

Discussion Article

Russian information campaigns and NATO in the Arctic

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Abstract

This discussion article presents evidence of how Russia mounts information campaigns through its press agencies to discredit NATO's presence in the Arctic region. The analysis highlights how and when different framings of NATO's actions in the Arctic region are disseminated by Russian press agencies. The discussion article suggests strategies to counter these campaigns as well as recommendations for policy-makers and researchers to better monitor Russian disinformation on the Arctic region.

Keywords

disinformation, NATO, information campaigns, Russia

Introduction

The unprecedented rate at which global warming unfolds has increased access to the Arctic region. Global warming has caused Arctic waterways to be ice-free for a longer period, especially in the Russian Arctic. The pace at which this dynamic will continue to develop, as well as the exact nature of its impact on different parts of the Arctic is difficult to properly evaluate. Such uncertainty is fertile ground for online disinformation. Disinformation is about deliberately and willingly spreading false information. Sovereign states (and many other non-state actors) are partaking in disinformation, integrating this type of information in informational campaigns. These informational campaigns are concerted and coherent efforts by a political actor to frame issues and influence others to shape their perceptions of current events and developments. For example, wild predictions, fabricated information and conspiracy theories are promoted and disseminated by rivals who wish to shape the informational environment to their advantage.

These efforts create informational competition, where narratives of different actors, including states, are promoted and spread out to impose their preferred perception of reality. Such informational campaigns and competition are deployed to describe the Arctic geopolitical landscape. This is not surprising considering that Arctic states are attempting to ensure that they retain a predominant status in their region. Control over shipping lanes (especially the Northern Sea Route in Northern Russia) and extraction of renewable and non-renewable resources are strategic objectives for the Arctic states.

In this context, studying Russian disinformation is pivotal as the Russian state has led several coordinated disinformation campaigns to undermine the legitimacy of democratic elections and credibility of authority figures in the West (Fallis, 2015; Lemke and Habegger, 2022). Of course, Russian disinformation is not at play on every single topic. Some Arctic issues, for example, were not subjected to disinformation campaigns (LaFortune and Landriault, 2024; Nae, 2022). It is then imperative to empirically analyse which Arctic issues are more subject to fall victim to Russian disinformation campaigns. Among these, the presence of NATO in the Arctic region is certainly one of these probable issues.

Because there is a high degree of uncertainty about the future of the region, strategic interests are at play for Arctic and non-Arctic states alike. For Arctic states, the main objective is to retain their dominance in a region where they have territory. For non-Arctic states, they want to have a role to play in a region opening up more and more to human activities, including resource extraction and possible shipping lanes. In this sense, framing the Arctic as an area of cooperation or competition will be part of this informational competition and could be used to justify the future governance institutions of the region. The same can be said about defining which threats are looming over the region. There was a consensus a few years ago that the Arctic region was characterised by cooperation and represented a zone of peace (Young, 2011, p. 180). Recent developments are casting doubts over this assessment.

The Russian invasion of Ukraine brought forth a more confrontational approach from Russia to exploit weaknesses or soft spots of Western countries. This can be observed in relation to Norway and especially Svalbard after 2022. Even though Norway has sovereignty over Svalbard, the archipelago is governed by a treaty which allows foreign nationals to live, trade and exploit resources in Svalbard. Already, Russian symbolic displays in Svalbard have multiplied to the point where Russian nationalism is visible: from displaying the flag to public rallies. These actions occurred against the backdrop of Russian press agencies relaying the Kremlin's accusations that Norway violated the 1920

Svalbard treaty, partook in a military build-up on the archipelago and denied Russia's access to the territory.

Finland's and Sweden's accessions to NATO will change Arctic relations, with seven of eight members of the Arctic Council being NATO allies. Finland and Sweden have already been the target of Russian disinformation campaigns in the lead up and after their respective NATO accessions. The objective is clear: to sow social dissent and to fracture NATO's solidarity. In this case, Russian informational campaigns are also combined with other actions launching hybrid threats at Western countries. The recent Russian initiative to send illegal migrants to the Finnish-Russian border was a recent example of this dynamic: the initiative was accompanied by important Russian media coverage to frame the crisis and provide shocking images.

More broadly speaking, the increased number of military exercises conducted by both Russia and Western allies in (or near) the Arctic region will exacerbate this informational competition. These drills typically represent flashpoints where the protagonist conducting the exercise will frame it as benign and defensive while the rival actor will cast it as offensive, disruptive and threatening, as documented through media coverage of the 2018 NATO exercise Trident Juncture, which was conducted in Norway (Landriault and MacDonald, 2019). With Russia attempting to reach out to non-Arctic states (BRICS countries, for example) to counterbalance Arctic Western states' cooperation, disinformation campaigns on Arctic issues and about the role of NATO in the Arctic are likely to multiply and intensify. Hence, it is pivotal to analyse Russian disinformation strategies to be able to respond in kind, providing counter-narratives and debunking Russian disinformation in real time.

Six themes of Russian Arctic communications

Russian information campaigns to discredit NATO's presence in the Arctic started well before Finland and Sweden submitted applications to join NATO. NATO Allies' cooperation with Norway and stops at Northern Norwegian ports (especially Tromsø) unleashed Russian disinformation prior to 2022. The goal was to highlight dissent in Allied countries and amplify discontent due to US presence in Norway. American and British military ships sailing close to the Russian Arctic in 2020 started a similar fury in Russian media coverage: the objective of Russian press agencies was to frame NATO countries as belligerent and solely responsible for heightened tension. The desire by both Russia and NATO members to deploy military exercises in the region to test operational capabilities and train soldiers in a cold climate provoked adversarial reactions from the opposite parties. These recent examples are all evidence of Russian disinformation increasing on Arctic issues and attracted the interest of academics. Researchers Lackenbauer, Bouffard and Lajeunesse (2022) have identified six themes in Russian communication tactics that are connected to NATO or NATO Allies in the Arctic:

Theme 1: The US and NATO are a destabilising force in the Arctic; the growing presence of NATO in the Arctic is presented as changing the fragile, peaceful equilibrium that prevailed prior.

Theme 2: Arctic states are pawns of the US; a hierarchical and simplistic vision of the Alliance is presented, with the US fully dictating orders to Allies and imposing their will to subordinate their interests to American interests.

Theme 3: The idea of a Russian threat is ridiculous; this theme is the flip side of Theme 1. While American and NATO presence is cast as threatening, Russian military exercises are presented as routine and banal.

Theme 4: NATO and the US are poor houseguests; Russia's disinformation will focus and highlight negative consequences or protest spurred by local communities when NATO or US forces disembark

at a Northern port or facility.

Theme 5: US colonialism and interference in internal Arctic states' affairs; the US is framed as meddling in the internal affairs of Arctic states by playing favourites or worsening internal tension. An example is the media coverage of Trump's idea to purchase Greenland.

Theme 6: Participation of Arctic states in US/EU sanctions damages their own Arctic economic interests; an extension of Theme 2, Arctic states should focus on their own interests, while pursuing economic cooperation with Russia that is presented as beneficial.

The presence of the US in most of these narratives is anything but surprising: the country is the most frequently mentioned nation in articles referring to the Arctic by Russian press agencies. There is a tendency in these agencies to allocate a disproportionate amount of attention to the US as great power competition accelerated in the past five years, with great power interests diverging in several key areas. Along with this array of themes comes the importance of properly distinguishing between those that are central and repeated at will, and those that have more of a dormant or punctual nature, ready to be reactivated on an *ad hoc* basis. The former requires a counter-narrative that is deployed on a long-term horizon while the latter calls for a quick response team to counter disinformation. For example, Theme 1 is most likely to require a permanent and long-term communication strategy while Theme 4, NATO/US as poor houseguests, deserves quick responses to redress Russian disinformation on the spot. The latter point will often be raised when US vessels, aircrafts or soldiers are transiting or exercising on the territory of a fellow ally: public outreach campaigns and transparency will dissipate most doubts about the intentions behind this presence.

Despite the publication of articles almost every month from 2020 to 2023 (the only exceptions were January and March 2022), certain events have caused a surge in Russian media coverage on the subject. We analysed articles published in TASS and Sputnik from January 2020 to February 2023 to assess the popularity of the six Arctic core themes. In order to gather these articles, we looked for articles in the two outlets that used the keywords "NATO" and "Arctic". Then, we manually coded the occurrences of these 6 themes in these articles, counting in how many articles a theme was articulated. In total, 224 articles were published with these keywords and close to 80% of articles had one of the six themes listed by Lackenbauer, Bouffard and Lajeunesse, with a majority of these articles containing more than one theme.

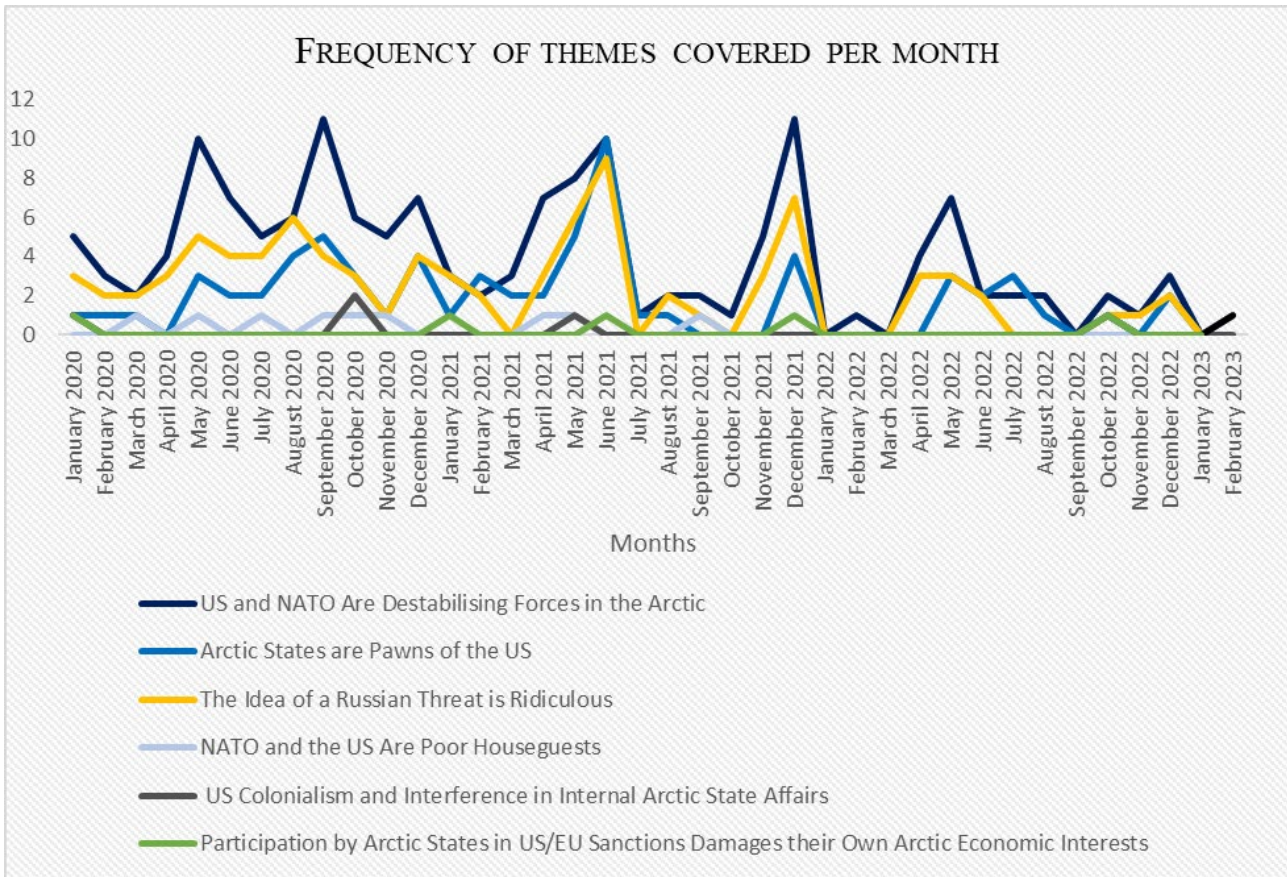


Figure 1. Frequency of themes covered per month.

Four peaks or periods of intense coverage appear on this timeline: May 2020, September 2020, June 2021 and December 2021.

The first rise in the number of articles in May 2020 can be attributed to media coverage by Russian press agencies of a military exercise by the US and UK in the Barents Sea. This time period is dominated by the themes *Destabilising forces in the Arctic* and *Idea of a Russian Threat is Ridiculous*. According to Russian media, NATO was expanding into the Arctic, and the Alliance’s increased activities in the region were undermining the regional cooperation to which Russia subscribed. In a similar vein, the same themes prevailed in September 2020, when military exercises were conducted near the Russian Arctic, when a NATO group was led by the destroyer USS Ross. A similar pattern emerged in December 2021, when Russian press agencies came back several times on a joint air patrol conducted by the US and Norway in Northern Norway. In all three cases, Russian disinformation was in direct relation to a US or NATO military exercise or patrol in the Arctic. In June 2021, media attention was propelled by the Biden-Putin Summit in Geneva. All these events were dominated by the mobilisation of the themes *Destabilising forces in the Arctic* and *Idea of a Russian Threat is Ridiculous* in the Russian communications strategy. In these instances, we observed that Russia is quick and active at framing NATO initiatives to fit their strategic interests: undermining the legitimacy of the Alliance by representing the actions of NATO members as nefarious and destructive.

From January 2020 to February 2023, the theme *Destabilising forces in the Arctic* was found in 205 articles, making it the most discussed theme, followed by the *Idea of a Russian Threat is Ridiculous* (91) and *Arctic States are Pawns of the US* (72) (Figure 2). These three narratives represent the core of Russian disinformation towards NATO, while the other three themes are secondary or offshoots of

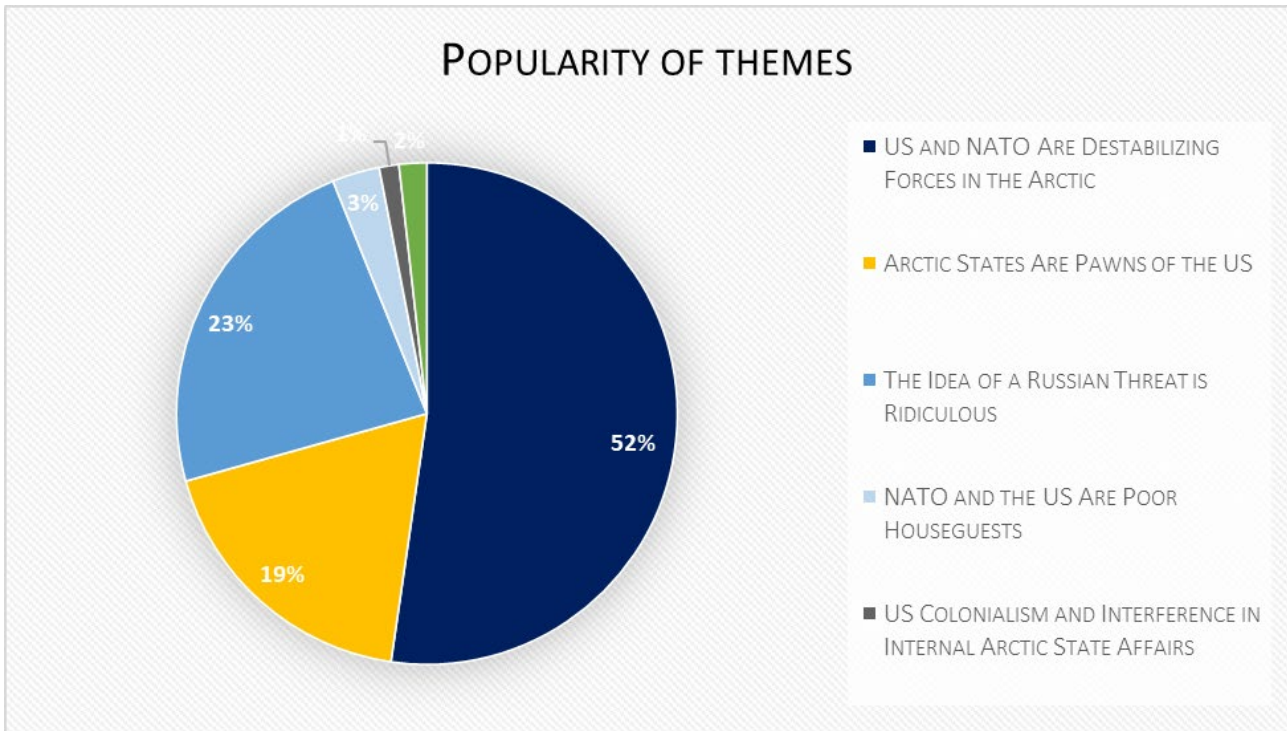


Figure 2. Popularity of themes from January 2020 to February 2023.

the three core narratives. All these narratives are typically woven together in Russian press agencies, one theme co-occurring often with the other: some themes are assembled to emphasise malicious US or NATO interests and downplay Russian intent. As can be seen in Table 1 (below), downplaying the Russian threat in the Arctic means almost systematically fear mongering about NATO or the US. The posited dependency of Arctic states on the US is also framed as contributing to destabilise the region, suggesting in Russian informational tactics an overblown assessment of the Russian threat. Arctic states are presented as US puppets, unable of agency and led to initiate to purely suit US interests rather than their own.

Table 1. Occurrences of different frames in Russian press agencies.

Themes appearing together in an article	Number of articles
US and NATO are destabilising forces and the idea of a Russian threat is ridiculous	79
US and NATO are destabilising forces and Arctic states are pawns of the US	56
Arctic states are pawns of the US and the idea of a Russian threat is ridiculous	38
US and NATO are destabilising forces and NATO/US are poor houseguests	7
Arctic states are pawns of the US and NATO/US are poor houseguests	7

The themes *Arctic states’ sanctions damage their own interests*, *US and NATO are poor houseguests* and *US colonialism* are present in less than 15 press articles over this time period. However, it is interesting to note that whenever economic sanctions are mentioned in an article, they are accompanied by the themes *Arctic States are pawns of the US* and/or *the idea of a Russian threat is ridiculous*. The theme *pawns of the US* is also treated alongside the theme of *US and NATO as poor houseguests*. In these associations, Russian press agencies accuse the US and NATO of forcing new military installations onto the territory of their Allies and degrading the environment.

Messaging about the Arctic after 24 February 2022

The Russian invasion of Ukraine created consequences for Arctic governance, with Western states suspending cooperation with Russia in different forums, including the Arctic Council and the Barents Euro-Arctic Council. Around the beginning of the war, there was a slight drop in Russian media coverage of the Arctic in relation to NATO. However, there was an increase in May 2022, attributable to the announcement by Sweden and Finland of their decision to join NATO. Russian intention here was clear: portray NATO enlargement as jeopardising Arctic stability and creating a source of tension for the Arctic region.

The accessions of these two countries ran counter to Russian Arctic interests by isolating Russia on the circumpolar scene. This increase was thus particularly linked to the theme *Destabilizing force in the Arctic*. During this period, the theme was frequently treated in conjunction with *The idea of a Russian threat is ridiculous* and *Arctic States are pawns of the US*. Moreover, these articles tended to frame the Arctic as the scene of a new Cold War, pitting the US and its Western allies against Russia and China. This was accomplished by presenting Russia and China as respecting international law and treaties (in a very selective way) while the US was not: ratification of the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea by China and Russia (but not the US) was, for example, presented as evidence. Russian media outlets also presented Russia-China Arctic cooperation as running counter to US intentions in the region: China and Russia were described as possessing shared interests and representing a unified front against US Arctic interests.

The narrative of NATO's Arctic expansion and discussions surrounding Ukrainian membership in the Alliance also began to be linked together in Russian press agencies. This tendency can also be seen in the association of *Destabilising forces* with the theme of *Economic sanctions*, as articles accused NATO of undermining regional economic cooperation. The Russian press spoke of destabilisation brought on by NATO and its Allies in the Arctic, similar to that caused by Washington's "provocative measures against China" in the Indo-Pacific region. Again, Russia and China were presented as being on the side of history, as mere victims of the detrimental and aggressive actions of the US. This narrative must of course not address evidence that goes against this construction. For example, the extension of Russian prerogatives over the Northern Sea Route or illegal Chinese actions in the South China Sea are not covered as these actions run counter to the narrative of Russia and China as model students of international law.

Takeaways, communication strategies and research priorities

Specific Russian narratives are punctual and require heightened vigilance during certain times. For instance, the accusation that the US and NATO are poor houseguests routinely emerges whenever NATO newly deploys to the Arctic region or makes a port visit – in northern Norway, for example. Transparency is key to limit rumours or the spread of conspiracy theories of US troops misbehaving or trashing the environment that are then amplified by the Russian media. In order to efficiently counter Russian disinformation online, a rapid response team, put in place by individual NATO members, must be able to quickly detect messages during these salient moments. Promptly providing clear information about specific developments will also reduce the impact of Russian disinformation.

Core narratives have to be addressed together and this requires sustained attention. More precisely, explaining how the US and NATO are not destabilising forces in the Arctic must go in tandem with describing how Russian Arctic military developments could represent a threat in the Arctic region. This last frame in particular will require a more agile and dynamic strategy, one that highlights and

focuses on social media and on Russian acts of hostility. For example, dangerous and disruptive Russian manoeuvres in the exclusive economic zones of Arctic states must be denounced more forcefully in NATO and Allies' communication practices. The social and economic impacts of these disruptive initiatives on NATO countries must be highlighted more clearly and efficiently. In the case of these core narratives, addressing only one narrative will mean only partially debunking the Russian informational competition approach. Western Arctic states need to be on the offensive rather than being satisfied with a defensive approach.

Disinformation in general erodes trust, destabilises societies and sows confusion. The Arctic region will evolve substantially in the next few decades: rival interests are bound to arise as the region opens up to new human activities. At the same time, the region is still remote and difficult to access for the majority of Arctic and non-Arctic societies. The quality of information we receive will be pivotal to coherent and rational decision-making in relation to this region. This challenge requires researchers to work together as only true multi-national, multilingual research initiatives can effectively measure the scope and extent of Russian disinformation about the Arctic region. This type of research consortium, pooling expertise from Finland, Canada, the United States, Norway, Sweden, Iceland and Denmark, does not exist as it stands.

The evidence provided in this discussion article is the tip of the proverbial iceberg, focusing on one topic and from rather traditional sources (Russian press agencies). Russian disinformation on social media presents us with a much more daunting challenge, constantly shifting and using anonymous accounts as well as bot farms. Although Russian disinformation on social media has been limited on Arctic issues, it is imperative to start focusing on it now, in order to establish baseline social media attention on certain Arctic issues and develop appropriate tools to monitor in almost real-time how the Arctic region is portrayed on social media. Such an approach would again allow researchers to be ahead of disinformation activities and be able to report faster when anomalies or certain narratives emerge. This objective is both feasible and desirable, proving once more that the Arctic research community can generate knowledge that is relevant and contributes to communities' wellbeing.

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