took a few days and some discussion/reasoning to be authorized. However, a tagline was one unifying factor that everyone participating, observing, supporting, and even protesting could attest to. By labeling the trucks with #Dragoonride, anyone with a smartphone taking photos, videos, making comments, etc. could tie their experience with the convoy in real time. In the Digital Media Chief’s words “everyone would know what to do with it” (ibid). In fact, according to a 2015 Atlantic Resolve report on social media, using hashtags such as #DragoonRide in conjunction with taglines of the general mission, such as #AtlanticResolve, or #StrongEurope, both increases visibility by up to 10% or more (Takacs 2015:10), and helps nest the Dragoon Ride mission within the overarching framework (ibid). This inevitably increases public knowledge of the factual concept of the operation and helps combat disinformation. Further, with posts originating from so many different locations a bot/troll network would have a much more difficult time inserting control over the tagline.

One final resounding theme from the EUCOM Digital Media Chief also has to do with US/NATO PAO policy going forward and is linked to core values and national narratives. She said, “the Russian government is OK with lying. The US and most countries that belong to NATO have national narratives based in truth, honesty, and transparency. US culture is rooted in the belief of honesty and fact. And that is the only way to combat Russian dis/mis-information...through spreading the truth” (W., J. 2018). Another interviewee who served in a PAO capacity during ODR ’15 and is now a USAREUR disinformation expert echoed the Digital Media Chief’s assertion. He said “combating disinformation is all about a cultural battle of values. US and NATO entities must continue to display truth, humanity, and a fairness in how we treat people. We have to continue to provide evidence that the disinformation reports that suggest that we are willing to lie, run over people, kill people, etc. are just false. If the US loses credibility, it is a slippery slope” (P., R. 2018).

The USAREUR disinformation expert mentioned another relatively simple strategy to combat disinformation. He said “we publish fact sheets for Atlantic Resolve missions which contain the ground truth facts. Then we share them around social and mainstream media as much as possible. That way we control the narrative by publishing what is really happening before any disinformation agents can put a spin on anything. When RT says something like ‘the US is deploying 400 tanks in Europe,’ and the previously
published Fact Sheet says something completely different, it is pretty easy to see the RT is spreading a falsehood. In fact, through this strategy, we have even seen Sputnik change a headline" (ibid). He continued, "the Russians paid attention to and exploited what we did when we kept things a secret, now we have precluded them from that ability to exploit our secrecy because we don’t keep anything a secret anymore. They cannot take advantage of that any longer” (ibid).

Another changing trend that had been endorsed by the journalism community in recent years is simply conducting fact-checking. According USAREUR disinformation expert, “Since the Crimean crisis in 2014 and the increasing influence of disinformation in the media since then, professional media outlets like AP, Reuters, and other Western media, have changed how they report things. In fact, outlets are going back to so-called ‘old-school’ journalism and have started cracking down on fact-checking things. Now we don’t see nearly as many examples of disinformation ending up in Western mainstream media” (ibid). He added that there has been an array of policy changes across Europe that have advocated tightening good journalism rules within many countries (ibid).

Current 2CR Public and Civil Affairs leaders shared a few contemporary techniques at countering disinformation, or perhaps preventing the opportunity for disinformation agents to manipulate a story from the beginning. They mentioned a “no maps rule” for 2CR social media, which was adopted after pro-Russian disinformation agent Pravda.ru created a false story around Saber Strike 2018. According to the team, 2CR posted a picture with various Regimental leaders huddled around a map of CEE, planning transportation routes for the exercise. The photo was intended to reflect effective communication and team camaraderie. Kaliningrad, a relatively small Russian territory in the Baltics, was colored in red on the map to ensure no convoy movements traversed through the territory (X., X. 2019 a, b, and c). However, Pravda.ru used the map to spread disinformation claiming, “Saber Strike 2018 is a provocation against the Russian Federation and NATO/USA will train how to isolate and occupy Kaliningrad” (LAF 2018). The 2CR leaders also indicated that they collaborate with host nation military and disinformation teams as much as possible, offering that CEE citizens have had more experience with pro-Russian disinformation than their US counterparts, especially in the last couple of decades. Thus, host nations usually know best how to counter disinformation attempts in their own territories (X., X. 2019 a, b, and c).

In response to other changes in US/NATO TTPs for heightened success in subsequent Atlantic Resolve operations, the USAREUR disinformation expert discussed another piece to combat disinformation: education, sharing, coordination, and de-confliction (P., R. 2018). He said, “leaders must understand the impact— the so-what factor of our actions. The less opportunities we give platforms like RT to find their ‘kernel of truth,’ the better we are at neutralizing disinformation before it even begins. After ODR ‘15 we started anticipating more in our (USAREUR) planning. We made deliberate attempts to build relationships, and publish pre-coordinated, well-laid out, information out front with ample lead-time before the operations were to take place. We didn’t want local communities to get overrun by a US/NATO convoy unexpectedly. That would make us look like the bad guys by blocking towns and upsetting people, which is opposite of our goal and opposite of what we want to convey” (ibid). In this sense, the USAREUR disinformation expert said his “biggest takeaway (to success in Atlantic Resolve missions) was coined by a German Chief of Staff who said, ‘Freedom of movement does not mean you don’t have freedom from coordination”’ (ibid).
CONCLUSION

As a response to Russia’s annexation of Crimea, Operation Dragoon Ride 2015 was a high-profile and controversial USAREUR tactical convoy. A squadron of Strykers with additional logistical and support elements traveled in a convoy almost 2000 km from Estonia back to their home base in Vilseck, Germany through the Baltics, Poland, and the Czech Republic. Largely because of the convoy’s representation as a symbol against Russian adventurism, ODR ’15 received a significant amount of pro-Russian disinformation. This disinformation contributed to the convoy’s controversy, especially in the Czech Republic where the disinformation was predominately focused. In fact, disinformation attempts, comprising of a mix of false reporting in mainstream media, sharing of said disinformation, and bot and troll activity on social media, caused many (Czechs and non-Czechs alike) to believe that most of the Czech Republic did not support the convoy’s passage through the country. Ultimately, this notion turned out to be false as tens of thousands of Czech citizens showed up along Czech roads in support of the US convoy, which was far more significant than any opposition elements present. Nevertheless, disinformation surrounding the event had a significant impact on society. As a result of ODR ’15 and subsequent Atlantic Resolve convoys, as well as the changing landscape of disinformation (primarily pro-Russian, or Russian state-backed), tactics and techniques used to combat said disinformation have ebbed and flowed over the past four years. Two primary public relations models have been used to conduct the NATO convoys, one advocating high-profile press, and the other espousing a quieter public approach. Both strategies have proven effective at handling various levels of disinformation attempts, but neither model is perfect.
RESOURCES


**Interviews:**


S., M. (2018c): Interview on 10.11.2018 via messenger conversation and email with former Masaryk University Student who was a participant at arrival of ODR15 convoy in Vyškov. Record and transcription in author’s archive.

Š., O. (2018): Interview on 01.11.2018 via messenger conversation and email with Masaryk University Student who was a participant at arrival of ODR15 convoy in Vyškov. Record and transcription in author’s archive.

T., M. Interview on 27.10.2018 via messenger conversation and email with Masaryk University Student who was a participant at arrival of ODR15 convoy in Vyškov. Record and transcription in author’s archive.


X., X. (2019 a, b, and c): Interview on 13.02.2019 in Vilseck, Rose Barracks Germany with various members of 2CR. Record and transcription in author’s archive.