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Moscow Says the NYT Reported Fake News About Russia's War on Fake News

Welcome to the rabbit hole of Russian propaganda about American propaganda about Russian propaganda

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There is a scene in the 2016 film "Dr. Strange" where Benedict Cumberbatch's character first experiences "the astral plane," as well as "other dimensions." Blasted into outer space and then through a kaleidoscope of colors and geometric shapes, Dr. Strange falls into a portal that then becomes the pupil of his own eyeball. He stares at his arms, as little hands explode and multiply from his fingertips. It's a montage of repeating, mindbending twists and turns.

The same thing, basically, is happening with Moscow's campaign to expose "fake news" published in the Western media.

On Feb. 22, Russia's Foreign Ministry unveiled a new website dedicated to "busting fake news," vowing to put an end to what the Kremlin says is hostile, inaccurate foreign reporting. The ministry's spokesperson said the need for such a service "is obvious."

When it launched, however, the website's usefulness was anything but obvious. Visitors found only screenshots of news stories from English-language media outlets with a large official-looking seal reading "FAKE" stamped over the headlines, along with a line of text that said, "This article puts forward information that does not correspond to reality."

Several Western reporters covered Russia's new project, including Neil MacFarquhar at The New York Times, who joked, "Russia's Foreign Ministry got into the fake news business in a splashy way." We wrote about it here at The Moscow Times, too.

Related article: Russia's Foreign Ministry Joins the Battle Against Fake News. (Seriously.)

On Feb. 27, for the first time, Russia's Foreign Ministry started adding explanations about why the stories it flags are inaccurate. The first article to get this treatment was a story that appeared in The Financial Times, titled "Russia Asks World Powers to Pay for Syria Rebuild."

While Moscow confirms that Russian diplomats met with officials from the European Union as reported, the Foreign Ministry's "fake news" debunkers wrote, "We'd like to draw The Financial Times' attention to the fact that Russian officials at no time during the meeting ever proposed that the EU 'allocate tens of billions of dollars to Syria's post-war recovery.' Unfortunately, the staff at The Financial Times never reached out to the Foreign Ministry to verify this information."

On March 1, that looping, trippy vibe from "Dr. Strange" kicked in when Moscow's debunkers slapped their "fake news" stamp on an article published in The New York Times on Feb. 22, targeting — yes — Neil MacFarquhar's report on the "fake news" project itself.

"Mr. MacFarquhar either didn't understand or didn't want to hear our position," Russia's Foreign Ministry wrote online. "This is indicated, in particular, by the statement in his article that Russia '[apparently] assigns the label of fake news to any story it doesn't like.'" The ministry also objected to MacFarquhar's claim that its website "fits a pattern identified by many analysts" that the Kremlin tries "to create alternative realities."

In other words, Moscow says The New York Times' story about its fake-news debunking campaign is inaccurate because the interpretations offered by MacFarquhar and his sources are "fake." Fake interpretations. Fake opinions.

With this response, the Russian government makes it clear that its real target isn't "false facts" reported in the West, but beliefs and sentiments appearing in the media that fail to present the Kremlin's actions as reasonable, relatable, and warranted by the dangers and injustices of our topsy-turvy world.

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