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TREADING A FINE LINE

**Countering Russian Disinformation in
Poland**



INTRODUCTION

Russia has established information as part of its security doctrine and unabashedly uses it for its political goals across the globe. While in terms of physical war Poland is behind the frontlines, in terms of information it is under constant attack. Here Russia prefers to act in a decentralised manner, putting its assets into many different baskets. Central for its modus operandi vis-à-vis its adversaries is the erosion of trust within societies of respective countries, toward their states' agencies and between international actors.

Poland has a complex but predominantly brutal relationship with Russia. In its memory Russia is the occupier and that apparently inoculates Poles against any positive feelings towards Russians and, especially, the Russian state.

Therefore, most Polish experts on disinformation agree that Russia works to utilise and amplify certain narratives rather than create them. It sows doubt, discontent, polarisation and indifference. This builds on fringe sentiments or misconceptions in Polish society and boosts them across a wide range of channels with the help of a variety of actors, from political operators to bots. Currently, Russian informational attacks focus on breaking European unity, sowing conflict between Poles and Ukrainians, increasing polarisation and promoting Polish isolationism.

On the other hand, Russian or "ruski" is the one of the most common invectives and the synonym for anything bad, corrupt or simply useless. "Rusek" has become the most common form of orientalism in Polish culture. The politicians of all political camps have grown used and unimpressed with accusations of working for Russia. Russia has in turn become more sanitised. It has become a banal and superficial in the collective mindset without much reckoning of contemporary Russia and its deceit in exploiting Polish fears and desires. Polish belief of being immune to Russian influence and malign subthreshold activities have often led to it being blindsided.

Actors

Russian narratives are very hard to discern from home-grown Polish narratives and Ukraine is a case in point. Both hard-right politicians from the Konfederacja and Korona Polska as well as elderly post-communist left wing politicians such as the former prime minister Leszek Miller or the journalist Monika Jaruzelska happily jostle with the anti-Ukrainian card. Grzegorz Braun and people he surrounds himself (most recently, Fire Extinguisher Front (Front Gaśnicowy) with are the most

Treading a Fine Line

committed promoters of the narratives that serve the Russian cause. His open letter to Sergey Lavrov about the poor state of Polish-Russian relations could be seen as a performative act but is symptomatic of the conduciveness to malign information campaigns.

This is not to say that the public space has been void of pro-Russian elements. Przemysław Witkowski, one of the most prominent Polish researchers of radical right, have called this the „partia rosyjska” (Russia party). After 1945 the communist government and the Marxists supported Russia but from 1986 the pro-Russian sentiment moved to nationalist, ultra-conservative and ultra-religious groups (e.g. Myśl Polska, Kamraci, wRealu and All-Polish Youth).

It has been very difficult to pinpoint Russia and trace the narratives to Kremlin. The big email leak from political operators Sargis Mirzakhanyan and Aleksander Usovsky in 2014-2017 is one of the few pieces of publicly available evidence. It shed lots of light on the way these operations are funded. As a result, some Russians were expelled from Poland. But as technology advances, cryptocurrencies flourish mapping these channels from Russia to Poland has become even more complicated. Faster technological development means faster disinformation and manipulation. Moreover, the Polish political operators become savvier and tread carefully avoiding any traceable connections to Russia.

Channels

Erosion of trust in the state and any relevant authorities, be it medicine, public intellectuals or media, have enabled Russia. X or Twitter has historically been the platform where conspiracy theories, hate speech and verbal aggression spread the easiest. Poland has traditionally had high numbers on the platform, making it an important space for political statements and direct communication. While Meta platforms have been traditionally more restrictive, since 2025 the numbers of pro-Russian narratives have increased, especially in Facebook groups. TikTok has also emerged as a conducive space for radical and emotional narratives that fit the patterns of Russian disinformation. As some researchers say (see DFRLAB) deficiencies in data transparency by major platforms makes it harder to clearly identify inauthentic accounts run by foreign actors.

Long-form commentaries should in theory moderate opinions and ease emotions but have become the repository for all kinds of narratives, both democratic discussions and pro-Russian manipulations. A significant portion of fake and half-true discussions have migrated to channels on Youtube where in the sake diversity of opinions and struggle against presumed censorship a wide range of fringe actors get closer to the mainstream.

NARRATIVES

Ukraine

The major Russia narrative in Poland is the scepticism towards Ukraine. Ukraine has been the corner stone of Polish political thinking in the twentieth century. Be it Jerzy Giedroyc or Zbigniew Brzezinski saw Ukraine as fundamental to Polish security and a bulwark against Russian imperialism. Ukraine has been so important for Poland and there so many Polish-Ukrainian interactions that external actors have done their best to exploit any tensions that appeared between Poles and Ukrainians or Poland and Ukraine. Since 2014 this has turned into a constant stream of disinformation and manipulation. Russia's full-scale war against Ukraine has led to the usual fatigue in societies but the second half of 2025 has marked a stark increase in case of anti-Ukrainian narratives online (Demagog, Res Futura and others). Police have been noting a steep increase in verbal and physical violence against Ukrainians over 2025.

The history of WW2 and the Ukrainian nationalist massacres of Poles are central to bilateral relation and have a long history of manipulation by the communist Polish state, the Soviet Union and Russia. Nor have the independent states shown much good will in resolving this very painful chapter of common history. Researchers and civil society have been vocal in stressing the risks of unresolved historical questions exploited by malign foreign actors, Russia being the most active. The mass Ukrainian migration to Poland after the start of the war in 2014 led to multiple occasions for malign influence campaigns. Politically, both Ukraine and Poland did little to defuse the tensions.

Other prominent Ukraine-related narratives involve refugees and migrants. After Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine Polish solidarity was extraordinary but the society was being tested. One narrative involved Ukrainian men working in Poland rather than serving in the army. Just as men were blamed for avoiding military service, female refugees were seen stealing Polish men for Polish women.

The issue of "gratitude" would come to dominate the discourse on Polish-Ukrainian relations in 2025 with the president Karol Nawrocki being the opinion leader. Amplified by anti-Ukrainian accounts (and alt-right American users) over the whole of 2025 these narratives have developed into new directions such as Ukrainian greed and extortion of Western funds or unwillingness to negotiate a peace deal. The decision by the liberal Civic Platform candidate Rafal Trzaskowski in January 2025 to bring in the use of social support for refugee children only normalised the scepticism among the general population.

The Russian use of Ukrainian citizens as disposable agents has helped to move Poles and Ukrainians apart. According to publicly available data, Ukrainians citizens (also from occupied territories) are the biggest group of people charged with cases of

Treading a Fine Line

sabotage. This has been easily exploited in social media to promote fake news of Ukraine dragging Poland into the war, while supposedly blaming Russia. This narrative has been pushed by Polish politicians such as Ewa Herńik-Zajączkowska but also boosted on social media.

Polarisation and the reliability of the Polish state

Polish political scene has become famously polarised and pillarised with little signs of cohesion in the nearest future. The Polish-Polish war was, as it is often by political commentators, has been a fertile ground for the weakening of state institutions. The Smolensk air disaster from 2010 marked a rift in the Polish society that would widen as years went. The Russians did not miss the occasion to exploit it (see Grzegorz Rzczkowski).

The courts and state media have been central to political divisions. In Poland trust in the legal system is one of the lowest in the UE and the legal reforms by the Law and Justice government post 2015 only led to further losses (Eurobarometer, CBOŚ). This distrust has been regularly fostered in social media, claiming politically motivated privileges. Prominent cases like the escape of the judge Tomasz Szmidt to Belarus were just one more hit the image of the state institutions. The military and border guards became one of the polarising topics in 2021-2023 (this time the liberals undermining state institutions) with the liberal camp radicalising narrative.

Once in a while Russia would also launch direct information attacks such as the generally failed attempt at creating panic by sending false text messages with information about mobilisation. In 2024 the cyberattack on the Polish Press Agency PAP resulted in two fake publications about the military mobilisation of 200 000 civilians for service in Ukraine.

Following the drone attack, Russia peddled narratives suggesting that it was a mystification by Polish institutions further questioning the reliability of the state to respond. Similar arguments could be made (and are much better researched) involve the COVID-19 pandemic and the abortion ban.

Sovereignty and Poland's place in the world

The overall themes of isolationism and sovereignty have been central in narratives complementary with Russia's strategic goals. Fall of Western civilisation has been a popular trope for Russia's propaganda operations across the world and Poland is probably not an exception. To the Polish radicals the restoration or recovery of independence has been one of the major slogans. It usually means the severance of ties with the European Union, the rejection of the special security arrangements with the United States and the general distrust of Poland's neighbours. It lies in Russia's interest to amplify distrust in international organisations and allies, even supporting Poland's huge investment in defence to suggest Poland is "going it alone".

Treading a Fine Line

Historically, Poland has been one of the most Euro enthusiastic countries in the EU. However, after a deeper look we can easily see times when that support has wavered. The last three years mark a period of constant decline, almost reaching the levels of 2004-2005. As of 2025 already around 25% of sceptical of the EU, be it positive sentiments, benefits or membership overall.

Russia has been identified as the disseminator of disinformation by the European Union (Council conclusions) but local actors have been unrelenting. Again, Grzegorz Braun has been the epitome of anti-European sentiment, building on a long tradition of euroscepticism in the political fringes. The phrase “eurokołhoz” has been central to his political identity. He regularly compares the EU with the Soviet Union and claims that Poland had more freedom as Russia-ruled Kingdom of Poland in the nineteenth century.

Polish-American relations have historically been viewed very positively in Poland, reaching 80% in 2023, but since Donal Trump’s election this has fallen to just above 30% in 2025. This can be seen as nothing special given the controversial politics of the US president but just as with any other divisions this decline could be fanned by Russia. In the long term there is the image of Poland as an American puppet state, losing its hard won independence.

An alarming dynamic can also be observed in Polish-German relations. Over the last century these have been very difficult and even the uptick after 1989 now seems like a short-lived moment. The German state has failed to see the process of reconciliation as a long-term commitment and to recognise the explicit murder of Poles during the second world war as something that would come to haunt the partnership at the centre of European politics and economy.

REACTIONS

The rise in anti-Ukrainian sentiment, the Euroscepticism and the high level of polarisation combined with the powerful rise of the political parties peddling Russian narratives point to lack of political will, failures by state institutions and the scale of malign information campaigns. Russia that refrains from creating new narratives but exploits existing tensions in Poland and amplifies them is much more difficult to tackle. The spectre of censorship in a politically heated environment can be paralysing. These narratives are peddled by Polish citizens, and the legal system is slow to put a stop to hate speech and spread of false information. While subthreshold attacks on infrastructure require significant planning from the Russian side and are easy to trace, low intensity informational activities can be disseminated at a very low cost.

Russian channels were never popular in Poland and very permanently banned by the Polish state in 2022. The disintegration of the traditional media landscape and the polarisation in media only accelerated the erosion of trust. Therefore, the focus of troll factories and the like have been the social media where Poles get their

Treading a Fine Line

information (very strong among the 18-44 cohort and which is well above the EU average). Fortunately, just like the Russian TV channels Telegram did not really pick up in Poland and is mostly used by foreign-language speakers and foreign actors looking for disposable agents, and criminal activities rather than spreading narratives among the Polish population.

At the forefront of the fight with online fraud, disinformation and election meddling is NASK, the state research and response institution responsible with keeping the internet safe for everyone, protecting users from digital threats. While helping the state institutions to be resilient in the face of direct cyber-attacks is the primary task (Poland is one of the most attacked countries in the world), researching and advising on disinformation is high on the list. Other important institution that has the capabilities to quickly react include Government Centre for Security (RCB) that has its DisInfo Radar and the text messaging alert. The Polish Ministry of Foreign Affairs has changed its structure to include the Department for Strategic Communication and Countering Foreign Disinformation and established the advisor Council for Resilience that includes many recognised experts. The Council published its recommendations for the Government in late December of 2025, and the focus was on the state administration taking on a bigger role in tackling malign influence and better coordination between ministries and various state agencies. It recommends more financial support to civil society initiatives but leaves a strong sense that these are too small for the scale of the problem.

Polish attempts to create a special state commission on Russian influence into internal security could be seen as an excellent initiative but the polarised environment meant that its sole aim was incriminating political opponents. The first commission was established by the Law and Justice just a couple of months before the 2023 October parliamentary election that led to the change in government. The scrappy report published already after the election advised against entrusting Donald Tusk, Bartłomiej Sienkiewicz and Tomasz Siemoniak with any functions related to state security. Leaving the scant evidence aside, it targeted the politicians that were to become the prime minister, minister responsible for special services and the minister of culture in just a few weeks.

The commission was relaunched in 2024 with the task of exploring Russian disinformation. Its report finally published in January 2025 was much more balanced highlighting some of the narratives mentioned above. It also focused on the shortcomings of the Polish state stressing the need to supplement the analytical capacities with units working countering disinformation. The general expert opinion is pushing for more preventive or pre-emptive measures rather than even real-time debunking. Prebunking domestically created false narratives has a high political price. One option floated in the expert community could be saturating the information space with content produced by trusted sources or generated with AI based on Polish-language source such Polish Large Language Model (see PLLuM by the Polish Academy of Science).

Polish military officials in closed door discussion and lately on social media have been more active in highlighting Polish-Ukrainian relations as the most vulnerable side of Polish defence. The murder of an eleven-year-old by a twelve-year-old in

Treading a Fine Line

Southern Poland in December of 2025 prompted a statement by the General Staff of the Polish Armed Forces put out a statement that claims about the Ukrainian origins of the killer are a case of Russian disinformation. Considering that not all that long ago giving nationality of suspects or offenders in press articles and official statements was seen as stigmatising migrants, this marks a significant change in strategy. It also continues a pattern of communication by the General Staff related to Russian disinformation and influence campaigns, especially against Ukrainians (regular posts on Facebook). Considering the high level of trust the military enjoys, this engagement is very valuable.

Polish state think tank such a Centre for Eastern Studies, the Mieroszewski Centre and the Narutowicz Institute have been very good at identifying and alarming the public about the threats but have been very cautious when it comes to challenging the politicians or even academics about their dissemination of Russian narratives. In some isolated cases “strategic silence” can be the right choice, ignoring some of the extreme narratives.

One of the European responses to disinformation and better control of the social media platforms was the Digital Services Act. However, in some in the polarised society the DSA came to represent censorship from the unelected European bureaucracy. When vetoing the national implementation president Karol Nawrocki compared the proposed Polish law to George Orwell’s 1984. The rejection of international solutions might have also been influenced by the close alliance between Donald Trump’s administration and Karol Nawrocki and the wider Law and Justice political camp. With the American administration staunchly against European regulation of American companies there seems to be a dead end. The general distrust of the European bureaucracy by part of the polarised Polish society makes the whole topic even more problematic. One additional option is the sharing of best practices with other partners such as Ukraine, which is already being done at the level of agencies.

Looking at the overall picture, the impression is that the Polish civil society has been at the forefront of defending the state against Russian narratives. Here, there is usual risk of falling into the trap of polarisation as the civil society is usually seen as better aligned with the political centre. These include the European Research Collective Res Futura, the Media Monitoring Institute (IMM), Foundation INFO Ops, the Association NEVER AGAIN and the Association Demagog. They use AI tools to monitor internet traffic and inform about trends. Independent analysts such as Anna Mierzyńska or Ludwik Rey. They all do significant work in alarming the Polish public about the threats and are resolute in naming names. From 2025 Polish state companies that include some of the biggest businesses in Poland (see PZU, PKO BP) are using its foundations to support these civic initiatives with actual funding.

However, the scale of the problem seems beyond the capacity of the most determined individual initiatives. Especially, when some of the key decisions should be taken at an international or supranational level. The traditional slogan of “more education” might not be enough. Some seed initiatives such as the scheme to support local medias and local leader of opinion (see Ministry of Culture and National Heritage) might be a small step in the right direction.

CONCLUSIONS

Russia's interference in Polish discourse is certain, but the exact scale and intensity is incredibly hard to measure. There are spikes in targeted activity but for most of the time pro-Russian actor or direct Russian agents simply peddle disinformation and narratives created by Poles themselves. These destroy trust in state institutions and support Polish isolationism or a narrow definition of sovereignty. Over the last year, however, it is the anti-Ukrainian narrative that has come to dominate Polish information sphere. Ukrainians are blamed for unresolved historical issues, greed and warmongering.

Polish state institutions are more than ever aware of the risks posed by the malign and false narratives but have been slow in transforming their excellent analytical capacity into forward action. State institutions tread the thin line of censorship in democratic societies and careful not to step over the line. The legal framework is slow to react to the fast-changing media environment. The scale of the problem forces the military and the less politicised parts of the state apparatus to demonstrate initiative. The current information space requires lots of content and the pro-democracy must have the means of supplying it.

In these conditions it is the Polish civil society that get to play a leading role. Their ability to move faster and more directly is very important. The question remains is whether in the face of the information war it is enough to rely on the civil society.

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Treading a Fine Line

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