

Bingecast: Denise Simon on Russian Misinformation Tactics

<https://mindmatters.ai/podcast/ep119>

Austin Egbert:

Greetings I'm Austin Egbert, Director of Mind Matters News. You're listening to another bingecast where multiple episodes are combined into a single program. This week, we talk with Denise Simon about Russian efforts in artificial intelligence, cyber warfare, and misinformation. Enjoy.

Announcer:

Welcome to Mind Matters News where artificial and natural intelligence meet head on. Here's your host, Robert J. Marks.

Robert J. Marks:

When one thinks of warfare, thoughts of killing people and breaking things come to mind, but there are also psychological and other components to war. Our guest is Denise Simon. She is a senior research and intelligence analyst for foreign and domestic policy for numerous flag officers and intelligence organization. Her blog Founder's Code is considered by many to be the place to go to for ahead of the curve information. And we'll provide a link to Founder's Code on the podcast notes.

Robert J. Marks:

She also hosts the Denise Simon's Experience, which is a podcast with interviews and the Denise Simon's Experience is something to listen to, and we are about to experience Denise Simon.

Robert J. Marks:

Denise. Welcome.

Denise Simon:

Thank you, sir.

Robert J. Marks:

Before we talk about some of the psychological aspects of something you taught me, which was the Gerasimov doctrine, there was recently a four day drill held in December 2019 in the Gulf of Oman in the Indian ocean and the participants in these war games, I believe you can call them war games, were not exactly friends to the United States. They included Russia, Iran and China, and since Mind Matters and our website and podcast deals a lot with artificial intelligence, let me ask you, is any military AI or robotics a part of this war games?

Denise Simon:

We would have to assume so. It would be irresponsible if we didn't, but we also need to remember too, that probably 90% of what comes out of the Kremlin, comes out of Moscow, is not exactly the truth. Analysts, the Pentagon, and I would say the Defense Intelligence Agency, all have to strip away what they think may be superfluous to events and what they know, they wouldn't necessarily have to inject into the events.

Denise Simon:

But I would argue that those military drills, especially because it included China with Russia, they do collaborate and they do collaborate also on artificial intelligence. So, the short answer is we would have to assume, yes,

Robert J. Marks:

My goodness. I know that China's actually sunk \$30 billion into development of AI, promises to be the leader in artificial intelligence in a couple of years. We know that part of that's going to be militarily applicable, so that's kind of chilling.

Robert J. Marks:

Let's talk about a different aspect. As I mentioned, war is not all about killing people and breaking things. There's psychological components to it also. Dr. Joseph Goebbels was the Reich Minister of Propaganda of Nazi Germany during World War II, and he used propaganda very powerfully. Modern cyber media amplifies our ability to mess with people's minds and interfere with the nation's business. This looks to be a part of Russia's modern warfare strategy. It'll include a lot of media information just exactly as you mentioned. I learned from you that the strategy was first published out loud by a Russian army general, Valery Gerasimov. I practiced that word, Denise, but I goofed it up. Gerasimov. And the way I remembered, remember Asimov? Isaac Asimov, the science fiction writer. I can say Asimov, but just putting the 'Ger' in front of it is difficult.

Robert J. Marks:

Anyway, Russian army general, Valery Gerasimov. There I did... Gerasimov. Tell us about his so-called Gerasimov doctrine, which is actually published, and we know about.

Denise Simon:

He has, and that was in the early 2000s and then he did a second iteration. I think he did the second iteration at the behest of the Kremlin because Putin has a very, and at the time too, Medvedev, had their own agenda on geopolitics and geo ambitions across the globe.

Denise Simon:

I think they probably went back to dress him off, along with another fellow by the name of Yevgeny Primakov, and they used a second iteration by what was published, to update if you will, applications for what would necessarily be called large scale war.

Denise Simon:

Now the word 'war', we have our own definition, but we have to make sure that we understand their definition, meaning Russia's definition. And it could be very different, because in their world it could be just conflict or it could be ambitions that may be met with some countermeasure aggression.

Denise Simon:

I say that because we have obviously the annex of Crimea, we have the conflict going on in Ukraine today. During the Bush administration, we experienced the matter of Russia going into Georgia. We have Russia all over Latin America. I mean, they own Cuba and yet Cuba owns Venezuela. You see what I'm saying?

Denise Simon:

It's not an easy answer. It's hybrid. It's asymmetrical of what their mission is and how Gerasimov is giving an outline to Russia for being ready to have superiority among their adversaries across the world.

Robert J. Marks:

I'm quoting from the article. By the way, Denise did a wonderful article for Mind Matters News, which we will also link in the podcast notes concerning the Gerasimov Doctrine and other Russian doctrines.

Robert J. Marks:

But here's some of the things you mentioned that were part of the Gerasimov Doctrine, which actually correspond to artificial intelligence. I've heard about this in the news. I just never thought it was actually a doctrine that came from Russia itself.

Robert J. Marks:

This includes false or fake stories and publications, cyber threats, corruption, ridicule, trolling. All of these are things which are done through the cyber media. This is kind of chilling. They also talk about things such as the cyber threats, and I suppose that corresponds to kidnapping websites where you have to play ransom in order to get your website released. This is all part of the Gerasimov Doctrine I believe I learned from you. Is that correct?

Denise Simon:

Yes. There is a building in St. Petersburg and the building was at the time called... It was occupied by a business that one of Putin's best buddies and oligarch had created called the Internet Research Agency. The Internet Research Agency paid Russian employees, generally the younger generation, about \$600, \$700 a month. Their only job was to troll the United States headlines and then put out fake articles, put out fake posts on social media in order to cause chaos, and they did that very well, and they continue to do that.

Denise Simon:

Now they're going to use a different model because we have now found out about the Internet Research Agency, which by the way, was in the Robert Mueller investigative report. But they don't always necessarily have operations in Russia. They may hire a center in Romania. They may use Bulgaria or Belarus. So, if you're looking for some kind of other operations that might be in St Petersburg, or even in Moscow, it may not be there. They're going to use proxy servers and proxy locations in order to carry these activities out, otherwise known as active measures.

Robert J. Marks:

My goodness. We've come a long way since Joseph Goebbels had his propaganda from World War II, haven't we?

Denise Simon:

Well, it's a new art form.

Robert J. Marks:

It is a new art form. What are some of the other things going on? This is primarily disrupting media with fake news. What other sort of things are they doing?

Denise Simon:

They will create fake companies in the United States. They will hide money and people in the United States. In fact, they just found three houses in Atlanta that are part of money laundering, but that's a topic on the sidebar.

Robert J. Marks:

Wow. So you do investigative sort of stuff also. This is money laundering through Russia, is that correct?

Denise Simon:

Real estate is one of the largest most successful ways to have front companies and do money laundering and other pretty nasty things like weapons trafficking and so forth. They do it through fake people and fake things in real estate. Now interestingly enough, Miami is a very big location as is New York and London. So yeah, it's a whole nother realm of responsibilities and accountabilities that our State Department has to stay on top of as the Defense Intelligence agency does.

Robert J. Marks:

You mentioned the Mueller report, which was a special prosecutor who was tasked into looking whether or not Donald Trump was encouraging the Russians to tamper with the US elections, and you mentioned some of these things were actually mentioned in the Mueller report. Could you elaborate on that? And what is your... As an analyst, putting the Mueller report and everything aside, do you think Donald Trump was involved in that?

Denise Simon:

No, I don't. I mean, there were a lot of... It was a perfect opportunity for the Kremlin to cause chaos in the United States. That is one of the more successful things that Russia does is cause chaos in their adversaries. You can lure a person into thinking that there's a new relationship that could be beneficial for Trump businesses or Trump politicians or Trump administration, and they could necessarily think they might be doing a good thing. It's beyond dispute that Trump and his corporation was interested in developing real estate interests in Russia and so the Kremlin would decide, "Okay, let's cause some real chaos here and we'll spin off on that and we'll inject that into politics in the United States".

Denise Simon:

Successfully so, because we went through a three-year investigation of which Robert Mueller... He found a lot of people, but there was really nothing of substance that was there.

Robert J. Marks:

Okay.

Denise Simon:

It's fake and it's hard to figure out what fake is or isn't.

Robert J. Marks:

So Russia is on this campaign for misinformation to the United States. Abraham Lincoln has a famous quote. He says, "You can fool all of the people some of the time and all of the people some of the time". No, I got that backwards, didn't I? "You can fool all of the people some of the time and some of the people all of the time, but you cannot fool all of the people all of the time".

Robert J. Marks:

Those that are going to be influenced by this Russia campaign of misinformation, look to be, in my opinion, the mushy middle, those that really don't have a solid basis and can actually easily be swayed by this information. I think people that are sitting on a firmer foundation might not be swayed. What's your opinion on this? Do you think that this misinformation campaign is going to have an effect on America?

Denise Simon:

Well, it does. We went through three years of chaos with this investigation, but it's been going on going all the way back to when Secretary Robert Gates was Chief of Staff and when he was head of the CIA. He wrote a couple of books on it and they're really quite fascinating. At the time, in one of his books, he actually said during, I think it was the Reagan administration when we had the immigrant illegal coming across the border and Reagan was forced to, I think didn't he give them amnesty? Secretary Gates blamed that on the Russians because the Russians' influence is very real. The footprint is very real in Latin America. It was causing chaos and it did.

Robert J. Marks:

The late Russian prime minister, Yevgeny Primakov, offered a doctrine in contrast to the doctrine of Russian army general, Valery Gerasimov. Both doctrines were meant to improve the military stance of Russia on the world stage, the military and the political stance, especially Russia's political stance with the United States. Our guest today says that Gerasimov and Primakov doctrines have merged and we in the United States need to understand this Russian mischief. Could you real quickly review the Gerasimov Doctrine concerning cyber events aimed at the world.

Denise Simon:

The Gerasimov Doctrine was an outline, a pretty extensive outline, on redefining the military and non-military tactics of Russia. What he was essentially saying is that we have to be ready with weaponry of all sorts, including soft weaponry, which would be all things cyber, to address new horizons, because we're getting away from the conventional hard hardware if you will. We just don't do tanks anymore and put thousands of boots on the ground. We do other things. That includes drones, which are done remotely, but drones are not just armed with munitions. They're also armed with surveillance capabilities and that information that they collect goes back to certain centers where Russian experts would analyze and then grade that information. We do the same thing.

Denise Simon:

What Gerasimov was arguing is we can't just hope that we can create smart bombs and then have them deliver because one, they're expensive; two, they have to keep factories going, and then they have to be delivered. We have to be prepared in other ways. Russia knew that they were behind, so they had married with some advances that they were able to collaborate with China on. Of course, China is getting it from us because they steal everything from us.

Robert J. Marks:

They do. Yes.

Denise Simon:

Everything.

Robert J. Marks:

Yes.

Denise Simon:

Then we have, you have Yevgeny Primakov. He was a politician. He was also, I think, a foreign minister at one point, and he was probably more closely tied to all things Kremlin because the Russian leadership has a certain agenda. They want to expand their footprint, which means they want to be a little bit more of a force in Eastern Europe. They have certain ambitions in Latin America and now in the Middle East obviously, and in Africa. The prudent thing to do would be to marry those two doctrines and apply all things that are one, cheaper; and two, cyber-based for their objectives.

Denise Simon:

Now, what all their objectives are, we out here don't know, but we would probably get very fascinating answers when it came to the State Department or the National Security Agency, or the Pentagon.

Robert J. Marks:

In fact, this is a word I learned from you also, maskirovka. What is maskirovka? By the way, Denise, I practice-

Denise Simon:

You're doing great.

Robert J. Marks:

I practiced saying that word. It's M-A-S-K-I-R-O-V-K-A. Maskirovka. What is maskirovka?

Denise Simon:

I've mentioned many times what is known as active measures. In the Russian world, it's maskirovka, which is to obfuscate or deception, that's both on and off the battlefield. That includes a new term that I think I first learned it from Senator Marco Rubio, is deep fakes.

Robert J. Marks:

Aha.

Denise Simon:

Yes. Our Senate, especially, I would say under the Senate Armed Services Committee with Marco Rubio, he's very concerned about these things. That's another component of we trying to decipher what's real coming out of the Kremlin and what isn't real. And even if it isn't real, what consequences it has on influence activities.

Robert J. Marks:

My goodness. One of the things that Russia is invested in, is artificial intelligence. Vladimir Putin came out with a quote that basically said whoever controls artificial intelligence is going to control the world. I think he was referring to both the economic and military aspects of artificial intelligence, but there's lots of interest there.

Robert J. Marks:

Now, according to your Mind Matters news article, and we're going to post a link to that on the podcast page, you said in 2018, Vladimir Putin organized engineers, education, science, and commercial developers to develop a plan for AI and big data. This was a couple of years ago. What is he trying to do?

Denise Simon:

He has created a couple of buildings where these activities... I think it's called the Moscow Institute of Physics and Technologies, which is kind of the center for artificial intelligence. What he has done, is he has gone out to his own population and populations outside his country, mostly China, to find those scientists. And I would say cyber scientists or computer engineers, software types, to bring them in and teach so they can expand their talent base to enhance the operations going forward in the hybrid or asymmetric warfare or conflict fair.

Denise Simon:

We are in conflict with Russia when it comes to the Arctic, for instance, so that is what his ambition is. He's actually given research grants to companies and entities inside Russia and outside Russia to mobilize these talents. They even have contests for machine learning and speech recognition technologies and facial recognition and all those kinds of things. They were behind the curve and they're working diligently to not only get up to speed, but to be more advanced by a factor of probably eight or ten years over the United States. They're not going to get there, but that's their ambition.

Robert J. Marks:

I see. Why the Arctic? Why is anybody interested in the Arctic?

Denise Simon:

Energy.

Robert J. Marks:

Energy. Oh, for oil development and such?

Denise Simon:

Oil. Yes.

Robert J. Marks:

Ah, okay. Interesting. You also mentioned in your article that you say that audio and video deep fakes are expanding from Russia and they're targeting places like the Ukraine and the Baltic States and Africa. What's going on with our deep fakes in both video and audio?

Denise Simon:

There would be some YouTube videos that would be promoted by say Russia Today that would end up out there in mainstream media platforms where you may have somebody that you created out of whole cloth, and you'd put a certain face over the real person, and then you'd put a certain voices to it. You're faking the people out that are viewing this. They come to people's attention, then they have to go see what's real about it, so we expend an awful lot of resources and energies to determine those types of fakes.

Denise Simon:

James Clapper, who was under the Obama administration, the head of all spies, if you will, he did say one interesting thing and he wanted to have a center for information technologies. That would be to have some other types of experts or create experts that could investigate what information is real, possibly real and not real at all. You would grade the things that Russia is doing, and they've been doing it for decades and decades and decades. His concentration certainly was on Russia.

Robert J. Marks:

There used to be detectives in universities that actually could look at things like photoshopped pictures and doctored videos, but I don't know how effective those are going to be anymore. I wonder if there's any detectives out there that can actually do detection of fake video and fake audio.

Denise Simon:

Yes. This is maybe a little bit off topic here, but we had a Ukraine plane that was shot down several years ago and Russia still to this day has not taken responsibility for it. But there was a fellow by the name of Eliot Higgins who happened to be an at-home mom, if you will, because he didn't have a job, in London who didn't have anything else to do so he decided he was going to try and get to the bottom of this one. He enlisted, if you will, almost in a crowdsourcing of talent across the globe, to help him and this little team that he created to determine who shot down that plane with a Buk missile. B-U-K missile. And they did. They were able to get recordings. They were able to get locations. They went to geographies, they looked at all kinds of things and you can find his work. It's something called Bellingcat, B-E-L-L-I-N-G-C-A-T. Did a remarkable job.

Robert J. Marks:

This was all done by an amateur?

Denise Simon:

An absolute amateur.

Robert J. Marks:

Wow.

Denise Simon:

Absolutely. It took him a lot of years, but he learned a lot of things. Now with this second plane that was shot down, this Ukrainian plane that was shot down in Iran and Iran denied it, he enlisted a lot of his same volunteer skills, if you will, to determine and prove that it was Iran that did it.

Denise Simon:

What's interesting about that is that when you take pictures using your iPhone or you take video, there are some things that are going on in the background that identify that picture so we know that it came from an iPhone. We know the date that it was taken. We know the locations where it is. There's all of these other things, these technologies that we're pretty unaware of in the basic world, but these little technology gurus, these geeks, they understand it and they can tell a very different story.

Robert J. Marks:

Very fascinating. Let me ask you a question related back to Russia. How are the Russians using robotics and AI today? We know that you mentioned they had a lot of interest in AI research, but have they actually reduced it to practice, are they using it?

Denise Simon:

They have teamed with a energy company and I think a power company to create some of these robots that they are in fact testing. And I would say that they're testing them in the Arctic and you don't have to deal... When you have robots, you don't have to deal with human protection or human recovery. You have just this machine out there that is guided remotely so, from a base to investigate patterns where submarines can go, where there may be pockets of oil and/or gas. They're not only doing it in the Arctic, but if you go up towards the North Atlantic, above Europe, they're doing it there as well.

Denise Simon:

It has made some of those countries, the Norways and the Finlands, very suspect on these activities. And of course, then they're going to tap the United States on the shoulder and say, "Do you see these things that are going on?" Of course, we say we do, but we have to kind of pick and choose where our own footprint is.

Robert J. Marks:

So Denise, we have Gerasimov, the Primakov doctrines, the application of Russia of artificial intelligence to numerous different places, also the mischief that they do with their misinformation and their cyber fakes. How should we respond? How should the US government respond? Are we doing it the right way? And how should you as citizens respond, like me?

Denise Simon:

Well, if nothing else learn it. Understand what they're doing, that would be the first thing. We had a couple of poisoning events in London. We may remember a fellow by the name of Alexander Litvineko. He was poisoned. He used to be I think one of the Russian detectives or KGB and he found out that the things that they were doing, he couldn't do anymore. Russia decided that he needed to be eliminated, and he eventually was eliminated. He had fled to Britain and he eventually got poisoned, successfully so. We had another attempt a couple of years ago in Britain by a former Russian spy also by the name of Sergei Skripal. He had apparently gone to a restaurant and was poisoned there along with his daughter by something called polonium.

Denise Simon:

Now, why would the Kremlin want to eliminate Sergei Skripal? Well, Sergei Skripal was essentially hired by Western intelligence to go over and advise poor Eastern Europe, the small, sad little countries over there that are under siege, if you will, by Russia, to teach their intelligence agencies all these things that

you and I are speaking about when it comes to active measures and tactics. So poor Skripal, he did survive, but that was the reason that Russia attempted to kill him.

Robert J. Marks:

My goodness. So, what you're saying is that we can spend our time privately in debunking Russian misleading information, but in doing so it might be dangerous to our health. Is that right?

Denise Simon:

Yeah, that would be a good one.

Robert J. Marks:

Yeah. How about that?

Denise Simon:

They use a nerve agent called Novichok when they tried to kill Skripal. It's a military grade nerve toxin.

Robert J. Marks:

Okay. Well, that's fascinating. Denise, this has just been a fascinating talk with you. Thank you for your time.

Denise Simon:

My pleasure.

Robert J. Marks:

We've been talking to Denise Simon. She's a senior researcher and intelligence analyst for foreign domestic policy. We are going to link a lot of things relating to this podcast on the podcast notes page. So, until next time, be of good cheer.

Announcer:

This has been Mind Matters News with your host, Robert J. Marks. Explore more at mindmatters.ai. That's mindmatters.ai.

Announcer:

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