

Russian Disinformation Tactics in the MH17 Case

The Role of Meta-Inoculation



When Malaysian Airlines Flight MH17 was shot down on 17 July 2014 over eastern Ukraine, killing 298 civilians, Russian authorities and affiliated information outlets immediately launched a coordinated campaign of obfuscation. Rather than committing to a single narrative, they **flooded the information space with dozens of conflicting “alternative” explanations**, making it exceedingly difficult for audiences—especially those lacking time or expertise—to verify claims. The objective was not to persuade the world of a particular false version, but to **generate confusion and cynicism** about the availability of any truth at all.

The initial reaction from Russian-backed militants suggested **admission and even**

celebration—an online declaration that Ukrainian aircraft had been downed. Once it became clear that a civilian jet had been destroyed, the narrative changed abruptly to denial, deletion of prior statements, and the production of **numerous contradictory accounts**. These ranged from claims that **corpses were “not fresh”** (implying the crash site had been staged) to conspiracies that Ukraine had intended to shoot down President Putin’s plane. The Kremlin also distributed unsupported allegations that Ukrainian fighter jets fired on the aircraft or that a bomb had been planted on board. Each version lacked credible evidence but served the same purpose: **burying the established facts under a pile of misleading possibilities**.



This technique—**blaming others**, particularly Ukraine and “the West,” and alleging **false-flag operations**—has since been repeatedly applied to more recent war crimes. Russian officials denied the reality of massacres in **Bucha**, insisting that bodies had been moved after liberation to frame Russia. Similar toolkits appeared following the **Mariupol maternity hospital bombing** and the **Kakhovka dam destruction**, where the Kremlin’s disinformation machine again shifted rapidly from denial to **accusations that Ukrainians had staged the scenes themselves**. The goal is **narrative overload**: once audiences encounter enough mutually exclusive stories, they may give up trying to discern the truth.

Lie about MH17: Rehearsal of the Russian full-scale propaganda war

On July 17, 2014 Russia fired a BUK 9M83 surface-to-air missile from the temporarily occupied territories in Ukraine to shoot down Malaysia Airlines flight MH17,

killing all 298 civilians on board. The Netherlands and Australia have [established](#) that Russia is responsible for the deployment of the Buk launcher that brought down flight MH17 and that this act constituted a violation of international law. Since that day, pro-Kremlin disinformation outlets have spread dozens of different disinformation narratives to distract from the fact that Russian authorities are responsible for these murders. The EU Member States have stated – no Russian disinformation operation can distract from these basic facts, established by a court of law.

As if the annexation of Crimea and the murder of 298 civilians was not enough, on February 24, 2022 invasion Russia has started an unprovoked and outright imperialistic war against Ukraine.

'We warned you – don't fly over our skies'

For more than ten years, Russian authorities have tried their best to hide their

connections to the murder of 298 innocent civilians aboard flight MH17 behind a veil of lies and denial. However, their initial reaction to the downing of the aircraft was one of triumph, celebration, and conceit, as the perpetrators were not yet aware that they had just shot down a civilian aircraft carrying almost 300 people.

Minutes after downing the MH17 flight, Igor Girkin, self-proclaimed ‘Minister of Defence’ of the so-called ‘People’s Republic of Donetsk’, [proudly declared](#), sharing pictures of the smoke from the downed aircraft: ‘We warned you – don’t fly over our skies’.



Shortly afterwards, Girkin attempted to delete the message and pretend he had never said any such thing. On 17 November 2022, the District Court of The Hague found Girkin along with another Russian national, Sergey Dubinskiy, and Ukrainian national Leonid Kharchenko [guilty](#) and sentenced them to life in prison for causing Flight MH17 to crash and for the murder of the 298 persons on board. The court also ordered them to pay more than €16 million in compensation to the victims. Of course, these criminals were tried in absentia and so they ignored the sentences. However, the

fact of the verdict remains. Their guilt was proven beyond reasonable doubt.

Years later, during Russia’s full-scale invasion of Ukraine, Girkin rebranded himself as an ultra-nationalist military commentator. He furthermore proved his bloodthirst by openly criticising Russian [tactics](#) during the invasion as too mild and humane. Girkin did not criticise the fact Russia was invading a sovereign country, but that they were doing it wrong. Effectively, he was criticising Putin as a failure. And, in Putin’s Russia, that is a big no-no. So, Girkin landed in a Russian

prison with a four-year sentence for ‘inciting extremism’, instead of a life sentence for MH17’s destruction as ruled by a Dutch court.

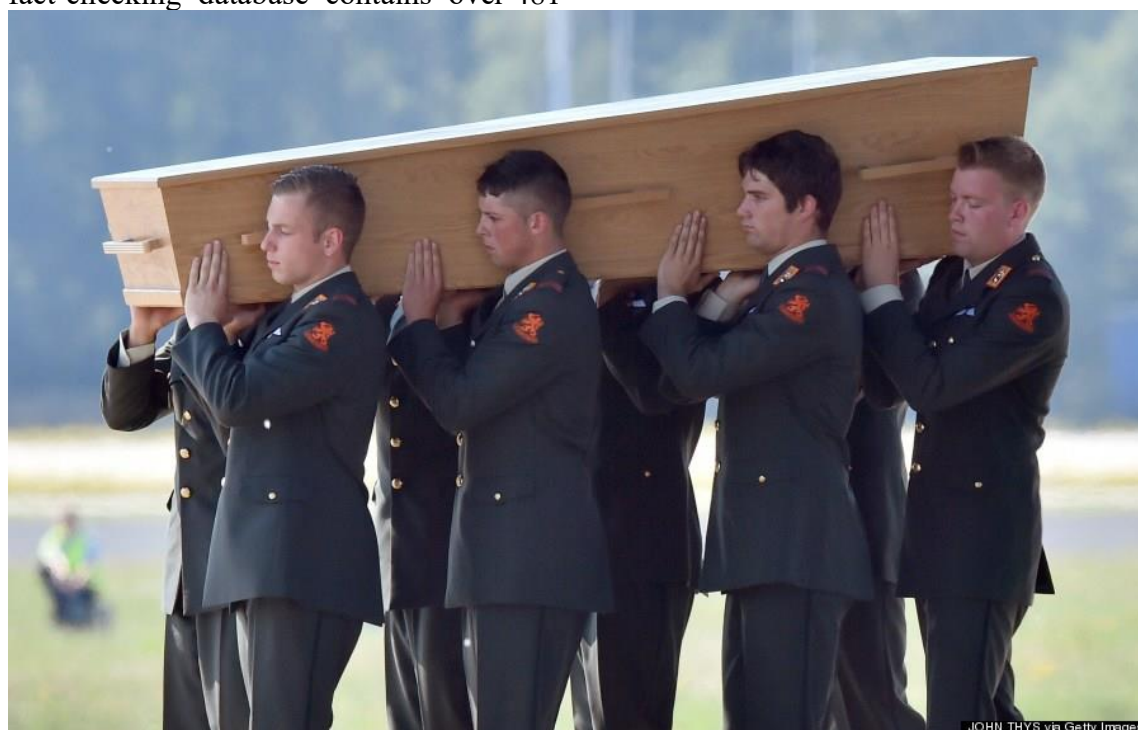
The first lie: we never said we did it

The first lie – ‘We never said we did it!’ – is a typical knee-jerk reaction when making a fatal mistake.

In the MH17 case, the Kremlin decided to stick with lies and denial. The EU-wide fact-checking database contains over 481

cases of disinformation on MH17. A distinctive feature of the history of lies in this case are the ferocious attempts to create ‘alternative versions’ of the tragedy.

Pro-Kremlin outlets used this trick from the MH17 playbook after the Bucha massacre. First, the Kremlin denied that it happened at all, then it denied any Russian involvement, and finally it blamed others and spread conspiracy theories about the possible perpetrators.



The second lie: it was staged

On 18 July 2014, less than 24 hours after the downing of MH17, Mr Girkin, now attempting to hide his initially triumphant grin, claimed, ‘According to people who were collecting corpses after the crash, a large share of the corpses were “not fresh” – people had died several days earlier.’

This statement is not only a hideous lie and a humiliation of the hundreds of people who lost their loved ones in the attack.

Also after the Bucha massacre in Ukraine, through April 2022, pro-Kremlin outlets offered reasons why Ukraine would stage such a gruesome fake performance using actors or corpses, reverting to MH17 tactics again.



The third lie: they did it themselves

Later on the day of the tragedy, 17 July 2014, several Russian outlets reported that Ukrainian forces had intended to shoot down the aircraft of the President of Russia.

A source in Russia's Federal Air Transport Agency, requesting anonymity, told the Interfax news agency that the target of the Ukrainian missile might have been the aircraft of the President of Russia. According to the source, the Russian 'Air Force One' and the Malaysian Boeing were near each other at one point and flew in the same air corridor.

Russia's Air Force One is a completely different type of aircraft and with only distantly similar red-white-blue livery and followed entirely different routes. The

claim is one of the oldest and also one of the most persistent.

After the Russians blew up the Kakhovka dam in June 2023, the Kremlin was quick to accuse Ukraine of the destruction of the dam, despite the fact that it was located in territories then occupied by Russia. Again, these accusations recycled MH17 experiences. Inevitably, Russian commentators also arrived at the conclusion that the 'West' was behind this attack([opens in a new tab](#)), despite mounting evidence to the contrary([opens in a new tab](#)). Some pro-Kremlin information manipulators even sought to draw parallels with the Bucha atrocities and Nord Stream pipeline explosions([opens in a new tab](#)), while others sought to ridicule Ukraine by depicting the attack on the dam as a huge miscalculation([opens in a new tab](#)) by its own armed forces.



REMKO DE WAAL via Getty Images



Blaming Ukraine and the West

On 19 July 2014, two days after the tragedy, a Twitter account belonging to a certain ‘Carlos, a Spanish dispatcher’ working for air traffic control at Kyiv Airport, claimed that two Ukrainian fighter jets had downed the aircraft. It was quickly proven that there is no ‘Carlos’ working for Ukrainian air traffic control and the Twitter account was deleted. Still, the known pro-Kremlin disinformation state-outlet RT pushed the narrative about Ukrainian air-to-air missiles as recently as 22 June 2021, suggesting that the fighter jet version had not yet been discarded.

Mainstream pro-Kremlin outlets also focussed their attention on a claim that the Buk system in question was operated by Ukrainian forces. Such claims were

frequent – here is an example from early June 2021 from the Russian state outlet RT. Ukraine’s Armed Forces also operate Buk installations, but all individual missiles were accounted for after the tragedy.

The Kremlin also claimed that there was a bomb hidden on board the aircraft. It tried suggested that the tragedy was beneficial to Ukraine and, hence, following the principle of ‘Cui Bono’ – who benefits – that Ukraine is responsible. And of course, the Kremlin disinformation machine also claimed that the shooting down of MH17 was a false flag operation and a devious scheme to discredit Russia. The EU fact-checking database on disinformation contains numerous cases where pro-Kremlin outlets suggest ‘the real perpetrators’ behind MH17: British intelligence, the Dutch, the Americans and Western Elites. And of course, the Ukrainians.

These manipulative tactics were taken off the shelf again when the Russians invaders committed their next war crime: shelling Maternity Ward No. 3 in Mariupol, taking multiple innocent lives, including children. After first denying their responsibility, they shifted towards claiming that the maternity ward had been taken over by the Azov battalion who ordered all pregnant women, medical nurses, and other personnel out of the building. Mentioning the Azov battalion was a clear attempt to distract from the crime by invoking the Kremlin's favoured [Nazi](#) regime narrative.

None of the claims are supported by any legitimate sources. The real [evidence](#) of the Dutch court was completely ignored.

Reality

In November 2022, the court in The Hague sentenced three of the four suspects in the MH17 criminal case to life imprisonment for their role in the shooting down of the Malaysia Airlines plane over eastern

Ukraine on 17 July 2014. The fourth suspect was acquitted by the court.

Igor Girkin, Sergei Dubinsky, and Leonid Khartchenko received life in prison. The charges against Oleg Pulatov were not considered by the court to have been legally and convincingly proven. The prosecution had demanded life imprisonment for all four suspects.

Pro-Kremlin outlets were very quick to dismiss the decision, calling the case legally invalid, blaming Ukraine, and questioning the integrity of the Dutch legal system. All reactions were perfectly in line with all other narratives Russian outlets have been spreading to deflect all blame for this massacre.

Seeing the Kremlin use the same tactics and narratives to deflect blame for many other atrocities since the downing of MH17 only confirms their brutal zeal to achieve their goals. This unfortunately means that we have not seen the latest of their vicious acts and dirty tricks.



More atrocities

Almost four years after the full-scale invasion of Ukraine started, we see that Russia used the downing of MH17 as a dress rehearsal for a number of disinformation narratives and manipulation tactics. This unprovoked war has caused thousands of casualties in Ukraine. The Kremlin tries to justify this with numerous farfetched disinformation narratives, but some of Russia's atrocities received special pro-Kremlin disinformation treatment, as did MH17.



The war crimes committed by Russians soldiers in Bucha; the bombings of the theatre, maternity hospital, and other civilian targets in Mariupol; the bombing of the Nova Kakhovka dam; and the levelling of the city of Bakhmut are only the starkest examples among countless others.

Let's look at how pro-Kremlin outlets have been using similar disinformation tactics and narratives during the war against Ukraine as they did with obfuscating the truth about MH17.



Meta-Inoculation Theory

Research on **inoculation theory** shows that exposing people to a small “dose” of misinformation alongside refutations can strengthen their resistance to persuasion. However, recent scholarship demonstrates that one can also **weaponize this model in reverse**—a phenomenon known as **meta-inoculation**. That approach encourages individuals to distrust corrective information altogether by insisting that **any attempt to expose disinformation is itself manipulative** and by appealing to slogans such as “think for yourself” without providing the tools to do so.

Meta-inoculation does not need to offer evidence; instead, it **casts doubt on the very process of fact-checking**, making citizens feel that all sides are lying. This aligns exactly with Russia's MH17 strategy: present many contradictory stories, then **frame truth-seeking mechanisms (courts, international investigators, media) as biased**. Ultimately, audiences may conclude that **“no one really knows what happened”**—a perfect result for the perpetrator, who then escapes accountability in the fog of radical skepticism.

Conclusion

*MH17 marked a **dress rehearsal** for Russia's large-scale wartime propaganda. Its approach relies not on convincing the world of a single fiction, but on **destroying shared reality** itself. By combining narrative saturation (many "truths") with meta-inoculation messaging (distrusting any verification), Russian propaganda cultivates a public mindset of **nihilism**: truth is unknowable, institutions are corrupt, and therefore **no one has the right to judge Russia's actions**.*

*Understanding these tactics is essential for designing counter-strategies. Without **proactive inoculation** and rapid evidence-based communication, audiences become vulnerable to the intended psychological outcome: **confusion, exhaustion, and surrender to apathy**.*
