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IN THE CROSSHAIRS

**France as a target of Russia's
malign interference**



Main thesis

1. Seen in Moscow as NATO's "soft underbelly", France is a priority target for Russia's strategic objectives of weakening the Euro-Atlantic alliance and discrediting liberal democracy from within. Part of the French establishment – business, intellectual and diplomatic elites alike – has traditionally harboured a toxic fascination with Russia's grandeur. Mainstream media groups are increasingly controlled by right-wing moguls who bolster far-right populism. This makes France a key entry point for foreign information manipulation and interference (FIMI).
2. The Kremlin aptly instrumentalises the contradictions inherent to French democratic society, using cognitive manipulation and sowing chaos to capture elites, confuse voters, and bolster extremist parties. Wielding malicious "sharp power" tactics, Russian intelligence and its proxies exacerbate divisive trends in public debate to fuel social discontent, radicalization and polarization.
3. Faced with the threat of outright destabilization, French democratic institutions recently experienced a strategic awakening of sorts. Once thought of as a means of paralyzing decision-makers, Russia's hybrid aggression has triggered relevant political, doctrinal and institutional responses. In view of forthcoming local and national elections, however, much remains to be done to accurately beef up societal resilience against Russia's malign influence.

Introduction

Like all other Western countries, France has faced Russia's hybrid attack for over a decade. This exposure owes less to its status – France is the world's 7th economy and, since Brexit, the only EU member state with nuclear weapons – than to the fact that Moscow strategists see France as NATO's "soft underbelly". It thus became the priority target for Russian information manipulation and interference (FIMI) operations. This has been particularly notable since President Emmanuel Macron adopted a firmer stance against Russia's actions in Ukraine, arguing that Moscow should not be allowed to win the war. A "coalition of the willing" was subsequently created to provide post-ceasefire Ukraine with security guarantees, much to Putin's dismay.

Russia's strategic interest remains to weaken the Euro-Atlantic camp from within. Undermining the appeal of liberal democracy in pivotal states such as France is instrumental for that purpose. Much like during the Cold War, Putin's Russia sees itself at war against an aggressive West whose values threaten its own authoritarian governance model, and whose expanding organisations (EU, NATO) it feels challenge its neo-imperialistic aspirations.

An opportunistic actor in contemporary world affairs, Russia adopted a "sharp power" strategy that consists of seeking an increase in its relative influence by downgrading that of its competitors.¹ Since the annexation of Crimea in 2014, Russia's priority has been to weaken international support for Ukraine, using the asymmetric war playbook to compensate for

1 A logic for which Polish expert Maciej F. Bukowski coined the term "parity by subtraction" is described in the report: Maciej Filip Bukowski, *Agents of Chaos. The Shadow Campaign Against the West*, Casmir Pulaski Foundation, 24.09.2025, <https://pulaski.pl/en/agents-of-chaos-the-shadow-campaign-against-the-west/>

its inability to convince democratic countries to let it reshape the European security architecture. The Kremlin thus multiplied below-threshold attacks against its Western adversaries to confuse voters and petrify decision-makers. France has long been and remains central in the Kremlin's crosshairs due to several vulnerabilities that Russian intelligence knows to exploit all too well.

France's weak points: socio-political vulnerabilities

The case of France provides a very strong example of Russia's sharp power and its ability to exacerbate the inner contradictions that traverse democratic societies, rewarding the political forces whose ideological views align with or serve Russian interests.

Low social cohesion, high protest-propensity: a fertile ground for FIMI

For some years the French middle class has harboured a sense of decline (“*déclassement*”) due to accumulating economic and social problems. Against the backdrop of a widening gap between rich and poor, recurring corruption scandals and the fading quality of social services, the French display unprecedented levels of collective anxiety, ideological polarization and defiance towards state institutions.²

Popular discontent often expresses itself through street protests and blockades. The Yellow Vests movement (2018-2020) has been a windfall for Russian propagandists, whose (social) media coverage has aimed at portraying France as being on the brink of civil war. France became an easy target for Russia's “whataboutist” claims because it deployed disproportionate violence while policing the protests. Moving online during the Covid lockdown, popular protests did not recede after restrictions were lifted. Instead, they resulted in a further radicalization of anti-governmental discourses and boosted the popularity of extremist parties.

In 2025, anti-establishment moods culminated in a general rejection of Emmanuel Macron's policies. Whereas his 2017 presidential bid to rule “above the parties” and with direct civil society involvement shattered the established right-left divide, ironically after 8 years of his presidency the French political arena is more polarized than ever. This both suits Russia's interests and facilitates further interference in the chaotic functioning of French institutions.

Fascination with Russia, a shared pathos of French extremist parties

Prior to 2022 the French were mostly receptive to narratives about Russia's grandeur and, subsequently, quite permeable to Putin's geopolitical claims. One reason is that idealised visions about the uniqueness of Russia's culture have been distilled in French history books and intellectual circles for over a century. This fueled a toxic fascination³ that partly explains why French elites have long been so vulnerable to Russian propaganda, notably on the right of the political spectrum. Misconceptions about the geography and history of Central and Eastern Europe convinced French people that Russia should have a say over the fate of its neighbours. Hence, they are rather skeptical about Ukraine joining the EU, as challenging

² Brice Teinturier, Mathieu Gallard, Pierre Latrille, Diane Lamotte, *Fractures Françaises. Octobre 2025 – 13^{ème} édition*, Sciences Po CEVIPOF, October 2025, https://www.sciencespo.fr/cevipof/sites/sciencespo.fr/cevipof/files/FracturesFrancaises_Oct2025.pdf

³ Elsa Vidal, *La fascination russe. Politique française : trente ans de complaisance vis-à-vis de la Russie*, Paris 2024.

the myth that Ukraine is in Russia's allegedly "natural" sphere of interests could irritate Moscow. For fear of reprisals, many French are thus willing to believe Russians' arguments regarding "the root causes of the war" and to accept as legitimate the notion that Ukraine should remain a neutral buffer zone.

Among them are the supporters of Marine le Pen's *Rassemblement National* (RN), arguably France's most Russophile political party. According to opinion polls, by the end of 2025 over half of the French electorate would vote for the RN candidate in the second round of future presidential elections.

The RN has a long-standing special relationship with the Russian regime, which is based on converging values, interpersonal friendships and mutual support schemes. Investigative journalists revealed the party received a €9.4 million loan from a Russian bank to fund Le Pen's campaign in 2014. The RN is suspected to have repaid this credit in kind by voting against or abstaining on key pro-Ukraine decisions adopted in the French and European parliaments.

After February 2022 the party condemned – albeit reluctantly – Russia's full-scale invasion. However, it has gradually intensified criticism of the French government's support for Ukraine. Today it expresses sympathy towards the Kremlin's position in welcoming Donald Trump's "peace plan", as well as demanding from Ukraine territorial and other concessions. Moreover, the RN shares most of the ideas defended by Putin's party United Russia: an abhorrence for LGBT and same-sex marriage, nativist ideals about "national preference" (with respect to migrants), and a critical attitude towards EU bureaucracy. As elsewhere in Europe, the far right in France admires the "strongman" image of Putin and sees Russia as the last safeguard of traditional Christian values against multiculturalism and liberalism.⁴ Part of the leaders and supporters of the mainstream conservative party *Les Républicains* (LR) share these views.

Anti-Americanism can also explain why the French mindset is so vulnerable to Russian sirens. This primitive sentiment is deeply rooted and is shared across the board. However, it has a defining influence on the far left and notably parties like *La France Insoumise* (LFI). While rejecting accusations of "Putinophilia", the party's leader Jean-Luc Mélenchon systematically parrots the Kremlin's narrative about the war and Ukraine. Knowingly or not, left-leaning pacifists calling for peace "at all costs" are currently serving Putin's strategic interests as well.

The white-red diaspora: Kremlin mouthpieces or a potential fifth column?

Whereas in Soviet times the White émigrés (who fled Russia in 1917-1922) spread their idealized vision of the Russian Empire upon integrating with the French aristocracy, the fact that their descendants are legion within the foreign and defence ministries deeply impacts how the French administration relates to Russia. Many of them have found in Putin a much awaited "messiah".⁵ Turning a blind eye to his KGB background and a deaf ear to his statements about the demise of the USSR as "the greatest geopolitical catastrophe of the 20th century", this "old" diaspora welcomed Putin's conservative turn.

4 Nicolas Lebourg, Olivier Schmitt, *Paris-Moscou, un siècle d'extrême droite*, Paris 2024.

5 Cécile Vaissié, *Les Réseaux du Kremlin en France*, Paris 2016.

This group echoes “Russian world” (*Russkiy mir*) narratives designed in the Kremlin to convince French audiences that Crimea had always been Russian or that Ukrainian nationhood and sovereignty are artificial. The “red” diaspora, i.e. Russian migrants who left the USSR at the turn of the 1990s, is mostly supportive of Putin’s imperialistic ambitions. The popularity of their rhetoric about Russia’s reborn greatness ultimately weakens adherence to founding UN principles such as the intangibility of state borders, non-interference in domestic affairs, and peaceful conflict resolution. This in turn represents a threat for French democracy and potentially a security breach should Russia try using these communities as a fifth column in the context of its hybrid threat activities against France.

An oligopolistic media scene that boosts the narratives of Russia’s neocons

Another enabling factor for Russia’s FIMI is the fact that French media groups are concentrated in the hands of right-wing moguls who promote conservative values, using populist vectors (infotainment, conspiracy theories, yellow press scandals, and outright fake news). French media groups are now controlled by a handful of billionaire families who have massively invested in press and TV to gain political influence and immunize themselves against journalistic investigations: the Dassault family, that of the construction giant Martin Bouygues, Vincent Bolloré (Vivendi group), and Bernard Arnault (the CEO of LVMH – the world’s largest luxury brands company). The youngest and most radical, Pierre-Edouard Stérin, is an ultra-Catholic, pro-Trump entrepreneur and philanthropist who deliberately shakes the political *status quo* by bolstering the RN.

In recent years the Bolloré group, which has stakes in several media groups including the *Journal du Dimanche* newspaper, Fayard publishing house, Canal+ (a major sponsor of French cinema), and CNews TV (the equivalent of Fox News), has pushed their editorial line towards far right and Russia-friendly narratives. Formally retired, this “French Murdoch” keeps yielding considerable influence on domestic debates too through controversial editors in chief and journalists he has appointed on CNews. This includes the columnist Xenia Fyodorova, the former head of RT-France, a Russian channel banned in the EU since 2022 due to its repeating of Kremlin war propaganda.

With family alliances and the buying of one another’s assets, these media moguls have taken almost full control of the publishing segments and digital platforms that together with newspapers and audio-visual media form the French information ecosystem.⁶ In jointly promoting socially conservative, economically liberal and geopolitically sovereigntist views, this oligopoly ultimately works in the interest of Russia, which aspires to lead the return of “decadent” Europe to traditional (read: white, Christian and anti-woke) values. These tycoons knowingly challenge journalistic ethics by surfing on the public’s attraction to conspiracy theories and sensationalist or fake news. This sets a worrying trend for the future of French democracy as it creates a fertile ground for a home-grown demagogue to hijack it, and for FIMI to undermine it. This is exactly what Russian hybrid warfare strategists have been doing over the past few years.

France, a priority target of Russian FIMI

In addition to the arsenal of active measures already wielded against liberal democracies since the Soviet era (surveillance, sabotage, industrial spying, etc.), over the past decade Russia has engaged in an intense information manipulation struggle as part of a wider hybrid war. It uses below-threshold activities, i.e. aggression below the level where articles 4 or 5 of the North-Atlantic Treaty could be activated. This is done to test the resolve, unity and defenses of NATO member states. France is believed to be a priority target of these malicious cognitive operations.⁷

Russian influence operations amplify existing divisions and tensions within French society, sowing discord. Their goal is to undermine trust in mainstream media, state institutions and democratic principles. A new feature of the 2020s is that Russia doesn't bother anymore about plausible deniability: it knows it can escape accountability even if found guilty. The confusion provoked in itself means a won battle on the cognitive battlefield. The fact that the targeted audience becomes fearful or anxious as a result is already a tactical victory. Using classic Soviet playbook tactics, Russian intelligence has tailored its cognitive and psychological operations in order to exacerbate illiberal trends at work in France, such as Islamophobia and anti-Semitism. Following the 7th October 2023 Hamas attacks on Israel, Russia opportunistically exploited the high sensitivity and polarization seen in French society regarding the Israel-Gaza war. For example, it appears that the Russian FSB was behind the 250 blue Stars of David graffitied on the walls of Paris in November.

Inter-confessional tensions increased six months later in the context of an upsurge of antisemitic acts that polarized public opinion: on 13th May 2024 the Paris Shoah Memorial was vandalized with dozens of red hands painted on it. Confusing audiences further, on 1st June 2024 five fake coffins with the inscription "French soldiers of Ukraine" were unloaded from a truck near the Eiffel Tower. That was a few days after discussions were held with Ukraine over the deployment of French military instructors. To maximize the psyop impact, disinformation intensified in 2024 around high-profile events, such as the Paris Olympic games in July and August. In previous months Russia-supported conspiracy theorists tried to rain on the parade by blowing out of proportion a bedbug infestation that had made public transport appear unclean. There was also a rumour of an imminent Islamist attack. This was all done to challenge the idea that France was a safe place to host a world-class sports competition.⁸

The "uberization" of psyops

All these operations were carried out by unprofessional agents from Moldova, Bulgaria or Ukraine who had come to France only to perform these actions. This was done for a small fee (from 50 to 200 euros each) and those involved remained ignorant about the effects of their actions. The French authorities quickly linked them to pro-Russian sponsors from organized crime and attributed the operations to the FSB's 5th Directorate. Investigations showed that Russian intelligence adapted its recruitment strategy to the new landscape in Europe, from which hundreds of undercover agents have been expelled since 2022 due to sanctions and visa bans.

7 Elie Tenenbaum with the collaboration of Amélie Zima, Return to the East: the Russian threat and the French Pivot to Europe's Eastern Flank, *IFRI*, IFRI studies #119, 13.06.2024 <https://www.ifri.org/en/studies/return-east-russian-threat-and-french-pivot-europes-eastern-flank>

8 Eto Buziashvili, Valentin Châtelet, Russia-linked operations target Paris 2024 Olympics, *Atlantic Council*, DFRLab, 01.08.2024, <https://dfrlab.org/2024/08/01/russia-linked-operations-target-paris-2024-olympics/>

Russian special services now increasingly recruit disposable operatives in criminal networks, outsourcing their sabotage and destabilization operations to third country nationals. The infamous Wagner Group of Evgeny Prigozhin provided the Russian foreign and military intelligence services (SVR and GRU, respectively) with ideal profiles. For example, Alexander Malkievich, Prigozhin's most trusted second when it comes to disinformation operations, masterminded the psyops aimed at turning African populations against the French Army in charge of Operation Barkhane in the Sahel region. At the same time, Malkievich was also spotted spreading hate speech on social networks, calling people to participate in protest marches across France.

Another pattern is that Russia doesn't bother about being caught red-handed, as part of the targeted audiences will agree with its denial plausible anyway. With these low-cost provocations occurring in plain daylight, Russia also manages to distract attention away from other issues, such as human rights violations at home, or the judicial problems facing pro-Russian political forces in France.

Sowing doubt and chaos: online campaigns and the threat of AI-generated fakes

The most famous disruptive action conducted by Russia in recent years to stoke tensions amongst supporters of Ukraine targeted France, among others. The Doppelganger operation consisted of cloning legitimate information websites, using typo-squatted URLs to make them disseminate fake news on social media, and bots to post comments on commodified Facebook and Twitter/X accounts, which were then relayed by authentic ones. The EU DisinfoLab identified the Doppelganger operation in September 2022. Joining forces with the French General Secretariat for Defence and National Security (SGDSN), it found that a network called Reliable Recent News (RRN) had disseminated Russian propaganda messages⁹ in "news" that appeared to be authentic. This was done by using these cloned websites. The operation was first attributed by Meta in December 2022 to two companies in Russia: Structura National Technology and Social Design Agency (SDA). It later appeared that, in France, the virality of the circulated information was boosted thanks to the reposts and tweets of politicians known for their pro-Russian views, such as Florian Philippot, Senator Yves Pozzo di Borgo, and the MEP Thierry Mariani.

OpenAI also discovered that Russia uses its models to amplify disinformation. Even after having been attributed, these operations still flourish, grow and interconnect with others. The next series of concerns stems from the fact that pro-Russian disinformation operations are now using generative AI chatbots to attack Russia's adversaries on social networks, as is the case with the famous Storm-1516, which has targeted France with several fake narratives since December 2024.¹⁰ While FIMI multiplied and intensified throughout 2025, by the year's end hybrid threat attacks that Paris could not or did not want to formally attribute to Moscow also included drones overflying strategic military sites. An example of this was seen on 4th December 2025 at installations in Brest that host the French Navy's nuclear submarine base.

⁹ The three main messages conveyed were that Western sanctions against Russia were mostly harming Europeans; that Ukraine is a failed, corrupt and Nazi state; and that the Ukrainians staged the Bucha massacre to incriminate Russia.

¹⁰ More about the matter here: Natalie Huet, McKenzie Sadeghi, Chine Labbé, Une campagne de propagande russe cible la France avec des scandales générés par IA, cumulant 55 millions de vues sur les réseaux sociaux, *NewsGuard*, 17.04.2025, <https://www.newsguardtech.com/fr/special-reports/campagne-russe-cible-france/>

From self-defence to resilience

Hybrid warfare and FIMI add to the threat that the rise of radical parties entails for French democracy. With its polarized political scene, within which radical parties have prospered in recent years, and its media arena dominated by populist outlets that push public opinion to lean towards the far right, France is particularly vulnerable to FIMI. Unsolved tensions within the French model of national identity subsequently become potentially explosive in these circumstances. Yet authoritarian countries with malicious intentions against the French social model and European values more generally – Russia but also China, Azerbaijan and Turkey – are eager to exploit these tensions in order to sow chaos, or even ignite in the worst case scenario a civil war.

Following a belated but salvatory strategic awakening in 2023, the French leadership seems to have abandoned its naïve attitudes towards Russia. Paris has realized the seriousness of the threat that Moscow's malicious activities entail, as well as the urgent need for France to patch its vulnerabilities. This acknowledgment allowed for the holding of parliamentary inquiries to probe foreign malign influence, resulting in an update to national strategies and ambitious institutional capacity-building initiatives. This resulted in the establishment of a special watchdog known as VIGINUM (Service de vigilance et protection contre les ingérences numériques étrangères), which is tasked with identifying and attributing foreign digital interference operations.

Under the backdrop of the current regime crisis, however, French democratic institutions are at threat of a tactical and *ad hoc* alliance of extremes that could deliver the 5th republic a fatal blow. Both the far-left LFI and far-right RN parties stand ready to take power with a revolutionary program that includes a radical overhaul of French institutions and the establishment of a 6th republic, operating on a new constitution freed from the principles they abhor. Should they reconcile their views on key common denominators – desires for the resignation of President Macron from office, the holding of a referendum on further support to Ukraine, to mention but two hypothetical topics – the risk grows that Russia could exploit societal fractures. Simultaneously, it could also exploit legal loopholes and procedural malfunctions within the judiciary system for malicious purposes, all with a view to destabilizing state institutions.

The outcome of the intensification of Russian FIMI will depend to a large degree on France's ability to adopt a whole-of-society approach to resilience, and on its determination to raise awareness about, and fight back against, Russian sharp power attacks on the "hearts and minds" of the French population, especially of younger voters. Efforts in that direction include updating anti-corruption legislation, beefing up the judiciary, and boosting people's media literacy.

As this paper has argued, a significant part of the French establishment – business, intellectual and diplomatic elites alike – harbours a near toxic fascination with Russia's *grandeur*. Many sectors of French society remain receptive to narratives that stress the uniqueness and genius of Russia's culture, and thus subsequently help Putin justify his geopolitical ambitions in the former Soviet space. This attitude has facilitated the penetration of Russian narratives about the war in Ukraine, and more generally of pro-Russian worldviews in many French political discussion circles. Given that most of the amplification occurs on social media, joining forces with other EU member states is crucial in

order to enforce the EU Digital Services Act. The effective regulation of social platforms is needed in order to limit the exploitation of internal tensions and divisions by any malevolent external forces.

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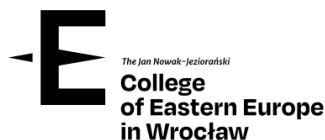
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