Small Grants from Great Powers: Academic Integrity vs. Information Warfare

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In an atmosphere defined by war, crisis, and democratic backsliding, disinformation is spreading rapidly. Far from being encountered only in the most obscure corners of the Internet, it has been disseminated even by highly respected organizations. Russia's war of aggression in Ukraine is a frequent topic of disinformation. In 2015, for instance, the *New York Times* (*NYT*) published an op-ed stating that Ukraine should become "a neutral buffer-state between Russia and NATO" to restore peaceful relations—something which it essentially was by law when Russia invaded in 2014, making the author's demand highly misleading. More recently, an independent panel of legal experts found that a press release by human rights NGO Amnesty International had, without trying to obtain reliable information, drastically misrepresented the plausibility of allegations regarding international humanitarian law violations by the Ukrainian Armed Forces.

In some cases, the spread of disinformation is directly and actively driven by the information warfare of authoritarian countries—with Russia being clearly the most skilled and engaged actor. One of Germany's award-winning and most visible journalists received 600,000€ for authoring two books extolling the *realpolitik* virtues of Vladimir Putin, as well as privileged and frequent access to the Russian dictator, without informing his publisher or the public about the transaction. The disinformation debate may also have reached the IR discipline: The recent book *How States Think* by John Mearsheimer—who also happened to be the author of the aforementioned misleading *NYT* article—and Sebastian Rosato has caused discussions in the scholarly community: Mearsheimer had acknowledged in the foreword that his "research was facilitated by a small grant from the Valdai Discussion Club", the latter being a think tank and conference series which has mostly—though, at least before the current war, not exclusively—assembled scholars and public intellectuals with viewpoints sympathetic to those of the Russian government.

Had his opinion been bought? Is IR scholarship at risk of being affected, appropriated, or otherwise misused by the information warfare efforts of authoritarian countries? Or, in the words of Sławomir Dębski, can "great powers promote their interests through small grants"? Are they actually doing so, and if this is the case, how should scholars react to this? Obviously, issues of academic integrity, academic freedom, and national security all come into play when responding to these questions. Is there, for example, actual published academic work containing obvious disinformation beneficial to Russia's position? The short answer is that yes, there is. The controversial book by Mearsheimer and Rosato is full of rather far-fetched rationalizations of the full-scale invasion of 2022, declaring it a rational response to fears about NATO enlargement, something that has been found implausible in most IR research on the topic. Another book, tellingly titled *Russophobia*, was published by Glenn Diesen shortly in 2022 in a well-known academic book series. It laments that "Russia was accused of preparing for an invasion of Ukraine" (pg. 5), and interprets this as unfounded propaganda and as evidence of Western, well, "Russophobia". Embarrassingly, the full-scale invasion of Ukraine started before the book was even published.

In another case, in which an essentially conspiratorial tract on the Maidan shootings was published in a peer-reviewed academic journal, it seems obvious that a journal in a field actually associated with the topic—such as criminology or Ukrainian politics—would have rejected the paper. A journal on labor movements and class relations then published it for some unknown reason. Here, it should be noted that articles published in topically implausible journals are often found to be fake scholarship in other disciplines as well. That such blatant examples are rare in IR

might indicate some resilience of the peer-review process against disinformation, or, for the case of the war, a relative rarity of Putin sympathizers among academics—which seems to be the case at least in comparison to the electoral success of some political parties sympathetic to Russia. In general, dubious IR scholarship on the war tends to appear at the margins of the discipline, Mearsheimer being an exception. It seems that academic impact is not its main purpose. It might, of course, also be motivated by other factors than money or extortion, for example by contrarianism.

But with regards to strategically disseminated disinformation, IR as a field faces a very different situation than, for example, climate science or research on the effects of tobacco consumption, both of which have long suffered from efforts to suppress or falsify actual research results. The latter two fields are different from IR mainly in the sense that their research results can directly influence government policy or public opinion, often mediated through science journalism, whereas IR, like the social sciences in general, mostly relies on policy think tanks or the media presence of individual scholars to generate such impact. And it seems that Russian information warfare, as far as academic publications are concerned, is mainly interested in their function as a plausible backdrop for disinformation spread in the media.

This follows the pattern of a well-known case from the 1980s, in which an East German intelligence service asked a Berlin-based biophysicist to produce a research report that accused U.S. military laboratories of having artificially produced the AIDS virus. The resulting narrative was disseminated through media in the Warsaw Pact and in non-aligned countries, and eventually picked up by Western publications. It is still believed by some today and, several years ago, was recycled by contemporary Russian disinformation campaigns. The fake scholarship being used as a backdrop was, however, not of high quality. It was easily refuted by scholars working on the origins of AIDS, just as disinformation contained in scholarly work in IR today is, in most cases, convincing only to non-experts. Its main purpose lies in forming a plausible context for disinformation directed at the general public.

In this sense, it is unlikely that the academic debate of IR, conducted mostly in journals technically and linguistically not easily accessible to non-scholars, will be flooded by disinformation. However, the fact that purveyors of academic disinformation are disproportionately invited by media outlets is a result of the latter's tendency to form a "false balance" between academics with opposing opinions on an issue, even when there is an overwhelming consensus among experts. This is a matter which scholars will be powerless to address by themselves, however, it could be taken up by the ethics committees of professional organizations. After all, it is in our interest as a scholarly community that our research is not misrepresented in the media. It should also be our aim as citizens.

Yet, criminal convictions of individuals in several countries illustrate that the intelligence services of authoritarian countries may have other, more clandestine uses for IR scholars. Here, some of the basic parameters of our work makes us interesting for recruitment: We often have access to state officials working in our field of expertise and can contact them without arousing suspicion. We also frequently train the next generations of diplomats, military officers, and security experts, and therefore often have wide networks among them. This access is a valuable resource for any hostile intelligence agency, and the classical case of the Cambridge Five, who were recruited while studying at university, shows that its exploitation has a certain tradition. The 2012 conviction of an IR scholar in Denmark, who was paid by the Russian embassy for information about colleagues and students, demonstrates it is still in use. In 2022, the arrest of a Brazilian security studies scholar in Norway, whose academic work was not sympathetic towards Russia in any way, might have been a similar case. The suspect confessed to being an officer in Russia's military intelligence agency GRU, having worked undercover in Canada and Norway.

In another more recent case, an IR theorist at an Estonian university was arrested for espionage charges. Reactions in the academic community were incredulous at first, as many could not believe that a scholar might present an attractive target for intelligence recruitment, and pointed towards the colleague's earlier public criticism of the Putin regime. A Russian academic publicly accused Estonia of an anti-Russian bias in the prosecution—an accusation that is very likely unfounded given the history of impartiality and professionalism of the country's security services. It should be noted that this case has not yet gone to trial, and the presumption of innocence applies fully. However, some of the reactions have demonstrated a certain unfamiliarity with the methods and aims of intelligence recruitment among academics. And the same unfamiliarity in the wider public has already been exploited by Russian

information warfare.

What conclusions should we as IR scholars draw from these and other recent events? In my view, we should at least develop a consciousness that as a scholarly community, we might plausibly be targeted by the intelligence services of hostile countries. We should be aware that cooperation with those services does not always occur because of ideological sympathies, and does not necessarily aim at our academic research. We should inform ourselves about the methods that intelligence services use to exploit individual vulnerabilities. We should, of course, refrain from working with them if approached, and report any hostile intelligence activities to the competent authorities—this is something that should not have to be mentioned, considering the sinister goals and methods of Russia and other authoritarian states. However, the potential damage to the trust our expertise enjoys in public life, as well as to the confidence in the sincerity of each other's intentions which we as scholars should be able to have, is also worth considering.

On the other hand, we should not become distrustful of each other due to the risk of intelligence activities against the academic community. No serious scholar should want to go back to the days of McCarthyism. Considering the rising tensions in global politics, and the possible resulting increase in intelligence activity, such infiltration anxiety may be another real risk in the near future. It might itself become a moral panic that could in turn be exploited by the information warfare of authoritarian states. A sober, reasoned debate on information warfare and intelligence risks in academia should be a good antidote, as well as a service that IR as a discipline must be capable of providing.

About the author:

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