

**Nina Jankowicz:**

**HOW TO LOSE THE INFORMATION WAR: RUSSIA, FAKE NEWS, AND THE FUTURE OF CONFLICT.**

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Russian information operations, disinformation and propaganda have together become one of the most widely discussed security challenges of today. Therefore, the emergence of a number of studies, books and articles focusing on this subject is hardly a surprise. Ironically, this plenitude puts readers in a somewhat uncomfortable position since they are far too often likely to encounter new publications promising unexpected revelations, unconventional angles or even a breakthrough in disinformation research. In this context, it would be hard to blame them for a sceptical outlook on the added value of yet another book focused on this area. However, these hypothetical readers would be mistaken if these reservations caused them to miss the opportunity to read *How to Lose the Information War*. Its author – Nina Jankowicz, a Disinformation Fellow at the Wilson Centre – has successfully presented a fresh perspective in the ongoing debate. And moreover, she did so in a captivating and intriguing manner.

The key element of the book's success is the ability to move beyond the 'admiring of the problem', which describes known cases of Russian information operations, to shed light on the measures that were subsequently applied in the targeted states and how they were reflected by society. In comparison with numerous works analyzing only Russian influence operations without any in-depth analysis about how to tackle them, Jankowicz's take on the problem is quite refreshing. The book is modest in its scope and does not aim – for

the most part – to talk about everything, but maintains a narrow research focus. The core of the book is the analysis of five cases of Russian information operations or reactions to them from Central and Eastern Europe. Jankowicz describes, for instance, the case of the Bronze Soldier in Estonia in 2007 and Ukrainian activities related to the referendum on the European Union Association Agreement in the Netherlands in 2016. However, these selected cases serve as a springboard for the description and analysis of activities that were applied in the respective countries.

The author takes full advantage of field research she conducted in the region prior to the writing of this book. As she colourfully describes her own impressions of the places described, the events which took place and the interviews she conducted, the publication starts to feel like a novel. When the right tone is set, the author prefers to let her protagonists speak for themselves, using direct quotations from conversations she had. This approach makes the book very engaging and keeps the reader interested. Despite these belletrist techniques, the publication still mixes in engaging descriptions, enlightening remarks and insightful comments in the right ratios. Therefore, the reader learns not only key facts surrounding these events but also about disinformation in general, while enjoying travels throughout Central and Eastern Europe. The arguments presented are even stronger since Jankowicz proves to be determined to provide a full and nuanced picture of the case studies. This is especially visible in her repeated attempts to speak to people from 'the other side', such as editors of websites accused of spreading pro-Kremlin propaganda in the Czech Republic or government officials in Georgia who are suspected of being sympathetic to Russia. The moments when this intellectual honesty leads the author to the re-evaluation of her own positions are some of the strongest parts of the book, as this adds a great deal of persuasiveness to the other arguments presented.

The book seems to be tailored to an American audience, from the tone of the introduction and epilogue, to the frequent references to the US context. The ambition to play an active role in the expert debate in her home country is definitely worth appreciating (especially since Jankowicz proves throughout the book that she definitely has a lot to offer), but this also requires contextual knowledge that audiences outside the United States may lack. The ambition to contribute to the US debate unfortunately impacts the final chapter. Rather than utilizing the case studies analyzed throughout the book, Jankowicz brings in completely new topics (such as regulation of social media) and provides recommendations that are not that relevant outside the American context. For Czech readers, some compensation for this drawback is the fact that the book includes a chapter focused on the establishment of the Centre against Terrorism and Hybrid Threats at the Czech Ministry of the Interior. Jankowicz's non-partisan and intellectually honest reflections provide quite an interesting alternative narration on the Czech struggle with disinformation.

The publication clearly did not aim to be a purely academic work, but instead reaches out to a broader audience. However, it would benefit from a more conventional structure since it only vaguely defines its core focus. In the Introduction, for example, it claims to be interested mainly in Russian information operations, yet in certain parts of the text there is a shift to the general phenomenon of disinformation. This is the case especially in the chapter related to Poland, which mainly describes how domestic political actors utilize conspiracy theories. Similarly, her proposed solutions do not actually address Russian influence per se but are more closely related to the new information environment. This confusion is in fact quite widespread in the professional debate on disinformation and it would be beneficial for experts working in this field to be able to express more transpar-

ently which issues they are aiming to address. This is true not only for the sake of clarity in research as such, but also because this would help the general public to better understand the context and issues at hand.

The book also does not sufficiently contextualize the issue of Russian information operations. Russia is reduced to a malicious actor that is waging attacks as a means to destroy Western democracy. The causes of this behaviour are never properly analyzed and so the information war does not have clear reasons or aims; the reader is told only that this is the new reality in which we are sentenced to live. This hypothesis is a legitimate starting point that allows for observation, analysis and discussions on various measures to tackle the challenge. Which is what Jankowicz successfully does. But one should be aware that this reduction of the war to a set of procedures which does not acknowledge the overarching political level in this struggle, fails to appreciate the possibility to seek compromise and peace rather than only to win or lose.

The book *How to Lose the Information War* has some inconsistencies in its approach to the matter it aims to address. The final chapter would benefit from a stronger emphasis on the experiences of the analyzed countries and it is too tailored to a US audience. Despite these weaknesses, it should be read. The chapters on individual countries are very well researched, nuanced and not afraid to challenge pre-existing assumptions with complete intellectual honesty. The findings are presented in captivating language with the right mixture of personal experiences, quotes from interviews with experts, and remarks from the author which effectively engage the reader. As the combination of a well-researched and captivatingly written book is often rare, this book should not be missed by anyone interested in Russian information operations or disinformation.

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