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# FROM RUSSIA WITH LIES:

## Assessing the malign influence of Russian 'sharp power' in the EU



## Main thesis

1. Russian malign interference in foreign elections has made headlines in recent years. Given that the Kremlin recently admitted that it was a priority of its foreign policy, one should expect the many elections due to take place throughout the world in 2024 to be targeted again.
2. These efforts are part of a wider influence strategy known as “sharp power” projection, which is used mostly for authoritarian regime-survival purposes. Using old Soviet tactics and new technologies, Russia’s objective is to weaken liberal Western democracies from within, by exploiting their internal divisions.
3. Even though targeted EU member states have acknowledged this threat, and designed ways to patch up their vulnerabilities and shield their institutions, ahead of the 2024 European Parliamentary elections the build-up of societal resilience against Russian malign influence should be a strategic priority for the EU.

## Introduction

Putting Russia on the map of threats to democracy makes particular sense since the Kremlin, in waging its war on Ukraine, is showing absolute contempt for democratic values. These values never had solid roots in Russia, which considers them as alien, both for itself and its post-Soviet neighbours. President Vladimir Putin considers the promotion of Western democracy in Russia an existential threat. This is also true regarding NATO and EU enlargement into what he claims is Russia’s sphere of allegedly “natural”, and exclusive, interests on the Eurasian continent. Hence, his regime has spent the past two decades fighting both “threats”, using direct electoral interference, hybrid warfare, territorial annexation and even military aggression to prevent other countries from making their own geopolitical choices. Countries defending the principles on which a rules-based international order has been built since the Second World War – equality of sovereign states, the right to self-determination and peaceful conflict resolution – are now faced with Russia’s nuclear blackmail. Yet such an escalation might hide the forest from the trees. In fact, Russia has waged a war against democracy for a long time and most European countries still fail to realize what this means for their own societies.<sup>1</sup>

## Destroying democracy from within

Over the past decade Russia has spared no effort in manipulating the outcomes of electoral processes in many countries, bolstering candidates whose worldviews and future decisions, once in power, would be in line with Russia’s own interests. Where it could not be a king-maker, Russia has striven to undermine trust in election results, thereby delegitimizing the very notion of free and fair conduct.

The election of Donald Trump as president of the US in 2016 is a clear example of successful Russian electoral interference.<sup>2</sup> Counter-intelligence reports and investigative journalists have shown that Russia has tried to influence European voters as well, including en-

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1 Keir Giles, *Russia’s war on everybody and what it means for you*, London 2023.

2 William Saletan, A new report adds evidence that Trump was a Russian asset, *Slate*, 18 March 2021. <https://slate.com/news-and-politics/2021/03/trump-russian-asset-election-intelligence-community-report.html>

couraging support for Brexit.<sup>3</sup> In most cases, Russia was found to be bolstering far-right and Eurosceptic narratives, candidates and parties most compatible with the Kremlin’s political preferences – Marine Le Pen’s Rassemblement National in France, Matteo Salvini’s Northern League in Italy, Victor Orban’s Fidesz in Hungary, etc.<sup>4</sup> The spectacular rise of “alternative” radical movements such as the “alt-right” in the US or AfD in Germany is also partly the work of Russia. Yet they were not the only ones benefitting from Moscow’s helping hand, which extended to far-left parties too, notably La France Insoumise, Syriza (Greece) or Die Linke (Germany).

There is no contradiction here. Whereas in Cold War times Moscow’s foreign policy was focused on expanding communism, Russia’s current strategy is more opportunistic than ideological. Neither does it limit itself to supporting candidates who are openly pro-Putin or anti-EU. The purpose is to encourage the coming to power, or at least the rise in influence, of political forces that can undermine mainstream parties, democratic institutions and the transatlantic camp *from within*. Direct interference in electoral campaigns is but one way of achieving this goal. Moscow is eager to support Eurosceptic parties and governments that are critical of sanctions and sympathetic to its neo-imperialistic claims. But it does not aspire to be loved. As a result, its influence strategy does not qualify as *soft power*. In Putin’s eyes it is more important that Russia be feared and its adversaries weakened.

To achieve this, (pro-)Russian forces exacerbate the internal dissent that runs freely throughout European societies so as to spread distrust in democratic institutions. They do so mostly by promoting disputes over polarizing issues that they believe will lead the EU project to collapse. These issues include multiculturalism (resulting from uncontrolled immigration) and moral decadence (due to the advancement of LGBT rights).<sup>5</sup> The upholding of ultra-conservative and xenophobic values thus bears similarities to the strategy of the far right. The difference resides in the sophistication of the instruments available to the Kremlin for sowing chaos in the process.

### Russia’s ‘sharp power’ toolbox

Notwithstanding the build-up of its military might (*hard power*), the key instruments that allow Russia to project coercive power abroad rather fall under the category of *sharp power*. Coined in 2017, the term refers to the capacity of authoritarian regimes to undermine the political institutions of their adversaries by penetrating their information environments in order to amplify the negative consequences of internal crises. This is achieved through distraction and manipulation, bullying and subversion, and pressure and corruption.

Sovietologists are familiar with these tactics. Russia has a long track record in psychological operations (“psyops”) to manipulate public opinion abroad. In Soviet times, these techniques were part of so-called “reflexive control” strategies taught at faculties prepping KGB and GRU (military intelligence) officers. Reflexive control is a means of conveying specially prepared (dis-)information to encourage a target to voluntarily, albeit unconsciously, make a decision that is beneficial to the initiator of the manipulation. It is operationalized

3 Geir Hågen Karlsen, Divide and rule: ten lessons about Russian political influence activities in Europe, *Palgrave Communications*, vol. 5, issue 19, 2019. <https://www.nature.com/articles/s41599-019-0227-8>

4 Anton Shekhovtsov, Russian interference, and where to find it, European Platform for Democratic Institutions, 2019. <https://www.epde.org/en/news/details/new-epde-publication-russian-interference-and-where-to-find-it.html>

5 Russia’s role in stoking right-wing extremism in the West, *Stratfor*, 18 January 2021. <https://worldview.stratfor.com/article/russia-s-role-stoking-right-wing-extremism-west>

via propaganda and “*maskirovka*” (deception), in order to distort and control the target’s decision-making environment so as to make it think or act against its own best interests.

Throughout the Cold War, the USSR acquired mastery of deceptive tactics, and a powerful subversive arsenal to implement them, with “white” propaganda and disinformation being but the tip of the iceberg. It also relied on much dirtier covert actions, ranging from blackmail and sabotage to assassinations and supporting terrorism. All this fell under so-called “active measures”. A KGB agent himself, Vladimir Putin knows how mastery of these tactics can help Russia maximize its gains in the asymmetric setting of today’s increasingly multipolar politics.<sup>6</sup>

## Weaponizing (dis)information

The most widespread influence tactic consists of distorting the adversary’s information environment, by using the transmission belt of loyal media, academic institutions and think tanks.<sup>7</sup> A facilitating element in democratic societies is that decision-makers are elected by, and reputedly accountable to, their citizens, whose freedom of opinion and expression is almost unlimited. In shaping the information environment, the influencing party can therefore maliciously swing voters’ opinions, thereby influencing the decisions made by elected officials. The endgame is not necessarily to advocate openly pro-Kremlin narratives. From a Russian standpoint, the fact that a target is distracted, confused or dismayed by the information received constitutes a tactical victory. Hence disinformation needs not be convincing or even credible. The harm is done if at least part of the audience believes that alternative information is equally untrustworthy.

There are countless records of how Russia has reached precisely this objective over the past decade. It is enough to mention the Lisa affair<sup>8</sup> in Germany, the massive online disinformation campaigns launched to deny Russia’s responsibility in the MH17 air crash,<sup>9</sup> and the Skripals’ poisoning.<sup>10</sup> In these scandals as during the 2016 US election, Russia aptly manipulated social media to deceive and confuse public opinion not only at home but also abroad. With its army of trolls and bots operating fake accounts on social networks (on Facebook, Twitter, LinkedIn, etc.), the Kremlin significantly expanded its propaganda outreach, all the while moving attention away from other issues. Through psyops, they have kept honest people busy debunking fake news.

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6 Steve Abrams, Beyond propaganda: Soviet active measures in Putin’s Russia, *Connections*, vol. 15, issue 1, 2016, pp. 5-31.

7 Kateryna Smagly, Hybrid analytica: pro-Kremlin expert propaganda in Moscow, Europe and the US, *Underminers*, 29 January 2019.

8 In January 2016, Russian propaganda outlets spread news, which turned out to be fake, that a Russian-German teenager had been kidnapped and raped by Turkish migrants. This deepened the divide in public opinion over Chancellor Merkel’s immigration policy.

9 On 17 July 2014, a Malaysian Airlines passenger aircraft crashed in eastern Ukraine on its route between Amsterdam and Kuala Lumpur, killing all 298 people on board. An international criminal investigation proved it was shot down by a “Buk” missile launched by the Russian military from separatist territory under its control. Pro-Kremlin media fabricated outlandish alternative explanations to clear the blame.

10 On 4 March 2018, ex-double agent Sergei Skripal and his daughter Julia were poisoned in Salisbury. Another UK citizen also died after exposure to Russian-made Novichok nerve agent. The Kremlin succeeded in convincing part of the world’s public opinion that it was not behind this chemical weapon attack.

## Exploiting vulnerabilities

The malicious impact of sharp power lies in its capacity to exploit a target's inner weaknesses, while invoking plausible deniability to ensure that the disruption caused is not seen for what it is: outright political warfare. Russia has designed country-specific malign influence strategies to derive maximum benefit at minimum cost. Despite this, there is a pattern of vulnerabilities that it has sought to exploit in all targeted countries. Any structural or conjunctural feature that makes a community *dependent* on Russia is viewed as worth exploiting.

The most potent dependency links are economic ones. Countries that rely on Russian gas imports to meet their energy needs, as in South-Eastern Europe, have traditionally been more susceptible to Russia's energy blackmail and malign influence. The Nord Stream pipelines built under the Baltic Sea made huge sectors of the German economy dependent on, and well intended towards, Russia. In bypassing transit states, the project also weakened European unity. Other European economies got entangled in a worrying dependency on Russia, either because they pursued a key export market (for Austrian banks, French luxury goods, Italian wines, etc.), or became privileged destinations for Russian capital outflows (the UK, Switzerland and Cyprus). Local business interests and corruption allowed Russian money to effectively buy off resistance to policies hostile to Russian interests. This proved essential in preventing or challenging the blacklisting of some economic sectors and individuals each time EU member states tried to adopt sanctions following 2014.

Another predictable entry point and influence multiplier is the existence of a Russian-speaking diaspora. Russia has unilaterally proclaimed its right to intervene anywhere it thinks the interests of its "compatriots" need protection – irrespective of the fact that in most instances they do not hold Russian passports. Whatever the wave of emigration their presence results from (except the last one from 2022), they are believed to harbour pro-Russian, patriotic sentiments, and to potentially be turned into a fifth column. Being watchers of Russian TV, many of them are easy prey for Kremlin propaganda. In Eastern European countries, they answer the Kremlin's calls to protest when local authorities try to remove a Soviet monument for example. Some Russians born abroad may also constitute a threat to national unity wherever they form a significant minority, for example in the Baltic states. The fact that Russian-speakers have distinct political preferences and parties, and are concentrated in areas bordering Russia (Narva) or in capital cities (Riga and Vilnius) is a security concern shared by other front line states such as Finland. In Western Europe, Russian émigrés act as interest groups as well, furthering Moscow's political interests and business practices in London ("Londongrad"), Switzerland or on the French Riviera for example.

Some countries are believed to be more susceptible to Kremlin-friendly sentiments or embracing Putin's worldviews due to historical or cultural ties with Russia. This is true, for instance, if they too belong to the Orthodox world (Romania, Bulgaria, Greece and Serbia). In fact, in recent years the Russian Orthodox Church (ROC) has replaced the Communist Party of the USSR as the transmission belt for Moscow's ideational influence efforts abroad.

Russian sharp power operations mobilize three other institutions that appear to work hand in hand abroad: intelligence services (responsible for spying and recruiting agents in foreign countries); diplomats (providing cover and hosting traditional soft power agencies, such as Russian cultural centers); and organized crime, which is reputedly closely intertwined with the first two.<sup>11</sup>

## Enrolling MICE

Influence is a two-way interaction that requires enrolling accomplices. This is based on standard profiling strategies for recruiting agents, whose motives schematically derive from one of the four MICE incentive categories (Money – Ideology – Compromise – Ego).

Most people who have fallen for Kremlin-framed information traps are usually unaware of being part of a Russian psyop – hence why they were targeted in the first place. Russian influencers are keen on feeding “**unwitting agents of influence**” the (dis)information they are fond of in order to pull them into their web of delusion, whether online or offline. By exploiting their egos they can create echo chambers for narratives that serve the Kremlin’s interests. Individuals and groups with anti-establishment, anti-system, anti-globalization or extremist views are likely targets for Russian subversive activities. So are the adepts of “deep state” conspiracy theories. Since the COVID-19 pandemic, Russian trolls have had clear leeway in recruiting such “useful idiots” in anti-vax forums, as well as among flat-earthers and adepts of esoterism. The Kremlin insidiously used the informational chaos and emotional distress caused by the pandemic to increase mistrust in science, state institutions and mainstream media.

Russia **apologists** are another reliable transmission belt for (pro-)Kremlin narratives. Being from all walks of life, they constitute a heterogenous support group, which includes:

- the descendants of White (aristocratic) Russians.
- Jewish émigrés from the USSR and their descendants.
- “Ostaligists” (people nostalgic for the communist past).
- admirers of Putin’s ultra-masculine, iron hand and conquering image as “the strong leader we are missing here”.
- those idealizing “eternal” Russia for its contribution to world culture (art, ballet and architecture) or its mythical status as the Third Rome of the Eastern Christian Slavic world.
- the defenders of “Great” Russia, who praise its achievements in the scientific or military field for example.
- Today, Kremlin and Putin apologists are most likely to be found among adepts of populist, far-right and neo-Nazi ideologies. However, there are other groups involved in these influence operations too.
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Russia-**understanders** (from the German term “Russlandverstehers”) make up a critical mass of enablers for Russian malign influence. This group includes people who, for various reasons including out of fatalism, are open to compromise on democratic values. They may agree to give Russia a free pass to behave as a rogue state because they consider its aspirations as legitimate (“Crimea was always Russian”) and deserving of accommodation (“Ukraine is in Russia’s natural sphere of interests”). The Kremlin is keen on courting these

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<sup>11</sup> Mark Galeotti, Crimintern: How the Kremlin uses Russia’s criminal networks in Europe, *ECFR Policy Brief*, European Council on Foreign Relations, 18 April 2017.

'accommodationists' because they are open to believe Russian claims of uniqueness ("Russia is a distinct Eurasian civilization"). Conveniently, they effectively remove Russia from international human rights law standards ("Democratic values are alien to the Russian soul"). Accommodationists are legion among the intellectual elite of Western European countries, notably in those harbouring strong anti-American sentiments (France and Italy for instance), as well as among pacifists. Their votes will be pivotal in forthcoming electoral campaigns, when issues of vital importance for the Kremlin will be debated, such as military support to Ukraine ("This war is not ours and has already cost us too much") or enforcing a ceasefire on Moscow's terms "because Russia should not be humiliated".

The most powerful category of enablers, given their wealth and frequent dependence on Russian money, is **lobbyists**. Countless individuals and companies in Europe have become reliant on and thankful for Russian financial largesse, whether through legitimate business contracts or no less lucrative but shadier corruption deals. Russia has long supported services and favours for acting political leaders (Prime Minister Viktor Orbán notably) and retired ones, like Gerhard Schröder or Nicolas Sarkozy. In offering Western politicians, businessmen or bankers a seat on the board of major Russian state corporations, Putin has consolidated a mercantilist dependency link that he knows can pay back in kind. If money is the foundation of war, then the financial fallouts that these figures have received, continue to receive or hope to receive for this "consultancy" work is a good enough incentive for them to defend Putin's views, especially in future peace negotiations with Ukraine.

### **Building resilience: keep your own house in order, and keep influence enablers at bay**

Russia's subversive influence is now acknowledged as a national security threat in many countries. Counter-intelligence services have highlighted the pervasive impact of Russian activities, and European governments have beefed up their deterrence capacities, setting up task forces to monitor and counter "malign" Russian activities. These include the "EU-vsDisinfo" platform, the EU Centre of Excellence on Hybrid Threats (Helsinki) or the NATO Strategic Communication Centre (Riga). Investigative journalists and corruption watchdogs have joined forces to track fake news and expose money laundering schemes.<sup>12</sup> Frontline states have shared best practice in the field of fake news debunking, which has helped raise media awareness in more lax target countries. Grants have also been issued for academics to conduct and publish policy-relevant research that decision-makers can build on.

All these initiatives have proven useful since 24 February 2022 for tailoring smart sanctions. Russia's foreign interference capacity arguably declined as hundreds of diplomats, including honorary consuls and intelligence officers, were expelled from their postings, thereby curtailing Russia's spying and recruitment capacities. Bans on Kremlin propaganda outlets (*Sputnik* and *RT*) curbed Russia's disinformation potential, which European voters became aware of. Economic dependence on Russia receded as sectoral sanctions and public opprobrium pushed hundreds of Western companies out of the Russian market, severing many corrupt links in the process.

However laudable, these counter measures might not be timely and comprehensive enough to fully contain Russia's destabilization potential. It is clear that the worm is already in the fruit and has corrupted many European institutions from the inside.

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<sup>12</sup> See the work of Bellingcat, OCCRP, VSquare, etc.

In most EU countries, the moral compass has visibly shifted towards the “banalization” of illiberal, anti-democratic, nationalistic and intolerant narratives. Radical views are no longer the domain of extremist parties. They have become mainstream in public debates and have penetrated parliaments and governments, a trend that gives malicious foreign forces considerable leeway. The 2024 European Parliament elections will be a testing ground for the resilience of democratic institutions in the face of Russian interference.

Unfortunately, a lot of the harm done in previous decades can hardly be undone. Many suspicious Russian businessmen were granted EU citizenship and cannot be blacklisted. Others have exploited legislative loopholes to establish mutually lucrative front companies. They operate alongside schemes and through proxies embedded in the local white collar criminal world, which are difficult to untangle. Concessions and land were given for building Russian cultural centres and churches which cannot be taken down, even though they are known to serve as facilities for the Kremlin’s spying and subversion activities.

Since national security is at stake, ensuring that law enforcement and judiciary systems are equipped to sentence agents of malign influence is crucial. A legislative arsenal to fight disinformation, corruption and espionage crimes must be developed, and the police and judiciary provided with the means to effectively enforce it.

Transparency regarding any movement, present or past, of laundered Russian money is crucial. The EU should maintain a procurement register and a beneficiary ownership register so it knows where “presents” have been received in exchange for favours to Russia (luxury real estate, yachts, etc.), as well as where they are located – be it in the UK, Switzerland or Dubai. EU countries should not shy away from blacklisting their home-grown “foreign agents”. Acknowledging that Russia is at war with European democracy, the enablers of its disruptive efforts could, in fact, be held accountable for high treason.

Since February 2022 and the revelation of Russia’s bloody crimes in Ukraine, it has become much less fashionable for lobbyists and apologists to display their support for Putin. Yet accommodationists, after an initial phase of paralysis, are again advocating for pro-Russian causes in the media. Few of the useful idiots have changed their minds. All these enablers are here to stay and new ones could emerge. An ethically right balance must be found between upholding free speech and challenging our enemies’ voices. What is not right is that whistleblowers who reveal collusion with Russia face libel trials in European courts or are forced to self-censor.

### **Conclusions: preparing for looming threats ahead of the coming elections**

Russian malign influence has deeply entrenched itself in the EU and is not going to disappear. Moreover, its tactical successes are readily emulated by other authoritarian countries (China, Iran, etc.). Russia is resilient and adapts to challenges, seizing any new opportunity it can to advance its destructive agenda. The fast technical progress in the field of artificial intelligence opens avenues to generate “deep fakes”, which could cause immediate and irreversible reputational damage to any politician.

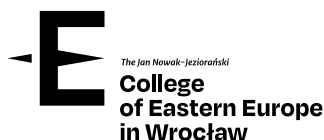
One observable trend in the information environment after 24 February 2022 is that Kremlin propaganda, banned from TV screens in the West, has moved to new online social



networks and media platforms (Instagram, Telegram chats, YouTube channels, TikTok, etc.). While Russian ‘Z-agents’ may be on the EU’s visa-ban list, they like any other digital nomad can still move to places like Africa or Turkey and continue their cyber activities from there. Under the backdrop of the Hamas-Israel conflict, Russia’s capacity to recruit ‘cyber warriors’ in Muslim countries should be of concern. Through them, the Kremlin is able to mobilize Turkish, African, Maghrebi or Chechen minorities back in Europe, where these communities’ dissatisfaction with the lack of support for the Palestinian cause is already fuelling anti-US, antisemitic and anti-government sentiments. Experience should have taught us that, once the spark of riots is ignited, Russia will maliciously blow on the embers. Hence, the scale of Russia’s influence in the future will depend on the ability of counter-intelligence services to react promptly to Russian attempts at recruiting, coordinating or empowering troublemakers among the “angry young men” readily identified as transmission belts for Russian subversive activities – neo-Nazis, Islamists, violent football hooligans, motorbike gang members, Cossack paramilitaries, fans of extreme combat sports, survivalists, etc.

Another concerning trend is the multiplication of doppelgänger websites mimicking or pretending to impersonate reliable media or state agencies. Malicious forces have placed fake information on these sites to discredit genuine organizations or manipulate their audiences. Several respected European media platforms have recently fallen victim to this tactic. One can predict that the campaign websites of candidates who are not to the Kremlin’s liking in forthcoming EU and US elections will likely be targeted too. This should serve as a reminder that media literacy is a key safeguard for democratic resilience, as part of a wider, all-of-society approach to security, which all EU countries should strive to implement in order to deter malign influence.

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