‘Experts’, forgeries and feigned objectivity:

How Russian disinformation tools influenced the no-campaign of the Dutch referendum on the EU-Ukraine Association Agreement.

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Introduction

Ever since the Euromaidan revolution in Ukraine in 2014 there has been an outright hype in Western media outlets for anything that revolves around Russian disinformation, fake news, post truth, information warfare, hybrid warfare, etc. The topic lives in the public debate and has gained more relevance because of it. Unfortunately, those terms are used trigger happy, intermixed and often without a clear definition. The terms are dropped in the articles, and few journalists bother explaining the matter in depth or with background, as long as it is clear that Russia is the culprit interfering in Western democracy. This way of dealing with Russian disinformation is counterproductive and we think it could be a breeding ground for the skepticism and doubt disinformation seeks to cultivate. At the same time, the majority of high level politicians in Europe is concerned on both EU and national level of Russian interference into the democratic process. This has been illustrated by statements made during campaigns towards the Dutch elections in March 2017, the French elections in May 2017 and the German elections coming in September 2017. Most politicians base their concern on the fact that political opinions on social media are all too easily manipulated by foreign states, namely Russia. An influential example of Russian interference in the democratic process can be found in the US with the November 2016 elections. There the possible interference by the Russian state in the elections and communication with the Trump campaign during the elections still foments distrust and continues dividing the country.

Although it should be stressed that the main victims of Russian disinformation are the Russian population and Eastern European countries, our focus for this dissertation will be on the Netherlands. On 6 April 2016, a nation-wide referendum took place in the Netherlands. The Dutch were asked to express their opinion on whether they were in favor or against the treaty for the Ukraine-European Union Association Agreement. Since the Netherlands was the last EU member state to ratify the agreement at the time; the Dutch people, state and government were inexperienced concerning national referenda, this moment of decision-making formed a good target for Russian interference. Most importantly, a ratification by the Netherlands would bind Ukraine to the EU, and this would mean both a strategic and symbolic loss for Russia.

Of course, the Dutch referendum was soon subject to the fears disinformation allegations, and certain elements in the no-vote campaign would be under alleged US investigation for illegal Russian financing (Foster and Holehouse 2016). The no-campaign denied this, with Thierry Baudet, one of the initiative takers, responding: “It would seem that being a Eurosceptic makes you a Russian ally. That is not reality.” (Baudet, 2016). These discussions about possible Russian interference and support to the no-campaign deviate from the real issues at hand within the campaign. The subject was highly politicized and soon whether you believed Russian interference was there or not had to be linked to your personal political views on the EU-Ukraine Association Agreement. With the referendum passed more than a

year ago, the subject is less politicized but still as relevant. Therefore, this dissertation will attend to the following research question: How has Russian disinformation attempted to penetrate the public debate through the no-campaign? Our main focus will be on online disinformation, as this is widely regarded as the most important source of disinformation nowadays.

The first part of the dissertation will research disinformation itself. The reason why disinformation is not clearly defined can partly be found in the academic debate. There is no standard nor agreement on what constitutes disinformation. And in fact, the media kept the plethora of terms used concise, compared to the academic world. Therefore, we believe it is necessary to narrow down a clearly defined concept of disinformation, which we will be able to use further down the line in our research. In this first part of the paper we will answer what the difference is between disinformation, information warfare, hybrid warfare and reflexive control. It is imperative to explain those terms and their relation to each other as they form a whole, as little parts of a greater narrative played out by the Russian state. Disputes within the academic debate will be discussed as well. When those terms and their interrelations are explained, disinformation will be analyzed more thoroughly, explaining its perceived recent revival, discerning its aims, target groups and argumentation and most importantly the tools used to conduct disinformation. This chapter will provide a critical selection of Russian disinformation's tools that we will use for the research on the referendum in the Netherlands. This will allow us to analyze and filter our primary source material in a structured manner.

The second part of the dissertation will explain in detail the context of the referendum on the Dutch ratification of the EU-UA Association Agreement. First and foremost, who were the actors, and what was their motivation in the referendum. Special attention will be given to the initiative takers of the no-campaign, *Burgercomité EU*, *Geenpeil*, *Forum voor Democratie* and the main personalities surrounding the initiatives. By explaining their initial motivation and argumentation for the referendum, without moving into their actual campaign, we aim to understand this position by performing a target audience analysis.

The context of the referendum will also be provided, because certain preconditions unique to the referendum and The Netherlands might have had an important impact. We will also assess how the no-campaign ran a neutral campaign under Geenpeil, and to what extent they managed to separate the neutral campaign from the no-campaign. How factors like these could have influenced the course of the campaign will be equally discussed. It is important to note that this chapter is about shaping the right landscape to interpret the source material in the next chapter in. Therefore, an assessment will be made at the end of this part of how vulnerable the no-campaign as a target group was to a possible Russian disinformation campaign, based on their beliefs and argumentation.

The third chapter will consist of the analysis of our primary sources and the original research of this dissertation. First, RT and Sputnik's argumentation on the referendum and Ukraine during the campaign will be compared to that of the no-campaign. By doing this we want to assess to what extent Russian narratives have been taken over by the no-campaign. Second, we will analyze the social media of the actors of the no-campaign selected in Part II, mainly but not limited to: Twitter, Facebook, Youtube and their own websites. The researched period runs for the entirety of the campaign: from moment they gained enough signatures until the referendum itself on 6 April 2016. The tools of disinformation clearly defined in part one will be used to analyze and structure the researched material. Categorizations will be made of the different materials and findings and each of the tools will be assessed for their effectiveness and prominence in interfering in the Dutch referendum. Finally, we will present our results in a conclusion, answering to what extent Russian disinformation influenced the no-campaign, which tools of disinformation have been most effective in this campaign, and explain why those tools might have been so effective.

This research primarily focuses on how Russian disinformation has seeped into the no-campaign's public debate, and how they have facilitated spreading Russian narratives. It does not aim to answer to what extent Russian disinformation has had influence on the result of the referendum. However, it does serve as an indicator of Russia's success in this disinformation campaign. As Keir Giles said: "the key criterion in judging their effectiveness has to be the results: examples of successful penetration of Russian narratives into foreign decision-making environments (Giles 2016, 35). This is exactly what we will do in this dissertation. By assessing the above, this dissertation hopes to contribute to the academic knowledge and debate on Russian disinformation.

PART I: What is disinformation?

In this chapter, we will build a concept of disinformation based on the most influential academic research available on the subject. We aim to analyze the penetration of Russian disinformation in the no campaign using the concept of disinformation below. First, we will assess what constitutes Russian disinformation aimed at an audience outside of Russia. A general overview will be provided of what disinformation is and what Russia's tradition with the subject is. Afterwards, the terminology will be explained as to disentangle the interrelationship between disinformation and related concepts such as hybrid war, information war, information space and information weapons. Finally, we will go deeper into disinformation itself, discerning its goals, how it hopes to achieve them, assess the targeted groups and according argumentation used and ultimately list the main tools disinformation uses to achieve its goal.

In part two the context and actors of the no-campaign will be discussed, by doing this we will demonstrate how Russian disinformation goals, targeted audience and associated message described in academic theory this part can be found back in the characteristics of the referendum and the no-campaign. We will show that the preconditions of the referendum and the actors in the no-campaign gave strong incentive to Russia to conduct a disinformation campaign. In part three, qualitative analysis of examples from the no-campaign will be used to demonstrate that disinformation, as defined in this chapter, has penetrated the public debate. Our qualitative and descriptive approach allows us to use the tools of Russian disinformation defined in this chapter to analyze the information and content published by the no-campaign in Part III.

Background

Despite the recent media hype and a boom in the number of academic articles, most scholars agree that Russia has had a long and rich tradition of engaging in hybrid war and information war. This includes disinformation, and the whole idea of some newly emerged phenomenon is considered new wine in old bottles by many scholars (Snegovaya 2015, 9; Galeotti 2016a; Giles 2016, 8). In Tsarist times there were already forgeries, the Bolsheviks had their 'useful fools' [polezniye duraki] and during the Cold War the theory of active measures and information manipulation was steadily developed and refined (Schultz and Godson 1984). In addition, Maria Snegovaya claims that strategies such as reflexive control (cfr. infra), are older than the term information war in its current meaning (Snegovaya 2015). She makes the interesting remark that the Western perception of Russian hybrid and information war as something new, whilst exaggerating its capabilities, can be seen as the very success of Russia's disinformation and public relation campaigns (Snegovaya 2015, 13).

Whilst we should be careful not to overstate the importance of recent developments, it must be acknowledged that there has been an increase in attention in Russian military journals on

the subject since the colour revolutions. Scholars such as Thomas and Darczewska note that to revive the idea of Russian information strategy, the ideas of Igor Panarin were influential. Panarin is a Russian scholar specialized in information warfare and connected to the Diplomatic Academy of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Russia. He designed a new management system for Russian information war and information units that consisted of both military and state news media (Thomas 2011; Darczewska 2014). Combined with the expansion of the internet, this has led to the development of new tools and means to conduct information warfare. However, according to Darczewska, it has not fundamentally changed the rules: "Net propaganda is based on the disinformation, manipulation, information fabrication, verbal provocation and intimidation techniques described by Panarin" (Darczewska 2014, 27). Also important to the development of the subject, the Gerasimov doctrine should be mentioned, a highly contested so-called new way of hybrid Russian warfare, that was in fact an answer to Western threats, and has been misinterpreted and cause for academic debate (Bartles 2016). Since the Euromaidan revolution many scholars have analysed the intensified Russian information campaigns that came with the annexation of Crimea and the unrest in Donbas. This has led to an increase in academic output and growing knowledge and awareness on the subject.

Terminology – defining terms and explain their interrelationship

A plethora of terms concerning disinformation is used in academic research. We will situate disinformation within bigger concepts such as information warfare, public diplomacy and hybrid warfare. One of the main reasons behind the plethora of terms in English academic research can be found in the discrepancy between the Russian terminology and academic usage of terms and the one in the West. As Darczewska states: "[Russian authors on information warfare] mix the military and non-military order and the technological and social order by definition" (Darczewska 2014, 12). Since the academic debate in the West is based on Russian authors, journals and institutions, we will set out to explain those terms in English, but provide the Russian counterpart it is based upon.

The popular term of hybrid warfare, or the even more vague asymmetrical warfare will only be touched upon briefly to state its relevance to this dissertation. It is an entirely different subject with its own academic discussion. However, for more a thorough reading on the subject, Mark Galeotti's *Hybrid War or Gibridnaya Voina? Getting Russia's non-linear military challenge right* offers a good insight (Galeotti 2016b) as well as Bartles' *Getting Gerasimov right* (Bartles 2016). Crudely stated hybrid warfare is a non-Russian term, used by the West and is seen as an indirect way of waging war, most notably described in the context of Russian aggression. It blurs the lines between military and non-military means, in an effort to further its own goals (Bartles 2016). Academic literature on hybrid warfare is often interwoven with information war, as information war can be a part of hybrid warfare. Snegovaya claims Russia engages in hybrid warfare to stay militarily competitive whilst being at a disadvantage economically and in sheer military power (Snegovaya 2015, 9-10).

A key term for this part is information war. Most widely used in academic research, the term is translated from the Russian term 'informatsionnaia voina'. Information war in its turn can be divided into two aspects: information-technical and information-psychological. The information-technical aspect deals with the hardware and software that converts digital input into useful data, or with the security of the information infrastructure objects (Thomas 2015, 16; Franke 2015, 29). This will not be treated in this dissertation. Information warfare will only be discussed in its information-psychological aspect. This means the effect that the data has on the subconscious mind of the population (Thomas 2015, 16). Now that we have established what aspect of information warfare we will be discussing, we will study information war in greater detail.

There is no unilateral agreement on what information war specifically entails, what is conceptualized strictly under information warfare and is not. However, the work of Ulrik Franke on information warfare has proven influential in the Western academic debate and helped sharpen the lines. Franke has given a detailed account of the Russian academic debate, explaining in detail the terminology and ideas of different Russian authors writing on information war as well as important terms coined and defined by the Russian Ministry of Defence (Franke 2015). As Franke's work carries importance in the Western academic debate surrounding information warfare, and his work is based on thorough analysis of the Russian academic debate, military corporations and Ministry of Defence, it will serve as the basis terminology for this dissertation.

"Information war [informatsionnaia voina] is a struggle between two or more states in the information space with the goal to damage information systems, processes or resources, critical or other infrastructure, to undermine political economic and social systems, to destabilise a society and a state by massive psychological influence on the population, and also putting pressure on a state to make decisions that are in the interest of the opponent." (Franke 2015, 14). As noted above, we will be working with the information-psychological aspect of the term, therefore the latter of the definition is most applicable. The psychological influence on the population and the pressure put onto the state to make decisions that are in the interest of the opponent is what we will be looking for in our case study.

"The information space [informatsionnoe prostranstvo] is the sphere of activity related to forming, creating, converting, transmitting, using and storying information to influence both individuals and society, information infrastructure, and information itself." (Franke 2015, 14). Although this might seem trivial, it is important to demarcate our field of research within the information space as well. This research will be confined to the digital information space, namely social media and the internet.

Finally, *"an information weapon [informatsionnoe oruzhie] is information technology, means and methods that are used in order to wage information war."* (Franke 2015, 14). Thus, disinformation can be categorized as an information weapon. It is a technology that has been

developed and used within the information-psychological aspect of information warfare. It only serves as a part of information warfare on a whole. Within the technology that disinformation is, we discern different aims and methods and targets that characterize disinformation.

Goals of disinformation

Now that disinformation is situated within its terminology we will assess the concept more closely. Concerning the goals of disinformation, there can be two aims discerned in the academic debate that need not be mutually exclusive.

The first goal, supported by a large group of scholars and experts, is that Russian disinformation aimed at the West is used to create doubt and confusion (Giles 2016, 37; Pomerantsev 2014a; Laity 2016; Pomerantsev and Weiss 2014, 6). NATO Chief Strategic Communications, Mark Laity, explained on his personal capacity that "The aim [of Russian disinformation] is to make you trust nobody and bury you in various explanations of a story. It's creating indecisiveness. That makes you vulnerable to someone that is decisive." (Laity 2016). Laity drew parallels to Hannah Arendt's famous quote from *The origins of Totalitarianism*: "The ideal subject of totalitarian rule is not the convinced Nazi or the dedicated communist, but people for whom the distinction between fact and fiction, true and false, no longer exists." (Arendt 1951). The goal is to keep the recipient passive and confused, to ensure that he is not agitated for action. Closely related to this, Galeotti adds that the goal is to demoralize, divide and distract (Galeotti, 2016a). In the context of Europe, Stefan Meister believes "the aim is nothing short of paralyzing and sabotaging the decision-making processes in EU and NATO, organizations that depend on consensus, by influencing politics within the individual member states" (Meister 2016,7). Considering the above, the Dutch referendum is a very attractive target.

The second goal, supported by scholars such as Thomas, Lucas, Snegovaya and equally Pomerantsev, goes further and states that disinformation as a part of information war is used to achieve reflexive control [upravlenie refleksivnoe] (Thomas 2004; Bjola and Pamment 2016, 6; Snegovaya 2015, 10; Lucas and Pomerantsev 2016). Reflexive control is defined by Thomas as "a means of conveying to a partner or an opponent specially prepared information to incline him to voluntarily make the predetermined decision desired by the initiator of the action" (Thomas 2004, 237). One could argue that this is another way of describing disinformation. However reflexive control is more than just disinformation; the aim inherent to reflexive control is that you manipulate your opponent in taking a decision that is harmful to them, and disinformation is a means to achieve that reflexive control. Not all cases of disinformation will have the aim of reflexive control behind them, however Thomas claims that in a case of decision-making process, reflexive control and disinformation are most effective to influence an information resource. (Thomas 2004, 240-241). According to Turko and Prokhozhev who are quoted by Thomas, "the most significant of threatening actions is

disinformation that seeks to exert a goal-oriented effect on public opinion, or on decision-makers for the purposes of reflexive control" (Thomas 2004, 254). In other words, the Dutch referendum -the decision-making process- and the no-campaign and its followers -respectively the information resource and the decision-makers- are the perfect victim to achieve reflexive control over. Moreover, if we consider that this theory stems from information war, we see it now used against a civilian population and political campaign that is not aware it is the target of an information war.

How does Russian disinformation hope to achieve its aim?

Because of the universal nature of the reflexive control theory, it should be clear that there is no clear-cut ideology behind disinformation. Russian disinformation in Europe therefore is not aimed at loyally supporting certain political views on the long term. As the aim is to sow doubt or make the target audience do something which is not beneficial to it, the focus should be on the indirect influence and the ultra-flexibility disinformation shows in exploiting any group (Wilson 2015a). Those making use of reflexive control try to find a soft spot in the target audience's critical information filter, which is the concepts, knowledge and experiences that form his decision-making (Lucas and Pomerantsev 2016, 7). To ensure the best effect, different types of argumentation are used on different target groups. One of the reasons why Russia is able to conduct its disinformation campaigns in this manner lies in the nature of Western societies. Russia exploits the freedom of expression and information and general openness of Western liberal democracies to disseminate their disinformation and consequently further their foreign policies through information warfare (Pomerantsev and Weiss 2014, 14). Through the message that mainstream media are not to be trusted Russian disinformation seeks to isolate the target audience from unofficial sources that are not authorized (Giles 2016, 38). By doing this they penetrate the audience's critical information filter even further.

Targeted groups and associated message

The amount and types of groups and ideologies targeted by disinformation have increased since the collapse of the Soviet-Union. During the Cold War, the Soviet Union mainly supported the narrative of leftist groups. It was an ideologically defined war where leftist support would further the agenda of the Soviet Union and there was no need to have different messages for different audiences. Nowadays, the Kremlin is not dedicated to supporting a certain political opinion. It seeks to play all sides. From the extreme left to the extreme right, nationalists, separatists, traditionalists and postmodernists, Russia tries to influence them all when convenient to further its own goals. (Pomerantsev and Weiss 2014, 6). Wilson goes even further by claiming disinformation only serves the regime itself and not necessarily Russia as a nation (Wilson 2015a). Ironically enough, this view of most Western academics on who Russia targets is confirmed by a senior contributor to Russia Today (RT) and Sputnik, Dmitry Babich. When asked the question in a debate why Russia supports right wing voices

such as the French extreme right Front National, he answers the following: “I think Russia could also be supporting left wing parties, […] we’re looking for alternative voices in Europe. The ones that show some understanding for our [position].” “It’s not directed at mainly right or left wing. It’s directed at looking for people who are ready to listen to our arguments” (Babich 2016). He goes on acknowledging that “Russian elite may be interested in changing the Western policies” (Babich, 2016).

Important to this idea of supporting a plethora of groups is that each group will have their own message and arguments adapted especially to their point of view. This is necessary for the reflexive control to work. For example, on the right, extreme-right nationalists are convinced by anti-EU messages or messages of a relentless and massive refugee invasion to Europe. And it doesn’t stop with ordinary people: Multiple European right-wing parties such as France’s FN, Austria’s FPÖ, Nigel Farage’s UKIP, Germany’s AfD and Hungary’s Jobbik have all shown their sympathy towards Putin, and those political forces critical of the EU are somewhat a constant in Russian support. The most salient example of this is an investigation running against FN for illegal Russian campaign funding (L’express 2014) and a shady 9 million Euro loan from the First Czech-Russian bank in 2014. Jean-Luc Schaffhauser, French Member of European Parliament for Marine Bleu would have played a key role (Laske and Turchi 2015). At an ALDE conference on Russian disinformation in the European Parliament in June 2016, Schaffhauser went out of his mind against the allegations made by Guy Verhofstadt concerning Russian funding of FN (ALDE 2016). A similar story, but of bribe-taking, could be heard with Jorg Haider and the FPÖ (Pomerantsev and Weiss 2014, 20).

Russia is not only supporting right wing or Eurocritical political forces. Alternatively, leftists are swayed by messages of ever-increasing globalization, anti-elitism and narratives of US hegemony over Europe. Pomerantsev and Weiss use the example of the NATO concern of Russian support to green movements’ effort to block ‘oil fracking’. This would maintain Europe’s dependency on Russian energy (Pomerantsev and Weiss 2014, 19). Similarly, Stefan Meister notes the sympathy of the left-wing Die Linke to Russian influence (Meister 2016, 8). Populists in their turn are influenced by messages stressing the divide between the elite and the rest of the population. They feel as if their voice does not matter anymore, and this can link into the EU-critical voices as well, with the argument that everything is decided by elites in Brussels. Conservatives are persuaded by arguments of a morally decaying West, due to its progressive and liberal values. Russia would then set out to contrast this with its own moral incorruptibility (Bader 2017). The list of possible targets and their according message is endless. Pacifists are confronted with their fear of war, politicians with the fear of unpredictability and entrepreneurs with the fear of monetary losses (Darczewska 2014, 35). Ultimately, Russia tries to convey different messages that will attract all kinds of dissatisfied groups of people. Bringing mixed messaging adds to the confusion, and it attracts a broad spectrum of people to their communication means, who they then set out to divide (Pomerantsev and Weiss 2014, 19). It should be noted that there are scholars, most notably Stefan Meister, who believes that the overarching strategic narrative is aimed against the EU

and against liberal values (Meister 2016), however this does not affect the way disinformation is flexible in attracting groups from every ideological corner and adapting their message to them.

What tools does disinformation bring to the front?

We will assess the tools used to convey a certain message or narrative, list the techniques commonly used in Russian disinformation campaigns to convince someone of a certain idea. For this part, we will draw from different academic studies and their categorizations. We will mainly explain the tools with which digital disinformation enters the information space. However, in the interest of analyzing the case study, some other methods relevant to our research will be discussed. Following the idea of Darczewska that Russian digital information warfare does not differ in rules from its traditional counter-part, and many of these tools are hardly new, we think this is permitted (Darczewska 2014, 27). One major difference with traditional disinformation is the speed and intensity with which information is spread online. Digital disinformation has gained much importance (Giles 2016, 28) and according to Milina, online media are the primary information space where people share political opinions. Thus, it is an important information space for disinformation, and the most relevant one for us to research (Milina 2012, 54-56). Because the knowledge on Russian disinformation in a digital information space is still developing, a plethora of tools and strategies are pursued. To demarcate our research, the list of tools below will be a critical selection of the most important and widely used tools, and is by no means exhaustive.

The most straightforward tool of disinformation is the usage of state media such as RT, Sputnik, Russia Direct, Russia Beyond The Headlines (RBTH) or Russia Insider. These media outlets have often been the subject academic research (Imamgaiazova 2016; Yablokov 2015; Ioffe 2010). As this tool has the broadest reach in target audience, it is considered one of the prime tools of how Russia can carry out digital disinformation. It is almost impossible to write about Russian disinformation and not mentioning the media platforms mentioned above, and many respected scholars in the field such as Snegovaya, Galeotti, Pomerantsev, Giles, Thomas, Darczewska, Franke, Meister, Lucas, Wilson and Ben Nimmo use them as examples in their research. Russia Today (RT) has a strong prominence on all social media, became big on Youtube. RT's motto, "Question More", wants to tell the untold story, implying that the mainstream media does not tell you everything, and foster distrust. At the same time, they try to mimic the style and objectivity of Western media. They are considered as the extension of Russian soft power in the digital information space. A similar platform is Sputnik News, a new multi-language media platform set up in 2014, that was born out of the Voice of Russia. In 2017, it is published in 34 languages and has the same aim as RT. RBTH has a similar purpose, although they mostly capture their audience with messages with a cultural or human-interest theme that puts Russia in a positive spotlight. It is the author's conviction that with this strategy they try to weaken your information filter, because these messages are then intermixed with messages similar to those of RT and Sputnik.

The outlets mentioned above are used to distribute either fake news, stories that are entirely made up, or stories that are partially made up and have been given serious spin. There are different categories to discern. First there are unsourced or falsified claims, who try to mislead on purpose. This is what could categorize as fake news (Bjola & Pamment 2016, 5). Non-existent sources are also quoted, or forgeries are made to support disinformation (Kragh & Åsberg 2017). Often the sources referred to are in fact previous disinformation. This presents the opportunity to build a seemingly objective information space in which disinformation is recycled to feed and legitimize new disinformation, leading to an echo chamber for disinformation (Bjola and Pamment 2016, 5). Giles adds that for this use, 'false flag' websites are set up that resemble genuine news outlets, but feed into the fake and antagonistic reporting of Russian narratives. (Giles 2016, 31).

Second, there are claims with verified sources that are deliberately misinterpreted, or that are framed in a certain way. Although framing is inherently part of all media and reporting (Entman 1993), in this case it is done without regard for any journalistic norms, as long as it serves a certain narrative or goal. In this second category, Russian channels "tailor their level of sophistication of argument –and the extent to which they conceal their propaganda function through subtle imitations of objectivity- to the expectations of their intended readers and viewers" (Giles 2016, 30). The strength of digital disinformation is that it spreads so fast and in such quantity, that not all the stories can be debunked. In the case of partially made up stories it costs even more energy to clearly expose them. These stories then continue to spread on the internet, uncontested and often covered with comments from trolls, who purposely support the message and suppress any dissenting comment.

This brings us to another tool of digital disinformation, one that appeals to the imagination, namely the internet trolls. These so-called troll armies are people paid by the Russian government to suppress those critical voices in the information space that oppose the Russian narrative. The trolls try to discredit their criticism and consequently position. Within information warfare theory this has been metaphorically described as "suppressive fire" (Pomerantsev and Weiss 2014, 17). At the same time, they try to feign public support for disinformation stories, and attack voices that try to expose inconsistencies and hypocrisies within those stories. This magnifies the Russian argument in volume and intensity (Giles 2016, 35). In addition, those Russian channels will portray the government and established media as not trustworthy. The aim here is not in particular to make the target audience believe that Russian media is trustworthy, but rather to make it distrust all information that comes its way (Giles 2016, 39). This helps creating confusion and doubt, and ultimately aims to ensure a leveled playing field of the target audience's critical information filter (cfr. supra) for both Western media and Russian state media.

According to Giles, Russia exploits the ideals of a balanced message inherent to most of the independent Western liberal media, allowing disinformation to get past their information

filter (Giles, 2016,34). Mark Laity, also former journalist for the BBC, told a similar story, warning that with conflicting sources, the truth does not necessarily lie in the middle, yet Western media too often present it this way, or they leave judgement up to the audience who would naturally come to a similar conclusion. Especially if the story is going back and forth between conflicting messages over a couple of days of time, the Russian story will often get the benefit of the doubt (Laity 2016). Giles explains this through what he calls the 'unimportance of truth' and he notes that Western liberal media are not used to implausible and blatant lies, and thus also do not know how to deal with it, which results into the situation described above (Giles 2016, 38).

Conspiracy theories combine multiple elements mentioned above: they try to bring an untold story, implying that the established media does not tell you everything (Bjola and Pamment 2016, 6). They are often built to use information in an insulated information space, possibly fed with the 'false flag' websites mentioned by Giles, recycling and echoing previous disinformation. Conspiracy theories are usually used to discredit an official version of a story and to allude there is more to the official version than the mainstream media and government want the target audience to know. Preferably different conspiracy theories are launched on the same subject, as to muddy the waters and discourage the public of uncovering the truth (Yablokov 2015). The most notable recent example of this is the multiple inconsistent explanations that have been given by Russian state media for the downing of Malaysian Airlines flight MH17 over Donbas to create the impression that the narrative the West has put up, is just one of the many possible explanations.

Another key element that is often found in Russian disinformation is the so-called what-about-ism. What-about-ism is a disinformation technique that aims to distract the target audience's attention away from the main issue at hand, often trying to create a false analogy of something that looks vaguely and superficially similar to something in the West (Bader, 2017). The goal is to give an impression of Western hypocrisy and double standards that would undermine Europe's claim to moral authority (Headley 2015, 297). Andrew Wilson sharply explains what-about-ism as follows: "we cannot criticize A, because B is the same – which all too easily becomes a disarming moral pacifism. In the opposite permissive form of this paradigm, if X can do Y, then why can't we do it too? Russia is particularly adept at framing its actions as the mirror-image of America's. Crimea is the same as Kosovo; if America can invade Iraq we can invade eastern Ukraine" (Wilson 2015b). In short, what-about-ism tries to undermine the willingness and legitimacy of criticizing Russian policies, by claiming criticism equals hypocrisy.

Finally, the last tool we will be discussing, the coopting of experts. This has not been categorized as a part of disinformation by authors such as Galeotti and Pomerantsev and Weiss (Pomerantsev and Weiss 2014, 14). They rather put it next to disinformation as part of the information war's effort to demoralize the public. However, for the sake of this research

we will categorize it as a tool of disinformation, moreover as it serves the same purpose as disinformation, namely to convince the public and make it doubt previous convictions. Russian media will co-opt so-called experts on certain issues that are subject of an information campaign. The purpose is to add a perception of authority and objectiveness, and give more credibility to either a story or a narrative. The experts write opinion pieces, are quoted in articles, appear on RT often without any credentials or in some cases even a name to give their opinion. In other cases, they are wittingly or unwittingly invited by organizers of debates as neutral experts, or to provide balance, when Russian disinformation aims to exploit the ideals of a balanced message (cfr. supra).

PART II: The Dutch referendum on the European-Ukrainian Association Agreement

The purpose of this chapter is twofold. First, it describes the different actors, organizations and their points of view before and during the campaign. Second, we aim at discerning which preconditions of the referendum and the initiative takers have given incentive to a Russian disinformation campaign, based on the theory provided in Part I. Which preconditions in the no-campaign proved to be useful to achieve the goals of disinformation? How do the different actors of the no-campaign fit into the theoretical framework of targeted groups and their associated message? Researching the target audience is in line with the theory of reflexive control (cfr. supra), where it is imperative to understand the target audience in order to exploit the weak link in its information filter (Thomas 2004, 241). Therefore, we will research the target audience subject of our research, in order to discern how Russian disinformation might have penetrated their information filter. Finally, by sketching the necessary context in which the Dutch referendum for the European-Ukrainian Association Agreement took place, we get a thorough understanding of the case study. This is necessary for a correct empirical analysis of the content published by the no-campaign in Part III.

How did the referendum come to existence?

The idea for a referendum on the European Union-Ukrainian Association Agreement (AA) came from a Dutch Eurocritical movement named Burgercomité EU. This movement had been searching for years to find a subject they could hold a referendum on. However, they had to wait until a new referendum law would make this possible. The new law became active in July 1, 2016. They decided to try and hold a referendum on the European Union-Ukrainian AA, as it was one of the first to come up. They did not care about Ukraine, but wanted to use this referendum as a protest vote against the EU. Arjan Van Dixhoorn, one of the three initiative takers, stated they would grab any opportunity to strain the relationship between The Netherlands and the EU (Heck 2016).

One of the main reasons for holding the referendum often heard with initiative takers goes back to 2005 (Heck 2016). In 2005 the Netherlands held a referendum on a treaty establishing a constitution for Europe. According to Burgercomité EU, the result of this referendum, a clear 61% no-vote, was never taken into account, as two years later with the Lisbon Treaty the European constitution was established nonetheless. Although it was a slightly altered version, there had been a clear signal from the Dutch people that they didn't want it. This opinion is also shared by Jan Roos (NPO 2015). The fact that this referendum on the AA, just as the referendum in 2005, was again not binding, put a lot of politicians in favor of the referendum in a difficult position. It also gave rise to populist tendencies in the no-campaign. Political parties felt compelled to express to the public during the campaign whether they would adhere to the outcome of the referendum or not.

Through the logistic and communication support of the satirical and at times controversial website *Geenstijl,* translated 'no style' -whose motto is "tendentious, oversimplified and

unnecessarily offensive"- the idea of holding a referendum gained publicity. For Burgercomité EU the methods with which Geenstijl conducted journalism was not an issue for cooperation. On the contrary, Van Dixhoorn considered it "the best journalistic medium in the Netherlands" (Heck 2016). Geenstijl did most of the online campaigning for the referendum, and on 13 August 2015 the *Kiesraad* –an independent institution that advises the Dutch government on practical and technical aspects of the elections- approved the preliminary request for a referendum. The initiative takers had collected the necessary 10.000 (Kiesraad 2015a). From then on out, the initiative takers expanded their campaign. A cooperation of Burgercomité EU, Geenstijl and the organization Forum for Democracy (FvD), led to the creation of Geenpeil. This cooperation would be the center of the no-vote. The referendum at this point had had very little attention from the government in The Hague, and national politics would be rather late in their reaction to this initiative. Meanwhile Geenpeil and its subsidiaries did everything in their power to collect enough signatures and through intensive campaigning both physically and on the internet. On 14 October 2015, the *Kiesraad* announced that the referendum would take place. The initiative takers announced on their website that they had gathered 451.666 signatures, well over the 300.000 that were needed (Nijman 2015a). From this point, national politics and parties did get involved as there was no way around the referendum, campaigning either in favor or against the association agreement.

Jan Roos, spokesperson and the face of the GeenPeil campaign, declared he would, together with GeenPeil, campaign for a high turnout, and make people aware of the importance of their right to vote for this referendum. He explicitly said he would not be campaigning for a certain side, nor would he be providing voting advice in favor of any camp during the campaign (RTLnieuws 2015). However, the initiative takers seemed to have abandoned that line rather early. Jan Roos for instance did campaign against the association agreement, at least in his personal capacity. His Twitter (@LavieJanRoos) demonstrates this, and in interviews he is defending the no position. A similar story goes for Thierry Baudet (@thierrybaudet) and Bart Nijman (@BartNijman) who were part of Geenpeil yet at the same time they constituted the core of no-campaign. This creates a discrepancy between the veil of neutral initiative taking through ensuring a high turnout at the one hand and the actual intent of pursuing a no-campaign on the other. Sven Kockelmann questioned Jan Roos about this in an interview, stating both propagating to vote no and being the initiator of the referendum might be a legal grey zone, and the *Kiesraad* had not yet decided who to allocate the 2 million Euros of subsidies for the initiator to. Jan Roos, responded again that Geenpeil would not campaign for the no-vote (NPO 2015). He declared the political arena would decide why to vote yes or no, while Geenpeil would focus on the democratic aspect of a high turnout. (NPO 2015). Sven Kockelmann raised concern and stated that the initiators have the responsibility to tell the whole story, and not covertly campaign for a no-vote. Jan Roos responded to this that the responsibility for this referendum lies with the individual (NPO 2015).

Who were the civil initiative-takers involved in the no-campaign?

As sketched above, the referendum grew and matured outside of the traditional political arena, and the political parties only entered the debate at a later stage. Therefore, we will not focus on the position of the different political parties, but focus on the civilian initiative taken in the referendum. In order to analyze the content of their campaign in depth in Part III and hold it against the light of how disinformation tools influenced them from Part I, their motivations and background must be analyzed. A second reason we need to discuss the different actors in the no campaign is to ensure the nuances in argumentation are exposed, and we avoid generalizing their arguments to the argument of the whole no-campaign.

First and foremost, there is the already mentioned Burgercomité EU. The referendum was Burgercomité EU's brain child. Its founding members are Arjan Van Dixhoorn, Pepijn Van Houwelingen, Pieter Mink and Beata Supheert. Although they were the inventors of the referendum, they were rather reluctant to participate in the in the actual campaign in a personal capacity, and did not seek the spotlights. Instead, they maintained their website where they posted articles supporting the no-campaign, and they made a series of interviews on Youtube with key figures in the no-campaign. The interviews were conducted by the EU-critical documentary maker Peter Vlemmix (Burgercomité EU 2016). In addition, Burgercomité EU campaigned intensively on Twitter (@Burgercomiteeu). Aside from this there is only a few interviews that shed light on the voices behind Burgercomité EU themselves. In an NRC interview Van Dixhoorn, Van Houwelingen and Beata Supheert share their point of view on the subject (NRC 2016). Their view is strongly focused on rethinking the relationship with the EU and returning more sovereignty to The Hague.

Second, the weblog of Geenstijl should be mentioned. As mentioned above they provided the communicative support for the initial gathering of signatures for the referendum. If the referendum was Burgercomité EU's brain-child, it was Geenstijl who under the banner of GeenPeil nurtured it and put it on the national agenda. Geenstijl describes themselves as a "shocklog" and has been described as "the digital emotional instinct" of The Netherlands. The website is satirical, does not follow journalistic norms, and has strong populist tendencies (De Vries 2008). Joost De Vries interprets their work based on sources that are interpreted one-sidedly and based on emotions, yet they are influential on the established and qualitative media (De Vries 2008). Geenstijl's slogan: "Tendentious, groundless and unnecessarily offensive" adds to that image (Geenstijl 2017).

Geenstijl on a whole can be seen as the main mouth-piece for the no-campaign, and two important and public figures are part of the staff of Geenstijl should be mentioned separately. Bart Nijman and Jan Roos. Bart Nijman was the link between Burgercomité EU and Geenstijl. Nijman decided Geenstijl should support this initiative under the initiative Geenpeil (cfr. infra). Under the pseudonym "Van Rossem", he contributed many articles to the weblog on the Referendum and the Association Agreement. He was an important opinion maker in the campaign. He has given interviews, but his main contributions came in written articles on the Geenstijl website.

In addition, there is the spokesperson and face of the Geenpeil campaign, Jan Roos. Before joining Geenstijl, he was a journalist at PowNed, a controversial Dutch news broadcaster part of the Dutch public broadcast. During the campaign, he toured the country with a bus under the banner of Geenpeil, trying to reach the minimum turnout of 30%. As the face of te campaign he engaged most in public discussions and defended his point of view -and often that of Geenpeil collectively- in interviews, debates and talk shows organized by national mainstream and more established media. After the campaign on the referendum Jan Roos started his own political party, VoorNederland, but gained no seats in the parliamentary elections of 2016.

Third we should mention Forum voor Democratie (FvD), Forum for Democracy. During the campaign, this was a think tank and political forum that promoted more direct democracy, especially when it came to the EU. It is presided by Thierry Baudet – a long standing EU critic- who played an equally important role in the no-campaign. He was also very active in interviews, debates and talk-shows, and is well-spoken and a good debater. Although they were technically united under the banner of Geenpeil, Thierry Baudet and Jan Roos campaigned mostly separately, putting their own respective organizations, Forum voor Democratie and Geenstijl in the spotlight. Moreover, Jan Roos through his role as spokesperson for Geenpeil also gained a lot of personal publicity. In 2016, after the campaign on the referendum, FvD turned into a political party, and gained two seats in the parliament.

The three initiatives united under the banner of Geenpeil, an initiative that was first launched by Geenstijl in 2014, in the context of the 2014 European elections in the Netherlands. With the referendum on the Association Agreement, Geenpeil was reborn in their self-proclaimed Geenpeil 2.0. Under this organization, led by the earlier mentioned journalist Bart Nijman from Geenstijl, they spread flyers that gave information in favor, neutral and against the association agreement (GeenPeil 2016). Their main drive was the battle against political arrogance and the struggle for more direct democracy not only in national politics but also in the EU. They have continued their civil initiative into a political party for the parliamentary elections of 2016, but gained no seats in parliament (Geenpeil 2016).

In addition to the three big initiative takers mentioned above, the following initiatives or actors deserve attention because they played a role in the no-campaign. They will not be part of our further research, but they showed great similarities in their campaigning with the three initiatives described above, and with additional research similar conclusions might be drawn concerning the use of Russian disinformation. First there is OekraiNEE, an independent citizens initiative that provided articles and information related to Ukraine and the referendum on its website and social media (OekraiNEE 2016). In contrast to Jan Roos and Geenpeil, they were clear about their intention to run a campaign for the no-vote, and they provided a platform to discuss the arguments behind it. In their disclaimer, they explicitly claim to be not pro-Russian or against the people of Ukraine (OekraiNEE 2016). Finally, member of the Dutch parliament Harry Van Bommel deserves special attention. As long-standing member of parliament for the extreme left socialist party SP. He was the face of the no-campaign for the SP and was influential and active in this capacity.

What was the no-vote's general motivation and argumentation?

Straining the EU-The Netherlands relationship

The general motivation and argumentation behind the no campaign differed for each group and sometimes switched during the campaign. Initially for most initiatives the referendum was about the Association Agreement itself. Some made it clear that their intention was to strain EU-Ukraine relationships. Burgercomité EU admitted this openly, barely a month before the referendum took place (NRC 2016), the strongman behind Geenpeil and the campaign on Geenstijl, Bart Nijman did the same (van Dongen 2016). Other such as Thierry Baudet implicitly suggested this, through his argumentation and given his Eurocritical background. Although he always denied this, he has been accused of having this hidden agenda during debates (Montesquieu 2016). His organization FvD also built a campaign that was very much focused on articles building the momentum of the Brexit campaign, the loss of national sovereignty to the EU and the lack of direct democracy within the EU.

A stepping stone to a EU-membership

Closely linked to this is the fear that all initiative takers see the Association Agreement is a stepping stone to a full EU-membership for Ukraine. Baudet, in a debate -organized by the Montesquieu Institute in The Hague- just days before the referendum said you have to interpret the document- the Association Agreement- "correctly". Although Baudet admits it is not written in the contract, he believes eventual EU-membership is what you should read between the lines (Montesquieu Instituut 2016). Equally Jan Roos confirms he sees it as a stepping stone to EU-membership in a debate with Sven Kockelmann. Contrary to Baudet, he claims it is written in the Association Agreement itself. "You have to look at the goals of the Association Agreement, it says literally that it is a stepping stone to EU-membership" (NPO 2015). However, EU membership is not literally mentioned in the Association Agreement (Tractatenblad 2014). As organizations such as Burgercomité EU and Forum voor Democratie are mainly concerned with the EU, their principal argument revolves around the EU-membership. They create a slippery slope fallacy that agreeing with the Association Agreement will automatically lead to an EU-membership, without any democratic checks between the Association Agreement and a possible ascension to full EU-membership.

"It is not a trade treaty, it is a geopolitical treaty" – Jan Roos (NPO 2015)

Another argument that frequently returns is the geopolitical implications the treaty might have. For instance, Jan Roos stated in an interview with Sven Kockelmann that the treaty has great geopolitical implications. This links closely to the fear of the alleged military component that some initiative takers believe are entrenched in the association agreement. They believe these military aspects will drag The Netherlands into a war with Russia. They also believe this jeopardizes the stability of the Ukraine. Ukraine is in a civil war or even proxy war with Russia, and they fear Ukraine will drag them into the conflict. Van Dixhoorn: "Do you think it is nice that instead of fighting in between [EU-states] soon we will be at war with Russia? Because that's how it is" (Heck 2016). Van Dixhoorn uses the same argumentation that you have to read the AA "interpretatively" as Baudet did above: "You have to read the treaty

interpretatively. If we have an association agreement the pressure to help Ukraine [militarily] will become very high" (Heck 2016). In addition to this, another recurrent argument is that the EU and this Association Agreement are the very wrongdoers behind the unrest in Ukraine. They believe that by forcing the undemocratic and elitist neoliberal EU-agenda onto the Ukrainian people, the EU has forced the country to make a decision and forced it to split. They go as far as calling the Euromaidan protests and revolution a coup instigated by the EU. Alternatively, some no-campaigners, such as Baudet and Burgercomité EU, do not see the annexation of Crimea as an annexation by Russia, but rather as a voluntarily choice of the Crimean people joining the Russian Federation after a democratic referendum (Montesquieu 2016; NRC 2016).

No benefits for the Dutch or corrupt Ukrainian economy

The referendum will not benefit the Dutch economy, Ukraine is corrupt. This is the argument put forward by FvD, Burgercomité EU and Geenpeil. According to them the Association Agreement has a neoliberal character and will only serve the big companies. They bring arguments to the fore such as George Soros –American-Hungarian billionaire often mentioned in conspiracy theories - will buy all the valuable companies in Ukraine. The Association Agreement will therefore not benefit the Ukrainian nor the Dutch citizens. This is closely linked to their argument that Ukraine is the most corrupt country in Europe according to the Transparancy International CPI. In addition, FvD fears that The Netherlands will have to pay for the deteriorating economic and energy situation in Ukraine as a result of their bad relationship with Russia, which is caused because of the Association Agreement (Baudet 2016).

Reaction of the Yes-campaign

The reaction of the yes-campaign, and especially of top-politicians part of the national government could, in hindsight, be called clumsy. They reacted rather late and reluctant to the idea of a non-binding referendum in the first place. This should be seen in combination with the belief that most of the no campaign holds that democracy in The Netherlands is bankrupt. The initiative-takers exploited this reaction by claiming the government did not want them to vote, and there would be some sort of effort from the government to block the efforts of the initiative-takers. The very fact that top-EU politicians and the Ukrainian President, Petro Poroshenko, addressed the Dutch people to convince them to vote in favor of the of the referendum only added fuel to the populist fire of the no-campaign. It gave them more content to pursue their anti-EU and anti-elitist narrative.

How should we interpret these preconditions in terms of a possible Russian disinformation campaign?

By describing the context of the referendum, it became clear that they are a textbook target audience for a Russian disinformation campaign. The no-campaign is Euro-critical, anti-elitist and is already highly skeptical of established media. Instead of relying on media with qualitative and strong journalistic standards, their information filter seems to prefer

information resources that are populist and tendentious, such as Geenstijl. Since Geenstijl was part of their campaign, they only exacerbate the effect towards the voters. Their strong aversion of the EU is catalyzed by their anti-elitist views and the unhandy reaction of the both national and European political elite who were in favor of the referendum. All those civil initiatives such as Burgercomité EU, FvD, Geenpeil, OekraiNEE were established outside of the political arena because they did not feel represented anymore in the national politics. The rather right-wing conservative Geenstijl, Geenpeil and FvD are united in this referendum with the extreme left SP in their anti-EU sentiment. Stefan Meister's assertion that "the aim [of disinformation] is nothing short of paralyzing and sabotaging the decision-making processes in EU and NATO, organizations that depend on consensus, by influencing politics within the individual member states" (Meister 2016, 7) makes sense in this context. Moreover, as organizations such as Burgercomité EU have openly stated, and others such as Baudet have been accused of, they want to strain the relationship between The Netherlands and the EU with this referendum. In other words, there is a pretext for the no-campaign to adopt possible Russian disinformation as it would further the agenda of both parties. There is a clear mutual benefit, or so it would seem. In this context, it would be ideal for Russia to gain reflexive control over the vote on the referendum through disinforming the no-campaign, who in their turn would have influence on the target audience. In line with Thomas' thought; Russian disinformation would have to influence the information resource, in this case the no-campaign (Thomas 2004 240-241). Since the no-campaign and its followers are generally part of the traditional target group of Russian disinformation, it would not be hard to by-pass their information filter. Alexander Pechtold –parliamentary leader of D66, a political party in favor of the yes-vote- described the attitude of the no-campaign as follows: "Recently I have the feeling that the no-campaign trusts Moscow more than Brussels and The Hague." (Pechtold 2016). The comment seems at least true for the no-campaign's attitude towards information gathering. In fact, the objective –the referendum- and the context for achieving reflexive control is there. The traditional target groups for Russian disinformation are there, and they have already adopted the argumentation usually used by Russian disinformation. Therefore, they have a weak information filter on beforehand. This gives a strong incentive to Russia to conduct a disinformation campaign.

PART III: How did Russian disinformation tools influence the no-campaign?

In this part, we will provide empirical evidence on how Russian disinformation has attempted to disinform the Dutch public, -the decision-makers- through the initiative takers of the no-vote, -the information resource- of the Dutch referendum on the European-Ukrainian Association Agreement, the decision-making process. By attempting to disinform the no-campaign as an information resource Russia wanted to confuse the Dutch public and gain reflexive control over their vote. Russian information warfare theoreticians such as Turko and Prokhozhev consider this one of the most threatening situations of information security for a country, because it can alter their geopolitical position (cfr. supra; Thomas 2004, 254-255). In this main chapter, we will demonstrate how Russian disinformation has tried to influence the consciousness and ideas of the no-campaign. Special attention will go to how disinformation tools become visible through what the no-campaign publishes. We will do so by analyzing the content produced by the no-campaign on their websites, news outlets and social media. In order to structure this part, we will adhere to the concept of disinformation that we defined in Part I: First, we will analyze how Russian disinformation and state media has fed the different arguments and narratives of the no-campaign and influenced their consciousness with publications of Russian state media RT and SputnikNews. We will provide trends and examples of disinformation that supported the main arguments of the no-campaign described in Part II, published by Russian state media for the duration of the campaign. We aim to show Russian disinformation attempted to influence the no-campaign. Second, we will look at a selection of the most salient examples of disinformation reproduced by the no-campaign, structured according to the tools of disinformation described in Part I. Linked back to the theory from Part I, this chapter ultimately aims to certify how the no-campaign's critical information filter has been bypassed with certain Russian disinformation narratives. How the Dutch no-campaign has adopted those narratives and how they then set out to use the same tools Russian disinformation. This research will not be exhaustive, and only a fraction of the examples found during research can be presented in this dissertation. The aim is to discern how Russian disinformation has gotten through by presenting the most significant and representative findings.

In order to keep the bibliography separated from the large amount of primary sources used in this chapter, the references to primary sources in Part III can be found in Annex 1.

RUSSIAN STATE MEDIA

How has RT and Sputnik supported the main arguments of the no-campaign?

In order to analyze how certain Russian narratives have been taken over by the no-campaign, we will first observe where the main arguments put forward by RT and Sputnik News coincide with those of the no-campaign and where they differ. One of the most powerful assets available to the disinformation campaign on the referendum were the already established negative narratives on Ukraine, the Ukrainian government, the Euromaidan-protests and the unrest in Donbas region that were targeted at a European audience to confuse the public opinion. RT and Sputnik could now use those established disinformation narratives that they had been publishing since 2014 and could continue to build on them with the added purpose of interfering in the decision-making of the referendum in the Netherlands. Especially since one of the target audience's -the no-campaign- main arguments is the opposition to a conflict with Russia or to a treaty with an unstable country.

We will assess to what extent RT and Sputnik have used this argument as well as how the EU is portrayed. In addition we will discern if RT and Sputnik affirm the image of an undemocratic yes-campaign's and if they exploit the fear of Ukraine joining the EU as a member-state. In addition, we will look at how they portray the Ukraine in economic terms. It should be noted that the selection of RT and Sputnik is will be concise, just to illustrate that Russia is pushing certain narratives, and those two media outlets, although they have the highest view count, merely scratch the surface of the very decentralized network of media outlets engaged in Russian disinformation available on the internet. Negative reporting on Ukraine from Russian state media does not prove that it is aimed at the no-campaign in the Netherlands, not even when they are pushing the same type of arguments. Therefore, we will focus on articles that directly connect to the Dutch referendum or the AA. These articles come closest to demonstrating that they are targeted at the no-campaign, aside from strengthening RT and Sputnik's general anti-EU narrative. The research period runs from September 28 2015, the day the referendum collected enough votes until April 6 2016, the day of the referendum.

Geopolitical treaty and fear of conflict

Articles published by RT and Sputnik have tried to connect and associate their negative narrative on Ukraine to the Dutch referendum along arguments analogue to those of the no-campaign. In this part, we will demonstrate how the geopolitical impact of the treaty, the exploitation of fear of confrontation with Russia, the focus on the political instability of the country and the alleged prominence of extreme right political groups in Ukraine is featured in RT and Sputnik during the period of the campaign.

RT uses titles such as *"Ukraine is a moral and political black hole on the brink of collapse",* to start off an article that discusses the reasons why Dutch people would vote no on the upcoming referendum. Not only is the title far from the truth, it is marketed on the Dutch

people and it is meant to sketch the landscape of the Referendum for unwitting non-Dutch readers. The article tries to discredit the ideas of the yes-campaign, creating an atmosphere as if the yes-campaign is not telling you everything: "[Officials of the Dutch government have] also been told to drop rhetoric on sensitive issues like security concerns, and to avoid focusing on the Russian government's interests in Ukraine." (RT 2016a). The sole focus lies on the military cooperation articles in the AA, and just like the no-camp they voice this might bring tensions with Russia (RT 2016a). Another example that focuses on the alleged geopolitical expansion is titled: *"How EU and NATO exploited Ukraine to serve their own geopolitical goals"* (RT 2016b). Not only is the sovereignty of Ukraine completely negated here, -as if they have no say into this agreement and there is no public support- the EU and NATO are named in this article as if they are organizations that are one and have a common goal as well, while this is not the case (RT 2016i). This blurs the lines between the goals of those organizations which is then used to imply NATO and the US will get involved in Ukraine because of the AA (RT 2016b). Alternatively, Sputnik contributed an article *"The Dutch end up paying the price for supporting the Maidan coup – German Media",* about an art-heist that happened in the Netherlands in 2005. The stolen art is kept hostage in Ukraine and this would end up costing up to 50m EUR, in fact only 5m EUR, to the Dutch payer. This adds to the idea of Ukraine being an unsafe country. Moreover, Sputnik feigns in the title that the German Media calling Maidan a coup. The reader picks this up subconsciously as this is not the essence of this article, the stolen art is. The title also makes a causal connection between the Euromaidan protests happening in Ukraine and the fact that the stolen art ended up in the hands of Ukrainian ultranationalists, yet it does not provide any evidence for that. (Sputnik 2016a). Finally, the "German Media" wrongly quoted by Sputnik was *Die Junge Welt*, a Marxist newspaper that is not representative of the German media.

Within the theme of stability of Ukraine and fear of geostrategic games, one issue received more attention than any other: the reporting on the MH17 developments. As MH17 is a national tragedy for the Dutch, and it happened because of the conflict in Ukraine, it is a powerful narrative to not only remind the Dutch how getting involved in an unstable Ukraine might affect their nation, but also to sow doubt about who is responsible for the disaster. Possibly their future AA-partner, Ukraine, is the culprit. Especially RT dedicated a lot of articles to it. RT's reporting was heavily based on the shortcomings of the Dutch investigative reports. Instead of focusing on what is known, most titles induced doubt (RT 2016e). When it came to the ideals of a balanced message, Dutch media might have made the mistake to give Russian officials a platform in this case, as they are a possible suspect themselves. RT for instance, quotes an interview De Volkskrant conducted with the deputy head of Rosavia, Oleg Storchevoy (RT 2016c). The same Storchevoy in other articles claims Russia provided radar data and satellite images but that they have been ignored (RT 2016d). However, it is omitted that these radar images had been proven to be fabricated. Russia has contradicted itself on multiple occasions with evidence it provided towards the MH17 tragedy (Higgins 2016). Furthermore, RT featured a report from Almaz-Antey, the manufacturer of the missile system

used to down MH17, that looked to discredit the Dutch report more than present its own findings (RT 2016f). Interestingly enough, as soon as the Dutch report was presented, the previous Russian stance that it was doubtful if a BUK missile had shot down MH17 in the first place, was abandoned. Instead, the attention was shifted on whether it was a Ukrainian or Russian BUK-missile system who shot it down. They combined this with disregarding the actual perpetrator who launched or provided the missile altogether, claiming Ukraine had the final responsibility to close their airspace, but they didn't (RT 2016f; RT 2016g). The MH17 reporting by RT was highly suggestive and selective, and came with little evidence aimed to inform the reader. It rather seemed to aim at confusing, muddying the waters more and make the public doubt, while suggesting Ukraine might have done it themselves. Finally, the Dutch MP's Omtzigt and Van Bommel are featured in an RT article, asking questions about the Dutch investigation that the primary radar data is not available to the researchers (RT 2016h). In combination with the argument that the Russian radar data has been ignored, the strategy could be to make the reader believe this is a cover-up, and Ukraine has done this, as Russia is open with their information and Ukraine is not.

A stepping stone to EU-membership

Interestingly, RT and Sputnik do not mention the argument of the AA being a stepping-stone for Ukraine to join the EU, even though this is a major argument for the no-campaign. On the contrary, Sputnik for instance stresses the fact that EU-elites turned their back on Ukraine. It is implied that the elites wanted Ukraine to become a member, but now that such statements would agitate the Dutch no-vote they abandon Ukraine (Sputnik 2016b). The argument is made that the EU instrumentally uses Ukraine, but is not a "true friend" and does not truly want to further the welfare of the country (Sputnik 2016b). A possible explanation why this argument does not coincide with the no-campaign might be found in the general narratives of RT and Sputnik. The EU-membership stepping-stone argument could give the impression that the EU is attractive to Ukraine, which would play against an overarching narrative of RT and Sputnik, namely fostering anti-EU sentiment and showing the EU isn't doing well, and that the Dutch referendum is a symptom of this (Sputnik 2016f).

No benefits for the Dutch or corrupt Ukrainian economy

The economic argument put forward by Sputnik and RT claims the AA does not benefit the average citizen. It would only benefit the oligarchs on the Ukrainian side, and multinationals and elites in Europe. RT uses titles such as "*Ukraine-EU agreement 'George Soros road to nowhere' – Max Keiser"* It will "flood the EU with Monsanto's GM "food"" (RT 2016k). The article is illustrative for RT's point of view and portrays the AA as if it is a personal project of George Soros, an American-Hungarian billionaire who is often featured in anti-globalist conspiracy theories. Soros is also the owner of an organization that funded the yes-campaign for this referendum. Although Soros undoubtedly has interests in this agreement, it is preposterous to present it as if it is his private project, or that the EU and Ukraine would bend their policies to his will. This article cultivates the aversion of the no-campaign towards the

economic elite, and it feeds its populist base. The prediction that this would lead to a flood of GMO products in the EU would play well with the extreme left parties such as Van Bommel's SP.

Another example where Russian media are reporting diametrically opposed to the no-campaign's arguments can be found in an article on Yuriy Kosyuk, a Ukrainian agriculture tycoon. Kosyuk got "duped by the agreement" because there are quota on the export of chicken to the EU. This means only 1,3% of his production could be exported to the EU (Sputnik 2016c). In contrast, the no-campaign in the Netherlands portrays the image that the Netherlands will be flooded with "plofkippen", a catchy Dutch word for extremely fast grown chicken of low quality meat (Geenstijl 2016a). The Sputnik article continues and claims that there will be no economic growth in Ukraine, which is repeated a couple of times in other articles (Sputnik 2016c; Sputnik 2016d; Sputnik 2016e). Finally, Sputnik and RT also addressed the issue of corruption, and just before the referendum took place, the Panama Papers were released. This exposed tax-evasion of high-ranked politicians all over the world and reporting by RT focused heavily on Petro Poroshenko's involvement in tax-evasion while at the same time reporting about the Dutch reaction on this development, days before the referendum (RT 2016j).

Reaction and agenda of the elites

Lastly, Russian media and the no-campaign have the narrative of backdoor elite decisions and an undemocratic EU agenda in common. The reactions of the yes-campaign are used to reinforce the feeling of elitist and undemocratic policies. One of those reactions was made by the President of the European Commission Jean-Claude Juncker who, in an attempt to temper the fear of the no-campaign that Ukraine would join the EU as a member state, stated Ukraine will not become a member. Sputnik reported this as follows: "the words by President of the European Commission Jean-Claude Juncker that Ukraine will not be able to become a member of the EU in the next 20-25 years, has unveiled the truth the West concealed and ignored" (Sputnik 2016g). Again Sputnik portrays the EU as an unreliable partner. The Dutch and Ukrainian government are also portrayed as if they want to downplay the importance of the referendum until they could no longer ignore it (RT 2016l; Sputnik 2016h).

THE NO-CAMPAIGN

Now that we have demonstrated the attitude of RT and Sputnik during the campaign, we will show how the no-campaign was influenced by, and made use of, Russian disinformation tools. Primarily we will assess to what extent they used the tools of disinformation described in Part I themselves, as well as discern which tools of disinformation returned most frequently and which ones had the best effect. By establishing that the no-campaign's narratives are more or less in line with those of Russia, we will now provide examples proving that the critical information filter of the no-campaign was breached by Russian disinformation sources, and that Russian state media is used as if they hold the same journalistic standard as domestic Dutch journalism. Afterwards, we will analyze the no-campaign for the usage of tools of disinformation without necessarily relying on a direct visible link for each story with Russian media. Instead we will see how these tools have influenced their reporting and arguing in line with Russian disinformation tools. We will assess the three initiative takers of Geenpeil: Burgercomité EU, Forum voor Democratie with Thierry Baudet and Geenstijl with Jan Roos and Bart Nijman.

Coverage of RT and Sputnik

Of the three organizations that were researched, Burgercomité EU most often directly republished Russian news websites such as RT, Sputnik and Russia Insider (Burgercomité EU 2016j; Burgercomité EU 2016k; Burgercomité EU 2016m; Burgercomité EU 2016n; Burgercomité EU 2016o; Burgercomité EU 2016p). They also juxtaposed the links to the articles in their Tweets next to the links leading to articles of established Western media (Burgercomité EU 2016l; Burgercomité EU 2016q). Therefore, Burgercomité EU indicates that they view both RT and Sputnik and established Western media as equally worthy information resources. Possibly they are unaware of the fact that the Russian state media might not be as trustworthy as Western established media. In some instances, Geenstijl also used RT as a partial source in their publications (Geenstijl 2016j), but the organizations of FvD and Geenpeil have not directly reproduced Russian state news articles from RT or Sputnik or any other known Russian state media for the duration of the campaign. A possible explanation why FvD and Geenpeil have been so prudent might be that the mainstream media was accusing the no-campaign of playing into Putin's hand, and being a mouthpiece for Russian propaganda. This might have encouraged them to be more careful and not publish it as source material. However, there is little reason to believe that the lack of actual direct reproduction of Russian state media is an indicator that they were not susceptible to it. Research below will show that other tools of disinformation did successfully breached their critical information filter.

Fake news – forgeries

One of the most widely discussed and thoroughly exposed examples of Russian forgeries during the campaign was undoubtedly the Azov-battalion video threatening The Netherlands to vote in favor of the referendum. Initially the video was picked up by established media as

well as the no-campaign and taken for the truth. However, a journalist at NRC, among others, debunked it as a fake (Smeets 2016). For an extensive research on why this video is fake, we refer to the Bellingcat report (Bellingcat 2016). Before it was exposed, the video was published by Burgercomité EU -and numerous other no-campaign outlets- and taken for truth (Burgercomité EU 2016a). While in established media the video was debunked as a forgery, Burgercomité EU had already reposted the video from Geenstijl, and they did not edit their page to adjust it once the video was uncovered as a forgery. They did link to pages questioning the authenticity of the video, but those articles left it in the middle whether the video was a fake or not. This attitude is illustrative for the whole no-campaign's approach to the video, and an article on The Post Online, based on the article of Geenstijl, captures the no-camp's attitude perfectly: "whether the video is fake or not doesn't really matter. The only thing Geenpeil wants is to put the Association Agreement up for discussion in a referendum. What The Netherlands gets back is a dubious and authorized video's from a neo-Nazi battalion of the Ukrainian army. Duly noted" (Paternotte 2016). Although the execution of the video might seem poorly done to experts on the region, or people who master the Ukrainian language, and it is widely exposed and debunked as a fake, its goal was achieved nonetheless. The video had increased the image of Ukraine infested with neo-Nazi's and extreme right elements. Increased the idea of Ukraine being an unstable state whose army is comprised of rogue military elements who are not scared of threatening The Netherlands and its citizens. It increased the image that it is in fact Ukraine who tries to meddle in their decision-making process, not Russia. Not only Burgercomité EU, but the whole no-campaign prefers to leave it in the middle whether the video is fake or not (cfr. infra). Given there is ample proof available that the video is indeed a fake, this illustrates that they consciously and instrumentally use this Russian forgery. They exploit the effect it has created on the public to further their own goal, and push the argument of Ukraine being an unstable country. Geenstijl did not change their title either once it became clear that the video was forged, and only at the end of the article they included a statement of the Ukrainian Embassy declaring the video was a fake. Instead of addressing the authenticity of the video, Geenstijl ignored the fact that the video was a forgery: "Real or fake: we now know that the Europhile yes-camp is willing to be malicious to intimidate no-voters", accusing the yes camp of voter-intimidation through this video (Geenstijl 2016b). Furthermore, Geenstijl continued to sow doubt about the film by claiming the weapons in the film might be real, even though this issue was irrelevant, given the video was already proven to be fake (Geenstijl 2016b). A follow-up video, also a forgery made by the same people released days after the first video was exposed, was retweeted by Burgercomité EU and taken for truth again. In this video, The Netherlands were yet again threatened by the Azov-battalion (Burgercomité EU 2016e). On April 4, 2016, two days before the referendum and almost three months after the video was uncovered to be a forgery, Bart Nijman continued sow doubt about the video. In an interview series for Burgercomité EU with Peter Vlemmix, Eurocritical filmmaker, Nijman said the following: "there was a video in which a couple of men with military clothing and balaclava's spoke in Ukrainian with a Russian accent or Russian with a Ukrainian accent. Vlemmix: "Nobody was able to clarify that, right?"

Nijman: “No people didn’t agree on that. People literally did not agree on that. […] The joke is, if people say they are Ukrainians with a Russian accent and people say they are Russians with a Ukrainian accent, then I think, maybe you just say this because it serves your interests. You want them to be Russians with a Ukrainian accent, or the other way around” (Burgercomité EU 2016f). More than just taking over Russian forgeries, Nijman reduces the importance of uncovering the truth to nothing by equating the question of authenticity to political affiliation. This creates an indifference and indecisiveness towards possible other Russian disinformation that might influence public opinion, and is a symptom of post-truth, which makes the target audience vulnerable to reflexive control.

Aside from this, there were other forgeries that have not been picked up as broadly as the Azov-video. Jan Roos for instance retweeted a translation of a forged letter where Viktor Hvozd, lieutenant-general in the SBU –the Ukrainian intelligence service- contacted President of Ukraine Petro Poroshenko personally with the request to conduct a mission to disrupt or alter the referendum on 6th of April involving local journalist in the Netherlands (Roos 2016a). The letter surfaced on the website of Cyber-berkut.ru, a pro-Russia Ukrainian website suspected to be a Kremlin front, and regular distributor of forgeries (Threatconnect 2016; Stopfake 2016a). It titled “Foreign Intelligence Service in Ukraine plans to disrupt the referendum in the Netherlands” (Cyber-Berkut.ru 2016). For extensive research on why the letter is a forgery we refer to Stopfake (Stopfake 2016a). Roos did not seem to be aware of this and tweets the following accompanied by screenshots of the message: “If this were any other organization, there would be security in front of the [my] door” (Roos 2016a). Roos believes it is a real threat and that implies the Dutch government is unwilling to do anything about this security issue, because the alleged threat is Ukrainian, and the underlying thought of the no-campaign is that the Dutch government is in bed with the Ukrainian government. Roos also used screenshots without referring to the original source, which is another tool used by Russian disinformation: obscuring the sources to make it harder for the audience to assess whether the information comes from a reliable source and if the information is correct or not. When asked by Twitter users where he got the information from, Roos did not respond (Roos 2016a).

The above forgeries both fed into the conviction of the no-campaign that Ukraine is a dangerous and unstable country that is willing to interfere into the democratic process. It combines the factor of an unstable Ukraine with their populist idea that the government tries to undermine the democratic process at all costs. Not all forgeries focus on this. The following example is aimed at the conviction that Ukraine remains as corrupt as before Maidan. The fake story claimed that the deputy-minister of Interior of Ukraine was arrested at the airport while attempting to smuggle 14million EUR out of the country. It was published by Burgercomité EU (Burgercomité EU 2016g), however debunked by Stopfake (Stopfake 2016b).

Russian forgeries seemed to have penetrated rather easily into the no-campaign. Although one of the forgeries was prominently exposed as a fake, the two other examples were not. The Azov-threat video, despite being uncovered as a fake, had achieved its goal nonetheless. The most likely reason why these forgeries initially got through the information filter is because they aimed specifically at that what the no-campaign wanted to believe: Ukraine is unstable, Ukraine is corrupt, Ukraine is infested with extreme-right elements. It is thus clear that those behind the forgeries have studied the no-campaign to learn what they are susceptible to, and acted accordingly. The reaction of the no-campaign, taking the forgeries for truth or leaving the authenticity in the middle, yet using those forgeries to affirm their beliefs, is a textbook example of reflexive control: "conveying to a partner or an opponent specially prepared information to incline him to voluntarily make the predetermined decision desired by the initiator of the action" (Thomas 2004, 237). Therefore, we can state that with this tool of disinformation Russia has successfully penetrated the no-campaign, who in their turn influenced the voter of the referendum.

Verified sources that are deliberately misinterpreted

The misinterpretation of sources -in line with the Russian point of view- can be found back frequently and extensively in the reasoning of the no-campaign. For example, Pepijn Van Houwelingen, one of the founders of Burgercomité EU, in an interview-series by his own organization, calls the events on Maidan a coup. This is in line with the Russian narrative on the events, and demonstrates they have taken over the Russian narrative. He further claims the rightful former president Yanukovich was forced out of his position (Burgercomité EU 2016b). Baudet tells a similar story of the Euromaidan events: "a coup d'état took place, the new government pushed the AA through legislation in an afternoon. Because of this, it almost instantly became clear the country was heading towards a very deep economic, political and cultural crisis, and that happened" (Montesquieu 2016). Baudet wrongly interprets historic facts. He claims it was because of the new government's approval of the AA that the country fell prey to a crisis, whereas in reality the country had fallen into a crisis already for months, when former president Viktor Yanukovich withdrew out of the AA in autumn 2013. This is what caused the public protests and consequent crisis, not the pushing of legislation by the new government. Moreover, Baudet denies Russian military intervention in Eastern Ukraine: "If Russia had seriously intervened with 20 battalions, Ukraine would not exist anymore. The whole idea that Russia invaded [Ukraine] is not true. Concerning the Russian intervention: you have to see it as a country that is deeply divided. We force it to make a choice it really can't make" (Montesquieu Instituut 2016). Baudet does two interesting things here. First, he wrongfully denies the Russian intervention in Ukraine, a surprising stance as it had been proven by multiple organizations that regular Russian military personnel was active in Eastern Ukraine and Russian military halted the Ukrainian military momentum over the separatists. Proof of this can be found, for example, in the award-winning VICE News documentary by Simon Ostrovsky "Selfie-soldiers: Russia checks in to Ukraine" (VICE News 2015). Second, Baudet connects the choice of geopolitical orientation of Ukraine to the fact that Russia

invaded the country. According to Baudet it is the EU who forced Ukraine to make a choice, hereby denying Ukraine any sovereignty or agency of its own. Thus, implicitly laying the responsibility of the Russian intervention –which he denied took place- with the European Union instead of Russia, who was the factual invading force. Similar argumentation that sows doubt about Russia's involvement in the military conflict, let alone responsibility is echoed by other organizations supporting the no-campaign.

Subtle imitations of objectivity

On the subtle imitations of objectivity, it is necessary to address Geenpeil. The initiative presented itself as a neutral organization that would campaign for a high voter turnout. It would inform the public about the possible arguments against and in favor of the referendum (Geenpeil 2016k). However, it will be demonstrated that in reality they campaigned heavily for the no-vote. Not only were all the participants of Geenpeil -Burgercomité EU, Forum voor Democratie and Geenstijl- campaigning for the no-vote, they also didn't manage to keep their campaigns separate from Geenpeil. Nevertheless spokesperson for Geenpeil Jan Roos stated multiple times they would merely run a high-turnout campaign. At the same time as being the spokesperson for the high-turnout campaign, Roos campaigned heavily for the no vote in his personal capacity. Therefore, the face of the no-vote got merged with the face of those who were merely in favor of a referendum.

The organization Geenpeil has systematically supported the no-campaign under the veil of a neutral campaign, and presented themselves as such towards the Dutch voters. An analysis of their Twitter-feed for the period of the campaign demonstrates that almost all articles tweeted and published were in fact in line with the no-campaign's argumentation. (Geenpeil 2016a; Geenpeil 2016b; Geenpeil 2016c; Geenpeil 2016d; Geenpeil 2016e; Geenpeil 2016f; Geenpeil 2016g; Geenpeil 2016h; Geenpeil 2016i; Geenpeil 2016j; Geenpeil 2016k; Geenpeil 2016l) One tweet even included an article from the highly controversial Russian-Ukrainian Vladimir Kornilov (Geenpeil 2016f; cfr. infra). He had been extensively featured by the no-campaign to propagate the point of view of the Donbas People's Republic (DNR) as a so-called neutral expert (cfr. infra). The feigning of objectivity plays an important role, but will return later in this paper under the section of co-opted experts, as they make use of this to bypass the critical information filter of the public.

Internet trolls

Although the weblog of Geenstijl has a very loyal supporter base that actively and often emotionally reacts to the articles on their website –those reacting to articles on Geenstijl call themselves 'reaguurders' and form a tight community- there is no reason to believe that internet trolls played a significant, if any part in this campaign. There might have been strong discussions on their forums, with populist tendencies, which is not unusual during a political campaign. But the usage of trolls -let alone paid Russian trolls- to suppress the opinion of others seems highly unlikely. One possible explanation for this might be that the discussions

were in Dutch, and required political and to an extent cultural affinity with The Netherlands to be able to penetrate the debate. Therefore, it would be highly problematic for Russia to try and disinform the public through this tool.

Conspiracy theories

In line with the attention that RT and Sputnik paid to MH17, the no-campaign paid a lot of attention on the investigation of the MH17-disaster. It seems they took a similar approach to the issue as RT and Sputnik (cfr. supra), and their main ideas were influenced by Russian media. Furthermore, the reporting on the disaster was often connected to the referendum, and the articles of Geenstijl give the impression that MH17 was used by the no-campaign as argumentation that Ukraine is an unstable country. During the campaign, an initial investigative report came out by the Dutch Safety Board, which lead to a lively output of publications that often included Russian disinformation. There were many different stories, and the intention of the no-campaign seemed to be to look for more questions rather than to look for answers. Therefore, their reporting on MH17 will be treated as a conspiracy theory.

There was a strong fixation of the no-campaign on the raw radar data that had not been included in the investigative report on the crash, nor had it been requested by the Dutch investigative team. The Joint Investigative Team confirmed there was no specific need for raw radar data, since it already had enough information about the flight traffic from processed radar data. However, Geenstijl demonstrated to have ignored this, and built instead on narrative demanding raw radar data (Geenstijl 2016f; Geenstijl 2016g). The argumentation implied that since the data is missing or not used, there must be some sort of cover up by the government (Geenpeil 2016i; Burgercomité EU 2016h; Geenstijl 2016c; Geenstijl 2016g; Geenstijl 2016h; Geenstijl 2016i). This is a fallacy as the conclusion does not logically follow from the premise. Alternatively, Geenstijl and Wierd Duk –a journalist and so-called expert on Ukraine (cfr. infra)- for instance reported the Russian theory that another plane might have shot down MH17 or that another plane might have used MH17 as a shield against the rocket. (Geenstijl 2016d; Duk 2016b). Geenstijl does not solely rely on Russian media, but does feature the fake radar data that was broadcasted on Rossiya 1 (Higgins 2016), as it is the core of their argumentation (Geenstijl 2016c). Wierd Duk is retweeted by Burgercomité EU when he claims “eyes are finally opening concerning #MH17 and the role of UKR” (Burgercomité EU 2016h), without constructing a coherent story. Furthermore, Geenstijl continued to build on the subject, with a plethora on different stories (Geenstijl 2016e; Geenstijl 2015f). Wierd Duk in a tweet attempted to discredit the Dutch technical research by quoting an example of Russian public diplomacy originally published by Russian state news agency TASS, that made it into the Dutch public broadcast: “Russia has pointed multiple times to the extraordinary bias of the Dutch technical investigation” (Duk 2016a). Finally, Jan Roos retweeted an article in which the president of the research council on MH17, Tjibbe Joustra, stated that a BUK-rocket was fired from territory held by pro-Russian rebels. Roos accompanied the tweet with a Dutch saying “Onderste steen” (Roos 2016b), which means as much as “we need to get to

the bottom". He thus makes clear he does not believe the information the head of the investigation presented. We believe the above example can serve as an illustration of the attitude of the whole no-campaign when it comes to critically assessing information. In conclusion, the no-campaign's critical information filter concerning MH17 is easier bypassed by Russian disnformation than by Dutch information or media. Especially if the information comes from official organizations that are part of the government, the no-campaign is very suspicious of the authenticity of this information.

We also want to mention conspiracy theories revolving around George Soros, previously mentioned by RT and Sputnik. The no-camp has a strong belief that the American-Hungarian billionaire is a powerful force that drives the AA (Burgercomité EU 2016d; cfr. supra). This conspiracy theory is closely linked to the disinformation tool of what-about-ism (cfr. infra), since the no-campaign claims the yes-campaign are puppets of Soros. The fact that an organization owned by Soros has sponsored the yes-campaign is used by the no-campaign to delegitimize their position, and creating the image of an elitist pro-EU plot (Geenstijl 2016k). It also serves to counter any criticism that portrays the no-campaign as puppets of Putin.

What-about-ism

The no-campaign made use of what-about-ism as a tool of disinformation in their campaign. For example, they push the idea that George Soros' interests in Ukraine are one of the main reasons why the AA is established, as RT had suggested earlier (cfr. supra). Taken the above in mind, what-about-ism appears with the following statement of Burgercomité EU: "why would we deem the interference of Putin worse than the interference of Soros?" and "The EU is as bad as the USA and Russia together" (Burgercomité EU 2016c). In other words, criticism on interference of Putin in the referendum is hypocrisy, because other foreign forces, such as Soros or the EU are also trying to interfere into the debate. And as Wilson described it (cfr. supra), what-about-ism has as effect that it creates moral pacifism. Other than what-about-ism the fixation of the no-campaign on the person of Soros is used to illustrate how only multibillionaires and multinational companies profit from the AA. (Burgercomité EU 2016d). Besides these recurrent examples it seems what-about-ism played a rather modest role as a tool of disinformation.

Co-opted experts

After referendum, there was international attention for the coopting of experts by the no-campaign. The New York Times published an article merely scratching the surface on the issue (Higgins 2017) after the Dutch newspaper *NRC* had published an investigative piece on it a month earlier (Heck 2017). In our own research, we will demonstrate how experts played a key role in disinforming the no-campaign and consecutively the Dutch voter. Given the subject of the referendum, a country and issue that most Dutch citizens are not well acquainted with, the effect experts had was exacerbated. We will discuss four experts who have been presented as neutral by the no-campaign, yet whose opinion proves to be biased for some, and outright problematic for others. By describing the experts below and their role in feeding the no-campaign with information, we will demonstrate they are an important tool of Russian disinformation.

Vladimir Kornilov

Vladimir Kornilov was one of the most controversial yet exposed so-called neutral expert during the campaign. We will demonstrate how he was able to successfully penetrate the Dutch debate to further the interests of Moscow. He is a Russian born Ukrainian national who grew up in Donetsk and lives now in the Netherlands. He is a strong supporter and one of the spiritual fathers of the Donetsk People's Republic (Heck 2017). In Ukraine, he had been director of the Ukrainian affiliate of the CIS-Institute, a controversial GONGO –Kornilov publicly denied the Holodomor and the SBU wanted him prosecuted for it (StopFake 2014)- that studies and promotes the interests of Russians in the Commonwealth of Independent States. Kornilov boosts his authority and expert status on the subject by claiming he is the "Director of the Centre for Eurasian Studies in The Hague". However, there is no Centre for Eurasian Studies in The Hague. No trace of it can be found back on the internet, nor in official Dutch publications of ventures and corporations. Kornilov is the director of a non-existent scientific institute for the sole purpose of adding intellectual weight and a sense of scientific neutrality to his argument. In an interview in the Dutch newspaper De Volkskrant in 2017 he even admitted the Centre for Eurasian studies does not exist (Modderkolk and Kreling 2017). However, he continues to present himself as such. Besides this, Kornilov has been contributing for years as expert to RT, RBTH, Russia Insider, Russia Direct, DNIpress and Sputnik News. In addition, he regularly featured as an expert on Ukraine for Russian state channel Rossiya 1. According to the website Inform Napalm, who investigated a hack of over 10.000 e-mails of Kirill Frolov, a former superior of Kornilov at the time he worked at the CIS-institute, Kornilov has contacts that run up until the Kremlin (Vasgri 2017).

Websites such as ThePostOnline, Geenstijl and even Nieuwsuur have portrayed him as a neutral expert during the campaign (Kornilov 2016; NOS 2016). Also, the SP, FvD and Burgercomité EU have used him as a source of expertise on multiple occasions (cfr. supra). Kornilov himself was heavily campaigning for the no-vote and can be seen as a liaison

between the no-campaign in The Netherlands and reporting for Russian media. His Twitter-feed shows he often appeared in Russian media during that period (Kornilov 2016a).

It was only after the referendum in the beginning of 2017 that several news outlets such as NRC and The New York Times named him as a Russian influencer, especially of the SP and Thierry Baudet. Others, such as The Volkskrant continued to defend Kornilov's position and casted doubt about his role in interfering in the no-campaign (Modderkolk and Kreling 2017). However, the position of The Volkskrant that Kornilov was solely handling in his own initiative is untenable for a number of reasons. First, Kornilov was the director of a non-existent institute and presented himself as such during the campaign, for which he has no explanation why he did that. Second, for years he has been featured in nearly all Russian state media aimed at a Western public and a major Russian tv-channel. Lastly, he has received a Russian honorary medal out of the hands of the Russian Minister for Foreign Affairs, Sergei Lavrov (Heck 2017), and he has built a professional career defending the Russian point of view abroad since his job at the CIS-Institute.

Not only has Kornilov himself penetrated the public debate in his capacity as so-called expert, he has also done this indirectly by influencing key figures in the no-campaign such as Thierry Baudet, Harry Van Bommel, Bart Nijman and Jan Roos. Baudet's FvD had invited Kornilov in the capacity as 'journalist' for a campaign evening in Amsterdam, but FvD noted that Kornilov cancelled due to illness (FvD, 2015). Nonetheless the willingness to invite him, the fact that Baudet follows him on Twitter (Broer 2016), and that Kornilov has interviewed Baudet (Kornilov 2015), illustrates he has successfully bypassed Baudet's information filter. In addition, Kornilov had campaigned with Van Bommel and his SP campaign (Van Bommel 2016), and Kornilov has been a source of information for Geenstijl in articles on Ukraine (Huijboom 2015).

The above shows that Vladimir Kornilov successfully bypassed the critical information filter of the no-campaign's main figures who in their turn influence the target audience, the Dutch people. Thijs Broer's quantitative Twitter analysis for the newspaper Vrij Nederland concluded that the no-campaign were not the "useful idiots" of Putin, and that just because they followed Kornilov's Twitter account, they didn't necessarily share his views or that he had informational influence over them (Broer 2016). My research above evinces in part that Broer's quantitative Twitter analysis, published days before the referendum, was flawed to determine whether the no-campaign were useful Twitter-idiots or not. Kornilov was regarded and presented as a neutral expert by, and did have influence over, the no-campaign. Moreover, much of the information presented above was known at the time of the campaign. This raises the question whether the no-campaign knowingly used people such as Kornilov, in an attempt to consciously disinform the Dutch public to further their own political goals.

Wierd Duk

Another expert who was presented as a Dutch journalist and neutral expert on the former Soviet-Union was Wierd Duk. He presents himself as 'Putin Versteher'. Based on his publications and the social-media he posted during the campaign, we assess that Duk has a strong predilection for the no-campaign. Our analysis makes us conclude that he provided the no-campaign with their own domestic co-opted expert, whose critical information filter was equally bypassed and who argued along the lines of the Russian point of view. Duk sees himself as someone who understands the point of view of Putin, and believes Putin is all too easily portrayed as the bad guy by the mainstream media. In his reports about Ukraine, Duk focuses on the ultranationalists and extreme right-wing groups (Burgercomité EU 2016i; Duk 2016f). His way of portraying Ukraine is highly selective and reminds of Russian narratives portraying Ukraine. Duk was featured in numerous information and debate evenings both by mainstream media and the no-campaign (FvD 2016c), and was invited in talk-shows on television. All too often he was presented in a neutral capacity. It is possible that Duk's opinions are entirely genuine, it is normal for experts to come to a different conclusion through academic research. However, by analyzing his Twitter-feed for the period of the campaign it becomes clear that his point of view is too much in line with the no-campaign to be considered an independent expert, and it shows he is rather susceptible to Russian disinformation. To illustrate this, some of his Tweets will be addressed. Duk engages in what-about-ism when he acknowledges the existence of Russian manufactured lies, in a string of Tweets concerning the discussed Azov-video. "Yes [there are] a lot [of Russian manufactured lies], just as there are a lot of manufactured lies about Russia" (Duk 2016c). When confronted with Russian interference in the Baltic states, Duk again uses what-about-ism: "Give me some examples of [Russian] interference in the Baltics, then I will explain you something about the ethnic position of Russians over there" (Duk 2016g). In addition, as mentioned above, Duk also engaged in the MH17 conspiracy (cfr. supra) and stated it is debatable whether or not Russia invaded Ukraine (Duk 2016d).

More interesting is how he defended the point of view of life-long RT, Sputnik and Voice of Russia contributor Dmitry Babich, who was another co-opted expert and whose appearance in the debate can be interpreted as a result of the Western journalistic need for a balanced message, which Russia tries to exploit. Babich was flown in from Moscow to Amsterdam, and presented his point of view at an information evening about Ukraine and the referendum as a political analyst (DeBalie 2016). He was presented as a "political analyst from Russia", without properly informing the public of what implications his lifelong engagement might have had on his views. Duk, who was also a guest-speaker at the debate, defended the position and argumentation of Babich, whose professional career has always revolved around defending the Russian point of view in the media. Moreover, Duk identified himself with Babich as "defenders of Putin's policy in UKR" (Duk 2016e; DeBalie 2016). When combining the above information, we believe to have demonstrated Duk shows many signs of being a co-opted expert.

Mark Almond

Another expert that was invited on an information evening by FvD was Mark Almond (FvD 2016a). He was presented as "Mark Almond (Oxford University)" (Fvd 2016a) although he is no longer a history lecturer at Oxford University. It would be more accurate to describe him as a year-long contributor to RT (RT 2016m). Moreover, Mark Almond works for the British Helsinki Human Rights Group (BHHRG), an obscure and controversial NGO that The Economist has labeled "a human rights group that defends dictators" (The Economist 2004) and the Guardian called the "PR man to Europe's nastiest regimes" (Aaronovitch 2004). However, to create authority and a sense of neutral and academic expertise, FvD chose to present him as an Oxford professor whilst omitting he works for RT and BHHRG. The expertise he brings to Dutch public attending the FvD information evening is unlikely to differ from the views he has shared on RT for years. FvD used him to feign that someone from Oxford agrees with their position (FvD 2016b). Interestingly enough, when Almond's position and integrity as 'expert' is questioned in reactions on the tweets used above, FvD does not attempt to counter these allegations. This strengthens the suspicion that FvD is aware of this, yet chooses to ignore this issue.

The ideals of a balanced message in established media

The very fact that people such as Vladimir Kornilov, Marc Almond, Dmitry Babich and Weird Duk are sought after for expertise to provide the whole spectrum of opinions confirms the disinformation theory on the abuse of the Western journalistic standard of a balanced message, and has helped those so-called neutral experts spread their message without too much suspicion. The ideals of a balanced message can be considered a catalyst for the effectiveness of the so-called experts. The knowledge of the general public on Ukraine's cultural, economic and geopolitical issues is another factor that helped in this regard. Because of the lack of general knowledge, the Dutch voters are forced to rely on the expertise of the people put forward by both the media and the respective campaigns. Some of those experts active in the no-campaign might not have had the intention to give a neutral and academic view on the issues at hand. Therefore, the responsibility lies with the campaigns and the media to correctly frame and introduce certain experts. It is our conviction that if this does not happen, the public's critical information filter is automatically bypassed as well. Despite the passing of the referendum, the problems with the idea of a balanced message persisted. An example is the article of De Volkskrant who after the referendum gave Vladimir Kornilov a platform to defend himself in an interview against the allegations made by The New York Times. Instead of doing their own research and treating the subject with a critical eye, the authors of the article left it in the middle whether the statements made by The New York Times were effectively true. It is understandable that those journalists most likely handled according to journalistic norms, and this is no attack on their work, however this example does confirm Giles' idea that the media does not know how to deal with implausible and blatant lies (Giles 2016, 38).

Conclusion

By researching the academic literature on disinformation in Part I we discerned different tools of Russian disinformation: Usage of state media such as RT and Sputnik, forgeries and fake news, verified sources that are deliberately misinterpreted, subtle imitations of objectivity, internet trolls, the abuse of the ideals of a balanced message, conspiracy theories, what-about-ism and co-opted experts. We also established that our case study, the Dutch referendum and the no-campaigners, would be the perfect victim for a disinformation campaign, as all elements to achieving reflexive control are present: the no-campaign as target audience is part of the traditional target audience of Russian disinformation, the debate surrounding the referendum provides the Russian disinformation campaign with a goal oriented effect on public opinion, and ultimately the referendum itself provides the opportunity to interfere in a decision-making process (Thomas 2004, 240-241, 254; cfr. supra).

Our empirical analysis in Part III has demonstrated that Russian disinformation tools did successfully penetrate the debate through the no-campaign. The usage of state media such as RT and Sputnik, even though the no-campaign was susceptible it, was not a prominent tool of disinformation in the campaign, as FvD and Geenpeil didn't reproduce use any articles directly. It is likely the reason for this lies with the criticism and scrutiny the no-campaign was under from the start of their campaign, claiming they were furthering Russia's geopolitical goals. Because they didn't want to exacerbate this sentiment we assume they were careful publishing Russian state media openly. All the other disinformation tools described, except for internet trolls, did play a role in manipulating the no-campaign.

The forgeries were one of the most successful and visible tools of disinformation that were used to deceive the no-campaign. Of all tools of disinformation, forgeries and fake news are also the most straightforward one. Interestingly, the exposure of the most sensational forgery, the Azov-battalion video, did not stop the no-campaign from sowing doubt about it towards their public. This confirms Giles' idea of the "unimportance of truth" (Giles 2016, 38; cfr. supra), and questions if we respond correctly to these forgeries. It also confirms that the no-campaign was never truly about objectivity. This brings us to the subtle imitations of objectivity, a disinformation tool that played an equally important role. We can state that the tool of feigning objectivity was successfully used because of two reasons. First, Geenpeil presented itself as a neutral campaign, while in fact it was not, its constituting organizations were all part of the no-campaign and they did not succeed at separating their campaigns. Second, Burgercomité EU, FvD, Geenpeil and Geenstijl presented their experts as neutral, while in fact they were not.

Conspiracy theories also played an important role in the campaign, where especially the MH17 disaster and a political elitist and capitalist plot were featured. Again, the

unimportance of truth emerged as the no-campaign sought to use the conspiracies to sow doubt in the voter rather than to look for answers. This is in line with the Russian approach to the issue. Therefore we conclude the conspiracy theories contributed as a tool of disinformation. What-about-ism as a tool of disinformation played a rather modest role. It came up when the no-camp had to defend itself from allegations of playing into Russia's cards. The argument that Soros does the same as Putin was used to paralyze criticism on the no-campaign and created a "disarming moral pacifism", confirming Wilson's views (Wilson 2015b).

Most importantly, our empirical research has demonstrated that the co-opted experts were the most influential tool of disinformation used in the debate for the Ukraine-referendum. Combined with the tool of feigning of objectivity they influenced both the no-campaign and the public. The no-campaign was made aware of this problem during the campaign, but chose to ignore it. The idea of a balanced message also played a role in allowing those experts a platform to bring their message. They were able to abuse the unfamiliarity of the Dutch people with the subject, namely Ukraine and the AA, and because the experts were presented as authoritative, they acted as a powerful catalyst in the disinformation process. Three of the four experts described had a big part of their professional career devoted to furthering the Russian cause abroad through media campaigning, yet somehow this was noticed too late, not noticed, or ignored altogether. In most cases the no-campaign chose to ignore the warning signs and present the experts as neutral as possible, against their better judgement. Because of this, Russia gained reflexive control through this tool over both the no-campaign, and the target audience of the no-campaign.

Aside from answering the research question, our research allows us to present some other findings. The results of Part II and Part III demonstrated that the critical information filter of the no-campaign was most likely already bypassed before the start of no-campaign. It was established that they belonged to the textbook target group of Russian disinformation, and that Russian state media such as RT and Sputnik had the same narratives and same arguments as the no-campaign. Because of the referendum, and the possibility for Russia to gain reflexive control over a foreign decision-making process, they were now especially targeted by a Russian disinformation campaign. Moreover, our research seems to indicate that the relationship between the no-campaign opinion-makers and Russian disinformation was mutually beneficial. It is our understanding that the no-campaign believed and wanted to believe the Russian narrative because it improved their professional lives and their ideological beliefs. That is the core strength of the Russian attempt at reflexive control and the disinformation campaign. To achieve this, the people behind the Russian disinformation campaign had undoubtedly studied their targets well, as is most convincingly demonstrated with the examples of the forgeries, that played into the convictions of the no-campaign.

Somehow, Vrij Nederland's article, which ran a Twitter analysis on the no-campaign, was partially right: Baudet and Roos are not just the useful Twitter idiots of Putin (Broer 2016). However, the article was right for the wrong reasons. What the article didn't mention, and what this research made clear, is that the no-campaign never intended to bring a correct image of Ukraine or the Association Agreement. They ultimately used the referendum and their publications in an instrumental way to strain the relationships between the EU and The Netherlands. Russia used their disinformation campaign for their own reasons, and in practice, the objectives of both parties were achieved. There was no need for collusion of the no-campaign with the Russian disinformation campaign, because the two actors, Russia and the no-campaign could act independently and instrumentally to achieve their goal. Therefore, we believe that the no-campaign, and especially those who used the referendum to strain the relationship between The EU and The Netherlands – however legitimate and democratic their beliefs against the political establishment might have been- share the responsibility for disinforming the Dutch voter in the referendum.

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