

Revealing Russian influence in Europe:

Insights from Germany,
France, Italy and
Ukraine

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Table of contents

1. Executive summary	4
2. Introduction	5
3. Research methodology	6
4. Russian influence in France	8
5. Russian influence in Germany	26
6. Russian influence in Italy	46
7. Russian influence in Ukraine	60
8. Conclusions	84
9. Recommendations	87

1. Executive summary

The full-scale Russian aggression of Ukraine has dramatically shaped the course of European contemporary history. The aftermath of this event introduces unparalleled challenges, encompassing security, Euro-Atlantic integration, and global economic development.

However, the roots of Russian aggression in Ukraine extend beyond its current military actions. Moscow laid the groundwork for this aggressive move, strategically investing in the dissemination of its narratives and exerting influence on public opinion across various states in Europe. The calculated use of propaganda emerged as a pivotal element in the Russian preparatory strategy that ultimately culminated in the invasion of Ukraine.

This report aims at providing an analysis of this preparatory strategy and focuses on how Russia created and promoted narratives that justified and anticipated its actions in Ukraine. Our analysis is particularly centered on four key European countries: Germany, France, Italy, and Ukraine, examining how the Kremlin has adeptly tailored its propaganda machinery to exert a significant influence on these societies. The consistent deployment of ex-

tensive disinformation campaigns, designed to amplify polarization and erode democratic discourse, has been a persistent feature of Moscow's propaganda strategy. Nevertheless, what sets Russian actions apart is their effective adaptation to the unique situations within these countries. The Kremlin strategically exploits the specific societal contexts in Germany, France, Italy, and Ukraine to maximize the impact of its narratives, showcasing a deliberate and targeted approach to achieving its political objectives.

Through the presentation of case studies and analyses grounded in open-source data, our objective is to delve into the impact of pivotal actors in Russian propaganda and their distinct characteristics within the national context. By scrutinizing specific dynamics and employing data-driven methodologies, we aim to investigate the intricate Russian propaganda's dynamics. We also are keen to contribute to a deeper understanding of Russian narratives and propaganda in a broader political context.

Finally, our report includes a set of recommendations aimed at fostering resilience and enhancing the capacity of democratic societies in

Europe and beyond to effectively counter Russian propaganda. These recommendations are designed to create a more robust environment where such Russian narratives struggle to generate polarization. By offering practical and strategic guidelines, we aspire to empower policymakers, institutions, and the public to build a collective defense against the divisive impact of Russian propaganda and malign narratives.

2. Introduction

The European Union (EU) has condemned the illegal annexation of Crimea in 2014, Russian Federation's (RF) unprecedented and unprovoked military attack against Ukraine in 2022, and the illegal annexation of Ukraine's Donetsk, Luhansk, Zaporizhzhia and Kherson regions in 2022.¹ To force severe consequences on Russia for its actions and to effectively thwart Russian abilities to continue the aggression the EU has imposed a series of sanctions including individual restrictive measures, economic sanctions, bans on media outlets, diplomatic and visa measures, restrictions on economic relations with specific areas, and measures concerning economic cooperation.

However, for a long time Russia has been performing covert influence on agenda via its mass media and minority groups as well as malicious collaboration with the European business and political actors.²

Since the illegal annexation of Crimea and launching hostilities in Donbas in 2014, RF has intensified its co-option of business and political elites³ and launched massive disinformation campaigns to increase polarization and undermine democratic debate.⁴ One specific Kremlin's objective is to block sanctions imposed by the EU on the RF.⁵ These activities erode the effort of the Union to deter Russia's aggression.

To execute sanctions with full force, a more systematic action is needed to identify and ban the agents of influence of the RF in Ukraine, the EU and the Black Sea Region countries which could be used to circumvent sanctions by Russia. Therefore, this project entails the analysis of publicly available but dispersed information about Russia's influencers, mass media and digital platforms, political parties, business associations, lobby groups, and others in Ukraine and in the European Union.

The focus of this project's analysis is on digital platforms and media in Ukraine and in the EU as well as direct lobbying of the EU Institutions.

1 European Council. Council of the European Union. (n.d.). EU restrictive measures against Russia over Ukraine (since 2014). EC. <https://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/policies/sanctions/restrictive-measures-against-russia-over-ukraine/>

2 Shekhovtsov, A. (2017). *Russia and the Western Far Right: Tango Noir*. Routledge.

3 Giles, Keir. (2015). *Russia's Toolkit*. Chatham House.

https://www.researchgate.net/publication/280611569_Russia's_Toolkit/link/55c11a7808ae9289a09d005e/download

4 Lucas, E. and Pomeranzen, P. (2016). *Winning the Information War: Techniques and Counter-strategies to Russian Propaganda in Central and Eastern Europe*. CEPA. <https://li.com/wp-content/uploads/2016/08/winning-the-information-war-full-report-pdf.pdf>

5 Bellingcat Contributor. (2017). *Russia Tries to Influence Le Pen to Repeal Sanctions*. Bellingcat. <https://www.bellingcat.com/news/uk-and-europe/2017/04/29/russia-tries-influence-le-pen-repeal-sanctions/>; Laine, M., Anesi, C., Bagnoli, L., and Tkachenko, T. (2023). *Kremlin-Linked Group Arranged Payments to European Politicians to Support Russia's Annexation of Crimea*. OCCRP. <https://www.occrp.org/en/investigations/kremlin-linked-group-arranged-payments-to-european-politicians-to-support-russias-annexation-of-crimea>

3. Research methodology

This study identified the subjects performing pro-Russian lobby activity in selected European countries since Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine. We considered individuals and organizations active in politics, media, culture, and other areas from February 24, 2022 (the start of the full-scale invasion) through August 24, 2023 (1.5 years since the full-scale war). The sample consisted of Brussels (the capital of the EU policymaking), France, Germany, and Italy (the three most populous countries of the EU), as well as Ukraine (the target of Russia's invasion).

We applied the following criteria indicating pro-Russian lobby activity by a subject (in the order of severity, starting from the heaviest):

- (1) entering Ukrainian territories occupied by Russia;
- (2) receiving Russian funding;
- (3) participation in pro-Russian events;
- (4) spreading pro-Russian propaganda;
- (5) casting pro-Russian cultural influence.

These were counted when they were found to be systematic, that is, occurring multiple times and/or in several criteria aspects, especially when cross-validated by several sources. The most evident indications of pro-Russian lobby activity instances from reliable sources were documented and used as proofs.

The data on Russian influence on digital platforms and media was collected by semi-automatic content analysis from publicly accessible websites and social media platforms. The data on the direct Russian lobby in the EU Institutions and Ukraine was collected via the analysis of the EU Transparency Register⁶ and records of regular meetings with Russian politicians or business persons. The collected data was structured and entered in a dataset disaggregated by regional sub-datasets.

A solid source of data was The Hamilton 2.0 Dashboard, a project of the Alliance for Securing Democracy at the German Marshall Fund of the United States.⁷ The Dashboard pro-

vides a summary analysis of the narratives and topics promoted by Russian government officials and state-funded media on Twitter/X, YouTube, state-sponsored news websites, and via official press releases and transcripts published by their respective ministries of foreign affairs. In particular, we utilized the the dashboard's collection of global media Twitter/X accounts via the Social Data Search, tweet search engine and data discovery tool,⁸ by searching for countries, hashtags, usernames, and key words. From July 13, 2023, Twitter/X removed access to its API for the Alliance for Securing Democracy's Hamilton 2.0 Dashboard and no new Twitter/X data was ingested. Therefore, in our project we continued the search for new entries ourselves.

Another source of ideas was the initiative by Let's Data and Detector Media of regular analysis and dissemination of media discourses on Ukraine in Europe and on other continents.⁹ In 2022-early 2023 their monitoring identified (i) themes, wordclouds, discourses, and nar-

6 Europa.eu (n.d.). Transparency Register. Europa.eu. <https://ec.europa.eu/transparencyregister/public/homePage.do>.

7 GMF. (n.d.). Hamilton 2.0 Dashboard. GMF. <https://securingdemocracy.gmfus.org/hamilton-dashboard/>

8 GMF. (n.d.). ASD Social Data Search. GMF. https://securingdemocracy.gmfus.org/asd-social-data-search/?q=*%28product+eq+%27Hamilton%27+or+product2+eq+%27Hamilton%27%29&start-date=2021-01-01&end-date=2023-08-14.

9 LetsData. (n.d.). Communicate as if you know the future. LetsData. <https://letsdata.net/>; Atlantic Council. (2023). Mapping the last decade of Russia's disinformation and influence campaign in Ukraine. Atlantic Council. <https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/news/transcripts/mapping-the-last-decade-of-russias-disinformation-and-influence-campaign-in-ukraine/>

ratives; (ii) productive, toxic, and neutral messages; (iii) quotations of Russian media by specific websites. In addition, they provide recommendations on communication priorities. Complementing their discourse analysis, we focused on the subjects of Russia's influence, especially with regards to sanctions and assistance to Ukraine provided by the EU and allies.

One source of inspiration for our project was the study of the Ukrainian data journalism initiative Texty.org.ua. On December 1, 2022, they published a study that

identified persons and organizations in European countries that support Russia in Europe.¹⁰ They took into account (a) Russian citizens and European nationals; (b) politicians, mass media, think tanks, and churches; (c) funding or sponsorship by Russian organizations, illegal crossing of Ukrainian border, as well as regular meetings with Russian politicians or officials, pro-Russian statements, voting in the European Parliament. In early 2023, they published a follow-up study.¹¹ Texty.org.ua's approach brings together a wide range of not only Kremlin's of influence, but also

sympathizers and Russian culture consumers. In contrast, our project focused on Russian lobbyists in Ukraine and in the EU that are undermining the sanctions against Russia and assistance provided to Ukraine.

By examining open sources, in total, we identified as many as 360 pro-Russian lobbyists. Country-wise, their distribution is as follows: France - 83, Germany - 133, Italy - 39, Ukraine - 105. Please see more detailed statistics and in-depth case studies in the following sections.

10 Texty.org.ua. (2022). The Germs of the Russian World. Texty.org.ua. <https://texty.org.ua/projects/108323/germs-russian-world-who-supports-russia-europe/>

11 Texty.org.ua. (2023). The Germs of the "Russian World". Version 2.0: Updated and Amended. Texty.org.ua. https://texty.org.ua/d/2023/germs_v2/en



4. Russian influence in France

Country context

Marlene Laruelle, an author of “Russian Soft Power in France: Assessing Moscow’s Cultural and Business Para-diplomacy,” defines¹² a range of instruments of the Russian propaganda influence in France. The first instrument worth mentioning are Russian **migrants**. Ever since the 1920s, when a flood of Russian migrants who were fleeing the 1917 revolutions arrived in France, the Kremlin has sought to foster a community within the French political and cultural elite that could be sympathetic to Russian interests. Many of these émigrés and their descendants would become important figures within France’s cultural elite and business classes, often providing a link between French firms and Russian markets, and, more recently, urging French policymakers to lift sanctions leveled against Russia.

The second instrument are **the far- and the mainstream right**. While the National Front, France’s leading far-right party, has been connected to Russia for decades, it was only af-

ter Marine Le Pen became its leader in 2011, that the party established itself as the strongest pro-Russian voice within French politics. Yet it may be Moscow’s links with Les Républicains, France’s traditional center-right party, that are most important. There is a distinct pro-Russian bloc within Les Républicains—a bloc that includes former President Nicolas Sarkozy, former Prime Minister François Fillon, and a circle of foreign policy advisors seen as friendly to Russia.

The third one is the **Russian Orthodox Church**. Through the 2007 canonic reconciliation between the Moscow Patriarchate and the Russian Orthodox Church Outside Russia, Russia was able to retake control of several Russian émigré parishes. However, it did not entirely succeed, and several parishes were able to remain independent. This is also the conclusion, gained by the research team of Texty in their report¹³ on how influential is actually the Russian church in Europe in the context of Ukrainian refugees. Laruelle adds that the fact of appearance of a new

Orthodox cathedral and cultural center on Branly Quay is proof that Russia has chosen Paris to display its reasserted power in the heart of Western Europe.

Another instrument of influence is a shared interest in a **politics of “sovereignty”**, usually manifested as a desire to emphasize the interests of the nation-state over those of the European Union and other transnational bodies. It is often seen in support of “protectionist,” rather than “globalist,” trade policy. In cultural terms, it’s frequently associated with hostility toward immigrants and reverence for so-called traditional norms regarding gender relations and sexuality. While the French left is generally dismissive of these cultural anxieties, it can be sympathetic to the sovereigntist views on politics and economics that are so vocally championed by Moscow, Laruelle adds.

The narratives that are being promoted in France by pro-Russian actors include the need for neutrality for Paris in matters of arms supply and political support of Ukraine, the

12 Laurelle M. Russia’s Presence in France Goes Deeper Than RT. Open Society Foundations, 24.01.2018. <https://www.opensocietyfoundations.org/voices/russia-s-presence-france-goes-deeper-rt>

13 Набожняк О., Кельм Н. Чому українці, які виїхали до Європи, ходять до храмів РПЦ, та як нові прихожани впливають на ставлення до війни. [Nabozhniak O., Kelm N. Why Ukrainians who left for Europe go to the churches of the Russian Orthodox Church, and how new parishioners influence the attitude towards the war] TEXTY.org.ua, 01.02.2023 <https://texty.org.ua/articles/108789/zdes-russkyj-duh-yak-vlashtovano-rosijsku-cerkvu-v-yevropi-i-kudy-hodyty-nashym-pereselencyam/>

necessity to weaken sanctions and enhance cultural ties with Russia and others. The Russians' aggressive war against Ukraine is, of course, referred to as "provoked by NATO and the USA", which are imposing their "hegemony" on defenseless Europe. Meanwhile, in Ukraine, "Nazis" are committing their "atrocities" against the "people of Donbas". There are also widespread conspiracy theories about the fabulous enrichment of "western elites" during the war, theses about the invincibility of the Russian army, and the need to sit down for negotiations as soon as possible, preferably taking into account all of Russia's territorial claims. These nar-

ratives largely coincide with similar messages from pro-Russian forces in other countries.

An overview of pro-Russian influence groups in France

In the tabulated section, we have listed about 80 individuals and organizations that relayed messages of Russian propaganda and otherwise manifested their pro-Russian stance after February 24, 2022. These are predominantly well-known pro-Russian figures who have not changed their opinion about Moscow after the full-scale invasion of Ukraine,

or these changes were insignificant and now full adoration has changed to cautious support for Russia and criticism of opponents.

This is one of the key differences from the database of the Texty publication, which contains over 300 positions in the "French" section. Our colleagues in this case included everyone who showed their pro-Russian stance in any way since the beginning of the war in 2014. We, however, excluded those who did not manifest after 2022, or changed their opinion, or whose firm pro-Russian stance could not be confirmed in open sources.

Table 1. Kremlinophiles in France: The overall sample structure*

Activist	11	Being active on demos, human rights protection activities
Army	7	Connected to army and / or intelligence, security services
Business	1	Business person
Culture	2	Cultural influence
Expert	12	Commentators, researchers not attributed to certain think tank
Media	17	Journalists, writers, for whom media is the main activity
Politician	16	Politically engaged
Russian organization	3	State-related Russian organizations
Think tank	14	Selected pro-Russian think tank and its representatives
Total	83	

* We have included a minimal amount of entities, who were publicly active after February, 2022, so there might be even more, but this table gives a general image of the structure. If there was a double categorized entity (e.g., army and think tank) we've collocated them only into one category.

Principal pro-Russian influence groups in France

Politicians: the Left and the Right

Among politicians who support pro-Russian narratives in France, there are plenty of representatives from both the right and left political forces. The top representatives of political elites, who often side with the Kremlin in the information field, include the far-right party **Rassemblement National** (RN) and one of its leaders, **Marine Le Pen**, former French President **Nicolas Sarkozy**, who is also ideologically more inclined towards the right spectrum. This list can also include former Prime Minister **François Fillon**, the leader of the Reconquête party **Eric Zemmour**, former Education Minister **Jean-Luc Mélenchon** (left party La France Insoumise), former member of the European Parliament (Patriotes party) **Florian Philippot**, the ex-wife of former president **François Hollande**, public politician of the Socialist Party **Ségolène Royal**, members of the European Parliament **Thierry Mariani** and **Hervé Juvin** (both from RN), etc.

Regarding Le Pen, a parliamentary investigation concluded in June 2023, according to which Russian interference in her political activities was documented - from the participation of her deputies in events in Crimea (and the recognition of its annexation by Russia as legitimate) to financing the party in the Czech-Russian bank¹⁴. The report pointed to a “long-standing” link between Russia and the far-right party co-founded by Jean-Marie Le Pen, then known as the National Front.

The report further noted that the “strategy of political and ideological rapprochement” with Moscow had “accelerated” since Marine Le Pen, Jean-Marie Le Pen’s daughter, became the leader of the party in 2011. The document details the frequent contacts between party representatives and Russian officials, culminating in the warm welcome Le Pen received at the Kremlin ahead of France’s 2017 presidential election. “All of [Le Pen’s] remarks on Crimea, reiterated during her inquiry hearing, repeat verbatim the official language of Putin’s regime,” says the report, as cited by France24¹⁵. Despite denials and accusations of political pressure, after February 2022, Le Pen and her

party continued to publicly support Russian narratives, deny the annexation of Crimea¹⁶, and call for a halt to arms supplies to Ukraine¹⁷, among other things.

Former French head of state **Nicolas Sarkozy** shocked the public in August 2023 with statements about the necessity of compromises with Russia, stopping negotiations on arms supplies, and denying the fact of Crimea’s annexation and the possibility of its return to Ukraine¹⁸. Sarkozy never hid his sympathies towards Putin and Russia, referring to himself as a great friend¹⁹ of theirs. However, his August interview²⁰ with Le Figaro became almost the first comprehensive statement of the politician regarding the events in Ukraine, and likely, a bid to return to the political forefront within the pro-Russian spectrum.

Think tanks and discussion platforms

A distinctive feature of the French information-political landscape is the presence of a large number of analytical centers, the leaders and experts of which often express opinions very similar to the narratives of Russian propaganda. This primarily concerns

- 14 Sonne P. A Russian bank gave Marine Le Pen’s party a loan. Then weird things began happening, The Washington Post, 28.12.2018, https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/national-security/a-russian-bank-gave-marine-le-pens-party-a-loan-then-weird-things-began-happening/2018/12/27/960c7906-d320-11e8-a275-81c671a50422_story.html
- 15 Le Pen’s far right served as mouthpiece for the Kremlin, says French parliamentary report. France24, 03.06.2023. <https://www.france24.com/en/france/20230603-le-pen-s-far-right-served-as-mouthpiece-for-the-kremlin-says-french-parliamentary-report>
- 16 Как Марин Ле Пен пытается откеститься от связей с Путиным, но остается союзницей Кремля [How Marine Le Pen is trying to repent of ties with Putin, but remains an ally of the Kremlin]. RFI, 14.04.2023. <https://www.rfi.fr/ru/%D1%84%D1%80%D0%B0%D0%BD%D1%86%D0%B8%D1%8F/20220414-%D0%BC%D0%B0%D1%80%D0%B8%D0%BD-%D0%BB%D0%B5-%D0%BF%D0%B5%D0%BD-%D0%B8-%D0%B5%D0%B5-%D1%81%D0%B2%D1%8F%D0%B7%D0%B8-%D1%81-%D0%BA%D1%80%D0%B5%D0%BC%D0%B-%D0%B5%D0%BC>
- 17 Xerri A. Pour la première fois, Marine Le Pen qualifie la livraison d’armes à l’Ukraine d’«irresponsable» [Xerri A. For the first time, Marine Le Pen qualifies the delivery of arms to Ukraine as “irresponsible”]. Le Figaro, 13.07.2023. <https://www.lefigaro.fr/politique/pour-la-premiere-fois-marine-le-pen-qualifie-la-livraison-d-armes-a-l-ukraine-d-irresponsable-20230713>
- 18 Willsher K. ‘Shameful’ Nicolas Sarkozy under fire for defending Putin. The Guardian, 19.08.2023. <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2023/aug/19/shameful-nicolas-sarkozy-under-fire-for-defending-putin>
- 19 Sharkov D. Sarkozy Declares Himself a ‘Friend of Russia’ Ahead of Meeting Putin. Newsweek, 29.10.2015. <https://www.newsweek.com/sarkozy-declares-himself-friend-russia-ahead-meeting-putin-335644>
- 20 Jaigu C., Roquette G. Nicolas Sarkozy: «Nous avons besoin des Russes et ils ont besoin de nous». Le Figaro, 16.08.2023. <https://www.lefigaro.fr/politique/nicolas-sarkozy-nous-avons-besoin-des-russes-et-ils-ont-besoin-de-nous-20230816>

the geopolitical and military components, as well as comments on economic development.

In contrast to the conservative Institute of Democracy and Cooperation headed by former State Duma deputy Natalia Narochitskaya, which operated in Paris in the 2010s and had indirect financing from Russian state grants²¹, there is no direct evidence of a financial connection with the Kremlin for the institutions in question. However, in terms of information, this is undoubtedly one large web. Economists, sociologists, former generals of the French army, and intelligence officers have become and continue to be regular guests on Russian and pro-Russian media, conducting discussions, round tables, publishing “reports”, and writing books on Russia’s geopolitical prospects and course of the war in Ukraine, meanwhile spreading the messages of Russian state propaganda.

The Franco-Russian Dialogue Association (Dialogue Franco Russe) plays a significant role in defending Russia’s political interests in the information field. Presented as a

“privileged tool of communication between political, economic, and cultural circles of both countries,”²² this platform has long become an opportunity to voice many opinions, but the majority of them are in the pro-Russian spectrum. Furthermore, the group essentially functions as a lobbying structure where businessmen and politicians from both sides can discuss opportunities for mutual cooperation.

From the French side, the association is led by **Thierry Mariani**, an ultra-right member of the European Parliament who has regularly visited occupied Crimea and Donbas illegally. He was a part²³ of the administration of one of the companies of the Russian oligarch Konstantin Malofeev, who, among other things, financed the war in Donbas. Precisely because of potential Russian influence, Mariani became the subject of investigations by the French parliament²⁴. From the Russian side, the head is **Sergei Katasonov**, a former deputy of the State Duma from the ultra-right LDPR party. One of the co-founders and co-leaders²⁵ of the organization was previously Vladimir

Yakunin, former head of Russian Railways, one of the oligarchs closest to Vladimir Putin. In the 2010s, Yakunin was responsible for organizing networks supporting Russia in conservative circles in Europe, working with numerous analytical centers and charitable foundations, which could have been a cover for his financial abuses²⁶.

Both Mariani and other members²⁷ of the Franco-Russian Dialogue bureau, as well as guests of the club’s regular meetings, which take place even during Russia’s full-scale invasion of Ukraine, regularly disseminate Russian propaganda narratives concerning both politics and military components in US-Russia, US-EU, US-EU-Ukraine relations, oppose arms supplies, repeat narratives about Nazis, etc. For instance, Mariani spoke²⁸ about Ukraine’s responsibility for the war with Russia on a par with the aggressor. His deputy and co-defendant in the parliament’s investigation, former senator **Yves Pozzo di Borgo**, circulated numerous conspiracy theories regarding the massacre in Bucha or the “Azov” battalion²⁹. Another guest of the Dialogue proj-

21 Kanevskaya N., How The Kremlin Wields Its Soft Power In France. Radio Free Europe / Radio Liberty, 24.06.2014. <https://www.rferl.org/a/russia-soft-power-france/25433946.html>

22 Укрепление связей между Россией и Францией [Strengthening ties between Russia and France]. Website of French-Russian Dialogue. <https://dialoguefrancorusse.com/ru/%d0%ba%d1%82%d0%be-%d0%bc%d1%8b-%d1%82%d0%b0%d0%ba%d0%b8%d0%b5/>

23 Laloy V. Mariani, le pilier du «parti russe» en France [Laloy V. Mariani, the pillar of the “Russian party” in France]. Desk Russie, 08.06.2021. <https://desk-russie.eu/2021/06/08/mariani-le-pilier.html>

24 El Idrissi A., Michel A. Thierry Mariani et Yves Pozzo di Borgo visés par une enquête pour corruption en lien avec la Russie [El Idrissi A., Michel A. Thierry Mariani and Yves Pozzo di Borgo targeted by an investigation for corruption linked to Russia]. Le Monde, 24.11.2022. https://www.lemonde.fr/police-justice/article/2022/10/24/thierry-mariani-et-yves-pozzo-di-borgo-vises-par-une-enquete-pour-corruption-en-lien-avec-la-russie_6147139_1653578.html

25 Вечер и торжественный ужин в честь франко-российской дружбы [Evening and gala dinner in honor of Franco-Russian friendship]. Website of French-Russian Dialogue, 09.11.2016. <https://dialoguefrancorusse.com/ru/non-classe/soiree-et-diner-de-gala-celebrant-lamitie-franco-russe/>

26 Кириленко А. Бассейн. Как Якунин выводил из бюджета десятки миллиардов долларов и отмывал их в Европе [Kirilenko A. Swimming pool. How Yakunin withdrew tens of billions of dollars from the budget and laundered them in Europe]. The Insider, 08.07.2022. <https://theins.ru/korrupciya/251363>

27 Bureau. Website of French-Russian Dialogue <https://dialoguefrancorusse.com/ru/membres-du-bureau/>

28 Dezspot T. Pour Thierry Mariani, Ukraine et Russie sont tout aussi responsables de la guerre [Dezspot T. For Thierry Mariani, Ukraine and Russia are equally responsible for the war]. TF1info, 26.08.2022. <https://www.tf1info.fr/politique/pour-thierry-mariani-ukraine-et-russie-sont-tout-aussi-responsables-de-la-guerre-2230400.html>

29 Guckert E. Yves Pozzo di Borgo: un ex-sénateur complotiste au service de la propagande russe [Guckert E. Yves Pozzo di Borgo: a conspiratorial ex-senator serving Russian propaganda]. Conspiracy Watch, 11.08.2022. <https://www.conspiracywatch.info/yves-pozzo-di-borgo-un-ex->

ects, ultra-right former member of the European Parliament Florian Philippot³⁰, also labels Ukrainians as “Nazis”. Many of the Dialogue’s guests and leaders have regularly visited Russia and the occupied territories.

Among the analytical centers clearly inclined to support Russian narratives, centers such as Geopragma, Stratpol, CF2R (The French Center for Intelligence Studies), and IFRI (French Institute of International Relations) can be noted.

Geopragma is led by **Caroline Galactéros**, a French political scientist known for her affinity towards far-right movements in France, pro-Russian and anti-American statements, and her support for dictatorial regimes in the Middle East³¹. This allows her to appear in the columns of Russian propagandistic media, which promotes narratives claiming that Ukraine initiated the war herself, thus needing demilitarization, and that the “Americentric” world is in decline³². In addition to Galactéros’ own articles about the

proxy war between NATO and Russia waged through Ukrainians³³, they also publish reflections of military experts on why it is impossible to defeat Russia, and why Ukraine should no longer hope to regain the occupied territories³⁴; about the ethnic cleansings against Russian-speaking population that the Ukrainian government intends to undertake after the end of the war³⁵ etc.

Among other co-founders and members of Geopragma’s council³⁶ are individuals such as retired General **Jean-Bernard Pinatel**, who as early as 2011 published a book titled “Russia: A Vitally Important Alliance”³⁷. He justified the annexation of Crimea³⁸ and prophesied the collapse of the European economy following the sanctions against Russia³⁹. Pinatel’s statements regarding the necessity of France’s withdrawal from NATO are being actively used by Russian media in their information and psychological operations⁴⁰.

Caroline Galactéros also gave lectures at the Russian Peoples’ Friendship University, participated in events

organized by the “Russian World” fund established by the Russian administration after the annexation of Crimea, and served as an expert on the Russian propaganda channel RT France.

The head of the **Stratpol** center is **Xavier Moreau**, who has been working in Moscow since 2000 as a business consultant, but in the last decade became one of the key mouthpieces for Kremlin narratives for international and Russian media⁴¹. Close to far-right movements, Moreau has been disseminating pro-Russian messages throughout the entire Russian war against Ukraine since 2014, starting with theories about the MH-17 plane crash, ending with fakes about the “independent” bombardment of their own positions by Ukrainians in 2022. In 2018 and 2022, Moreau illegally visited the occupied Donbas to participate in staged elections and referendums on joining Russia as an “observer”, where he obviously positively assessed their organization and conduct⁴². Moreover, Moreau has been a guest on Russian propa-

senateur-complotiste-au-service-de-la-propagande-russe.html

30 Giraud R. Guerre en Ukraine : Philippot qualifie les Ukrainiens de “nazis” sur Twitter [Giraud R. War in Ukraine: Philippot calls Ukrainians “Nazis” on Twitter]. RTL, 06.03.2022. <https://www.rtl.fr/actu/politique/guerre-en-ukraine-philippot-qualifie-les-ukrainiens-de-nazis-sur-twitter-7900131060>

31 Laloy V. Caroline Galactéros, porte-parole de Moscou? [Laloy V. Caroline Galactéros, spokesperson for Moscow?]. Desk Russie, 14.01.2023. <https://desk-russie.eu/2023/01/14/caroline-galacteros-porte-parole.html>

32 Russia not knuckling under despite Western expectations, French expert says. TASS, 28.12.2022. <https://tass.com/world/1556709>

33 Galactéros C. The World’s tipping point. Geopragma, 03.04.2023. <https://geopragma.fr/the-worlds-tipping-point-la-bascule-du-monde/>

34 Pinatel J-B., La guerre d’Ukraine révélateur du basculement géopolitique mondial [Pinatel J-B. The war in Ukraine reveals the global geopolitical shift]. Geopragma, 12.06.2023. <https://geopragma.fr/la-guerre-dukaine-revelateur-du-basculement-geopolitique-mondial/>

35 Lauzun P. de, Ukraine et Russie : naissance de nations [Lauzun P. de, Ukraine and Russia: birth of nations]. Geopragma, 05.06.2023. <https://geopragma.fr/ukraine-et-russie-naissance-de-nations/>

36 Board of Directors. Website of Geopragma. <https://geopragma.fr/conseil-dadministration-et-comite-dorientation-strategique/>

37 <https://www.eyrolles.com/Entreprise/Livre/russie-alliance-vitale-9782361590086/>

38 Pinatel J-B., Crimée: pourquoi Poutine joue son moment Brejnev et l’Occident son moment Sudètes [Pinatel J-B., Crimea: why Putin is having his Brezhnev moment and the West is having its Sudetenland moment]. Geopolitique-Geostrategie. <http://www.geopolitique-geostrategie.fr/crimée-poutine-joue-moment-brejnev-loccident-moment-sudetes>

39 Pinatel J-B., Après un mois de guerre en Ukraine [Pinatel J-B., After a month of war in Ukraine]. Geopragma, 04.04.2022. <https://geopragma.fr/apres-un-mois-de-guerre-en-ukraine/>

40 Pervak N., Mokliak T., NATO retired military and intelligence officers in Russian active measures. Center for Defence Reforms, 2023. <https://drive.google.com/file/u/0/d/16B7Te3xkRFHU22BsmdvCzAZLZnYi7XNE/view>

41 Voyage au pays des « idiots utiles » français de Poutine. Desk Russie, 16.09.2022. <https://desk-russie.eu/2022/09/16/voyage-au-pays-des-idiots.html>

42 Xavier Moreau. Politically biased elections observers. European platform for democratic elections. <https://www.fakeobservers.org/biased-observation-database/details/moreau-xavier.html>

gandistic shows⁴³. Some researchers point to his probable connections with representatives of the Russian Foreign Intelligence Service (SVR)⁴⁴.

As for the content on the Stratpol center's website, its pages are abundant with headlines about the impossibility of defeating Russia⁴⁵, Ukraine's foreign policy failures⁴⁶, the risks of supplying Kyiv with weapons through Nazis, and the threat of increased terrorism⁴⁷ etc.

Another pro-Russian center is **CF2R (The French Center for Intelligence Studies, Centre Français de Recherche sur le Renseignement)**, focused on research in the military sphere. Media requests for its expertise during the war are organic; however, the generals and former special services employees, who make up the core team of the center⁴⁸, do

not miss an opportunity to display their conservative, anti-Western, and Russophile positions. One of the leaders of the CF2R is Eric Denécé, a French political scientist and former intelligence officer⁴⁹. Denécé regularly participates in events of the Franco-Russian dialogue⁵⁰, echoing a series of Russian propaganda theses⁵¹, such as, at the beginning of the invasion, Russia "brought the Kyiv regime to its knees", that Zelenskyy is just a puppet in the hands of the Americans⁵², and that the Russian army is invincible⁵³.

Despite the fact that the CF2R center produces quite a lot of military analysis regarding various corners of the world, its publications on Ukraine are predominantly overtly pro-Russian and repeat narratives about the "proxy war" between the

USA and Russia, in which European countries should not participate⁵⁴, about numerous problems of the Ukrainian army, and the impossibility of continuing the counteroffensive⁵⁵. After the liberation of the Kyiv Region, Eric Denécé, along with other CF2R members such as retired Swiss intelligence officer **Jacques Baud** and military analyst **Olivier Dujardin**, expressed doubts over Russian involvement in the murders in Bucha⁵⁶.

Overall, the participation of active and retired generals of armies and intelligence agencies of NATO countries in active Russian propaganda events has been deeply and comprehensively investigated by specialists of the Ukrainian Center for Defence Reforms⁵⁷. They describe numerous events where the retired officers

43 La mention de "guerre" interdite à la télévision russe : comment les médias traitent-ils l'invasion ? [Mention of "war" banned on Russian television: how are the media covering the invasion?]. FranceTVInfo, 15.03.2022. https://www.francetvinfo.fr/monde/europe/manifestations-en-ukraine/la-mention-de-guerre-interdite-a-la-tellevision-russe-comment-les-medias-traitent-ils-linvasion_5014736.html

44 Izambard A. Guerre en Ukraine : Xavier Moreau, cet ex-militaire français devenu porte-voix du Kremlin [Izambard A. War in Ukraine: Xavier Moreau, this ex-French soldier who became the voice of the Kremlin]. Challenges, 10.10.2022. https://www.challenges.fr/monde/europe/guerre-en-ukraine-xavier-moreau-cet-ex-militaire-francais-devenu-porte-voix-du-kremlin_830648

45 La paix en Ukraine n'est possible que sur les conditions de la Russie [Peace in Ukraine is only possible on Russia's terms]. Stratpol, 06.07.2023. <https://stratpol.com/la-paix-en-ukraine-nest-possible-que-sur-les-conditions-de-la-russie/>

46 L'Ukraine ne repart pas les mains vides du sommet de l'OTAN [Ukraine does not leave NATO summit empty-handed]. Stratpol, 13.07.2023. <https://stratpol.com/ukraine-ne-repart-pas-les-mains-vides-du-sommet-de-lotan/>

47 Chambrin O., La géopolitique des armements en Ukraine crée-t-elle une menace pour la sécurité intérieure en France? [Chambrin O., Does the geopolitics of arms in Ukraine create a threat to internal security in France?]. Stratpol, 13.07.2023. <https://stratpol.com/la-geopolitique-des-armements-en-ukraine-cree-t-elle-une-menace-pour-la-securite-interieure-en-france/>

48 Research team of CF2R think tank. <https://cf2r.org/le-cf2r/equipe-de-recherche/>

49 Éric Denécé. Wikipedia. https://fr.wikipedia.org/wiki/%C3%89ric_Den%C3%A9c%C3%A9

50 Война в Украине: информация и реальность с Эриком Денеше и Пьером Конеса [War in Ukraine: information and reality with Eric Denece and Pierre Conesa]. Dialogue Franco Russe, 28.07.2022. <https://dialoguefrancorusse.com/medias/guerre-en-ukraine-information-et-realite-avec-eric-denece-et-pierre-conesa/>

51 Guckert E. Pourquoi Éric Denécé, expert du renseignement, est adulé par les conspis [Guckert E. Why Éric Denécé, intelligence expert, is adored by conspirators]. Conspiracy Watch, 18.05.2022. <https://www.conspiracywatch.info/pourquoi-eric-denece-expert-du-renseignement-est-adule-par-les-conspis.html>

52 Denece E., QUAND LE BROUILLARD DE LA GUERRE COMMENCE À SE DISSIPER [Denece E., WHEN THE FOG OF WAR BEGINS TO CLEAR]. CF2R, February 2023. <https://cf2r.org/editorial/quand-le-brouillard-de-la-guerre-commence-a-se-dissiper/>

53 Eric Denécé : «La désinformation anglo-américaine sur l'armée russe est sidérante!» [Eric Denécé: "The Anglo-American disinformation on the Russian army is staggering!"]. Breizh Info, 24.11.2022. <https://www.breizh-info.com/2022/11/24/211175/eric-denece-la-desinformation-anglo-americaine-sur-larmee-russe-est-siderante/>

54 Pinton M. COMMENT RÉTABLIR LA PAIX EN EUROPE? [Pinton M. HOW TO RESTORE PEACE IN EUROPE?]. CF2R, May 2023. <https://cf2r.org/tribune/comment-retablir-la-paix-en-europe/>

55 Dujardin O. GUERRE EN UKRAÏNE : LE MYSTÈRE DES EFFECTIFS ET LES DIFFICULTÉS À LES AUGMENTER [Dujardin O. WAR IN UKRAINE: THE MYSTERY OF THE WORKFORCE AND THE DIFFICULTIES OF INCREASING THEM]. CF2R, August 2023. <https://cf2r.org/rta/guerre-en-ukraine-le-mystere-des-effectifs-et-les-difficultes-a-les-augmenter/>

56 Pervak N., Mokliak T., NATO retired military and intelligence officers in Russian active measures. Center for Defence Reforms, 2023. <https://drive.google.com/file/u/0/d/16B7Te3xkRFHU22BsmdvCzAZLznYi7XNE/view>

57 ibid

participated, helping Russian propaganda legitimize its messages and confirm the existence of widespread pro-Russian support networks in the West.

They mention French Army general **Vincent Desportes**, former head of the Situation Intelligence Department and Radioelectronic warfare of French Army Headquarters general **Dominique Delawarde** and former Commander of the Special Operation Forces of France, colonel **Jacques Hogard**, who participated in the event concluding that NATO was responsible for the war against Ukraine. A regular guest of Russian TV shows, retired French brigadier-general **Francois Chauvancy** took part in another event, where he called “to hear Russia” and “renew the dialogue between NATO and Russian Federation”.

Former Deputy Chief of French army Headquarters general-major **Bertrand de La Chesnais** who was appointed head of right-wing Eric Zemmour’s presidential electoral campaign, publicly accused NATO of provoking the war against Ukraine. He has close ties with another French officer, former Head of French Army Headquarters (2014–2017) **Pierre de Villiers**, who is the brother of a famous French pro-Russian politician, former Minister of Culture and presidential former candidate **Philippe de Villiers**. Philippe de Villiers appears to have business connections with Russian oligarch Konstantin Malofeev, with whom

he among other things signed a contract on building an amusement park in annexed Crimea.

Former Intelligence chief of the French General Directorate for External Security Alain Juillet, a supervisory council member for CF2R and Geopragma analytical centers, declares that “the power in Kyiv was seized as a result of turmoil”, blaming the USA for the start of the war and summoning Ukraine “to negotiate”. Since 2020, **Alain Juillet** has hosted his own security and geopolitics program *La Source* on Russia’s state propaganda media RT France. Former Head of French Military Intelligence (DRM), retired Army general **Christophe Gomart** persistently convinces the French society that “France is being disarmed by supplying arms to Ukraine”. The supplies of LeClerc tanks to Ukraine according to his statement would become the point of no return in such a process of “disarmament”.

A year preceding the invasion, French society was engaged in a discussion with appeals that “We have to stop this runaway train before it’s too late!”, addressed to NATO General Secretary Jens Stoltenberg with criticism over the “NATO 2030” plan. The appeal was started by the analytical center **Cercle de réflexion interarmées (CRI)**, consisting of more than 60 French retired officers. The goal of the Center is to unite retired military for the sake of “solidarity of generations” and to provide analytics on defense issues. Among other

things, the authors of the document criticize NATO, blame it for anti-Russian activities, and justify the occupation of Crimea and the Russian aggression against Ukraine in 2014. The appeal was signed by retired French Aviation brigadier-general **Grégoire Diamantidis**, the son of a Russian emigrant from Taganrog. He is known as the co-author of the book “Second World Order” where he stated that France “is not obliged to be satisfied with American and NATO supervision”. Another signature was made by former Commander of NATO’s Forces in Kosovo Jean-Claude Allard. He periodically speaks on the Russian propaganda channel RT France expressing criticism of NATO and promoting closer ties with Russia. Allard’s works are also published on the website of Geopragma.

More covertly, pro-Russian positions are expressed at the **French Institute of International Relations (Institut français des relations internationales, IFRI)**, which is headed by the French economist **Thierry de Montbrial**. He openly advocates for peaceful negotiations between Ukraine and Russia⁵⁸, as a result of which the current actual borders will be established, not the borders of 1991, as Kyiv sees as its victory. Moreover, he, like many of his colleagues, sees the “hand of Washington” behind the military actions in Ukraine, which, among other things, is trying in this way to weaken Europe⁵⁹ as well. However, it should be noted that the majority

58 Clemenceau F. Thierry de Montbrial, président de l’Ifri : « Gagner une guerre, c’est ne pas la perdre » [Clemenceau F. Thierry de Montbrial, president of Ifri: “Winning a war means not losing it”]. IFRI website, 04.12.2022. <https://www.ifri.org/fr/espace-media/lifri-medias/thierry-de-montbrial-president-de-lifri-gagner-une-guerre-cest-ne-perdre>

59 Эксперт: Европа должна строить архитектуру безопасности с РФ, не полагаясь только на США [Expert: Europe must build a security architecture with the Russian Federation, not relying only on the United States]. TASS, 04.12.2022. <https://tass.ru/mezhdunarodnaya-panorama/16498535>

of publications by other authors of the Institute are often balanced or neutral regarding Russia or Ukraine.

Some researchers also classify the **Institute of International and Strategic Relations (Institut de Relations Internationales et Stratégiques, IRIS)**, headed by Pascal Boniface⁶⁰, as pro-Russian. In particular, the institute is criticized for participating in numerous events of the pro-Putin Valdai Club⁶¹ and the Franco-Russian Dialogue. However, in our opinion, if we only consider the period after February 24, 2022, commentators and experts of the Institute try to be objective and unbiased on issues concerning Russia.

Also, the analytical center **Observe (L'Observatoire)**, which operates under the Franco-Russian Chamber of Commerce and Industry, is often classified as having a pro-Russian orientation. It is headed by **Arnaud Dubien**. Among the partners⁶² of the analytical center are the pro-Putin Valdai Club and the Russian Council on International Affairs (a public organization that promotes Russian narratives in international politics, the supervisory board is headed by Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov, and Dmitry Peskov, Putin's press secretary, is a member of the presidium⁶³).

The Franco-Russian CCI actively cooperates with government structures, for example, with Rosatom⁶⁴.

During the one-and-a-half years of full-scale war, Observe served as the analytical department of the CCI for French entrepreneurs in Russia and Russian ones in France, regularly providing information on current changes in the conditions of doing business in Russia. Arnaud Dubien gives relatively neutral comments⁶⁵ on the course of the war in Ukraine, however, sometimes there are questions about the platforms on which he does this. For example, he commented on the situation in France in the program "International Review" on the propagandist state channel "Rossiia1"⁶⁶. Its host is Fyodor Lukyanov, one of the key propagandists of the "Russian world", against whom Ukraine has imposed sanctions⁶⁷.

We have not investigated whether absolutely all contributors, experts, and members of the supervisory boards of the mentioned analytical centers have pro-Russian views. This is because often their scientific interests do not intersect with Russia or the military topics that are currently relevant. In addition, information about individual researchers is often limited. A deeper study of the role and place of specific institutions and

their experts in promoting Russian propaganda in France and in the world could become the subject of further research.

Pro-Russian analysts should also include individual scholars who regularly express themselves in the context of Russian narratives. These include, for example, **Emmanuel Todd, Jacques Sapir, Karine Bechet-Golovko, Olivier Delamarche**, and others (more details about them in the tabular part).

Case study: Pierre de Gaulle

The chair of the Fund for Peace between Nations and Prosperity and the association "MIR France and Francophonie", **Pierre de Gaulle** is not an influential politician, nor an expert, but a frequent guest on Russian channels and events where he makes complimentary comments on Russian-French relations, the war in Ukraine and other current affairs. He is usually called a representative of the "Gaullism" movement frequently used as an ideological cover for Russian active measures, for example, to disrupt the French membership in NATO. After February 24, 2022, he took a public pro-Russian position, holding NATO accountable for the start of the war and accusing the West for helping "neo-Nazi

60 Sire B., Pascal Boniface : Prophète du faux [Sire B., Pascal Boniface: Prophet of falsehood]. Franc Tireur, 21.12.2022. <https://www.franc-tireur.fr/pascal-boniface-prophete-du-faux>

61 Паскаль Бонифас. Валдай. [Pascal Boniface. Valdai.] <https://ru.valdaiclub.com/about/experts/6971/>

62 Партнеры. Обсерво. [Partners. Observe.] <https://obsfr.ru/about/partners/>

63 Президиум. РСМД. [Presidium. RSMD.] <https://russiancouncil.ru/management/presidium/>

64 РОСАТОМ И ФРАНКО-РОССИЙСКАЯ ТПП ПОДПИСАЛИ НА ПОЛЯХ ПМЭФ МЕМОРАНДУМ О ВЗАИМОДЕЙСТВИИ [ROSATOM AND THE FRANCO-RUSSIAN CCI SIGNED A MEMORANDUM ON INTERACTION ON THE SIDEFIELD OF SPIEF]. CCIFR website, 15.06.2023. <https://www.ccifr.ru/news/rosatom-i-franko-rossijskaya-tpp-podpisali-na-polyah-pmef-memorandum-o-vzaimodejstvii>

65 Dubien A. Guerre en Ukraine, 1 an après : quel est l'état de la société russe ? [Dubien A. War in Ukraine, 1 year later: what is the state of Russian society?]. IRIS website, 27.02.2023. <https://www.iris-france.org/174043-guerre-en-ukraine-1-an-apres-quel-est-letat-de-la-societe-russe/>

66 Международное обозрение [International review] 07.07.2023. Arnaud Dubien's comment starts on 13.11 timecode. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?app=desktop&v=XP2l-Npe1fg>

67 Лукьянов Федор Александрович. Война & санкции. [Lukyanov Fedor Aleksandrovich. War & sanctions.] <https://sanctions.nazk.gov.ua/ru/sanction-person/15549/>

Ukrainian regime”. Simultaneously with the official Kremlin representatives Pierre de Gaulle declared the necessity to negotiate with Russia.

On June 14, 2022, Pierre de Gaulle visited the Russian embassy in France on the occasion of Russia Day where apart from expressing admiration of President Vladimir Putin he stated to had “regrets over the French government’s obligation to obey NATO” and “pity that France had joined NATO following the will of some French Presidents”⁶⁸.

On February 2, 2023, Pierre de Gaulle visited Volgograd in Russia where he accompanied Vladimir Putin at the event dedicated to 80 years since the Stalingrad battle. As part of his journey on February 3 de Gaulle participated in a round table next to the Russian Foreign Intelligence Service chief Sergei Naryshkin where among other matters he spoke of the need to stop Western arms supplies to Ukraine⁶⁹.

Over the year, Pierre de Gaulle not only expressed his views on the war in Ukraine, but also participated in the founding congress of the Russophile movement⁷⁰, unveiled a monument to his grandfather in Volgograd, which was erected alongside one to Stalin⁷¹,

and even managed to voice support for the Russian-speaking population in Latvia “against discrimination and oppression”⁷².

Despite the fact that the family of one of the most famous French leaders does not share the radical Russophile views of his grandson, this does not stop the Russian propaganda machine from using the prominent surname for its own purposes, creating myths not only for domestic consumption but also for foreign audiences.

Case Study: Comité International pour la Protection des Droits de l’Homme / International Human Rights Defense Committee (CIPDH)

The International Human Rights Defense Committee (CIPDH) deserves special attention - an organization that positions itself as a UN partner, but in reality, is a somewhat dubious agent of Russian influence in Europe and in the countries of the Global South. We have assigned it to the French section, as the headquarters of this organization is located in Paris, and a significant part of its activity is the African continent, a zone of clash

of interests between France, Russia, and other global players.

One of the investigations⁷³ revealed that nearly 70% of the organization’s leadership consisted of fake profiles. The organization is predicated on a combination of criminal activity, fraudulent schemes involving African gold, and a sanctioned leader from Russia connected to FSB⁷⁴. CIPDH is accused of selling fake diplomatic passports. Its activity is often associated with organized crime such as prostitution, alleged extortion, and implications of involvement in the moving of Gaddafi’s illicit wealth out of Libya after the fall of his regime.

At least two of top managers of the organization have close connections with the Russian military and security services. It is **Vitali Ginsburg** - a self-proclaimed former Russian military intelligence officer (GRU) whose career spanned nearly two decades with an emphasis on operations conducted in Ghana. He was said to participate in an allegedly fraudulent scheme involving nonexistent African gold.

Another one is **Aleksandr Ionov**, acting vice-president of CIPDH and head of Antiglobalist movement of

68 Выступление Пьера де Голля на государственном приеме по случаю Дня России [Pierre de Gaulle’s speech at the state reception on the occasion of the Day of Russia]. Website of the Russian embassy in France, 16.06.2023. https://france.mid.ru/ru/presse/vystuplenie_pera_de_gollya_na_gosudarstvennom_prieme_po_sluchayu_dnya_rossii/

69 Пьер де Голль, внук экс-президента Франции Шарля де Голля, приехал с визитом в Москву [Pierre de Gaulle, grandson of ex-French President Charles de Gaulle, arrived on a visit to Moscow]. Website of The Russian historical society, 31.01.2023. <https://historyrussia.org/sobytiya/per-de-goll-vnuk-eks-prezidenta-frantsii-sharlya-de-gollya-priekhal-s-vizitom-v-moskvu.html>

70 «Ребёнок родился, дальше наша задача – его вырастить»: в Москве учредили Международное движение русофилов [“The child has been born, our next task is to raise him”: the International Russophile Movement was established in Moscow]. Website of The Russkii Mir foundation, 15.03.2023. <https://ruskiymir.ru/publications/311302/>

71 В Волгограде открыли первый в России памятник генералу Шарлю де Голлю [Russia’s first monument to General Charles de Gaulle was unveiled in Volgograd]. V1, 06.05.2023. <https://v1.ru/text/gorod/2023/05/06/72284132/>

72 Внук первого президента Франции подписал письмо СПЧ в защиту россиян в Латвии [The grandson of the first president of France signed a letter from the Human Rights Council in defense of Russians in Latvia]. TASS, 05.09.2023. <https://tass.ru/obschestvo/18663109>

73 THE CURIOUS CASE OF THE FAUX U.N. HUMAN RIGHTS GROUP: CIPDH/IHRDC. Strike Source, 05.04.2021. <https://strikesource.com/2021/04/04/the-curious-case-of-the-faux-u-n-human-rights-group-cipdh-ihrdc/>

74 How a Russian organization with criminal activity, fraud, and under-sanctioned founders works in Paris. Russia vs World, 15.01.2023. <https://russiavsworld.org/how-a-russian-organization-with-criminal-activity-fraud-and-under-sanctioned-founders-works-in-paris/>

Russia. In Russia he calls himself a human rights activist⁷⁵. The United States Government has determined Mr. Ionov to be an FSB co-opted who participates in the Kremlin's malign influence campaign⁷⁶, and cooperates with Prigozhin's Project Lakhta entities that publish and disseminate disinformation; therefore, his actions have directly led to him being sanctioned by the U.S.

Russian organizations

In their project "The Germs of the Russian World", dedicated to Russia's influences on European countries, researchers from the Ukrainian media Texty noted⁷⁷ that almost every major European country has a hierarchy of Russian influence, which is associated with state narratives and political activities.

At the top of this hierarchy is, evidently, the embassy and a network of consulates. In close cooperation with them, the local representation of Rossotrudnichestvo operates - the Federal Agency for Issues of Co-

operation with Compatriots. Its hub is usually **the Russian House - a center for culture and science**. In another study⁷⁸, the authors note that many representatives of Rossotrudnichestvo in the central office and abroad are actually officers of the FSB and the Foreign Intelligence Service. The agency is now headed by Yevgeny Primakov⁷⁹, the grandson of the former head of the SVR and former Prime Minister of Russia, also Yevgeny Primakov.

Unlike many other countries, in France the Russian House actively functions⁸⁰, utilizing all available opportunities to promote cultural propaganda through concerts, films, language courses, and organizing trips for diaspora representatives to Moscow⁸¹. Among other events, for instance, there was a celebration of the "birthday of the Artek children's camp"⁸², organized by the association "Life and Growth", which has been taking French school children to the camp even after the occupation of Crimea by Russia, thus violating Ukrainian and international law.

Also, at the Russian House, there is a representation of **the Russian Geographical Society in Paris**. This is another tool of propaganda and cultural diplomacy, where French travelers are awarded Russian prizes⁸³, lectures by French scientists are held⁸⁴, and trips to Russia and its natural wealth are promoted. A nuance is the fact that the president of the Russian Geographical Society is the Russian Defense Minister Sergey Shoigu⁸⁵, who is one of the leaders of the aggressive war against Ukraine, and the board of trustees of the organization is headed by Russian President Vladimir Putin⁸⁶.

Another building owned by the Russian state and located right in the center of Paris on the Quai Branly is **the Spiritual and Cultural Orthodox Center of Russia**. Despite the common belief, this complex does not belong to the Russian Orthodox Church - it only uses its premises (the Holy Trinity Cathedral), which are owned by a structural unit of the Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs⁸⁷.

75 Правозащитник Александр Ионов: США объявили на меня охоту [Human rights activist Alexander Ionov: The US is hunting me]. RIA Novosti, 05.07.2023. <https://ria.ru/20230705/ionov-1882196612.html>

76 Ionov Alexander. Putin's list. <https://www.spisok-putina.org/en/personas/ionov-2/>

77 Nabozhniak O. and others, The Germs of the Russian World. TEXTY.org.ua, 01.12.2022. <https://texty.org.ua/projects/108323/germs-russian-world-who-supports-russia-europe/>

78 Набожняк О., Кельм Н. Співвітчизники тримають удар. Як організації росіян у Європі працюють на пропаганду та зовнішню розвідку [Nabozhniak O., Kelm N. Compatriots hold the blow. How organizations of Russians in Europe work for propaganda and foreign intelligence] TEXTY.org.ua, 15.05.2023. <https://texty.org.ua/articles/109625/spivvitchiznyky-trymayut-udar-yak-orhanizaciyi-rosiyan-u-yevropi-pracyuyut-na-propahandu-ta-zovnishnyu-rozvidku/>

79 Yevgeny Primakov Jr. Wikipedia. https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Yevgeny_Primakov_Jr.

80 Maison russe des sciences et de la culture à Paris. <https://crsc.fr/>

81 Молодые соотечественники из Франции посетили Москву по программе «Здравствуй, Россия!» [Young compatriots from France visited Moscow as part of the "Hello, Russia!" program]. Website of the Russian House in Paris, 25.08.2023. <https://crsc.fr/molodye-sootchestvenniki-iz-francii-posetili-moskvu-po-programme-zdravstvuj-rossija/?lang=ru>

82 День рождения МДЦ «Артек» отметили в РДНК в Париже [Birthday of Artek International Children's Center celebrated at RDNK in Paris]. Website of the Russian House in Paris, 16.06.2023. <https://crsc.fr/den-rozhdeniya-mdc-artek-otmetili-v-rdnk-v-parizhe/?lang=ru>

83 Французскому путешественнику Ж.-Л.Гуро вручили премию РГО «Хрустальный компас» [French traveler J.-L. Gouraud was awarded the Crystal Compass Prize of the Russian Geographical Society]. Website of the Russian House in Paris, 17.08.2023. <https://crsc.fr/francuzskomu-puteshestvenniku-zh-l-guro-vruchili-premiyu-rgo-hrustalnyj-kompas/?lang=ru>

84 В РДНК в Париже состоялась лекция французского профессора Орлеанского университета, основателя лимнологии о Байкале [A lecture was held at the RDNK in Paris by a French professor at the University of Orleans, the founder of limnology about Lake Baikal]. Website of the Russian House in Paris, 07.06.2023. <https://crsc.fr/v-rdnk-v-parizhe-sostojalas-lekcija-francuzskogo-professora-orleanskogo-universiteta-osnovatelja-limnologii-o-bajkale/?lang=ru>

85 President of RGS Sergei Shoigu. Website of RGS <https://rgo.ru/about/structure/president-of-the-rgs/>

86 Chairman of the board of trustees Vladimir Putin. Website of RGS <https://rgo.ru/about/structure/chairman-of-the-board-of-trustees-of-the-rgs/>

87 Centre Spirituel et Culturel Orthodoxe Russe. https://centrerusbrantly.mid.ru/fr_FR/

Notably, the building of the center, which opened in 2016, is located very close to the governmental buildings of the President of France's administration (Palais de l'Alma)⁸⁸. This has led to the emergence of semi-conspiratorial theories⁸⁹ in certain expert circles about the possibility of espionage influence by employees of the Russian facility on the governmental structures of France.

The center regularly hosts not only religious but also secular events - exhibitions, conferences, creative evenings, and so on. The fact that the center is part of a large propaganda machine is confirmed, for example, by the section about the "Great Victory" of the Soviet Union in World War II featuring two programmatic articles by Vladimir Putin on this topic⁹⁰. In its statement a week after the start of Russia's full-scale aggressive invasion of Ukraine, on March 3, 2022, the leadership of the center fully echoed⁹¹ Russian propaganda narratives about "fraternal Ukrainian and Russian peoples", "aggressive nationalist forces that seized power in 2014", "the ideology of neo-Nazism", "the tragedy in Donbas", etc.

The Russian Orthodox Church in France is represented by the Korsun Diocese⁹² (over 20 church parishes and monasteries in the country), as well as 18 parishes of the Russian Orthodox Church abroad⁹³ (which is essentially also a structural unit of the ROC), established by representatives of the "white emigration" at the beginning of the 20th century. Also, on the territory of France, in Strasbourg, there is a representation of the Moscow Patriarchate. Traditionally, the church in Russia is closely linked with the state and special services. Even Patriarch Kirill, as it turned out, could have been a spy in Switzerland on behalf of the KGB⁹⁴.

Also, the hotspots of active Russian propaganda are hundreds⁹⁵ of local public organizations of Russians who have moved to France. They are united by **the Coordination Council of Compatriots of France** - an "umbrella" organization of all diaspora associations and structures. It is part of the International Council of Compatriots. Both organizations work closely with embassies, the Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs, and Rossotrudnichestvo. Through the

coordination council of compatriot organizations, for example, they can apply for funding from state grant funds, such as the Russkiy Mir Foundation.

In addition to general support and interaction between various participants, organizing joint events, such as the propagandist march "Immortal Regiment" using Z-symbolism⁹⁶, the council of compatriots also provides legal assistance to immigrants. After the beginning of Russia's war against Ukraine in 2014, and especially after the deployment of a full-scale invasion in 2022, official propaganda began to spread the narrative about general Russophobia in Europe and the world. Since then, the task of Coordination Councils and the legal centers established there became the "protection of compatriots" from "discrimination on national grounds"⁹⁷. The previous head of the Coordination Council, **Dmitry de Kochko**, even founded⁹⁸ a separate public initiative "Committee of Vigilance, against Hatred and for Peace in Europe", which lists cases of "Russophobia" on its French-language website⁹⁹.

88 Palais d'Alma. Wikipedia. https://fr.wikipedia.org/wiki/Palais_de_l%27Alma

89 Werly R., A Paris, l'espionnage russe sous les coupes [Werly R., In Paris, Russian espionage under the domes]. Le Temps, 01.11.2016. <https://www.letemps.ch/monde/europe/paris-lespionnage-russe-coupoles>

90 Интересные факты [Interesting facts]. Centre Spirituel et Culturel Orthodoxe Russe. https://centrerusbrantly.mid.ru/ru_RU/national-heritage

91 Appeal of the Spiritual and Cultural Orthodox Center of Russia. Website of The SCOCR, 03.03.2022. https://centrerusbrantly.mid.ru/ru_RU/-/message-du-cscor?inheritRedirect=true

92 Приходы и общины во Франции [Parishes and communities in France]. Website of the Korsun Diocese of the Russian Orthodox Church. <https://cerkov-ru.com/catalog/gallia>

93 Parish Directory. Map of the parishes in France. Website of the Russian Orthodox Church outside of Russia. <https://directory.stinnoocentpress.com/viewparish.cgi?action=browse&lang=en&hCountry1=United+States&Country=France&hState1=Alabama&State=&x=21&y=10>

94 Le patriarche orthodoxe russe Kirill a-t-il espionné la Suisse pour le compte du KGB ? [Did Russian Orthodox Patriarch Kirill spy on Switzerland for the KGB?]. TVInfo, 06.02.2023. <https://www.tf1info.fr/international/russie-le-patriarche-orthodoxe-russe-kirill-a-t-il-espionne-la-suisse-pour-le-compte-du-kgb-les-services-secrets-russes-2247237.html>

95 Прокофьев В. Как живут россияне в столице Франции [Prokofiev V. How Russians live in the capital of France]. Rossiyskaya Gazeta, 20.08.2023. <https://rg.ru/2023/08/15/parizh-otkryt-no-nam-tuda-ne-nado.html>

96 Певзнер Г. В Париже на шествии «Память и мир» присутствовала Z-символика [Pevzner G. In Paris, the procession «Remembrance and Peace» was attended by Z-symbols]. RFI, 08.05.2023. <https://shorturl.at/bBQR6>

97 Дискриминация граждан РФ и соотечественников за рубежом [Discrimination against citizens of the Russian Federation and compatriots abroad]. Website of the Russian Compatriots coordination council. <https://conseil-russes-france.org/ru/voprosy/diskriminacziya-grazhdan-rf-i/>

98 Дмитрий де Кошко: Большинству французов не свойственна русофобия [Dmitry de Koshko: Russophobia is not characteristic of most French people]. Rossiyskaya Gazeta, 25.08.2022. <https://rg.ru/2022/08/25/russkie-klassiki-vernulis-na-polki.html>

99 STOPRUSSOPHOBIE. <https://stoprussophobia.info/>

Against this background, Russia promotes the idea that it will “protect” its citizens, wherever they are, in any hostile environment they find themselves. And here it is worth noting that Russia also invaded Ukraine, among other things, under the pretext of “protecting the Russian-speaking population”. However, the official Russian propaganda regularly scares the residents of Europe with the fact that the “invincible Russian army” can completely capture their cities¹⁰⁰.

A special place among the organizations of Russian compatriots is occupied by **associations of descendants of the White Guard emigration**, who, working in ordinary French companies and being integrated into French society, continue to gravitate towards the imperial legacy of Russia. Also, these communities periodically participate in propagandist events. For example, a number of representatives of the “fugitive aristocracy” at one time collected signatures¹⁰¹ under the letter of “solidarity with Russia during the Ukrainian tragedy”. One of the leaders of the local organization **Cossacks** (this group considers itself part of the white emigration, not to be confused with the Ukrainian

Cossacks of the 16th-18th centuries) even organized in the center of Paris “memorials” for the deceased leaders of the terrorist organization “DNR” from the occupied Donbas¹⁰² and rallies¹⁰³ in support of “Novorossiya” - a mythical entity in the imagination of the Russian “expert” and propagandist community, which “includes” the occupied territories of Donetsk and Luhansk regions.

Russian and pro-Russian media

The main Russian media outlet that operated (and continues to operate) in the French information field, broadcasting state Russian propaganda, is **RT France**, a part of the state propaganda holding “Russia Today” (Rossiya Segodnya). Although formally the channel ceased broadcasting in January 2023¹⁰⁴, its current materials are still available through the website <https://francais.rt.com/>, and also on social networks (for example, through Telegram). The French-language version is not only oriented towards France itself but also towards several African countries that traditionally speak French and are a sphere of political and geo-

political interest for Paris and Moscow. Pro-Russian politicians and experts, such as Caroline Galacteros¹⁰⁵, Gilles Rémy¹⁰⁶, Pierre de Gaulle¹⁰⁷, and others, continue to go there for interviews.

Besides RT, cultural propaganda with a touch of Soviet and White Guard nostalgia is also disseminated by the French-language page of the portal **Russia Beyond**¹⁰⁸, which tells about lifestyle, culture, history, and tourism in Russia, presenting it as a country attractive for travel and study. Similarly, the radio station **Sputnik** “Africanized”, which also belongs to the holding “Russia Today”, and whose website <https://fr.sputniknews.africa/> is now focused on the African continent for France.

However, in France, a whole range of local media platforms operate, which promote Russian narratives for political or ideological reasons.

For example, these include **the Omerta holding**, whose editorial director is **Regis Le Sommier**, an ex-journalist at RT France, and the investor is **Charles d’Anjou**¹⁰⁹, associated with right-wing politicians in

100 Пропагандист Соловьев заявил, что Россия должна войти в Берлин и Париж и «не выходить оттуда никогда» [Propagandist Soloviev said that Russia should enter Berlin and Paris and “never leave there”]. Gordonua.com, 06.01.2023. <https://gordonua.com/news/worldnews/propagandist-solovev-zayavil-cto-rossiya-dolzha-voyti-v-berlin-i-parizh-i-ne-vykhodit-ottuda-nikogda-1646489.html>

101 Солидарность с Россией в час украинской трагедии [Solidarity with Russia in the hour of the Ukrainian tragedy]. Russian Observer, 05.01.2015. <https://rusoch.fr/ru/events/solidarnost-s-rossiej-v-chas-ukrainskoj-tragedii.html>

102 ФЛАГИ ДНР, РОССИИ, КАЗАКОВ ФРАНЦИИ РАЗВИВАЛИСЬ СЕГОДНЯ В ПАРИЖЕ НА ПЛОЩАДИ ПРАВ ЧЕЛОВЕКА В ПАМЯТЬ ОБ АЛЕКСАНДРЕ ЗАХАРЧЕНКО [FLAGS OF THE DPR, RUSSIA, COSSACKS OF FRANCE DEVELOPED TODAY IN PARIS ON HUMAN RIGHTS SQUARE IN MEMORY OF ALEXANDER ZAKHARCHENKO]. Website Cossacs of France. <https://cosaquefrance.fr/ru/novosti/flagi-dnr-rossii-kazakov-francii-razvivalis-segodnya-v-parizhe-na-ploshhadi-prav-cheloveka-v-pamyat-ob-aleksandre-zaharchenko>

103 ДВИЖЕНИЕ В ПОДДЕРЖКУ НОВОРОССИИ [MOVEMENT IN SUPPORT OF NOVOROSSIYA]. Website Cossacs of France. <https://cosaquefrance.fr/ru/novosti/30-marta-dvizhenie-v-podderzhku-novorossii>

104 RT France. Wikipedia. https://fr.wikipedia.org/wiki/RT_France

105 La Grande Interview [The Big Interview]: Caroline Galacteros. RT en français, 06.09.2023. <https://francais.rt.com/magazines/la-grande-interview/107018-grande-interview-caroline-galacteros>

106 La Grande Interview [The Big Interview]: Gilles Rémy. RT en français, 16.05.2023. <https://francais.rt.com/magazines/la-grande-interview/105513-grande-interview-gilles-remy>

107 La Grande Interview [The Big Interview]: Pierre de Gaulle. RT en français, 6.05.2023. <https://francais.rt.com/magazines/la-grande-interview/105431-grande-interview-pierre-de-gaulle>

108 Russia Beyond. <https://fr.rbth.com/>

109 d’Anjou C., Nous portons plainte [d’Anjou C., We are filing a complaint]. Omerta, 07.04.2023. <https://www.omertamedia.fr/article/nous-por->

France and with former high-ranking FSB officer Vassili Verechtchak, for whom he served as an assistant¹¹⁰. At the launch party for Omerta, however, he was introduced as a modest “fixer-translator for the TF1 channel in Donbas”¹¹¹. The media positions itself as neutral and investigative, but almost immediately after its appearance at the end of 2022, other media accused it and its investor of a pro-Russian position¹¹². This assumption seems obvious given that most of the news and comments about the war in Ukraine are clearly favorable to Moscow. For example, the publication considers the information about the transfer of cluster munitions to Ukraine to be a sign of Kyiv’s weakness¹¹³, admires the successes of the Russian defense industry complex¹¹⁴, supports the idea of former French president **Nicolas Sarkozy** about re-holding referendums in the occupied territories of Ukraine¹¹⁵. In March, Omerta presented a film about “life in Russian

Crimea”, shot with the assistance of the occupying authorities¹¹⁶. According to researchers, Charles d’Anjou also financed the far-right media **Livre Noir**, which is not alien to Kremlin propaganda¹¹⁷.

The pro-Russian media also includes the left-wing magazine *Marianne*, for which the journalist **Natacha Polony**¹¹⁸, known for her pro-Kremlin views, writes. Since the beginning of the full-scale invasion, the publication opposes anti-Russian sanctions, promotes Russian propaganda narratives about Putin’s war with Washington, consistently criticizes America’s “imperialism”, and calls on European leaders to remain neutral in the war.¹¹⁹

The pro-Russian narrative is also promoted by the right-conservative publication **Valeurs actuelles (Current Values)**. On February 24, 2022, the same day the war began, the newspaper saw in the Kremlin

leader a “Russian patriot who legally cannot stand humiliation” and attacked NATO, a “military machine created in the USA”. A year after the Russian aggression, the authors condemn the “insincere delaying of NATO countries”, asserting that “no matter how much of an aggressor Russia is, it remains an important actor in the concert of nations”. The publication not only welcomes Bashar al-Assad’s return to the League of Arab States but also considers the Wagner group forces “impeccable”¹²⁰.

The pro-Russian narratives are disseminated by the “sovereignist”, populist, and anti-liberal magazine **Front Populaire** by philosopher **Michel Onfray** and journalist **Stéphane Simon**¹²¹. It is a quarterly thick magazine and a web portal where reports and opinions of conservative and anti-American experts are published. They write about the “decline of the West”¹²², the con-

tons-plainte-402/

110 Charles d’Anjou, actif dans la sécurité du CAC 40 en Russie, parraine le nouveau média Omerta [Charles d’Anjou, active in the security of the CAC 40 in Russia, sponsors the new media Omerta]. Intelligence Online, 12.10.2022. <https://www.intelligenceonline.fr/renseignement-d-affaires/2022/10/12/charles-d-anjou-actif-dans-la-securite-du-cac-40-en-russie-parraine-le-nouveau-media-omerta,109834147-art>

111 France-Russie : pas de trêve hivernale pour les médias poutinophiles [France-Russia: no winter break for Putinophile media]. Desk Russie, 01.12.2022. <https://desk-russie.eu/2022/12/01/france-russie-pas-de-treuve.html>

112 Tesquet O. Prorusse et anti-woke... Qui est le sulfureux Charles d’Anjou, l’homme derrière le média “Omerta”? [Tesquet O. Pro-Russian and anti-woke... Who is the sulphurous Charles d’Anjou, the man behind the media “Omerta”?]. Telerama, 04.04.2023. <https://www.telerama.fr/debats-reportages/prorusse-et-anti-woke-qui-est-le-sulfureux-charles-d-anjou-l-homme-derriere-le-media-omerta-7014981.php>

113 Le Sommier R., Ukraine : obus à sous-munitions, un aveu de faiblesse ? [Le Sommier R., Ukraine: cluster munitions, an admission of weakness?]. Omerta, 10.07.2023. <https://www.omertamedia.fr/article/ukraine-obus-a-sous-munitions-un-aveu-de-faiblesse-481/>

114 Grünwald A., “Armée-2023”, l’industrie de défense russe nargue les occidentaux [Grünwald A., “Army-2023”, the Russian defense industry taunts the West]. Omerta, 18.08.2023. <https://www.omertamedia.fr/article/armee-2023-lindustrie-de-defense-russe-nargue-les-occidentaux-513/>

115 Besnard J. Politique étrangère: Sarkozy prend le contrepied de Macron [Besnard J. Foreign policy: Sarkozy takes the opposite view of Macron]. Omerta, 22.08.2023. <https://www.omertamedia.fr/article/politique-etrangere-sarkozy-prend-le-contrepied-de-macron-515/>

116 В Париже прошла европейская премьера французского фильма о жизни российского Крыма [The European premiere of a French film about the life of the Russian Crimea took place in Paris]. TASS, 01.03.2023. <https://tass.ru/kultura/17173707>

117 Bock P. TF1, FRANCE 2 ET “LIVRE NOIR” À MARIPOUL : LE JEU DES DIFFÉRENCES [Bock P. TF1, FRANCE 2 AND THE “LIVRE NOIR” AT MARIPOUL: THE GAME OF DIFFERENCES]. Arret sur Images, 04.04.2022. <https://www.arretsurimages.net/articles/tf1-france-2-et-livre-noir-a-marioupol-le-jeu-des-differences>

118 Natacha Polony. Wikipedia. https://fr.wikipedia.org/wiki/Natacha_Polony

119 Laloy V., Natacha Polony et consorts, auxiliaires de Moscou [Laloy V., Natacha Polony and others, auxiliaries of Moscow]. Desk Russie, 25.03.2023. <https://desk-russie.eu/2023/03/25/natacha-polony-et-consorts.html>

120 Laloy V., « Valeurs actuelles », ou vive Poutine! [Laloy V., “Current values”, or long live Putin!]. Desk Russie, 25.06.2023. <https://desk-russie.eu/2023/06/25/valeurs-actuelles-ou-vive-poutine.html>

121 People’s Front. Wikipedia. [https://fr.wikipedia.org/wiki/Front_populaire_\(revue\)](https://fr.wikipedia.org/wiki/Front_populaire_(revue))

122 Dugois M. Déclin de l’Occident : et les peuples dans tout ça? [Dugois M. Decline of the West: and the people in all this?]. Front Populaire, 18.08.2023. https://frontpopulaire.fr/opinions/contents/declin-de-l-occident-et-les-peuples-dans-tout-ca_tco_24067334

stant failures of the Ukrainian offensive¹²³, and the proxy war the USA is waging on Ukrainian territory¹²⁴.

Skeptical pro-Russian articles and comments on the situation in Ukraine are also published by **Le Courrier des Stratèges**. This blog by Belgian journalist **Éric Verhaeghe** has entered the top 10 conspiratorial sites of 2022 according to Conspiracy Watch¹²⁵. The author talks about how the global elites are getting rich on the war in Ukraine¹²⁶, about Zelensky's usurpation of power¹²⁷, the mysterious deaths of American generals in the war with Russia¹²⁸, and so on.

The cultural publication **Putsch**, directly named after the Russian word for Coup d'État, also provides a platform for supporters of the aggressor country. For instance, on its YouTube channel, **Anne-Laure Bonnel**¹²⁹ shares her views on the NATO summit in Vilnius (of course, from an anti-Ukrainian point of view). She once made a film "Donbas"¹³⁰, based on Kremlin narratives in 2016, and continues to spread messages from the aggressor country since the onset of Russia's full-scale invasion¹³¹. Putsch's expert is **Nikola Mirković**¹³², a political scientist, head of the association "France – East: solidarity with Donbas", who illegally visited¹³³

the occupied Donbas to justify local fake elections, as well as former Swiss intelligence officer **Jacques Baud**¹³⁴, a conspiracy theorist who denied the presence of Russian troops in Donbas before February 2022¹³⁵, and the French-speaking deputy head of the State Duma of Russia, former presenter of propaganda television **Pyotr Tolstoy**¹³⁶.

There are also dozens of smaller websites, blogs, telegram channels, and Facebook groups that spread Russian propaganda but are not significantly influential beyond their audience. Among them are **Réseau international**, **Réseau Voltaire**,

123 Anizy A. Le funeste engrenage des alliances occidentales en guise de stratégie [Anizy A. The fatal gear of Western alliances as a strategy]. *Front Populaire*, 01.07.2023. https://frontpopulaire.fr/opinions/contents/le-funeste-engrenage-des-alliances-occidentales-en-guise-de-strategie_tco_22769525

124 Castelnau R. de, Polémiques estivales : l'Occident perd sa place et les médias regardent ailleurs [Castelnau R. de, Summer controversies: the West is losing its place and the media are looking elsewhere]. *Front Populaire*, 26.08.2023. https://frontpopulaire.fr/opinions/contents/polemiques-estivales-l-occident-perd-sa-place-et-les-medias-regardent-aille_tco_24209697

125 Le top 10 des sites conspirationnistes les plus visités en 2022 [The top 10 most visited conspiracy sites in 2022]. *Conspiracy Watch*, 16.05.2023. <https://www.conspiracywatch.info/le-top-10-des-sites-conspirationnistes-les-plus-visites-en-2022.html>

126 Verhaeghe E. Cette caste mondialisée qui s'enrichit grâce à la guerre d'Ukraine [Verhaeghe E. This globalized caste which gets rich thanks to the Ukrainian war]. *Le Courrier des Stratèges*, 07.09.2023. <https://lecourrierdesstrategies.fr/2023/09/07/cette-caste-mondialisee-qui-senrichit-grace-a-la-guerre-dukraïne/>

127 Ukraine: Zelensky suspend la démocratie - par Ulrike Reisner [Ukraine: Zelensky suspends democracy - by Ulrike Reisner]. *Le Courrier des Stratèges*, 11.08.2023. <https://lecourrierdesstrategies.fr/2023/08/11/ukraine-zelensky-suspend-la-democratie-par-ulrike-reisner/>

128 Guerre en Ukraine: silence du Pentagone sur la mort de ses généraux, par Topwar [War in Ukraine: silence of the Pentagon on the death of its generals, by Topwar]. *Le Courrier des Stratèges*, 03.08.2023. <https://lecourrierdesstrategies.fr/2023/08/03/guerre-en-ukraine-silence-du-pentagone-sur-la-mort-de-ses-generaux-par-topwar/>

129 Anne-Laure Bonnel: «Joe Biden a expliqué que l'Ukraine ne rentrerait pas dans l'OTAN car il y avait encore trop de corruption sur place!» [Anne-Laure Bonnel: "Joe Biden explained that Ukraine would not join NATO because there was still too much corruption there!"]. *Putsch*, 20.07.2023. <https://putsch.media/20230720/actualites/societe/video-anne-laure-bonnel-joe-biden-a-explique-que-lukraine-ne-renterait-pas-dans-lotan-car-il-y-avait-encore-trop-de-corruption-sur-place/>

130 Donbass. Un film de Anne-Laure Bonnel <https://www.breizh-info.com/2022/03/07/181117/donbass-un-film-de-anne-laure-bonnel/>

131 French Journalist's Fake: Ukrainian Troops Bombing Donbas. *StopFake*, 04.03.2022. <https://www.stopfake.org/en/french-journalist-s-fake-ukrainian-troops-bombing-donbas/>

132 Nikola Mirković : les gros mensonges et les secrets bien gardés et inavouables sur la guerre en Ukraine [Nikola Mirković: the big lies and the well-kept and shameful secrets about the war in Ukraine]. *Putsch*, 07.07.2023. <https://putsch.media/20230707/interviews/interviews-societe/nikola-mirkovic-les-gros-mensonges-et-les-secrets-bien-gardés-et-inavouables-sur-la-guerre-en-ukraine/>

133 Nicola Mirkovic. Politically biased elections observers. European platform for democratic elections. <https://www.fakeobservers.org/biased-observation-database/details/mirkovic-nikola.html>

134 Jacques Baud: «Même si l'on découvre que les USA sont responsables, les médias occidentaux continueront d'accuser la Russie!» [Jacques Baud: «Even if we discover that the USA is responsible, the Western media will continue to accuse Russia!»]. *Putsch*, 29.09.2022. <https://putsch.media/20220929/non-classe/video-jacques-baud-meme-si-lon-decouvre-que-les-usa-sont-responsables-les-medias-occidentaux-continueront-daccuser-la-russie/>

135 Pillonel M., Les méthodes de l'espion suisse Jacques Baud pour disculper la Russie en Ukraine [Pillonel M. The methods of Swiss spy Jacques Baud to exculpate Russia in Ukraine]. *Heidi News*, 27.05.2022. <https://www.heidi.news/articles/les-methodes-de-l-espion-suisse-jacques-baud-pour-disculper-la-russie-en-ukraine>

136 Piotr Tolstoy, vice-président de la Douma: «Vous allez payer très cher le prix de votre soutien à l'Ukraine par votre économie» [Pyotr Tolstoy, vice-president of the Duma: "You will pay very dearly the price of your support for Ukraine with your economy"]. *Putsch*, 24.11.2022. <https://putsch.media/20221124/actualites/societe/video-piotr-tolstoi-vice-president-de-la-douma-vous-allez-payer-tres-cher-le-prix-de-votre-soutien-a-lukraine-par-votre-economie/>

Les Moutons enragés, RusReInfo, Valérie Bugault, Wikistrike, Press TV, Égalité & Réconciliation, and so on.

Separately, we should highlight the French journalists who work in occupied Donbas. A number of them represent mainstream media outlets that support Ukraine, while some are purely pro-Russian propagandists. The question of how representatives of non-partisan French media negotiate their stay in the occupied territories with local terrorists remains open. Due to this, for instance, during the so-called “referendums” on joining Russia in the territories of the occupied Donetsk, Luhansk, Kherson, and Zaporizhzhia regions, the Center for Strategic Communications included in the list of collaborators with Kremlin stooges both representatives of independent media and propagandists who participated in observing this spectacle and its legitimization for Russian television¹³⁷.

The latter group includes a number of bloggers and journalists who constantly stay in Donbas and broadcast the “truth” about the “real life of ordinary residents”, “atrocities of Ukrainian Nazis”, and the “heroism of the Russian army”.

Some of them, such as **Laurent Brayard**¹³⁸ and **Christelle Neant**, united around the project Donbass Insider, which spreads fakes and conspiracy theories about the “crimes of the Ukrainian army”¹³⁹, neo-Nazi Banderites, and America’s proxy war against Russia¹⁴⁰. Neant was also previously involved in the operation of the DONi¹⁴¹ press center - a propaganda structure trying to promote the narratives of terrorist groups DPR-LPR in the world. The video content of Donbass Insider and its authors, removed from YouTube like many other pro-Russian propagandist videos, are broadcasted by “alternative” platforms such as Odysee and Rumble.

Very similar to propaganda videos are periodically filmed by “neutral” journalists as well. For instance, in June 2023 a scandal erupted around a feature by the TF1 channel, shot at the positions of Russian invaders in the occupied territory of Ukraine. It talked about the preparation of Russian troops for a counteroffensive of the Armed Forces of Ukraine, and their combat readiness, without mentioning that these are the forces of the aggressor country.

“With their actions, the TV channel effectively provided the aggres-

sor state a platform to broadcast propagandistic narratives. This is especially dangerous considering that the entire European community, and France in particular, are making significant efforts to limit Russian propaganda. The shooting of the feature takes place under the control of the aggressor state’s militants, in such a way as to demonstrate the high combat readiness of the Russian army. ... Also shown are shots of firing at targets, presumably Ukrainian equipment, which is part of the current narrative about the destruction by the Russians of weapons supplied to Ukraine by partners. All the above indicates the imbalance of the story,” stated in the statement¹⁴² of the National Council on Television and Radio Broadcasting - the regulator of the information space of Ukraine. According to officials, there is no doubt that this and similar stories will be used for further propaganda both in the EU and in Russia.

Reports from Russian positions, which are then actively used by Russian propaganda, periodically appear on the France 2 channel. For example, the Russians reported¹⁴³ about the supposedly shown on the channel “joyful residents of Lysy-

137 Propagandists, Communists, and Neo-fascists: Foreign “Observers” on Pseudo-Referenda. Spravdi.gov.ua, 12.10.2022. <https://spravdi.gov.ua/en/propagandists-communists-and-neo-fascists-foreign-observers-on-pseudo-referenda/>

138 Sklyarevska H., “Your man in Donbas” for two hundred euros. Who is Laurent Brayard? Detector Media, 17.09.2022. <https://ms.detector.media/trendi/post/30271/2022-09-17-your-man-in-donbas-for-two-hundred-euros-who-is-laurent-brayard/>

139 Donbass Insider. News in category DPR-LPR. <https://www.donbass-insider.com/fr/category/nouvelles/rpd-rpl/>

140 Donbass Insider. Analyses Archive. <https://www.donbass-insider.com/fr/category/analyses/>

141 Christelle Neant. Politically biased elections observers. European platform for democratic elections. <https://www.fakeobservers.org/biased-observation-database/details/neant-christelle.html>

142 Національна рада вважає сюжет французького телеканалу TF1 незбалансованим і таким, що грає на руку російській пропаганді [The National Council considers the plot of the French TV channel TF1 unbalanced and such that it plays into the hands of Russian propaganda]. Website of the National TV and radio council of Ukraine, 18.06.2023. <https://www.nrada.gov.ua/natsionalna-rada-vvazhay-syuzhet-frantsuzkogo-telekanalu-tf1-nezbalansovanyim-takym-shho-graye-na-ruku-rosijskij-propagandi/>

143 Телеканал France 2 показав радостных жителей Лисичанска после освобождения [France 2 TV channel showed joyful residents

chansk” who welcome the arrival of the Russian army “as liberators”.

Almost from the very beginning of the full-scale invasion, these and other French media - LCI, Agence France-Presse, France Télé, Le Monde newspaper, Le Figaro regularly participate in press tours to the occupied territories, organized by the Russian Ministry of Defense¹⁴⁴. This has been the subject of protests by the Ukrainian Ministry of Foreign Affairs. Some of these media outlets explicitly state that they worked with the permission of the Russians, but deny that they coordinated the results of their work or their reports with them in any way. And they consider such trips an opportunity to show the world the real state of affairs, so as not to leave this piece of the pie exclusively to Kremlin propagandist media. However, among French researchers, the debate does not subside over whether it is ethical and professional to take at face value everything that Russian “guides” tell in such press tours, as, for example, a journalist from Le Figaro did after a trip to the “de-occupied” “Azovstal”¹⁴⁵, fully retransmitting Russian propagandistic narratives about Nazis in the “Azov” regiment.”

Conservative channels CNews, BFM TV, and the radio network Sud Radio regularly invite pro-Russian politicians and experts to their studios. However, unlike openly pro-Russian

“alternative” media, here the possibility of discussions from various sides of the political spectrum is maintained, and the conspiratorial theories and pro-Russian inclinations of the guests are more of a business strategy to attract as wide an audience as possible, rather than a manifestation of political sympathy.¹⁴⁶

Country summary

Overall, it can be said that the number and intensity of the presence of pro-Russian oriented politicians, media representatives, and the expert community, although not critical and does not significantly influence the current attitude of official Paris towards Russia, Ukraine, the war, sanctions, arms supplies, and other topical issues, there is no certainty that the situation will remain such constantly. Support for politicians who promote pro-Russian, anti-American, anti-Western narratives is substantial. In the 2022 presidential elections in the first round, Marine Le Pen, Jean-Luc Mélenchon, and Éric Zemmour (2nd, 3rd, and 4th places respectively) collectively garnered over 52% of the voters’ votes against 27.85% for the incumbent and subsequently re-elected Macron¹⁴⁷. Le Pen’s support in the second round was over 41% - this is clearly not an unambiguous, unequivocal leadership of the current head of state.

After the formal closure of the Kremlin-financed mouthpiece of Russian propaganda RT France (which continues broadcasting online and on social networks), its mission was picked up by a network of old and new right and left radical platforms and communities, which, if not expanding the base of Moscow’s sympathizers among the French, are certainly trying to retain this audience within the bounds of conspiratorial theories and ideas of France’s neutrality, strengthening historical ties with cultural Russia.

Representatives of clearly and latently pro-Russian analytical centers continue to be desirable guests both on marginal party platforms and on mainstream national channels. What’s more, former army generals and intelligence officers, who work in such centers, are quite likely to continue to remain advisors and authorities for the active military functionaries. At the same time, without detailed immersion in the context of each specific institution or branch, it is impossible to say exactly how the pro-Russian position of one expert affects the similar approaches of the entire institute or analytical center. What to say, if even at the level of political parties such discrepancies are inevitable.

Clearly, in a democratic society, it is impossible to prohibit citizens from voting for a particular candidate,

of Lisichansk after liberation]. Izvestia, 04.07.2022. <https://iz.ru/1359476/2022-07-04/telekanal-france-2-pokazal-radostnykh-zhitelei-lisichanska-posle-osvobozhdeniia>

144 Coquaz V., Voyages de presse avec l’armée russe: LCI, France 2 et l’AFP déclenchent la colère de Kyiv [Coquaz V., Press trips with the Russian army: LCI, France 2 and AFP trigger the anger of Kyiv]. La Liberation, 28.05.2022. https://www.liberation.fr/checknews/voyages-de-presse-avec-larmee-russe-lci-france-2-et-lafp-declenchent-la-colere-de-kyiv-20220528_ILQVKS5V5BCPOPQKTFVVO7XKA/

145 Stoczkowski W., La presse française peut-elle servir de relais à la propagande russe ? [Stoczkowski W., Can the French press serve as a relay for Russian propaganda?]. Desk Russie, 01.07.2022. <https://desk-russie.eu/2022/07/01/la-presse-francaise-peut-elle-servir.html>

146 Sud Radio (France). Wikipedia. [https://fr.wikipedia.org/wiki/Sud_Radio_\(France\)](https://fr.wikipedia.org/wiki/Sud_Radio_(France))

147 Élection présidentielle française de 2022 [2022 French presidential election]. Wikipedia. https://fr.wikipedia.org/wiki/%C3%89lection_pr%C3%A9sidentielle_fran%C3%A7aise_de_2022

reading or watching certain media, trusting or not trusting the opinions of authoritative or self-proclaimed scientists. However, what is clear is the necessity of exerting more effort both from the side of the French government and other democratic countries, as well as from European-oriented representatives of civil society regarding explaining the falsity and harmfulness of Russian narratives, as well as the tragic consequences they

can lead to. This concerns delays in providing arms, implementing new packages of economic and political sanctions, the necessity for deeper investigations into the interactions of political circles, media, and the expert community with the aggressor state, and their possible use for military propaganda purposes, etc.

Examples of such investigations concerning Le Pen and Mariani demon-

strate, firstly, the existence of ties with Russia not at the level of rumors or assumptions, but at the level of documentary evidence, and secondly, the prospects of such actions to muffle the voices of propaganda, or at least forcing its bearers to better verify information and refrain from spreading outright nonsenses beneficial to Moscow at one time or another.



5. Russian influence in Germany

Country context

The history of Russian political, economic, and subsequently propagandistic influence on Germany goes far beyond the modern era, even beyond the Soviet period. Since the time of Catherine II, who was of German descent, the relationship between the two countries has been more than neighbourly, often characterised as a strategic partnership. Initially, this was purely a materialistic aspect of viewing Russia as a source of income and opportunities for social and economic growth, which were completely impossible at home, writes¹⁴⁸ German political scientist and founder of the European Resilience Initiative Center in Berlin and head of the Heinrich Böll Foundation in Kyiv from 2015 to 2021, Sergey Sumlenny, in his extensive essay on the roots of bilateral relations, “The Curious Case of Enigmatic Interdependence”. German architects went to Russia, German nobility headed political and military institutions, and opened factories and restaurants.

Despite the two countries having fought against each other twice in

the 20th century, the mutual sentiment of the Germans towards the Russians didn’t particularly dissipate, and after the end of World War II, it was further cemented by a feeling of guilt towards the Russians for the crimes committed by the Nazis. Russia was perceived as a neighbour whose interests should primarily be taken into account, ignoring the interests of Central and Eastern European countries. Today’s propagandistic narratives about the “boundlessness” of Russia’s borders and its image as a country with a “unique path” were firmly rooted in German political discourse half a century ago, Sumlenny notes.

Together with Moscow, Berlin could take the lead in matters of economy and technology in Europe, leaving military affairs and global politics to the Russians. “In this alliance, the interests of Poland and Ukraine, women and minorities, and even their own underprivileged social groups can be ignored, reviving the traditions of Prussia and other monarchical, conservative (and backward during their 19th-century existence)

German states. In this sense, the leap into Moscow’s embrace becomes a retaliation against the US,” the historian believes.

An overview of pro-Russian influence groups in Germany

Despite Germany today playing one of the leading roles in supporting Ukraine in its war against Russia, there is significant political support for forces opposing this backing. Consequently, these forces are prepared to block, minimise such support, and sway the Ukrainian government towards peace talks on unfavourable terms. The support for these forces is growing, and it’s possible that Russia itself is endorsing this. Unlike in France, where the main propagators are military circles of the ‘old guard’ and numerous scientific institutions and analytical centres, in Germany, businessmen and many ‘peace movements’, affiliated with both far-right and far-left political factions, are more involved in promoting Russia’s interests. Their supporters are easily swayed

148 Сумленний С. Загадковий випадок маревної співзалежності. Або: Походження і природа “окремих стосунків” Німеччини з Росією. ARC, ВИПУСК №8 – ЛЮТИЙ-БЕРЕЗЕНЬ 2023. [Sumlennyi S. Mysterious case of delusional codependence. Or: The origin and nature of “separate relations” between Germany and Russia. ARC, ISSUE #8 – FEBRUARY-MARCH 2023] <https://arc.ua/the-curious-case-of-a-delusional-codependency/>

by the propaganda narrative about the interest of the global West in the war with Russia, the invincibility of the Russian army, the corruption of the Ukrainian government, and the inappropriateness of sending weap-

ons to Ukraine at the expense of German taxpayers. Moreover, having been ‘sponsored’ for years by money from energy corruption schemes, numerous German regions at the regional government level might

continue to be latent supporters of Putin and his policies, even despite the brutality and inhumanity of the crimes the Russian army commits in Ukraine.

Table 2. Kremlin admirers in Germany: The overall sample structure*

Activist	27	Being active on demos, human rights protection activities
Culture	6	Cultural influence
Lawyer	2	Commentators and actors with legal background
Media	62	Journalists, writers, for whom media is the main activity
Politician	32	Politically engaged
Russian organisation	1	State-related Russian organisations
Academia	3	People and organisations with scientific background
Total	133	

* We have included a minimal amount of entities, who were publicly active after February, 2022, so there might be even more, but this table provides a general overview of the structure. If there was a double categorised entity (e.g., army and think tank) we have collocated them only into one category.

Principal pro-Russian influence groups in Germany

Business community

For many years, the most active lobbyist for a positive German attitude towards Russia was **the German business community operating in Russia**. In media and political dimensions, Russia was portrayed as one of Germany’s most important economic partners. At least, the

myth of such importance was always part of propaganda from Russia, even if it wasn’t supported by the numbers.

At the heart of much of Russia’s economic influence was, of course, Germany’s dependence on Russian gas. Apart from energy, many of Germany’s chemical production companies were also dependent on Russian raw materials. Only from the second half of 2022 did they manage to break away from Russian gas. Russian

state banks, primarily Sberbank, also aimed to ensnare the German economy by trying to provide loans to vulnerable German companies, like car manufacturer Opel. Russian state corporations “invested” in local regional budget-forming enterprises such as the Wadan shipyard in Mecklenburg-Western Pomerania and bankrupt engineering companies.

“German export-oriented production benefited from cheap Russian

gas for years, paying for it with European security. German regions saved their bankrupt productions, handing over leverage to the Russians to influence their politicians. German companies operating in Russia became hostages to their managers, who were interested in the lifestyle and privileges of white colonial masters,” highlights Sumlenny.

After the annexation of Crimea, the Russians began to pay even more attention to cooperation with Germany to demonstrate that the sanctions “don’t work” and “aren’t supported” at various levels. German businessmen regularly visited the occupied peninsula, and within Russia, German businesses received significant preferences. It’s no surprise that honorary consuls of Russia in Germany were major businessmen like the founder of the Knauf corporation, **Nikolaus Knauf**¹⁴⁹. However, after the onset of the full-scale invasion, all four consuls lost their positions.

Political groups

Thus, one can assertively state that singling out Russia in foreign policy and prioritising Moscow’s interests had been part of Germany’s state policy for a long time and was independent of the political parties in power. Of course, gradually after the onset of the great war in February

2022, this attitude began to change, and unequivocal support for Russia and Putin’s actions became the domain of marginal far-right and far-left forces.

In the study published by “Texty” titled **“The Germs of the Russian World,”**¹⁵⁰ the dataset with entities from Germany occupies the largest share. This is justified: Germany is the largest and most influential country in modern Europe, with historically strong economic and political ties rooted both in energy dependencies and influences dating back to the times when the nation was divided into “capitalist” and “socialist” parts. As our research methodology entails “filtering” only those individuals and organisations that continued their active pro-Russian activities after 24 February 2022, our dataset has been reduced by roughly a third, amounting to barely 130 entries. Predominantly, the politicians left are opposition figures from far-right and far-left structures. We aren’t mentioning, for instance, numerous visits by politicians from German regions to Russia for nationalist and left-radical forums, the activities in Berlin of a centre called “Dialogue of Civilisations”¹⁵¹ funded by the head of Russian Railways **Vladimir Yakunin**, or the “representations” of the terrorist DNR and LNR founded in Germany¹⁵², since these events took place

before the full-scale invasion began. It’s clear that we didn’t include all heads of local branches of nationwide German organisations supporting Russia or promoting pro-Russian narratives. Similarly, we couldn’t possibly list every minor left- and right-oriented online publication, newspaper, discussion club, and platform participating in pro-Russian protest actions, hosting marginal Russian “experts” or even visiting Moscow after the full-scale invasion, advocating for “peace” at the expense of Ukraine capitulating to Russia, and so forth. We focused on major examples that give an idea of the prevalence and depth of such sentiments and interests among different segments of the German population.

The primary narratives of Russian propaganda in Germany relate to refusing military support for Ukraine, discrediting Ukrainian refugees, economic issues, and political discord within the European Union and Germany itself, defeats of the Ukrainian military on the battlefield, breaches of warfare rules and customs, corruption in Ukrainian politics and the army, and more. These are disseminated by Russian media representations, diaspora organisations, numerous politicians from both the right and left spectrums and their associated “alternative” media and conspiracy theorists, networks of

149 Тайная дипломатия Путина. Новая Газета Европа, 06.12.2022. [Putin’s secret diplomacy. Novaya Gazeta Europe, 06.12.2022] <https://novayagazeta.eu/articles/2022/12/06/tainaia-diplomatia-putina>

150 Nabozhniak O. and others, The Germs of the Russian World. TEXTY.org.ua, 01.12.2022. <https://texty.org.ua/projects/108323/germs-russian-world-who-supports-russia-europe/>

151 Кириленко А. Бассейн. Как Якунин выводил из бюджета десятки миллиардов долларов и отмывал их в Европе. [Kirilenko A. Swimming pool. How Yakunin withdrew tens of billions of dollars from the budget and laundered them in Europe] The Insider, 08.06.2022 <https://theins.ru/korruptsiya/251363>

152 Mueller-Töwe J. und andere, Das abchasische Netz. [Mueller-Töwe J. and others, The Abkhazian network]. T-Online, 22.06.2022 https://www.t-online.de/nachrichten/deutschland/id_92219972/prorussische-lobby-im-bundestag-das-abchasische-netz.html

anonymous Telegram channels, etc. And this propaganda works¹⁵³.

According to a study by **CeMAS (Center for Monitoring, Analysis, and Strategy)**¹⁵⁴, during 2022 – i.e., during Russia’s full-scale invasion of Ukraine – more residents of Germany became susceptible to narratives of Russian propaganda, essentially taking it at face value. This is primarily due to residents of East Germany and voters of far-right parties like the **Alternative für Deutschland (AfD)** and left-wing parties (coming second), but the proportion among other population categories believing them is alarmingly high. For instance, the researchers found that almost one in five respondents agreed that Russia’s aggressive war was an unavoidable response to NATO provocations. 21% partially agreed with this statement. 18% of those surveyed believe Putin is fighting against global elites, with 26% partially believing this. Claims that Ukraine has no territorial claims of its own and is essentially part of Russia receive 24% approval in East Germany and 12% support in West Germany. 48% of AfD voters support this claim.

The reason for the high support for Russia’s actions, regardless of their

brutality, among the population in East Germany is apparent. Until the early 1990s, this region was effectively under Soviet occupation. Espionage, political, economic, and cultural ties were incredibly strong during this period. The current state of Putin’s Russia shares many similarities with this part of modern Germany – from the current president’s years of service in Soviet security agencies in Dresden to economic contracts and political corruption associated with the construction of Nord Stream gas storage and pipelines.

Far-right monarchist movements in the East, such as Free Saxony, or less radical civic associations like OstWind (founded by local AfD politician **Hans-Thomas Tillschneider**), as well as leftist peace-seeking movements like The Alliance for Peace in Brandenburg, are faithful allies of Russian and anti-Western propaganda, which became especially evident during the war in Ukraine¹⁵⁵.

According to various polls and trust ratings conducted regularly in Germany, the party rating for AfD remains stable at around 21-22%, while Die Linke is at 5-7%^{156 157}. The personal ratings of their respec-

tive leaders, Alice Weidel and Tino Chrupalla from AfD, and Sahra Wagenknecht and Janine Wissler from Die Linke, follow a roughly similar trend: the left leaders’ trust ratings are 12-17%, and the right leaders’ ratings are 12-14%^{158 159}. It’s important to note that not all party members have a favorable view of Russia and promote its narratives. However, such a level of support among the German population suggests that a significant portion of voters might likely share the extreme views of their political representatives. This situation presents a considerable challenge for the democratic society of Germany and the European community as a whole.

Political support

The activities of the deputies from the Bundestag and the European Parliament, particularly from the AfD and Die Linke parties, are evidently tilting towards Russian propaganda. Even though the party leadership officially condemned the war in Ukraine, many of the more radically inclined members at the national and regional levels continue to promote Russian narratives or show their favoritism towards Russia through their actions.

153 Platz S. Warum Kreml-Propaganda in Deutschland fruchtet. [Platz S. Why Kremlin propaganda is fruitful in Germany.] N-Tv, 12.11.2022 <https://www.n-tv.de/politik/Warum-Kreml-Propaganda-in-Deutschland-fruchtet-article23711615.html>

154 Lamberty P. und andere, Belastungsprobe für die Demokratie: Pro-russische Verschwörungserzählungen und Glaube an Desinformation in der Gesellschaft [Lamberty P. and others, Test of democracy: Pro-Russian conspiracy narratives and belief in disinformation in society.] CeMAS, 02.11.2022. <https://cemas.io/publikationen/belastungsprobe-fuer-die-demokratie/>

155 Kastner J. Why Does Eastern Germany Love Putin So Much? Foreign Policy, 17.09.2023. <https://foreignpolicy.com/2023/09/17/east-germany-putin-afd-misinformation/>

156 Germany — National parliament voting intention. Politico, poll results as of 25.09.2023. <https://www.politico.eu/europe-poll-of-polls/germany/>

157 Opinion polling for the next German federal election. Wikipedia. https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Opinion_polling_for_the_next_German_federal_election

158 Pistorius und zwei CDUler sind beliebteste Politiker [Pistorius and two CDU members are the most popular politicians]. N-Tv, 12.09.2023. <https://www.n-tv.de/politik/Pistorius-und-zwei-CDUler-sind-beliebteste-Politiker-article24390097.html>

159 Piehler M. Ranking der beliebtesten deutschen Politiker [Piehler M. Ranking of the most popular German politicians]. Yahoo. Nachrichten, 08.05.2023. <https://de.nachrichten.yahoo.com/ranking-der-beliebtesten-deutschen-politiker-085535579.html>

For instance, **Alexander Gauland**, the honorary chairman of AfD who had previously illegally visited the occupied Crimea¹⁶⁰, joined the propaganda-driven Victory Day celebrations at the Russian embassy in Berlin in 2023¹⁶¹. He propagated the narrative that Ukraine was intentionally drawing Germany into a war with Russia¹⁶². Another MP, **Andrej Hunko** from Die Linke, who also had illegal visits to the occupied peninsula¹⁶³, questions the necessity of supplying weapons to Ukraine to resist Russian aggression¹⁶⁴. His former colleague from Bavaria, **Dieter Dehm**, initiates anti-Ukrainian rallies in Munich¹⁶⁵. Meanwhile, MPs **Gunnar Beck** and **Rainer Rothfuß** frequently appear on Russian media to relay tales of horror about life in Europe¹⁶⁶ and label Ukraine a “failed state”¹⁶⁷, echoing Russian propaganda materials.

Notably, Rothfuß directly supports the war against Ukraine¹⁶⁸. In 2023, **Hans-Thomas Tillschneider**, an MP from Saxony-Anhalt of the AfD, calmly attended the Petersburg Economic Forum where Putin and the entire Russian political-military elite presented their pro-war propaganda speeches¹⁶⁹.

AfD politicians effectively utilized Russian propaganda tools¹⁷⁰, with Russia launching hundreds of fake and provocatively informative accounts on social networks to spread false and manipulated information about Ukraine, the realities in Russia, Germany, Europe, the progress of the war, and other sensitive topics. The deputies took this as the absolute truth, either deliberately or unknowingly, thereby aiding the Russian propaganda machine.

This is just the tip of the iceberg. A comprehensive list of other active supporters of the Putin regime among politicians can be found in the tabular section of this research.

The influence of Russia on these politicians is confirmed by a series of facts, including attempts to form an anti-war coalition to prevent military assistance to Ukraine following the start of Russia’s full-scale invasion. For instance, documents published by The Washington Post¹⁷¹ not only highlighted the Kremlin’s direct attempts to interfere in German politics by trying to establish such a coalition among Wagenknecht, the far-left, and the AfD, but also the willingness of German politicians themselves to partake in this collaboration. Besides the anti-war narratives, the “coa-

160 „Die Krim ist nun einmal ur-russisches Territorium“ [“Crimea is, after all, original Russian territory”]. Die Welt, 17.06.2017. <https://www.welt.de/politik/deutschland/article165650240/Die-Krim-ist-nun-einmal-ur-russisches-Territorium.html>

161 Monath H. und andere, Mit Schröder, Krenz und Gauland zum 9. Mai: Bizarre Riege deutscher Putin-Freunde feiert in russischer Botschaft [Monath H. and others, With Schröder, Krenz and Gauland on May 9th: Bizarre squad of German Putin friends celebrates in the Russian embassy] Tagesspiegel, 10.05.2023. <https://www.tagesspiegel.de/berlin/mit-schroeder-krenz-und-gauland-zum-9-mai-bizarre-riege-deutscher-putin-freunde-feiert-in-russischer-botschaft-9796322.html>

162 Барановская М. Как в бундестаге отнеслись к плану АдГ по окончанию войны [Baranovskaya M. How the Bundestag reacted to the AfD plan to end the war]. DW, 09.02.2023 <https://www.dw.com/ru/slava-ukraine-v-bundestage-kak-deputaty-otreagirovali-na-mirnyj-plan-adg/a-64661298>

163 Варкентин А. Немецкие «левые» встретились в Донбассе с «авторитетами» [Varkentin A. German “leftists” met with “authorities” in Donbass]. DW, 18.02.2015 <https://www.dw.com/ru/%D0%BD%D0%B5%D0%BC%D0%B5%D1%86%D0%BA%D0%B8%D0%B5-%D0%BB%D0%B5%D0%B2%D1%8B%D0%B5-%D0%B2%D1%81%D1%82%D1%80%D0%B5%D1%82%D0%B8%D0%BB%D0%B8%D1%81%D1%8C-%D0%B2-%D0%B4%D0%BE%D0%BD%D0%B1%D0%B0%D1%81%D1%81%D0%B5-%D1%81-%D0%BC%D0%B5%D1%81%D1%82%D0%B-D%D1%8B%D0%BC%D0%B8-%D0%B0%D0%B2%D1%82%D0%BE%D1%80%D0%B8%D1%82%D0%B5%D1%82%D0%B0%D0%B-C%D0%B8/a-18265602>

164 Leopard-Panzer mit Flagge der Nazikollaborateure – Andrej Hunko fragt Boris Pistorius [Leopard tank with the flag of the Nazi collaborators – Andrej Hunko asks Boris Pistorius]. Website of Andrej Hunko, 24.05.2023 <https://www.andrej-hunko.de/en/bt-en/reden/5581-leopard-panzer-mit-flagge-der-nazikollaborateure-andrej-hunko-fragt-boris-pistorius>

165 Naumann F. Gegen „ukrainische Killerbanden“ – 10.000 „Querdenker“ demonstrieren [Against “Ukrainian killer gangs” – 10,000 “lateral thinkers” demonstrate]. FR.de, 21.02.2023. <https://www.fr.de/politik/krieg-querdenker-news-ticker-siko-muenchen-protest-demonstration-ukraine-92095851.html>

166 Евродепутат: В Милане тысячи людей просят кусок хлеба. Труд [MEP: In Milan, thousands of people are asking for a piece of bread.Trud], 19.04.2022. https://www.trud.ru/article/19-04-2022/1415066_evrodeputat_v_milane_tysjachi_ljudej_prosjat_kusok_xleba.html

167 <https://www.facebook.com/drgunnarbeck/posts/432612728681538/>

168 Zimmermann M. Rainer Rothfuß – Der ewige Apologet Russlands [Zimmermann M. Rainer Rothfuß – Russia’s eternal apologist]. Allgäu - rechtsaußen, 06.03.2023. <https://allgaeu-rechtsaussen.de/2023/03/06/rainer-rothfuss-der-ewige-apologet-russlands/>

169 Eichler H. AfD-Vize Tillschneider schon wieder in Russland [Eichler H. Vice AfD Vice Tillschneider in Russia again]. Mitteldeutsche Zeitung, 16.06.2023. <https://www.mz.de/mitteldeutschland/landespolitik/afd-vize-tillschneider-erneut-russland-auftritt-propaganda-3632573?reduced=true>

170 Bernhard M. Wie AfD-Politiker von einem prorussischen Propaganda-Netzwerk profitieren [Bernhard M. How AfD politicians benefit from a pro-Russian propaganda network]. Correctiv, 23.06.2023. <https://correctiv.org/faktencheck/hintergrund/2023/06/23/wie-afd-politiker-von-einem-prorussischen-propaganda-netzwerk-profitieren/>

171 Belton C. and others, Kremlin tries to build antiwar coalition in Germany, documents show. The Washington Post, 21.04.2023. <https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/2023/04/21/germany-russia-interference-afd-wagenknecht/>

lition” aimed to undermine Western unity and freeze the war on its terms. “Soon after the Kremlin gave the order for a union to be forged between Wagenknecht and the far right, AfD deputies began speaking in support of her in parliament and party members chanted her name at rallies. Björn Höcke, chairman of the AfD in Thüringen in eastern Germany, publicly invited her to join the party”, the article states.

While Wagenknecht publicly declined the Kremlin’s support and orders, another individual, Petr Bystron, a charismatic AfD member of parliament, secretly travelled to Belarus for three days in November to meet with the Belarusian foreign minister. Shortly before the invasion, he visited Kyiv to meet with Viktor Medvedchuk, a close ally of Russian President Vladimir Putin, who was under house arrest. **Andreas Kalbitz**, a member of the Brandenburg regional parliament, received money from the “Russian Peace Foundation”, an organisation chaired by the Russian parliament’s foreign affairs committee chief, Leonid Slutsky. AfD members and **Ralph Niemeyer**, Wagenknecht’s ex-husband, through whom the Russians were trying to reach a political leader, have continued their visits to Russia since the war commenced. When Niemeyer visited Vladivostok, a Russian city in the Far East, in September, he posted pictures on social media from his meetings at an eco-

nomic forum with Peskov, Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov, and Alexei Miller, chief executive of Gazprom, the Russian state gas giant.

The documents also reveal that the Russians were planning protests across Germany, from Neustrelitz, a small town north of Berlin, to Stuttgart in the west, under the leadership of the far left or the far right. These included demonstrations led by the Reichsbürger movement, with slogans devised by Kremlin strategists.

The cooperation between Russia and the AfD on matters concerning blocking military supplies to Ukraine is further confirmed by another document leak, publicised by *Der Spiegel*¹⁷² in August 2023. It concerns correspondence suggesting that an assistant to one of the party deputies in the Bundestag, Eugen Schmidt, of Ukrainian descent named **Vladimir Sergienko**, along with members of the AfD parliamentary group in Berlin, was planning a legal complaint against German arms deliveries to Ukraine, hoping for Russian assistance. Sergienko, an author and activist born in Ukraine during the Soviet era, can often be seen spreading propaganda on Russian state television.

He has forged a dense network of contacts with Kremlin apologists in Germany over the years. This network includes **Jürgen Elsässer**, the editor and publisher of the far-right

magazine *Compact* and a staunch Putin supporter (see more about him in the section on pro-Russian media in Germany), Margarita Simonyan, the head of the television channel RT, and Vladimir Solovyov, host of one of the most hostile and inflammatory shows on Russian state television. He also seems to maintain contacts with numerous members of the Russian parliament, the Duma, including Maria Butina, who was convicted in the United States as an agent of Moscow and later deported to Russia, where she embarked on a political career.

Case study: Left and Right members of the Bundestag tweeting similarly about Ukraine

The Texty data journalism agency team, in September 2023, researched¹⁷³ the content of tweets from deputies of the German parliament from two German opposition parties: the socialist Left (Die Linke) and the nationalist Alternative for Germany (AfD). Researchers found that **the positions of the parliamentarians on key “Ukrainian” issues coincide, and they primarily echo the narratives of Russian propaganda**. Specifically, politicians from both factions criticise the German government for supplying weapons to Ukraine and for implementing sanctions against Russia. They promote “peaceful”

172 Baumgärtner M. and others, Secret Messages Document Moscow Contacts with Staffer of Far-Right AfD. *Der Spiegel*, 04.08.2023. <https://www.spiegel.de/international/germany/germany-secret-messages-document-moscow-contacts-with-staffer-of-far-right-afd-a-0040e526-39d7-4f22-8bc1-6772bc2d840a>

173 Romanyshyn N. Like Mirror Twins. Propensity of Right-Wing and Left-Wing Bundestag MPs for Russian Narratives on War in Ukraine. *Texty.org.ua*, 21.09.2023. <https://texty.org.ua/articles/110663/mirror-twins-propensity-right-wing-and-left-wing-bundestag-mps-russian-narratives-war-ukraine/>

negotiations and express negative views on Ukrainian refugees.

The authors note that they downloaded tweets from deputies who used Twitter from 24 February 2022 to 7 July 2023, with 100 tweets for each person. For those accounts that tweeted frequently, they considered the latest 100 tweets. In total, they analysed over 7,000 tweets and retweets, of which 5% pertained to Ukraine. Most from the AfD (79% of those who had Twitter accounts) mentioned Ukraine in their posts. In the other camp, within the Die Linke faction, fewer deputies wrote about Ukraine - about 60%. However, those who did wrote even more than all their right-wing colleagues combined. Overall, the number of tweets about Ukraine was higher in Die Linke: 220 compared to 170 in AfD.

The researchers identified a series of narrative categories about Ukraine. These include opposition to providing weapons to Ukraine; demands for a ceasefire and initiating diplomatic relations with the aggressor; opposition to Ukraine joining NATO/EU; negative attitudes towards Ukrainian refugees; criticism of counter-attacks and blaming Germany's impoverishment on Ukraine, etc. Also, within the dataset, there were many tweets

spreading Russian propaganda about the sabotage of gas pipelines and Kakhovka Hydroelectric Station, shifting the responsibility for the war from Russia to the West; statements against anti-Russian economic sanctions; calls to accept Russian draft evaders and support for performances of Russian cultural figures, and so on.

Based on the research results, the most popular topics of German deputies' posts were calls not to supply weapons to Ukraine and to transition to peace talks. Both parties criticise the German government's decision to supply weapons to Ukraine and argue that the primary priority should be diplomacy and peace talks. For example, the left actively spread and called for the signing of a petition by Bundestag deputy from the Left Party, Sara Wagenknecht, and journalist Alice Schwarzer, named "Peace Manifesto". Deutsche Welle reports¹⁷⁴ that several German media have called their petition the "Manifesto of Submission" because the initiators advocate for immediate negotiations, claiming that Ukraine supposedly "cannot win a war against the world's largest nuclear power."

Another example of a shared position between the two parties on one issue is the joint promotion of

the "shelter for Russians" narrative: it was most pushed by AfD representative **Mark Jongen and Jan Korte** from Die Linke.

Russian organizations in Germany

At the top of the pyramid of Russia's political and informational influence in Germany, besides the embassy, consulates, economic and military attaché, there is also the representation of **Rossotrudnichestvo** – the Federal Agency¹⁷⁵ for supporting cultural ties with the Russian diaspora. Given the significant size of this diaspora in Germany, the influence of such bodies is hard to overestimate.

The representation of Rossotrudnichestvo is primarily **the Russian Centre for Science and Culture, also known as the Russian House in Berlin** – the largest among all representations of the Federal Agency with a budget of over 10 million euros per year. As of January 2023, the German prosecutor's office is investigating¹⁷⁶ the Russian House on suspicion of violating the Foreign Trade and Payments Act. However, by the end of 2022, the Russian House had easily organised a "New Year's tree" in central Berlin, inviting Ded Moroz¹⁷⁷ (Father Frost, Russian analogue of Santa Claus) for the diaspora children. The Russian opposition

174 Гурков А. ЗМІ ФРН про петицію Вагенкнехт і Шварцер [Gurkov A. German media about the Wagenknecht and Schwarzer petition]. DW, 13.02.2023. <https://www.dw.com/uk/cinizm-zmi-frn-pro-peticiu-vagenkneht-i-svarcer/a-64691950>

175 Российский дом науки и культуры (Берлин) [Russian House of Science and Culture (Berlin)]. Wikipedia. [https://ru.wikipedia.org/wiki/%D0%A0%D0%BE%D1%81%D1%81%D0%B8%D0%B9%D1%81%D0%BA%D0%B8%D0%B9_%D0%B4%D0%BE%D0%BC_%D0%BD%D0%B0%D1%83%D0%BA%D0%B8_%D0%B8_%D0%BA%D1%83%D0%BB%D1%8C%D1%82%D1%83%D1%80%D1%8B_\(%D0%91%D0%B5%D1%80%D0%BB%D0%B8%D0%BD\)](https://ru.wikipedia.org/wiki/%D0%A0%D0%BE%D1%81%D1%81%D0%B8%D0%B9%D1%81%D0%BA%D0%B8%D0%B9_%D0%B4%D0%BE%D0%BC_%D0%BD%D0%B0%D1%83%D0%BA%D0%B8_%D0%B8_%D0%BA%D1%83%D0%BB%D1%8C%D1%82%D1%83%D1%80%D1%8B_(%D0%91%D0%B5%D1%80%D0%BB%D0%B8%D0%BD))

176 Рофе Ж. Прокуратура начала проверку «Русского дома» в Берлине [Rofe J. The prosecutor's office began an inspection of the «Russian House» in Berlin]. DW, 21.01.2023. <https://www.dw.com/ru/prokuratura-nacala-proverku-russkogo-doma-v-berline/a-64474162>

177 Шестаков Е. Посол России в ФРГ Сергей Нечаев: Немцы задаются вопросом: а что русские сделали нам плохого? [Shestakov E. Russian Ambassador to Germany Sergei Nechaev: The Germans are asking themselves: what did the Russians do wrong to us?]. Rossiyskaya gazeta, 17.01.2023. <https://rg.ru/2023/01/17/kuda-idet-germanii.html>

publication, *The Insider*, recently published¹⁷⁸ an excerpt from the private correspondence between the central office of *Rossotrudnichestvo* and the Russian House in Berlin regarding the objectives set for the representation:

“The RHSC should be a motivating framework for promoting a clear ideology as a system of guiding value principles that sets the RHSC apart from its competitors on the soft-power circuit. New ideas should form an ordered, rather than a chaotic collection. It is important to create a cohesive image, which will be perceived even on a subconscious level by the society of the host country. Here it’s worth analysing the best Soviet practices without directly copying them.”

Before the pandemic, the RHSC held 300-400 propaganda events each year in Germany, such as “Weekends at the Russian House”, “Preserving Historical and Cultural Heritage Abroad and Raising the Younger Generation”, “Role of Russian Saints in the Spiritual and Moral Education of Youth”, “Hello, Russia”, “Russian Seasons in Berlin”, “Sobibor”, etc., notes the publication.

Unlike in other countries, where the local Coordination Council of Russian compatriots closely cooperates with the representation of *Rossotrudnichestvo*, in Germany, this role is played by the local community organisation **Russkoe pole** (Russian Field)¹⁷⁹. This is simultaneously a coordination council, a media about the life of Russians in Germany, and a human rights organisation. It helps Russians avoid “discrimination” based on language or nationality, fights against “Russophobia”, which – according to Russian propaganda – has become too prevalent on the streets of European cities since the beginning of Russia’s full-scale invasion of Ukraine.

Other organisations with similar names also operate in Germany, such as the North German Coordination Council of Russian-speaking citizens¹⁸⁰. However, it is not part of the pro-government vertical but is, on the contrary, part of the list of opposition Russian forces that protest against Putin’s policies and even receive funding from the German government and other donors¹⁸¹.

Among other Russian organisations in Germany, “**Cossack**” associa-

tions stand out, operating in various cities, including Hanover, Berlin, Hamburg, Cologne, Stuttgart, Gummersbach, and others. “Cossacks” are essentially a paramilitary association of a folkloric-historical type, which supposedly conveys the spirit of the White Guard emigration of the early 20th century and at the same time maintains ties with “Cossack” organisations in Russia¹⁸². Importantly, such organisations, for example, take an active part¹⁸³ in Russia’s “special military operation” in Ukraine with the “blessing” of the Russian Orthodox Church. However, the Cossack organisations in Germany have been noticed only in cultural events; their representatives also took part in individual rallies in support of Russia (see Case Study: Pro-Russian Rallies). For example, in July 2023, an “International Cossack Bivouac” (congress, historical-sport camp) was organised in Hanover¹⁸⁴.

The Russian Orthodox Church is represented by the Berlin-German Diocese, headed by Archbishop Tikhon of Ruzsky, and the head of the German Diocese of the Russian Orthodox Church Abroad is Metropolitan Mark Arndt. Despite formally reporting directly to the

178 Kanev S. Secrets of Russian House in Berlin: Encrypted messages from Moscow, theft and hired criminals. *The Insider*, 06.02.2023. <https://theins.ru/en/politics/259153>

179 RUSSKOE POLE. <https://russkoe-pole.de/>

180 Северогерманский координационный совет. [North-German Coordination Council.] <https://www.ckcpc.de/>

181 Розэ А. Против Путина в Берлине. Жизнь российских активистов в Германии [Rose A. Against Putin in Berlin. The life of Russian activists in Germany]. *Radio Liberty*, 26.10.2022. <https://www.svoboda.org/a/protiv-putina-v-berline-zhiznj-rossijskih-aktivistov-v-germanii/32101351.html>

182 Набожняк О. Казакаріум. Як іспанський ріелтор, секс-підприємець з Естонії та міліціонер з Краснодару керують “казацкімі станицями” в Європі [Nabozhniak O. Kazakarium. How a Spanish realtor, a sex entrepreneur from Estonia and a policeman from Krasnodar manage “Cossack towns” in Europe]. *Texty.org.ua*, 13.02.2023. <https://texty.org.ua/articles/108939/kazakarium-yak-rieltor-z-marbeli-kinoloh-seks-startaper-z-estoniyi-i-milicioner-z-krasnodaru-staly-chastynoyu-ahenturnoyi-merezhi-kazackyh-orhanizacij-u-yevropi/>

183 Кошелева А. и др., Что делают кубанские казаки в зоне СВО. Кубанские новости [Kosheleva A. et al., What are the Kuban Cossacks doing in the Special Military Operation zone. *Kubanskies Novosti*], 20.07.2023. <https://kubnews.ru/obshchestvo/2023/07/20/chto-delayut-kubanskies-kazaki-v-zone-svo/>

184 4-й Международный казачий бивак в Ганновере. Казачий Информационно-Аналитический Центр [4th International Cossack bivouac in Hannover. Cossack Information and Analytical Center], 06.07.2023. https://kazak-center.ru/publ/novosti_kazak_inform/naibolee_vazhnye/4_j_mezhdunarodnyj_kazachij_bivak_v_gannovere/174-1-0-8153

Moscow Patriarch, these structures are reluctant to be a mirror horn for the theses of the Moscow Patriarch Kirill, who effectively blessed the Russian military for the war. Instead, German hierarchs sent aid to Ukraine (however, addressed to the pro-Russian Ukrainian Orthodox Church and were concerned about its “persecutions”¹⁸⁵ by the Ukrainian authorities, which was in tune with the theses of Russian state propaganda).

Case Study: Pro-Russian Rallies

The particularity of Russian influences in Germany lies in the extensive engagement of local communities in protest actions, rallies in support of Russia’s actions, motorcades, marches, and so on. In January 2023, investigators from the Reuters agency published an investigation in which they identified¹⁸⁶ several participants of such an event that took place in Cologne in September 2022. This was a protest march against the arming of Ukraine by Western allies and in favour of making peace with Russia. The identified participants are connected to multiple influence groups — including representatives of Russian special services, Cossacks, and members of the local diaspora who have lived in Germany for decades.

One of the event’s organisers was a Russian former air force officer,

originally named **Rostislav Teslyuk**, who changed his name to **Max Schlund** after settling in Germany a decade ago. In recent months, he travelled to Russian-controlled eastern Ukraine with his romantic partner and co-organiser of the pro-Russian events, **Elena Kolbasnikova**, originally from Ukraine and now residing in Germany. The agency provides evidence of Teslyuk/Schlund receiving payments from Rossotrudnichestvo for attending events in Moscow. Kolbasnikova gained attention from Russian propaganda outlets after claiming she was dismissed from her nursing job due to “Russophobia”.

Another rally speaker was **Andrei Kharkovsky**, who pledged allegiance to a Cossack society supporting Moscow’s military campaign in Ukraine. He currently resides in Troisdorf, southeast of Cologne, and runs a small trucking business. He is frequently seen in photographs from Cossack gatherings on his and other social media pages, often donning a Cossack military uniform.

The 2022 gathering in Hanover hosted Russian diplomats from the consulate in Hamburg, as mentioned on the Russian Orthodox Church’s website. A message was read from the acting leader of the Great Don Army, a Cossack organisation involved in recruiting soldiers and participating in Russia’s military operations in Ukraine. Photos shared by Khar-

kovsky on social media display him and other attendees standing before a Great Don Army flag.

Another participant identified by Reuters was **Oleg Eremenko**, a Russian-German businessman who had affiliations with the Russian military intelligence, the GRU. Journalists spotted him in photos from a German Communist Party event. On the panel, he argued that Ukrainian youths are indoctrinated to despise Russia. Clients listed on its website include the Russian Orthodox Church in Berlin. Eremenko is on the board of an organisation named “Desant”, composed of former Russian servicemen. He has attended events alongside Russian diplomats to honour the Soviet war dead buried in Germany and has been photographed with German politicians such as **Manuela Schwesig**, a Social Democrat member and state premier of Mecklenburg-Vorpommern. In a photo from 2016, Eremenko is seen alongside Igor Girkin, a former Russian intelligence officer recently convicted in absentia by a Dutch court for involvement in the downing of the Malaysian airliner MH17 over Ukraine.

Russian media in Germany

Given that Germany is arguably the most crucial target for Russian influence in Europe, the emergence of the state broadcaster Russia To-

185 Обращение митрополита Марка в связи с нападениями на Украинскую Православную Церковь. Русская православная зарубежная церковь. Германская епархия [Address of Metropolitan Mark in connection with the attacks on the Ukrainian Orthodox Church. Russian Orthodox Church Abroad. German diocese], 30.12.2022. <https://rocor.de/glawnyaya/informatiya/30122022-obrashhenie-mitropolita-mar-ka-v-svyazi-s-napadeniyami-na-ukrainskuyu-pravoslavnuyu-cerkov.html>

186 Nikolskaya P. and others, Pro-Putin operatives in Germany work to turn Berlin against Ukraine. Reuters, 03.01.2023. <https://www.reuters.com/investigates/special-report/ukraine-crisis-germany-influencers>

day was an anticipated move by the Russian state propaganda machinery. The German-language edition was launched in 2014¹⁸⁷. However, it only aired for German viewers from December 2021 to February 2022. Despite **RT Deutsch / RT.de** and its counterpart, the **Sputnik radio network**, being completely denied access to primary social media platforms in the European Union, the Russian government-funded edition continues to release propaganda material in German on international domains such as <https://de.rt.com/>, <https://rtde.live/>, <https://rtde.me/> and others. Researchers from Correctiv claim¹⁸⁸ that there are “dozens” of “mirrors” which effectively allow RT.DE to bypass EU and Bundesnetzagentur (Federal Network Agency) sanctions, targeting the German-speaking audience specifically.

The channel remains a primary source for opinion columns (“Point of View”)¹⁸⁹ with pro-Russian, anti-Ukrainian, and anti-Western narratives by both staff writers and external contributors, such as former Austrian Chancellor **Karin Kneissl**¹⁹⁰ (now residing in Russia¹⁹¹), propa-

ganda director **Uli Gellermann**¹⁹², and legal advisor to the Die Linke party **Alexej Danckwardt (Anton Gentzen)**¹⁹³ etc.

For a long time, the RT.de Telegram channel played a leading role in disseminating disinformation and conspiracy theories across other pro-Russian oriented Telegram channels within the German-speaking community. According to another study by CeMAS¹⁹⁴, **RT DE was by far the most-shared media source during the first week of the war** across relevant channels and groups on Telegram. Conspiracy theorists extensively disseminate unfiltered Kremlin propaganda, becoming a crucial source of Russian disinformation within their circle.

The propaganda news also continues unabated, albeit irregularly, on the website <https://snanews.de/>, owned by the **SNA agency**, an abbreviation for **Sputnik News Agency**. Quotations from Putin, Foreign Minister Lavrov, and other Russia-loyal spokespersons are standard fare for this website. Data from Similarweb suggests that while SNA’s metrics are modest – less

than 150,000 visits in August 2023 – the German RT service is more popular, garnering 4.8 million visits. SNA also expands beyond its traditional audience, creating propaganda channels on platforms like TikTok¹⁹⁵.

Based in Berlin, the video-on-demand agency **Ruptly TV** continues to operate for commercial purposes (it was once a public video distributor). Redfish.Media, part of the Ruptly holding and positioning itself against the Western capitalist system, closed at the end of 2022, allegedly due to pressures from this capitalist system¹⁹⁶.

However, less influential niche publications continue to operate. For instance, the government-funded **Russia Beyond Germany** (a German-language cultural and historical bulletin promoting nostalgia for Soviet times and the grandeur of tsarist Russia) and the private project RUSSLAND.RU (a news agency and platform for subjective opinions).

An interesting propaganda component is the economic publica-

187 RT (Fernsehsender) [RT (television channel)]. Wikipedia. [https://de.wikipedia.org/wiki/RT_\(Fernsehsender\)#RT_Deutsch](https://de.wikipedia.org/wiki/RT_(Fernsehsender)#RT_Deutsch)

188 Timmermann S. “With a few simple steps”: How RT DE circumvents the EU sanctions. Correctiv, 17.11.2022. <https://correctiv.org/en/fact-checking-en/2022/11/17/with-a-few-simple-steps-how-rt-de-circumvents-the-eu-sanctions/>

189 RT DE. <https://rtde.me/meinung/>

190 Exklusiv-Interview mit Kneissl: “Westen führt sich in Afrika kindisch auf”. RT DE, 29.07.2023. <https://de.rt.com/kurzclips/video/176486-exklusiv-interview-mit-kneissl-westen/>

191 Экс-глава МИД Австрии рассказала, что получает в России зарплату в рублях. РБК [The former head of the Austrian Foreign Ministry said that she receives a salary in Russia in rubles. RBC], 17.08.2022. <https://www.rbc.ru/rbcfreenews/64dda9259a794758c1d71d02>

192 Gellermann U. Focus-Magazin auf Nazi-Kurs: Rüstung, Rüstung über alles, aber schnell! [Focus magazine on Nazi course: armament, armor above all else, but quickly!]. RT DE, 01.09.2023. <https://de.rt.com/meinung/179482-focus-magazin-auf-nazi-kurs/>

193 Gentzen A. “Haltet den Dieb”: Immer mehr Anzeichen für baldige Kiewer Provokation im AKW Saporoschje [“Stop the thief”: More and more signs of imminent Kiev provocation at the Zaporozhye nuclear power plant]. RT DE, 01.07.2023. <https://de.rt.com/meinung/174119-haltet-dieb-immer-mehr-anzeichen/>

194 Rathje J. and others. CeMAS Study: Conspiracy ideological positioning on the Ukraine war and the role of RT DE on Telegram. CeMAS, April 2022. https://cemas.io/en/publications/conspiracy-ideological-positioning-on-the-ukraine-war-and-the-role-of-rt-de-on-telegram/2022-04-01_ResearchPaperRussianDisinformation.pdf

195 Fuhrmann L. „Deutsche“ Inhalte produziert von russischen Staatsmedien [“German” content produced by Russian state media]. Deutschlandfunk, 13.07.2023. <https://www.deutschlandfunk.de/russische-propaganda-auf-tiktok-100.html>

196 THE EU’S MEDIA CRACKDOWN: WHY REDFISH IS FORCED TO CLOSE. Redfish Media, 22.02.2023. <https://redfish.media/blog/the-eus-media-crackdown-why-redfish-is-forced-to-close/>

tion **World Economy**¹⁹⁷ by Russian political scientist **Alexander Sosnovsky**.

Despite being based in Germany and positioning itself as a serious scientific project, its author list¹⁹⁸ and themes reveal a solely pro-Russian propagandist inclination. Sosnovsky frequently attends Russian propaganda talk shows¹⁹⁹. Notable contributors and members of the journal's scientific board include Polish politician Mateusz Piskorski²⁰⁰, accused of spying for Russia, pro-Russian Hungarian government advisor László Kemény²⁰¹, and regular Russian propaganda media military commentator Rudolf Gulyaev²⁰², etc..

There are also media outlets founded by former RT.de employees who lost their jobs but remained ideologically loyal to their previous employer. According to CeMAS research²⁰³, examples include the

YouTube channel "InfraRot Medien - Sicht ins Dunkel" (InfraRed Media - Light in the Dark) directed by Ivan Rodionov, who worked at RT DE from 2014 until October 2021. Another instance is the blog "**Anti-Spiegel**"²⁰⁴, run by St. Petersburg-based Thomas Röper, which disseminates Russian propaganda narratives and falsehoods concerning the Russian war of aggression.

Röper also frequently appears on the propagandist YouTube-channel "**Голос Германии**" (**Voice of Germany**)²⁰⁵ run by Berlin-based blogger **Sergey Filbert**²⁰⁶. Filbert also manages the Telegram channels "Voice of Germany" and "Druzhba FM", endorsing and justifying Russian aggression in Ukraine and promoting the Russian worldview while supporting far-right and far-left movements in Germany.

Another representative of the Russian propaganda targeting the German-speaking audience is reporter

Alina Lipp²⁰⁷, who regularly visits the occupied territories in Eastern Ukraine and generally lives in Russia. Before the full-scale invasion, Alina was active on her YouTube channel "Glücklich auf der Krim" (Happy in Crimea) and is a member of the "Friends of Crimea Club". Her "testimonies" about Russia's "special military operation" and the "realities" of life in Germany²⁰⁸ are actively used²⁰⁹ by Russian propaganda channels. In January 2023, she released a 16-minute documentary "Donbas 2022"²¹⁰, based on materials filmed in Donetsk, Mariupol, and other occupied cities. Lipp portrays the Russian-Ukrainian war as Ukraine's "attack on Donbas" in 2014, justifying Russian intervention as a necessity to "protect the population from Nazis". German investigators have recorded²¹¹ Lipp's attempts to circumvent financial sanctions to finance her activities through donations from Russia supporters worldwide.

197 World Economy. <https://www.world-economy.eu/>

198 Namhafte Experten, Politiker und Autoren. World Economy. <https://www.world-economy.eu/world-economy/wer-sind-wir/>

199 Политолог и журналист из Германии Александр Сосновский выступит в Севастополе. Объектив [Political scientist and journalist from Germany Alexander Sosnovsky will speak in Sevastopol. Obiektiv], 09.08.2018. <https://obyektiv.press/node/99855>

200 Mateusz Piskorski. Wikipedia. https://pl.wikipedia.org/wiki/Mateusz_Piskorski

201 LÁSZLÓ KEMÉNY. Politically biased elections observers. European platform for democratic elections. <https://www.fakeobservers.org/biased-observation-database/details/laszlo-kemeny.html>

202 Западные эксперты не увидели приготовлений России к войне с Украиной [Western experts did not see Russia's preparations for war with Ukraine]. МК, 24.11.2021. <https://www.mk.ru/politics/2021/11/24/zapadnye-eksperty-ne-uvideli-prigotovleniy-rossii-k-voynе-s-ukrainoy.html>

203 Lamberty P., Frühwirth L. Pro-Russian Disinformation and Propaganda in Germany: Russia's full-scale Invasion of Ukraine. CeMAS, February, 2023. https://cemas.io/en/publications/pro-russian-disinformation-and-propaganda-in-germany/2023-02-24_ProRussianDisinformationAndPropagandaInGermanyRussiasFullScaleInvasionInUkraine.pdf

204 ANTI-SPIEGEL. <https://www.anti-spiegel.ru/>

205 YouTube channel Голос Германии [Voice of Germany]. <https://www.youtube.com/@Sergeyf617>

206 Фильберт, Сергей Викторович [Filbert, Sergey Viktorovich]. Ruscist. https://ruscist.com/wiki/%D0%A4%D0%B8%D0%BB%D1%8C%D0%B1%D0%B5%D1%80%D1%82_%D0%A1%D0%B5%D1%80%D0%B3%D0%B5%D0%B9_%D0%92%D0%B8%D0%BA%D1%82%D0%BE%D1%80%D0%BE%D0%B2%D0%B8%D1%87

207 Moody O. German social media influencer parrots pro-Russian propaganda. The Times, 10.01.2023. <https://www.thetimes.co.uk/article/german-social-media-influencer-parrots-pro-russian-propaganda-m39xxhfl>

208 Wienand L. Russe in Euskirchen zu Tode geprügelt? Polizei warnt vor "Fake-Video" [Russian beaten to death in Euskirchen? Police warn of "fake video"]. T-Online, 21.03.2022. https://www.t-online.de/nachrichten/ausland/id_91868854/fake-video-polizei-dementiert-mord-an-einem-russen-in-euskirchen.html

209 "ШТРАФЫ ЗА ПОДДЕРЖКУ РОССИИ": ЧЕСТНЫЙ РАССКАЗ НЕМКИ АЛИНЫ ЛИПП О ПРЕСЛЕДОВАНИЯХ В ГЕРМАНИИ [«FINES FOR SUPPORTING RUSSIA»: AN HONEST STORY OF GERMAN ALINA LIPP ABOUT PERSECUTION IN GERMANY]. Tsargrad, 01.04.2023. https://tsargrad.tv/articles/shtrafy-za-podderzhku-rossii-chestnyj-rasskaz-nemki-aliny-lipp-o-presledovaniyah-v-germanii_753133

210 Donbass 2022 von Alina Lipp (Video). Neues aus Russland. 11.01.2023. <https://neuesausrussland.com/donbass-2022-von-alina-lipp-video/>

211 Reveland C., Siggekow P. Wie finanzieren sich Putin-Propagandisten? [How do Putin propagandists finance themselves?]. Tagesschau, 02.02.2023. <https://www.tagesschau.de/faktenfinder/russland-propaganda-finanzierung-101.html>

Wilhelm Domke-Schulz, a journalist and director who has produced several documentaries defending the Russian government and military (“Remember Odessa” and “Living and Dying in Donbass”) and also worked with **Thomas Röper** (on the film “Living and Dying in Donbass”)²¹², is engaged in similar propaganda activities. He also appeared in the propaganda initiative “NATO – Investigative Committee” project by Sergey Filbert, as well as in the email “dumps” of the “Concord” company of Yevgeny Prigozhin, the former leader of the private military company “Wagner Group”, as one of the beneficiaries of Prigozhin’s information campaigns in Germany.

Pro-Russian media in Germany

At the same time, within Germany, many media outlets with either an ideological (ultra-left or ultra-right) bias or a conspiracy-focused direction (positioning themselves as “alternative to the mainstream”) side with Russia in their narratives and its aggressive activities in Ukraine.

Among them, for instance, is the Apolut media founded by **Ken Jebesen (aka Kayvan Soufi-Siavash)**, where authors (often the aforementioned Thomas Röper) are very sceptical about Ukraine’s chances of victory in the war with Russia, label Ukraine as a “Nazi state”, accuse it of persecuting religious communities, and shift the blame for the aggression onto the West²¹³. Apart from articles, the Apolut media group also produces videos and podcasts. Jebesen was previously known as the founder of KenFM radio and an activist who participated in anti-vaccination events. He now frequently comments on various issues for propaganda media, including the state news agency from Belarus²¹⁴.

Another influential player in the “alternative” media world is the **Compact magazine**²¹⁵, a monthly political journal led by **Jürgen Elsässer**. Since 2015, Compact has positioned itself as a mouthpiece for the right-populist “Alternative for Germany” (AfD) party and the anti-Islam Pegida movement. Its publications regularly feature conspiracy theories, historical revisionist, and anti-Semitic themes.

However, in 2022, this did not prevent the magazine from featuring on its cover a photo of the left party Die Linke’s leader, Sahra Wagenknecht, with the caption “The Best Chancellor”²¹⁶. Regarding Russia, the magazine praises the “new era of politics” initiated by Vladimir Putin²¹⁷, fuels tensions between Poland and Ukraine, and disseminates conspiracy theories about a possible division of Ukraine between Russia and NATO²¹⁸. Jürgen Elsässer is not only an active participant in pro-Russian rallies²¹⁹ but also comments on European events and the Russo-Ukrainian war for marginal Russian propaganda media²²⁰. His articles are also used for propaganda purposes²²¹.

Compact is also considered a key platform for the **Querdenken (‘Lateral thinkers’) movement** – conspiracy theory enthusiasts, who are often a significant electoral group among AfD voters. During the COVID-19 pandemic, this movement spread health disinformation. But with the increasing tension between Russia and Ukraine, especially after the onset of full-scale invasion, they actively broadcast

212 Wilhelm Domke-Schulz. Psiram. https://www.psiram.com/de/index.php/Wilhelm_Domke-Schulz

213 Ukraine. Apolut. <https://apolut.net/?s=ukraine>

214 Немецкий журналист после посещения Хатыни: в Беларуси честно берегут историческую память [A German journalist after visiting Khatyn: historical memory is honestly preserved in Belarus]. Belta.by, 28.03.2023. <https://www.belta.by/society/view/nemetskij-zhurnal-ist-posle-posesheniya-hatyni-v-belarusi-chestno-beregut-istoricheskuyu-pamjat-557866-2023/>

215 Compact (Magazin). Wikipedia. [https://de.wikipedia.org/wiki/Compact_\(Magazin\)](https://de.wikipedia.org/wiki/Compact_(Magazin))

216 Forster J. Sahra Wagenknecht: Neuer Star der Rechten? Dubioses Blatt wirbt für sie: „Die beste Kanzlerin“ [Sahra Wagenknecht: New star of the right? Dubious paper advertises her: “The best chancellor”]. Der Westen, 21.11.2022. <https://www.derwesten.de/politik/sahra-wagenknecht-linkspartei-id300130122.html>

217 Die Putin-Doktrin [The Putin Doctrine]. Compact Magazin, 19.09.2023. <https://www.compact-online.de/die-putin-doktrin/>

218 Jetzt diskutiert die NATO die Ukraine-Teilung [Now NATO is discussing the partition of Ukraine]. Compact Magazin, 17.08.2023. <https://www.compact-online.de/jetzt-diskutiert-die-nato-die-ukraine-teilung/>

219 Belton C. and others, Kremlin tries to build antiwar coalition in Germany, documents show. The Washington Post, 21.04.2023. <https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/2023/04/21/germany-russia-interference-afd-wagenknecht/>

220 Госканал в Чечне использовал выступление оправдавшего убийства мусульман для пропаганды войны [The state channel in Chechnya used the speech of someone who justified the killing of Muslims to promote war]. Kavkaz.Realii, 05.02.2023. <https://www.kavkazr.com/a/goskanal-v-chechne-ispoljzoval-vystuplenie-opravdavshogo-ubiystva-musuljman-dlya-propagandy-voyny/32256370.html>

221 Германский Compact: НАТО готовится развязать Третью мировую войну [German Compact: NATO is preparing to start World War III]. EADaily, 26.04.2022. <https://eadaily.com/ru/news/2022/04/26/germanskiy-compact-nato-gotovitsya-razvazat-tretyu-mirovuyu-voynu>

Russian propaganda narratives²²². These include stories that the war is orchestrated by the US, that the imperialist West is oppressing anti-colonial Russia, and that mysterious bio-labs are widespread in Ukraine.

Also worth mentioning is the **Manova News website**, previously known as **Rubikon**²²³. Here, in unison with Russian propaganda, they talk about the “cruel Azov fighters” who shoot peaceful citizens of Donbas²²⁴, the “chosenness” and “high spirituality” of the Russian people²²⁵, and the need to switch to peace talks with the aggressor²²⁶ (presumably on its terms) as soon as possible.

Anti-European, anti-Western, and pro-Russian messages are also disseminated by outlets such as **Nachdenkseiten** (this conspiracy-alternative blog is associated with former SPD politician **Albrecht**

Müller)²²⁷, the leftist Marxist newspaper **Junge Welt**²²⁸, anti-capitalist **Overton Magazin**²²⁹, ultra-right journal **Zuerst**²³⁰, and **Report24**²³¹, which is close to the right-wing opposition party AfD. Similar narratives are published by smaller outlets like the niche conservative tabloid **Weltexpress**, which directly replicates Russian narratives about “Ukrofascism”²³² and the significant role of Russian peacekeepers in the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict²³³, or the publication **Unzensuriert.de** (a subsidiary of the eponymous Austrian edition, close to the far-right FPÖ party)²³⁴.

Furthermore, in the German-speaking information space working with Russian narratives, there are portals like **Unser Mitteleuropa**²³⁵ (an Austrian multilingual publication with an opaque founder “European Institute of Political Studies and Media Networks” from Hong Kong, believed to be close to FPÖ

and AfD, domain registered in Russia²³⁶), Austrian media holding **AUF1** (distributors of conspiracy theories and Russian propaganda)²³⁷, and the anonymous Swiss portal of “alternative news” **Uncut News**²³⁸, etc.

In addition to “traditional” media still popular among German viewers and readers, Telegram channels, the “new media” on a platform believed to cooperate with Russian special services²³⁹, are gaining momentum. Apart from the official channels of traditional publishers and broadcasters, like RT.de or AUF1, Telegram also features blogs of individual personalities or anonymous discussion platforms.

Researchers from CeMAS note²⁴⁰ that the majority of significant “conspiracy” Telegram channels for German-speaking audiences in one way or another supported Russia and its “special military operation”

222 Gensing P. Putins treue Garde [Putin's loyal guard]. Jüdische Allgemeine, 07.04.2022. <https://www.juedische-allgemeine.de/politik/putins-treue-garde/>

223 Rubikon (Website). Wikipedia. [https://de.wikipedia.org/wiki/Rubikon_\(Website\)](https://de.wikipedia.org/wiki/Rubikon_(Website))

224 Drescher A. Gesichter des Krieges [Faces of war]. Manova News, 21.09.2023. <https://www.manova.news/artikel/gesichter-des-krieges>

225 Rottenfuß R. Der Himmel auf Erden [Heaven on earth]. Manova News, 15.09.2023. <https://www.manova.news/artikel/der-himmel-auf-erden>

226 Frei H. Eine Chance für den Frieden [A chance for peace]. Manova News, 05.09.2023. <https://www.manova.news/artikel/eine-chance-fur-den-frieden>

227 NachDenkSeiten. Wikipedia. <https://de.wikipedia.org/wiki/NachDenkSeiten>

228 Junge Welt. Wikipedia. https://de.wikipedia.org/wiki/Junge_Welt

229 Overton. <https://overton-magazin.de/>

230 Speit A. Aus dem Sumpf [From the swamp]. TAZ.de, 20.12.2009. <https://taz.de/Rechtes-Monatsmagazin-Zuerst/!5150618/>

231 Redaktion. Report24. <https://report24.news/redaktion/>

232 Puma P. Shit happens: Frühlingsoffensive der Ukro-Faschisten noch vor dem Herbst vorbei [Shit happens: the Ukro-fascists' spring offensive will be over before autumn]. Weltexpress, 17.09.2023. <https://weltexpress.info/fruehlingsoffensive-der-ukro-faschisten-noch-vor-dem-herbst-vorbei/>

233 Marder M. Krieg im Kaukasus – Russische Schutztruppen evakuieren Tausende aus Bergkarabach [War in the Caucasus – Russian security forces evacuate thousands from Nagorno-Karabakh]. Weltexpress, 20.09.2023. <https://weltexpress.info/krieg-im-kaukasus-russische-schutztruppen-evakuieren-tausende-aus-bergkarabach/>

234 Unzensuriert.at. Wikipedia. <https://de.wikipedia.org/wiki/Unzensuriert.at>

235 Unser Mitteleuropa. Psiram. https://www.psiram.com/de/index.php/Unser_Mitteleuropa

236 unser-mittleuropa.com. Whois. <https://www.whois.com/whois/unser-mittleuropa.com>

237 Broadcasting conspiracy theories: the alt-right media channel AUF1.TV. Get The Trolls Out, 18.10.2022. <https://getthetrollsout.org/articles/broadcasting-conspiracy-theories-the-alt-right-media-channel-auf1tv>

238 Uncut-News. Psiram. <https://www.psiram.com/de/index.php/Uncut-News>

239 Loucaides D. The Kremlin Has Entered the Chat. The Wired, 02.02.2023. <https://www.wired.com/story/the-kremlin-has-entered-the-chat/>

240 Rathje J. and others, CeMAS study: Conspiracy ideological positioning on the Ukraine war and the role of RT DE on Telegram. CeMAS, April 2022. https://cemas.io/en/publications/conspiracy-ideological-positioning-on-the-ukraine-war-and-the-role-of-rt-de-on-telegram/2022-04-01_ResearchPaperRussianDisinformation.pdf

in Ukraine in February 2022. These include channels of prominent German-speaking conspiracy theorists like **Eva Herman**, **Bodo Schiffmann** (Alles Ausser Mainstream, lit. “Everything But Mainstream”), and **Reiner Fuellmich**. The channels of the Saxon fringe political party Freie Sachsen (“Free Saxons”) and the “alternative” media outlets of AUF1, Freie Medien (“Free Media”), and Ken Jebsen – Aufklärung und Information (“Ken Jebsen – Clarification and Information”) sided with Putin, researchers say. The most active links to RT.DE news were distributed by various anonymous groups like QANONYMOUS KANAL DEUTSCHLAND, 17News17, Folge dem Plan, KOPP Report, etc. The main themes they raise are traditional for Russian disinformation²⁴¹: slanders against Ukrainian refugees, calls for “reconciliation” with Russia, blaming the war on Western countries, and undermining solidarity in support of Ukraine among allies.

It’s worth noting that in the info-pool, there are dozens of groups supporting Russia and Vladimir Putin’s actions. For example, Reuters researchers cite²⁴² the Telegram channel Putin Fanclub, run by a man named Wjatscheslaw Seewald living in Bavaria, a proponent of “Aryan theories” and the far-right Alternative für Deutschland par-

ty. In 2017, he posted a selfie with Bjoern Hoecke, an AfD politician and co-leader of The Wing, a far-right faction within the party that has since been disbanded. A German court ruled in March that The Wing’s aims were at odds with the country’s constitution. The group’s goals included protecting the ethnic integrity of the German people and keeping out “foreigners.” In a post on his Telegram three days after Russia invaded Ukraine, Seewald wrote: “The Reichstag needs to be taken again” in a reference to the German parliament building.

Several other anonymous Telegram channels spread specific narratives not only about the war but also about Ukrainian refugees, often using the fake identity of real mainstream German media. Researchers from the Institute for Strategic Dialogue cite²⁴³ **Deutsche Wahrheit channel** as an example, which is likely related to a major pro-Kremlin operation impersonating legitimate media and spreading disinformation across various platforms, mostly focusing on the refugee topic. The channel systematically spread disinformation against Ukrainian refugees and portrayed them as a threat to public health, security, or German families, falsely accusing them of committing crimes, of antisemitism, and Nazism. A proportion of

posts were specifically directed against women and teenagers from Ukraine. This activity could amount to incitement of hatred, and in some cases, sedition, the researchers note.

German media regularly report²⁴⁴ on the arrests of administrators of similar channels disseminating Russian propaganda.

Pro-Russian political experts and commentators

One of the most renowned pro-Russian political and economic experts and commentators for the German-speaking audience is **Aleksander Rahr**. A German management consultant and Eastern Europe historian²⁴⁵, he is also a lobbyist for the Russian gas company “Gazprom” and Vladimir Putin’s Russian government. Over the last 10-15 years, he has actively commented on Russian-German relations for both Russian and German media, not necessarily from a solely propagandist cohort; he participates in bi-lateral forums, joins working groups, and so forth. However, both his earlier and recent statements related to Russia’s invasion of Ukraine and Putin’s policies indicate that this analyst has always been and remains pro-Russian²⁴⁶. For instance, he

241 Lamberty P., Frühwirth L. Pro-Russian Disinformation and Propaganda in Germany: Russia’s full-scale Invasion of Ukraine. CeMAS, February, 2023. https://cemas.io/en/publications/pro-russian-disinformation-and-propaganda-in-germany/2023-02-24_ProRussianDisinformationAnd-PropagandaInGermanyRussiasFullScaleInvasionInUkraine.pdf

242 Nikolskaya P. and others, Pro-Putin operatives in Germany work to turn Berlin against Ukraine. Reuters, 03.01.2023. <https://www.reuters.com/investigates/special-report/ukraine-crisis-germany-influencers>

243 Deutsche Wahrheit: a pro-Kremlin effort to spread disinformation about Ukrainian refugees. Institute For Strategic Dialogue, 01.12.2022. https://www.isdglobal.org/digital_dispatches/deutsche-wahrheit-a-pro-kremlin-effort-to-spread-disinformation-about-ukrainian-refugees/

244 Stickings T. Telegram user arrested over pro-Russian propaganda in Germany. The National News, 05.08.2022. <https://www.thenationalnews.com/world/europe/2022/08/05/telegram-user-arrested-over-pro-russian-propaganda-in-germany/>

245 Alexander Rahr. Wikipedia. https://de.wikipedia.org/wiki/Alexander_Rahr

246 Malachowski M. “Eine Atommacht ist praktisch von außen unbesiegbar”. Telepolis, 27.02.2023. <https://www.telepolis.de/features/Eine-Atom-macht-ist-praktisch-von-aussen-unbesiegbar-7529061.html>

disseminates Russian propaganda narratives about Ukraine's lack of sovereignty (with Russia and the West being the opposing forces), the inevitability of Putin in Russia and his victory in the war, and the restoration of normal economic relations between Russia and the West following Ukraine's defeat.

However, not only direct lobbyists for Russia express pro-Russian or anti-Ukrainian views, but also representatives of intellectual circles in the German-speaking world, who are referred to as objective information sources. The publication Tagesschau cites²⁴⁷ the example of three pseudo-experts on Ukraine, who deliberately and consistently spread Russian narratives and disinformation under the guise of a balanced view on the situation concerning the relationship between the two sides.

The Swiss, **Daniele Ganser**, tours Germany and Austria giving lectures on Eastern Europe with pro-Russian and anti-American narratives. In his view, the US is responsible for the Russian war because the US government, under then-President Barack Obama, supposedly provoked a coup against the former President of Ukraine, Viktor Yanukovich, during the Euromaidan in 2014. Furthermore, he questioned the war crimes in Bucha in front of

his followers and described them as probable "disinformation."

Political scientist **Ulrike Guérot** previously headed the professorial chair of European politics at the University of Bonn, but she was dismissed at the beginning of 2023 due to accusations of plagiarism. She frequently appears on talk shows as an expert on Russia and Ukraine, even though she hasn't published scholarly works on the topic. She also views the US as primarily responsible for the war. In her opinion, the primary strategic goal of US foreign policy is to alienate Russia and the European Union from each other, using Ukraine as the tool.

The annexation of Crimea by Russia as a "self-defense in the face of time" is also the view of another public expert – former ARD correspondent in Russia, **Gabriele Krone-Schmalz**. She released a book titled "Understanding Russia," published a few months after the annexation of Crimea and the start of the war in Eastern Ukraine, where she also sought justifications for the actions of the Russian dictator Putin. In her speeches following the onset of a full-scale invasion into Ukraine, she criticizes sanctions against Russia as ineffective and calls for postponing the resolution of territorial issues for later²⁴⁸.

Russia-Friendly organizations

German-Russian business and political relations have traditionally been maintained through semi-formal "clubs" and discussion platforms, involving not only representatives from business or cultural sectors but also high-ranking officials from both nations. This refers to the **German-Russian Forum**²⁴⁹ and **the Petersburg Dialogue**²⁵⁰, founded in 2001 with the "blessing" of Chancellor Gerhard Schröder and President Vladimir Putin²⁵¹. While Germany approached these organisations with restraint and a professional focus²⁵², Russia sought to utilise these platforms to extend its influence. For example, on the Russian side, the co-chair of the political group for the Petersburg Dialogue was one of Russia's leading propagandists, **Vyacheslav Nikonov**²⁵³, chairman of the State Duma committee on education and science. The committee included key Russian TV propagandist, head of RT Margarita Simonyan, the head of Rosstrudnichestvo, directors of Rosatom, Sberbank, and of course, Gazprom. Following the onset of Russia's full-scale invasion into Ukraine, these organisations gradually reduced their activities, mainly at the initiative of the German side.

247 Reveland C., Siggelkow P. Viel Aufmerksamkeit für fragwürdige Experten [Lots of attention for questionable experts]. Tagesschau, 24.03.2023. <https://www.tagesschau.de/faktenfinder/ganser-guerot-krone-schmalz-101.html>

248 Käfer M. Mit eigenem Blick auf den Ukrainekrieg [With our own view of the war in Ukraine]. Stuttgarter Zeitung, 01.05.2023 <https://www.stuttgarter-zeitung.de/inhalt.gabriele-krone-schmalz-in-kernen-mit-eigenem-blick-auf-den-ukrainekrieg.d133242d-5195-45fb-bfc7-68720fa3f0ed.html>

249 Deutsch-Russische Forum E.V. <https://www.deutsch-russisches-forum.de/>

250 Petersburg Dialogue. <https://petersburger-dialog.de/>

251 [Petersburg Dialogue. German committee] <https://petersburger-dialog.ru/home/koordinatsionnyj-komitet/germanskij-komitet.html>

252 Петербургский диалог [Petersburg Dialogue]. Wikipedia. https://ru.wikipedia.org/wiki/%D0%9F%D0%B5%D1%82%D0%B5%D1%80%D0%B1%D1%83%D1%80%D0%B3%D1%81%D0%BA%D0%B8%D0%B9_%D0%B4%D0%B8%D0%B0%D0%BB%D0%BE%D0%B3

253 [Petersburg Dialogue. Russian committee] <https://petersburger-dialog.ru/home/koordinatsionnyj-komitet/rossijskij-komitet.html>

However, new associations emerge within Germany itself, aiming to advance Russian interests in the country, notably propagandist claims about the “oppression” of Russian-speaking citizens in Europe. An example is **Vadar (Vereinigung zur Abwehr der Diskriminierung und der Ausgrenzung Russlanddeutscher sowie russischsprachiger Mitbürger in Deutschland or Association for the Prevention of Discrimination and Isolation of Russian Germans and Russian-speaking Citizens in Germany)**. It’s led by former Bundestag member from AfD **Ulrich Oehme** and current deputy from the same party, **Eugen Schmidt**, a regular guest on Russian propagandist programmes²⁵⁴. Other politicians, such as Bundestag members **Karsten Hilse**, **Gunnar Lindemann**, and **Harald Weyel**²⁵⁵, also participate. The latter, for example, is known for demanding investigations into “religious persecutions” in Ukraine²⁵⁶. The association’s goal, as stated on its website, is to provide legal assistance to Russian Germans and Russian-speaking citizens who have suffered dis-

crimination or alienation due to the Ukrainian-Russian conflict²⁵⁷. Vadar’s statements and actions are regularly weaponised by Russian media and propagandist human rights structures to reinforce the Russian propaganda narrative of Russian citizens being oppressed in Europe.

A peculiar “parade” of Russia-friendly and Russian narratives in Germany can be seen in the numerous letters and appeals signed by figures from various organisations, academic and cultural communities, illustrating the level of support and narratives successfully propagated by Russian propaganda amongst German citizens. An example is a letter initiated by activist and **EMMA magazine editor, renowned writer and feminist movement figure Alice Schwarzer**, addressed to German Chancellor Olaf Scholz, urging peace and effectively opposing arms supplies to Ukraine²⁵⁸. Initially, about 30 intellectuals and artists signed the letter, with dozens more joining later. Some of them are active members of often left-radical

and pacifist movements, participating in either overtly pro-Russian or “anti-war” actions. A notable action was organised²⁵⁹ by Schwarzer (known for her pro-Russian and anti-Ukrainian statements) alongside controversial politician Sahra Wagenknecht from Die Linke. The latter is a favourite of Russian propagandist media for her statements about the need to halt arms shipments to Ukraine and her views on the proxy war between the West and Russia on its territory²⁶⁰.

According to an investigation released in April 2023 by The Washington Post, at least one person close to Wagenknecht and several AfD members were in contact with Russian officials when plans to cultivate antiwar sentiment in Europe and dampen support for Ukraine were being formulated²⁶¹ (see the section on politicians).

Several organisations in Germany present themselves as humanitarian, but in reality, they are part of the cooperation and legitimisation mechanism of terrorists in occupied Donbas and Russia’s annexation

254 AfD-Politiker treten erneut in russischer Talkshow auf [AfD politicians appear again on Russian talk show]. Der Spiegel, 08.02.2023. <https://www.spiegel.de/politik/deutschland/eugen-schmidt-und-olga-petersen-afd-politiker-treten-erneut-in-russischer-talkshow-auf-a-ac26e39dfee9-44ef-ab01-37226d015fa4>

255 VADAR потребовал от международных организаций признать существующую в ФРГ дискриминацию русских [VADAR demanded that international organizations recognize the discrimination against Russians existing in Germany]. Pravfond.ru, 31.01.2023. <https://pravfond.ru/press-tsentr/stati/vadar-potreboval-ot-mezhdunarodnykh-organizatsiy-priznat-sushchestvuyushchuyu-v-frg-diskriminatsiyu/>

256 Михеева Э. Немецкий депутат потребовал от ПАСЕ расследовать гонения Киева на УПЦ [Mikheeva E. A German deputy demanded that PACE investigate Kyiv’s persecution of the UOC]. 5 Kanal, 28.04.2023. <https://www.5-tv.ru/news/429540/nemeckij-deputat-potreboval-ot-pase-rassledovat-gonenia-kieva-naupc/>

257 About. Vadar. <http://vadar-ev.de/about/>

258 DER OFFENE BRIEF AN KANZLER SCHOLZ [THE OPEN LETTER TO CHANCELLOR SCHOLZ]. EMMA, 29.04.2022. <https://www.emma.de/artikel/offener-brief-bundestkanzler-scholz-339463>

259 Thousands in Berlin attend ‘naive’ Ukraine peace rally. DW, 25.02.2023. <https://www.dw.com/en/thousands-in-berlin-attend-naive-ukraine-peace-rally/a-64818249>

260 Naumann F. Putins Staatsmedien heben Wagenknecht in die Schlagzeilen - aus „verbotenem“ Facebook [Putin’s state media puts Wagenknecht in the headlines - from “banned” Facebook]. FR.de, 11.08.2023. <https://www.fr.de/politik/wagenknecht-russland-ukraine-krieg-kreml-putin-staatsmedien-facebook-tass-92454344.html>

261 Belton C. and others, Kremlin tries to build antiwar coalition in Germany, documents show. The Washington Post, 21.04.2023. <https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/2023/04/21/germany-russia-interference-afd-wagenknecht/>

of Crimea. An example is **Zukunft Donbass (Future of Donbas)**, which provides humanitarian assistance to the occupied territories of Donetsk and Luhansk regions²⁶². From a Ukrainian legal perspective, such visits are violations, as they evidently occur in agreement with local terrorist “administrations” and Russian state agencies.

However, the “humanitarian” nature of such missions shouldn’t be deceiving. Zukunft Donbass, like many other “humanitarian” organisations “helping the oppressed Donbas”, appears in media as participants in supply chains for overtly fascist groups with political ambitions and even the Russian military. Russian publication *The Insider* describes the entire chain²⁶³, using the organisation **Friedensbrücke-Kriegsopferhilfe e. V. (Peace Bridge - War Victims Aid)** as an example, which under the guise of humanitarian shipments, supplies the Russian army with goods for warfare, including BMP machine oil, drones, drone jammers, thermal imagers, etc. Zukunft Donbass provides the separatists with radios, Friedenshilfe Großostheim e.V. carries out projects with various organisations of war veterans, the “Combat Brotherhood”, the ruling party “United Russia”, the charity foundation of the accused in the downing of MH17 in 2014, Igor Strelkov, and the union of RF MIA employees.

Another organisation focused on aiding Donbas is **German-Russian Souls**, led by Jan Riedel. It’s important to note his interest in motorcycles. This is his shared enthusiasm with the Russian group “Night Wolves” – bikers ideologically close to Putin, who in previous years frequently conducted “patriotic motorcycle runs” across Europe with Russian flags. A Russian biker club, the Night Wolves, is under U.S. sanctions for helping Russian forces seize Ukraine’s Crimea in 2014 and recruiting separatist fighters in Donbas. Riedel’s organisation participates in pro-Russia events in Germany, sometimes alongside Russian diplomats, laying wreaths on the graves of Red Army soldiers killed in World War Two. He also partners with an organisation called **“Patriots of Novorossiia”**, the name that Russian propaganda gave to southern occupied regions of Ukraine²⁶⁴.

Case Study. How Russia bribed German elites: Gazprom & its friends

For many years, Russia has sought to make Europe, primarily Germany, economically and especially energetically dependent. This dependency would later enable Russia to pull political strings and establish influence networks, crafting a kind of European Union bastion against the United States. Perhaps the most notorious instrument to create such dependency has been natural gas supplies and

the lobbying for various Gazprom projects, as well as reliance on Russian oil. For these purposes, Russia employed a multitude of approaches ranging from the direct bribery of politicians at local, national, and European levels to long-term strategies involving cultural, academic, and educational exchanges, fostering “bridges of friendship” between German and Russian regions and involving high-level officials from both sides.

German investigative journal, *Correctiv*, released several significant investigations about these influences, notably after Russia’s full-scale invasion of Ukraine. Here we’ll touch upon two of them: Gazprom’s lobbying in Germany and the youth festivals and cultural exchanges orchestrated by Russia to instil a sense of importance regarding Russo-German friendship in the minds of future German politicians and businesspeople.

The first story²⁶⁵ delves into the intricate web of political connections and economic interests tying leading German parties to major Russian state corporations. It explores how the German state became reliant on Russian energy supplies. It wasn’t just Gerhard Schröder, the former Social Democrat chancellor who became Russia’s most prominent lobbyist in Germany after leaving office in 2005. The research also highlighted the involvement of members from both the

262 Aktuelle Ereignisse. AK Zukunft Donbass E.V. <https://www.zukunftdonbass.org/aktuelle-ereignisse/>

263 Цой И. Получи, фашист, гумпомощь. Как немецкие «благотворители» через неонацистов снабжают российскую армию [Tsoi I. Get humanitarian aid, fascist. How German “charities” supply the Russian army through neo-Nazis]. *The Insider*, 31.03.2023. <https://theins.ru/politika/260064>

264 Nikolskaya P. and others, Pro-Putin operatives in Germany work to turn Berlin against Ukraine. *Reuters*, 03.01.2023. <https://www.reuters.com/investigates/special-report/ukraine-crisis-germany-influencers>

265 The Gazprom Lobby. How Russia enlisted German politicians, business leaders and lawyers to ensure German dependence on Russian gas. *Correctiv*, 07.10.2022. <https://correctiv.org/en/latest-stories/2022/10/07/gazprom-lobby-germany/?lang=en>

centre-left Social Democrats (SPD) and the conservative CDU/CSU bloc, which formed Germany's coalition government until 2021. Various key regional clusters of Russian-oriented lobbying were identified, including areas in **Mecklenburg-Western Pomerania (MV), Saxony, Brandenburg, and North Rhine Westphalia**. Russia orchestrated not just economic, but also cultural forums, music festivals, discussion platforms, "Russian Days", and even sponsored football clubs. A significant aspect of this lobbying centred around entities like the 'Deutsch-Russische Rohstoff-Forum' (DR-RF or German-Russian Raw Materials Forum) and conferences such as the Deutsch-Russische Rohstoff-Konferenz (DR-RK or German-Russian Raw Materials Conference). A primary nexus in this influence web was VNG (Verbundnetz Gas) – Gazprom's partner in Germany.

The second story²⁶⁶ sheds light on German-Russian youth exchange events, such as the **"German-Russian Young Leaders"** conferences, sponsored by leading Russian and German businesses. These lavish gatherings united over 200 promising young individuals from German and Russian companies, from heirs of prominent German business dynasties to up-and-coming staff from corporations like Gazprom. These conferences provided a luxury backdrop for networking among current and prospective employees. Even amid the "Crimea crisis", the momentum of these conferences remained unbroken. Organised by the German association "Deutsch-

land-Russland – die Neue Generation" (Germany-Russia – the New Generation), these gatherings quickly became an epicentre for influential energy company representatives, elite circles surrounding former chancellor Schröder, and entities with direct ties to the Kremlin. Payments for these elaborate events were footed by brands such as Porsche, VNG, Siemens, Gazprom, E.ON, McKinsey, and Metro.

These "Young Leaders" would form tight-knit connections, often finding one another on digital alumni platforms later in their careers, particularly within gas-related industries. Moreover, ties were established with entities like the German-Russian Forum and NGOs affiliated with Vladimir Yakunin, the former head of Russian Railways, who was pivotal in the conservative cultural propagation of Russian influences in Europe.

Country summary

Germany is a pivotal focal point for Russian propaganda and political influence. Despite a significant shift in its approach towards Russia and a reduced level of loyalty to Moscow following the full-scale invasion of Ukraine, memories of previously amicable relations remain potent.

As of the end of 2023, echoing the narratives of Russian propaganda and showing loyalty towards its military actions seems to be the realm of extremely radical political and public forces. These forces are most likely directly funded or ideologically connected to the Kremlin. Any

admiration for Putin from pro-establishment politicians could potentially spell the end of their political careers. However, one must not be misled by the apparent "marginality" of these opposing forces. Collectively, parties like AfD and Die Linke secure around 30% of voter support, as per polls. Despite the formal distancing of their leadership from outright support of the Russo-Ukrainian war, elements of the Russian narratives remain active. These narratives call for "peace in Ukraine" at the expense of the interests of Ukrainians; condemn Germany's intentions to provide more arms and financial support to Kyiv; accuse the US of profiteering from the conflict; and talk about the "oppression" of Russian-speaking refugees in Germany, potentially viewing the diaspora as an additional electorate.

A distinctive feature of Germany is the alignment of cultural and academic intelligentsia, communities of political philosophers and educators, often linked to left-wing organisations, with "peace initiatives".

Disinformation campaigns orchestrated by Russia in Germany – like creating fake websites of popular publications and disseminating propaganda videos on social media suggesting that helping Ukraine deprives German citizens of warmth and food – highlight the Kremlin's unwavering interest in this information market. Actively organised "peace marches" and pro-Russian rallies, likely funded or at least inspired by Moscow, indicate a readiness to invest considerable resourc-

²⁶⁶ Vodka, Scholz and Gazprom. This is how young lobbyists celebrated good business with Russia – and fueled gas dependency. Correctiv, 19.04.2023. <https://correctiv.org/en/latest-stories/2023/04/19/vodka-scholz-and-gazprom/>

es into this market and maintain a vast network of “sleeping agents” in constant mobilisation. Media reports about the arrest of organisers of subversive groups, administrators of propaganda channels, and exposed attempts at overthrowing the government suggest that the

German government is on top of the situation, keeping tabs on most provocateurs and overt Russian sympathisers.

However, since propaganda can often masquerade under the guise of freedom of speech, the right to

peaceful assembly, and defending diverse political views, one can expect further abuses and an intensified search by Russia for loopholes in the system, designed to protect against disinformation and counter its harmful informational influences on German society.



6. Russian influence in Italy

Country context

Italy and Russia have maintained strong ties dating back to the era of the Soviet Union. Russian influence on Italian society is frequently attributed to the robust presence of the Italian Communist party (PCI) from 1945 to 1991, which was the largest in the so-called Western world and relied heavily on Soviet support until the early 1980s²⁶⁷. This holds true for numerous organizations that were previously associated with PCI., particularly in media, trade unions and academia. However, in more recent times, there has been a notable increase in the extent of Russian influence within the Italian economy and society. Specifically, two distinct yet interlocking factors contribute to the growing presence of Russian actors within Italian society.

First and most importantly, a substantial number of influential Italian political figures began forging closer ties with the Kremlin, especially following the consolidation of Vladimir

Putin's authority during his initial presidential term. At the forefront of this political shift stands the late Italian prime minister Silvio Berlusconi (1936 – 2023). His three non-consecutive mandates witnessed a deepening relationship with Russia, creating a substantial bridge between Italy and Russia, fostering economic partnerships, political and military cooperation²⁶⁸. Berlusconi's influence extended beyond mere government cooperation, as his media holdings, including Mediaset, played a role in shaping public perceptions of Russia in Italy.

Furthermore, his personal rapport with Putin contributed to the strengthening of bilateral ties. This alignment began to take a formal outline on May 28, 2002, at the Italian Air Force base in Pratica di Mare, near Rome, during the annual NATO summit that was attended by Vladimir Putin himself for the very first time. Notably, various agreements were signed between Russia and NATO countries during this summit.

Subsequently, both Berlusconi's political party and the broader Italian center-right political faction have consistently asserted their unique and enduring connection with Russia and Vladimir Putin and a so-called "Spirit of Pratica di Mare"²⁶⁹.

It is important to remark that this "spirit" has dramatically shaped Italian foreign policy. For instance, during the worsening of relations between the West and Moscow between 2007 and 2008 following the war of aggression in Georgia, Italy consistently sought to maintain an open dialogue and positive relations with Moscow, both at the national and European level.²⁷⁰ Also, Italian government along with Germany and France, was critical of both the Bush administration's plan to deploy a missile defence system in Eastern Europe and the desire to support the entry of Georgia and Ukraine into NATO through the Membership Action Plan, as stated in the 2008 Bucharest NATO declaration²⁷¹.

267 Drake, R. (2004) The Soviet Dimension of Italian Communism [Review of Oro da Mosca: I Finanziamenti Sovietici al PCI dalla Rivoluzione d'Ottobre al Crollo dell'URSS; L'Oro di Mosca: La Verità sui Finanziamenti Sovietici al PCI Raccontata dal Diretto Protagonista. 2nd ed., by V. Riva & G. Cervetti]. *Journal of Cold War Studies*, 6(3), 115–119. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/26925390>

268 Phil Edwards (2005) The Berlusconi Anomaly: Populism and Patrimony in Italy's Long Transition, *South European Society and Politics*, 10:2, 225–243, DOI: 10.1080/13608740500134945

269 La Guerra fredda finì davvero a Pratica di Mare, come dice Berlusconi? (2018, June 11). *Il Post*. <https://www.ilpost.it/2018/04/20/pratica-di-mare-berlusconi/>

270 Soluzione della crisi Russia - Georgia: successo della mediazione italiana (2010, July 30). *ForzaItalia.it*. <http://governoberlusconi.forzaitalia.it/dettaglio/471/soluzione-della-crisi-russia-georgia-successo-della-mediazione-italiana>

271 Italian Interests and NATO: From Missions to Trenches? (2014). *Istituto Affari Italiani*. <https://www.iai.it/sites/default/files/iai1412e.pdf>

Furthermore, over recent years, a significant number of key political figures, including League leader Matteo Salvini²⁷², former Prime Minister Giuseppe Conte of the Five Star Movement²⁷³, and the current Prime Minister Giorgia Meloni²⁷⁴, have repeatedly expressed admiration for Putin's Russia and its political system on multiple times. In other words, Italian foreign policy has consistently leaned towards forging unique connections with Moscow, particularly with Vladimir Putin, and this inclination is a shared trait across the entire political spectrum and various political leaderships.

In addition to its political influence, Russia has also exerted a significant impact on Italy's economy through the increasingly robust relations that Rome and Moscow have cultivated, especially since the early 2000s. It is important to remark that the economic synergies between Italy and Russia thrive on the complementarity of their national economies. Italy excels in the manufacturing sector, while Russia is a major hydrocarbon exporter. Hence, the business ties between the two countries have expanded from automotive and energy to machinery,

textiles, furniture, and pharmaceuticals. For instance, it was reported that over 400 Italian businesses operate in Russia, along with eight major banks and financial institutions²⁷⁵. Yet, it is crucial to note that Russia ranks only as the 14th destination for Italian export, comprising merely 1.5 percent of the total turnover for Italian exporting businesses. While some sectors, such as clothing, furniture, appliances, and machinery, may experience relatively higher export shares to Russia (particularly before the Russian invasion of Ukraine), their dependence on Russia was and remain quite limited outside the energy sector.²⁷⁶

Until 2022, Russia held the position of Italy's primary energy partner. Moscow was as Italy's major partner in the field of natural gas, while also occupying the fourth position in terms of oil supply. These combined contributions amounted to a substantial share, typically oscillating at approximately 40% of Italy's total energy imports.²⁷⁷ Moreover, Italian energy companies, including ENI (Italian largest energy company that is partially controlled by the State) had extensive investments and partnerships in Russia's

energy sector as they participated in joint ventures for oil and gas exploration and production projects, mostly in partnership with Rosneft and Gazprom.²⁷⁸

Another key area of economic cooperation between Russia and Italy revolves around the agrifood sector, which has historically maintained limited but strong connections with

Italian politics and frequently featured in bilateral agreements between the two nations.²⁷⁹ The export of Italian agricultural products to Russia continues to hold considerable significance for high-quality products²⁸⁰, with various agrifood associations expressing concerns²⁸¹ and complains about the sanctions imposed following the full-scale invasion of Ukraine, primarily by international organizations like the European Union²⁸². Moreover, as of today, we still do not know how many Italian companies still operate in Russia and how many left the country²⁸³.

The present status of Italian-Russian relations is indeed quite unique. Although the Italian government has

272 See what your friend Putin has done": Salvini mocked in Poland. (2022, March 9). Euronews. <https://www.euronews.com/2022/03/09/see-what-your-friend-putin-has-done-salvini-mocked-in-poland>

273 Conte invita Putin in Italia: "Manca da troppo tempo". (2018, October 24). Agenzia ANSA. https://www.ansa.it/sito/notizie/mondo/2018/10/24/-conte-in-russia-la-nostra-economia-e-solida-governo-fara-la-sua-parte_f723d979-20ea-4d2a-aa9f-1865642e71f3.html

274 Roberts, H., Lemire, J., & Stokols, E. (2023, July 27). [Putin can't count on his friends in Italy anymore.] POLITICO. <https://www.politico.eu/article/vladimir-putin-giorgia-meloni-relationship-russia-italy-not-friends/>

275 Italy and Russia, the link is increasingly close. (2019, March 11) Reset DOC. <https://www.resetdoc.org/story/italy-russia-link-increasingly-close/>

276 Putin: Italia grande partner. Ma Russia vale solo l'1,5% dell'export. (2023, October 3). Skynews <https://tg24.sky.it/economia/2022/01/27/russia-italia-commercio>

277 De Maio Nicolò Sartori, G. (2018, November 14). Le relazioni tra Italia e Russia. IAI Istituto Affari Internazionali. <https://www.iai.it/it/pubblicazioni/le-relazioni-tra-italia-e-russia>

278 Our work in Russia (2023, September 16) <https://www.eni.com/en-IT/eni-worldwide/eurasia/russia.html>

279 De Maio Nicolò Sartori, G. (2018, November 14). Le relazioni tra Italia e Russia. IAI Istituto Affari Internazionali. <https://www.iai.it/it/pubblicazioni/le-relazioni-tra-italia-e-russia>

280 Italian Wine Export to Russia in 2022. Odessa Journal <https://odessa-journal.com/public/italian-wine-exports-to-russia-in-2022-set-a-record>

281 Liberato, G. (2022, October 12). La Russia dice "no" all'agroalimentare europeo per tutto il 2023: stop all'export di prodotti Made in Italy - Liguria Coldiretti. Liguria Coldiretti. <https://liguria.coldiretti.it/news/la-russia-dice-no-allagroalimentare-europeo-per-tutto-il-2023-stop-all-export-di-prodotti-made-in-italy/>

282 Vinai, F. (2022, October 13). Guerra: embargo russo fino al 2023 pesa sull'export agroalimentare cuneese - Coldiretti. Coldiretti. <https://cuneo.coldiretti.it/news/guerra-embargo-russo-fino-al-2023-pesa-sullexport-agroalimentare-cuneese/>

283 More than 550 global companies are still doing business in Russia. Many are European. (2023, January 20). Euronews. <https://www.euronews.com/my-europe/2023/01/20/more-than-550-global-companies-are-still-doing-business-in-russia-many-are-european>

consistently endorsed sanctions and actively backed Ukraine, particularly in the provision of military assistance and aid, one can claim that the enduring historical connections with Russia continue to exert a significant influence within the country. This peculiar situation can be attributed to at least three distinct yet interconnected factors, all of which directly influence Russia's capacity to wield influence within the country.

First, Italy continues to maintain robust political and cultural connections with Russia. These ties encompass not only the longstanding relationships that date back to the time of the USSR, such as those within academia and trade unions, but also more recent political affiliations based on the so-called "Pratica di Mare Spirit". Notably, current political figures like Matteo Salvini

and Giuseppe Conte, who frequently advocate pro-Russian stances and positions, continue to lead their respective parties, namely Lega and the 5 Star Movement.

Second, in the field of the economy, narratives concerning the impact of sanctions on Italy's economic well-being are still very much present within the country's political discourse. This underscores the enduring relevance of Russia in Italian economic affairs, particularly for the influential Agrifood SMEs as well as in the energy sector. As a result, Italy offers a unique environment where Russian disinformation and pro-Kremlin messages on the invasion of Ukraine can continue to spread and shape Italian public opinion across various spheres, including media, academia, and the politics.

Last but certainly not least, Italians have grown accustomed to the presence of public figures advocating pro-Russian positions in economy, politics, and media²⁸⁴. Given the previously described context, it is unsurprising to find public voices that amplify Russian position or assert the existence of a unique cultural/economic link between Rome and Moscow. In other words, since Russia is often portrayed as a strong ally of Italy, there are numerous influential Italians asserting the existence of a special relationship between the two nations. Therefore, it has become quite challenging for Italians to discern Russian propaganda as such. This may well be the most significant vulnerability that Italy faces concerning Russian propaganda and disinformation activities.

The sample of selected pro-Russian actors in Italy

Table 3. Pro-Russian influencers in Italy*

Politicians	17	Being openly active in promoting Russian interests in Italian politics
Media and cultural organisations	8	Cultural & Media influence in the public discourse
Journalists	10	Journalists that have promoted pro-russia and/or Russian disinformation in the media landscape
Pro-Russian Political Organisations	4	Pro-Russian political organisations
Total	39	

* We have included a minimal amount of entities, who were publicly active after February, 2022, so there might be even more, but this table provides a general overview of the structure. If there was a double categorised entity (e.g., army and think tank) we have collocated them only into one category.

²⁸⁴ Italy and Russia, the link is increasingly close. (2019, March 11) Reset DOC. <https://www.resetdoc.org/story/italy-russia-link-increasingly-close/>

Principal pro-Russian actors in Italy

Among Italian politicians who adopt pro-Russian narratives, there are representatives from various political factions, spanning both the right and left sides of the political spectrum.

Prominent figures within the major national political parties who often align themselves with the Kremlin include **Matteo Salvini** (Lega, Far Right-Wing) and many members of his party League (Lega). Matteo Salvini has historically advocated for lifting sanctions and creating stronger relations with Russia, more specifically, Vladimir Putin.

Other members of his party that have often expressed pro-Russian positions include **Mario Borghezio** (former MEP), **Stefania Pucciarelli**, (former undersecretary of Défense)²⁸⁵, **Lorenzo Fontana** (current speaker of the Chamber of Deputies).²⁸⁶ Moreover, there are several local politicians that have created a positive environment at the local level to spread Russian disinformation and propaganda. For instance, in 2016, **Stefano Valdegamberi**, a regional council member representing the Veneto Region, made a proposal to recognize Crimea as part of Russia. This resolution was approved by the regional council and, as a consequence, several official

meetings between representatives of Veneto Region took place in the occupied Crimea.²⁸⁷

Another pro-Russian local politician is **Gianluca Savoini** who worked in some key communicational offices of the party both at the local and national level. Savoini gained international notoriety for his alleged involvement in fostering close ties between Lega and Russia. Savoini's role came under scrutiny after press reported allegations that he was involved in negotiations to secure Russian funding for the Lega Nord during the European parliamentary elections in 2019. The controversy revolved around a secretly recorded conversation in which Savoini was purportedly discussing a scheme to receive funding from Russia (see case study below).²⁸⁸

On the other side of political spectrum (populistic left), the 5 Star Movement has been a major political party in which Pro-Russian positions have been raised and spread. Most notably, **Giuseppe Conte**, the former Prime Minister of Italy, former Prime Minister of Italy, has been recognized for his advocacy of strengthening relations with Russia as well as promoting some Russian narratives. He has emphasized the importance of maintaining dialogue and cooperation with Russia on various issues, including defence, economic part-

nerships, and conflict resolutions. His distinctively Euro-sceptical and pro-Russia stance on foreign policy has stood out as a prominent feature of his two terms as prime minister.

Additional pro-Russian members within the Five Star Movement include individuals such as:

Alessandro Di Battista, a former Member of Parliament and one of the movement's leading figures. Di Battista has voiced reservations about Western sanctions imposed on Russia and has urged a more diplomatic approach in managing relations with the country. Furthermore, he has been a prominent advocate for recognizing Crimea as a part of Russia, making him one of the most visible public figures that expressed such opinion on this matter.

Beppe Grillo, the co-founder of the Five Star Movement, has also been spreading Russian disinformation, for instance by claiming that Euro-Maidan was controlled by secret forces linked to the West and Crimea is a legitimate part of Russia.²⁸⁹ Other members of the Five Star Movement that had similar positions include

Vito Petrocelli, former senator and leader of the party group in the senate, who has been known for his pro-Russian and anti-western stance²⁹⁰.

285 Gli "storici" rapporti tra Putin e i politici italiani. (2022, February 24). Corriere della Sera. https://www.corriere.it/politica/22_febbraio_24/filo-putiniani-d-italia-salvini-prodi-passando-conte-berlusconi-1aff1366-94d5-11ec-8815-5a4a3253d55e.shtml?refresh_ce

286 Italian parliament elects pro-Putin Eurosceptic as Speaker (2022, October). Financial Times. <https://www.ft.com/content/93fdb66-a437-43dc-9164-356d3b641258>

287 Russia, Eurosceptic Parties, and Italian Elections (2018). German Marshall Fund. <https://www.gmfus.org/news/russia-eurosceptic-parties-and-italian-elections>

288 Italy's far-right leader calls allegations of Russian influence a 'James Bond' fantasy (2019, July 24). Washington Post. https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/europe/italys-far-right-leader-calls-allegations-of-russian-influence-a-james-bond-fantasy/2019/07/24/9c0dff2-ac93-11e9-9411-a608f9d0c2d3_story.html

289 Tre mesi di silenzi e pacifismi, ma Beppe Grillo parlava di "Crimea russa" e "forze occulte in Ucraina" (di P. Salvatori). (2022 May 14) (https://www.huffingtonpost.it/politica/2022/05/14/news/grillo_ucraina_russia-9390261/)

290 Gli "storici" rapporti tra Putin e i politici italiani. (2022, February 24). Corriere della Sera. https://www.corriere.it/politica/22_febbraio_24/

Manlio Di Stefano, former under-secretary of State for Foreign Affairs and International Cooperation, who has advocated for improved relations with Russia, and called Ukraine “US puppet state”²⁹¹.

As mentioned in the first section, the late **Silvio Berlusconi** and his party Forza Italia (Centre Right) has always been a close ally of Vladimir Putin. The former Italian Prime Minister has historically maintained close ties with Russian leadership, visited occupied Crimea and promoted Russian narratives through his media.²⁹² Another key personality in Forza Italia that can be considered Pro-Russia is the late **Franco Frattini**, former Italian Minister of Foreign Affairs and European Commissioner, Frattini has often promoted pro-Kremlin opinions on various topics, including Ukraine.²⁹³

Fratelli d'Italia, also known as Brothers of Italy, is a political party with a historical track record of advocating pro-Kremlin narratives at both local and national levels. Although there have been some recent shifts towards a more pro-Atlantic stance within the party, it is worth noting that numerous members of the party have had expressed pro-Russian and Pro-Kremlin disinformation

viewpoints, especially at the local level.

Giorgia Meloni: the leader of the right-wing Brothers of Italy party, has expressed pro-Russian sentiments, emphasizing the importance of friendly relations between the two countries. Additionally, she publicly endorsed Russia's Sputnik vaccines and asserted that the EU held biases in its approach to their approval.²⁹⁴ Nevertheless, since she became Prime minister, her position on Ukraine and Russia has notably changed²⁹⁵.

Maurizio Marrone: currently serving as an councilor in the Piedmont Region. In 2016, he established a so-called representation center of the Donetsk People's Republic in Italy. In addition, he holds responsibility for International Cooperation and has actively advocated for a variety of initiatives aligned with pro-Kremlin positions.²⁹⁶

Irina Osipova: daughter of a senior Rossotrudnichestvo official based in Italy, she is known for her sovereigntist and anti-EU opinion as well as her close connections with Italian mercenaries in Donbass fighting with Russians. In 2016, she ran as a candidate for Fratelli d'Italia, for which she

was an active member and organised various events. Moreover, she has been repeatedly captured in various pictures together with individuals associated with neo-Nazi groups in Donbas²⁹⁷.

Case Study: From Russia with Love

Background

One of the clearest examples of Russian efforts to influence Italy is the well-known case “From Russia with Love.” During the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic in March 2020, Italy found itself at the forefront of a devastating health crisis.

The country, unprepared for the rapid spread of the COVID-19 virus, faced a multitude of challenges that exacerbated the impact of the pandemic. Several significant factors contributed to Italy's struggle, shaping the severity of the outbreak and the country's subsequent response. Italy, as one of the first countries significantly affected by the virus in Europe, encountered a swift and overwhelming influx of cases. This, combined with Italy's high proportion of elderly citizens—having the largest population of individuals over 65 in Europe—led to a higher death toll and

filo-putiniani-d-italia-salvini-prodi-passando-conte-berlusconi-1aff1366-94d5-11ec-8815-5a4a3253d55e.shtml?refresh_ce

291 Manlio di Putin, la conversione del grillino Di Stefano (2022, February 24) <https://www.ilfoglio.it/politica/2022/02/24/news/manlio-di-putin-la-conversione-del-grillino-di-stefano-3720770/>

292 La Guerra fredda finì davvero a Pratica di Mare, come dice Berlusconi? (2018, June 11). Il Post. <https://www.ilpost.it/2018/04/20/pratica-di-mare-berlusconi/>

293 Gli “storici” rapporti tra Putin e i politici italiani. (2022, February 24). Corriere della Sera. https://www.corriere.it/politica/22_febbraio_24/filo-putiniani-d-italia-salvini-prodi-passando-conte-berlusconi-1aff1366-94d5-11ec-8815-5a4a3253d55e.shtml?refresh_ce

294 Roberts, H., Lemire, J., & Stokols, E. (2023, July 27). Putin can't count on his friends in Italy anymore. POLITICO. <https://www.politico.eu/article/vladimir-putin-giorgia-meloni-relationship-russia-italy-not-friends/>

295 Canepa, di C., Ruffino, di L., Negri, di M., & Marasti, di M. (n.d.). Quattro Temi (Più Uno) su cui meloni ha cambiato idea. Pagella Politica. <https://pagellapolitica.it/articoli/meloni-russia-euro-unioni-civili>

296 Ucraina, bufera sull'assessore Marrone. Il Pd: “Legatissimo ai filorussi del Donbass, ecco le prove.” (2022, March 14). La Repubblica. https://torino.repubblica.it/cronaca/2022/03/14/news/pd_marrone_donbass-341379935/

297 Irina Osipova, una putiniana al Senato. (2023, September 8). La Stampa. https://www.lastampa.it/esteri/2023/09/09/news/irina_osipova_una_putiniana_al_senato-13037559/

an increased demand for intensive care services. Additionally, pivotal events such as Milan Fashion Week, Champions League soccer matches, and the 2020 Final Eight basketball games, which attracted international visitors, likely contributed to the rapid spread of the virus within the country²⁹⁸.

In response to the crisis, Italy imposed a nationwide lockdown (the first in Europe of this kind), closing down shops, schools, restaurants, and public spaces, with exceptions for essential services such as grocery stores and pharmacies. This drastic measure aimed to contain the spread of the virus but significantly impacted the economy and disrupted daily life for Italians across the country. Yet, as the crisis continued to escalate, Italy faced a shortage of resources, including hospital capacity and medical equipment. The situation became increasingly dire, particularly in regions hit hardest by the outbreak.

The Russian aid to Italy in the context of Covid

Given this context, Russia has capitalized on this new opportunity to advance its geopolitical goals and positioned itself as a benefactor, by extending COVID-19 support to Italy as a Good Samaritan. This assistance, under the banner of the “From Russia With Love” mission, initially appeared as a humanitarian effort to aid Italy during its time of need. Large military planes landed

at Italy’s Pratica di Mare airbase, and according to the Russian Defense Ministry, the planes brought equipment necessary for diagnostics and disinfection.

However, suspicions arose regarding the true intentions behind Russia’s aid delivery. For instance, Italian media reported that the Russian supplies were not suitable for local requirements and apparently lacked ventilators and other vital breathing assistance apparatus. In addition to medical equipment, Russia dispatched military medical brigades and personnel. In total, eight medical brigades and another 100 personnel, including biological and chemical protection troops, were sent. The Russian mission was led by General Sergey Kikot, who claimed that that his personnel had been granted unrestricted movement across the entirety of Italy’s national territory due to a purported “high-level political agreement.” Nevertheless, this unrestricted movement right was never confirmed²⁹⁹.

First, the manner in which the aid was delivered raised questions and fuelled speculation about potential ulterior motives. Russia’s government and its delegation to NATO have published multiple videos of trucks en route to Bergamo, the epicenter of Italy’s coronavirus crisis, on their Twitter accounts. Meanwhile, Russian state media showed Italy’s foreign minister personally welcoming the first Russian plane. Labeled “From Russia with Love,” planes and

trucks bore giant stickers showing heart-shaped Russian and Italian flags next to one another, which showcase a strong communication campaign behind it³⁰⁰.

Second, the aid, which lacked the essential medical equipment needed, was seen as a strategic move by Russia to showcase solidarity while highlighting the alleged insufficiencies of support from the European Union. There were suggestions that Russia’s aid was delivered in a way that emphasized its assistance, potentially aiming to influence local media and public perception. Analyses of the aid delivery painted a picture of a larger geopolitical and diplomatic strategy by Russia, suggesting it was a move to challenge the EU’s response to the crisis and weaken its position within Italy and the broader European context. Media coverage and propaganda efforts projected Russia as a supportive ally, juxtaposed against the perceived indifference of the EU, serving to potentially undermine the EU’s credibility and influence in the region.

Last but not least, the former Italian Prime Minister **Giuseppe Conte** faced pressure by the COPASIR (a parliamentary committee for the security of Italy) in relation to his decision to allow the Russian mission. Some NATO and Italian military officials expressed worry over the presence of Russian military personnel, fearing Russia might have been exploiting the crisis to weaken Europe through propaganda tactics and

298 Italian former PM faces renewed questions over Covid aid from Russia. Guardian News and Media. (2022, March 23). The Guardian. <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2022/mar/23/italian-former-pm-conte-faces-renewed-questions-over-covid-aid-from-russia>

299 Luxmoore, M. (2020, April 1). Coronavirus aid coming “from Russia with Love” -- or an agenda? RadioFreeEurope/RadioLiberty. <https://www.rferl.org/a/coronavirus-aid-coming-from-russia-with-love-or-agenda-/30523737.html>

300 Ibid.

espionage instruments. It is worth to mention that Giuseppe Conte has also been recognised as a pro-Russian political figure in Italy³⁰¹.

Organised political influence

The Russian disinformation impact on Italy's political landscape operates across three distinct yet interconnected narratives. Firstly, Italy's national sovereignty is somewhat restricted due to Italy's membership in NATO, the EU, and the Western Bloc as a whole. Consequently, both its domestic and foreign policies are significantly influenced by American and other Western actors. Secondly, Russia and Italy share profound cultural, economic and political ties, incentivizing Italy to maintain a robust relationship with Moscow to advance its national interests. Hence, those who do not want have such relationships are essentially jeopardising Italian political interest. Thirdly, as Russia perceives itself as a victim of Western expansion, particularly through NATO's enlargement and the enduring effects of the post-Cold War era, Italy should act in order to reduce this perception. Indeed, as Russia does not hold a hostile stance toward Italy, it makes beneficial for Italy to avert perceived provocations, such as further NATO expansions.

These three narratives collectively contribute to the intricate dynamics of Russian influence in Italy's politi-

cal landscape and facilitate the creation of organised political groups that amplify Russian narratives. For instance, in 2014, Paolo Grimaldi, a member of the Lega party, created an informal political group in the Italian Parliament called "Friends of Putin" and invited all members of the parliament to join the group³⁰². These and other actions brought some far-right politicians closer to the ideas promoted by the Kremlin and facilitated the creation of groups that spread pro-kremlin narratives.

For instance, a large number of members of the right and far-right parties in Italy organise and regularly attend biased-electoral observation missions in Russia and occupied territories of Ukraine³⁰³. Identifying all the individuals involved in these practices in Italy remains quite complex due to the large number of people who, over the years, have taken part in such missions. Yet, it is crucial to emphasize that these practices are frequently utilized as a hybrid threat to legitimize authoritarianism and undermine democratic processes and spread narratives that are beneficial for Russia and its foreign policy, particularly within the Italian public opinion. Hence, this is a clear example of organised political influence that aims at spreading disinformation and promoting detrimental messages for democratic institutions.

Disinformation has also been promoted through blog and social

media network. Around early 2016, there was a noticeable increase in messages that supported Russia and criticized the West within the 5 Star Movement. These messages, which included various conspiracy theories, spread through a network of websites and social media accounts associated with the 5 Star Movement and its members. These sources often shared content from media influenced by the Kremlin. For example, Sputnik Italia became a popular source for **Tze Tze** and **Beppe Grillo's** blog, two of the main websites supporting the Movement³⁰⁴.

Case Study: Interconnected Web of M5S-Affiliated Sites and Allegations of Misinformation

Background

For many years, populism was associated with conspiracy theories and disinformation in Italy. The Five Star Movement (M5S) in Italy, founded by Gianroberto Casaleggio and Beppe Grillo, The movement is known for its direct democracy approach and innovative use of technology to gain political support. Central to this network is Casaleggio Associati, a tech firm established by Casaleggio, which, following his passing, is currently overseen by his son Davide. This company used to govern and operate various platforms, including TzeTze, La Cosa, and La

301 Redazione@eunews.it, di, Luca@fabiana_luca, di F., & Bonini@emanuelebonini, di E. (2019, May 15). Studio parlamento UE: "lega e movimento 5 Stelle Fabbriche di Disinformazione." Eunews. <https://www.eunews.it/2019/05/15/studio-parlamento-ue-lega-movimento-5-stelle-fabbriche-disinformazione/>

302 Carnieletto, M. (2018, October 2). In parlamento Nasce l'intergruppo degli Amici di Vladimir Putin. *ilGiornale.it*. <https://www.ilgiornale.it/news/parlamento-nasce-lintergruppo-degli-amici-vladimir-putin-1073100.html>

303 Shekhovtsov, A. (2021) Bogus International Monitors for the Bogus Russian Parliamentary Elections. *www.fakeobservers.org*. <https://www.fakeobservers.org/politically-biased-election-observers.html>

304 Redazione Eunews.it (2019, May 15). Studio parlamento UE: "lega e movimento 5 Stelle Fabbriche di Disinformazione." Eunews. <https://www.eunews.it/2019/05/15/studio-parlamento-ue-lega-movimento-5-stelle-fabbriche-disinformazione/>

Fucina, alongside influencing M5S's fundraising. These platforms were known to spread disinformation and conspiracy theories.

Structure and Allegations

Casaleggio Associati is at the core of this web, controlling M5S-related sites and data flow. The complexity of the structure is notable, with shared IP addresses, Google Analytics, and AdSense IDs among these platforms, drawing comparisons to networks involved in disseminating fake news. The sites associated with M5S maintain purported independence while actively sharing content from sources like Sputnik, a Kremlin-backed platform known for propagating Russian propaganda.

In particular, allegations indicate that these sites, including Beppe Grillo's blog, maintained purported independence while actively sharing content from sources like Sputnik, a Kremlin-backed platform known for propagating Russian propaganda. For instance, in 2015 Beppe Grillo published on his blog an article in which he uses all the key words of Russian propaganda³⁰⁵ and disinformation. Moreover, he frequently promoted so-called political missions of the 5 Star movement in Russia co-hosted by United Russia³⁰⁶.

Additionally, within the group of par-

ties and political associations connected to the Lega, several organizations appeared to support Russian interests. These groups, starting at a local level, became more important internationally. For example, the creation of Lombardia-Russia (started by Savoini mentioned earlier), Veneto-Russia, and Liguria-Russia associations brought influential local figures who pushed for local decisions recognizing Crimea as part of Russia and organized official visits to areas of Ukraine held by Russian forces.

Case Study: Gianluca Savoini and Metropol Scandal

In the summer of 2019, the Italian media L'Espresso together with BuzzFeed launched investigations probing the links between the League and various of its members and Russian authorities. These inquiries unveiled meetings involving Gianluca Savoini, one of the co-founders of Lombardia Russia and a key ally of the party leader Matteo Salvini, and a small group of Italian and Russian individuals at Moscow's Metropol hotel³⁰⁷. Among them were figures associated with the sanctioned oligarch Konstantin Malofeev and the FSB³⁰⁸. Additionally, other attendees at the meeting were tied to anti-European ideologies in Russia³⁰⁹.

According to the media investigation, they were working on a deal to sell 3 million tons of diesel between Russia's Rosneft and Italy's ENI, the largest Italian energy company which is still partially state-controlled. The deal, valued at \$1.5 billion, aimed to provide approximately 60 million euros in funding for the League's 2019 European election campaigns and supposedly to promote certain Russian narratives post-election. However, for various reasons, this arrangement didn't come to fruition, and the party did not receive any funds. Yet Malofeev, who was part of the deal, acknowledged its existence.

It is essential to note that Italian law strictly prohibits political parties from seeking funds from foreign sources, including merely engaging in negotiations for financial support. However, engaging in deals involving individuals under EU sanctions (such as Malofeev) may result in severe penalties for those involved in such transactions.

Despite these investigations, Savoini retained his position in the Lombardy regional Council's Communications Committee (Corecom) as well as his membership in the party. Although a legal inquiry was initiated in 2019, it concluded in April 2023 without any criminal sentence. Savoini was investigated for interna-

305 Beppegrillo.it. (2018, February 28). Una delegazione Di Pace m5s in Russia e crimea. Il Blog di Beppe Grillo. <https://beppegrillo.it/una-delegazione-di-pace-m5s-in-russia-e-crimea/>

306 Biondo, N. (2019). Non solo Savoini Quattro domande ai Cinque Stelle sui loro rapporti con la Russia di Putin. <https://www.linkiesta.it/2019/10/russiagate-salvini-savoini-cinque-stelle/>

307 Biondo, N. (2019). Non solo Savoini Quattro domande ai Cinque Stelle sui loro rapporti con la Russia di Putin. <https://www.linkiesta.it/2019/10/russiagate-salvini-savoini-cinque-stelle/>

308 Rainews, Esclusiva/ Metropol, l'oligarca Russo: "Savoini Mi ha confermato che si è parlato di eni e petrolio." Rai. <https://www.rai.it/programmi/report/news/2019/10/Esclusiva-Metropol-loligarca-russo-Savoini-mi-ha-confermato-che-si-e-parlato-di-Eni-e-petrolio-9944dc4e-9d60-44a4-a006-cbdd3c6a40cc.html>

309 Redazione, D'Amato, A., Ruggiero, G., & Gennaro, A. (n.d.). Scandalo Fondi russa - lega. Open. <https://www.open.online/temi/scandalo-fondi-russia-lega/>

tional corruption but was ultimately cleared by the Milan court³¹⁰.

This incident highlighted potential concerns about political funding and Kremlin-led connections in Italy³¹¹. Although no funds were received, the mere attempt to arrange such deals raised legal and ethical questions and shows Italy's vulnerability vis-à-vis Russian influence. On April 5, 2022, Savoini was effectively removed from the vice presidency of the Corecom following a motion put forward after the Russian large-scale invasion of Ukraine in February 2022. The motion was later voted on by the regional council, including some members of the right-wing parties³¹².

Journalism and Media

The influence of Russian propagandists and experts in Italian news programs and media, particularly on sensitive topics like migration, Ukraine, and Euroatlantic integration, has been a subject of concern for many years. The use of media personalities to shape narratives and promote favourable Russian images in Italy is a strategy that has been observed across various media outlets, including Italian state TV Rai.

The Italian Parliamentary Committee for the security of the Republic (Copasir) reported on Russia's efforts during the Covid-19 pandemic

to project the image that Russia was more effective in handling the virus compared to Western democracies. This was achieved by the consistent involvement of media personalities who have a significant role in influencing media discourse, thus aiding in the promotion of positive Russian narratives through Italian media channels. Indeed, a large number of media personalities are known in Italy to have strong and acritical Russian views.

The list provided below comprises a significant number of individuals who, occupying diverse roles with varying degrees of visibility, have disseminated pro-Kremlin views in Italy. Some work within traditional journalism, while others operate through new media platforms and Telegram channels. Nonetheless, their considerable influence on Italian public discourse, particularly concerning topics directly linked to Russia, is notable. Moreover, establishing a direct link with Russian authorities is not always demonstrable in these cases. Their support contains distinct ideological elements, notably concerning Italy's position within NATO, the EU, and the Western Bloc.

Marc Iannaro: Marc Innaro is an Italian journalist known for his work as the head of the Rai correspondent office in Egypt and his extensive experience as a correspondent in

Moscow. He is frequently invited as an expert on Eastern Europe by television networks. However, his opinions have generated controversy due to his alleged promotion of pro-Kremlin narratives, especially regarding NATO's eastward expansion. Ukrainian authorities have expressed concerns about Innaro's alleged strong anti-Ukrainian biases. These alleged biases have led to his visa being denied for Ukraine in the past, highlighting a certain hostility or positions that have not been well-received by Ukrainian authorities³¹³.

Giulietto Chiesa: Former Member of the European Parliament, Giulietto Chiesa, was a prominent journalist known for his staunch pro-Kremlin stances. He passed away in 2020. In 2014, he established Pandora TV, an online publication where Pino Cabras, a member of parliament for the Five Star Movement, contributed to the editorial team. Pandora TV held exclusive rights in Italy for imagery from the Russia Today network and its subsidiary, Ruptly³¹⁴. The editorial team focused mostly on controversial topics, such as migration, Syrian civil war and the war in Donbas. Chiesa was actively involved in advocating for Russian interests in Ukraine. Notably, in 2017, Chiesa served as an electoral observer in the disputed "primary regional elections" held in the self-declared "Donetsk People's Republic"³¹⁵.

310 Ibid.

311 Biondo, N. (2019). Non solo Savoini Quattro domande ai Cinque Stelle sui loro rapporti con la Russia di Putin. <https://www.linkiesta.it/2019/10/russiagate-salvini-savoini-cinque-stelle/>

312 Redazione, D'Amato, A., Ruggiero, G., & Gennaro, A. (n.d.). Scandalo Fondi Russia - Lega. Open. <https://www.open.online/temi/scandalo-fondi-russia-lega/>

313 HuffPost Italia. (2022, March 4). "Basta con Marc Innaro, Filorusso della Rai". Le Analisi Pro-putin in Diretta TV Diventano Un caso politico (Di F. Olivo). https://www.huffingtonpost.it/esteri/2022/03/04/news/innaro_ucraina_russia-8894060/

314 Puente, D. (2022, June 11). Le Liste dei filorusi? Le Pubblicano I sostenitori di Vladimir Putin e dell'Invasione in Ucraina. Open. <https://www.open.online/2022/06/11/lista-filo-russi-putin-corriere-copasir-telegram/6/>

315 Shekhovtsov, A. (2021) Bogus International Monitors for the Bogus Russian Parliamentary Elections. www.fakeobservers.org. <https://www.fakeobservers.org>

Vauro Senesi: he is an Italian journalist and satirical cartoonist whose career gained international attention in 2009 when he was dismissed from RAI due to his controversial drawings and outspoken leftist perspectives. He often identifies as nostalgic for the USSR and is known for expressing anti-American and anti-Western ideas in his work. His work has covered various socio-political issues, including his nostalgic sentiments toward the former Soviet Union. During his visit to the occupied Donbas, he asserted that Ukrainian authorities were accountable for the alleged ethnic cleansing of the Russophone population³¹⁶.

Eleonora Forenza: an far-left former Italian politician, she currently holds the role of spokesperson for culture and communications within the Communist Refoundation Party. She's an active member of several significant organizations, including the collective Femministe Nove and serves on the board of the International Gramsci Society of Italy.

During her mandate as a Member of the European Parliament (MEP) in 2017, Forenza attracted attention for visiting the self-declared "republics" in Donbas. Her visit included taking photos near the statue of Vladimir Lenin, ostensibly to express solidarity with "the anti-fascist and democratic factions of the region"³¹⁷.

Gianfranco Pagliarulo: an Italian journalist and politician, he currently holds the position of President within the National Association of Italian Partisans, a highly influential civil society organization in Italy.

Pagliarulo has been involved in controversial incidents before and during the full-scale invasion. He has drawn attention for labelling Ukrainians as "Nazis" while notably amplifying information from sources like Sputnik. Moreover he has a history of disseminating disinformation, including unverified claims regarding the flight MH17 tragedy. Moreover, Pagliarulo has expressed opinions asserting that the Euro-maidan movement constituted a coup d'état³¹⁸.

Alessandro Orsini: an Italian sociologist and terrorism scholar, presently he serves as an associate professor at LUISS University in Rome. Orsini gained prominence as a controversial guest on talk shows during the Russian invasion of Ukraine. During these appearances, he consistently voiced criticisms of NATO's expansion towards Russia and the perceived diplomatic shortcomings of the European Union, attributing them as contributing factors to the conflict in Ukraine. Orsini's commentary has been subject to international scrutiny due to his tendency to report unverified

information and promote narratives aligned with pro-Russian propaganda³¹⁹.

Sergio Romano: is a multifaceted individual, serving as an Italian diplomat, writer, journalist, and historian. His contributions extend to a columnist role at the newspaper *Corriere della Sera*, the major Italian newspaper reflecting his diverse expertise. Moreover, Romano held a significant position as the former Italian ambassador to Moscow during the Soviet Time. While historically recognized for his analytical skills, Romano has more recently drawn attention for amplifying and advocating pro-Russian viewpoints on various subjects, including the events surrounding Euromaidan. This shift in perspective has marked a notable departure from his earlier career and has sparked discussions and debates around his current stances.³²⁰

Alberto Fazolo: He is an economist, journalist, writer, and political activist. He claims to have lived for two years in Donbass, from 2015 to 2017, and to have personally experienced the Donbas war. Fazolo is the author of several books promoting the alleged communist liberation of Donbas as well as Russian imperialism. He frequently appears on national television as an expert on Eastern Europe.³²¹

www.fakeobservers.org/politically-biased-election-observers.html

316 VitaAdmin. (2023, August 7). Vauro: "in ucraina è in Atto Una Pulizia etnica." Vita.it. <https://www.vita.it/vauro-in-ucraina-e-in-atto-una-pulizia-etnica/>

317 StopFake editors. Kyiv demands extradition of EU MP. StopFake. (2017, June 5). <https://www.stopfake.org/en/fake-kyiv-demands-extradition-of-eu-mp/>

318 Carmelo Palma, La struggente passione per Putin dei Vecchi ... - linkiesta.it. <https://www.linkiesta.it/2022/04/anpi-comunisti-putin/>

319 Guardian News and Media. (2023, August 31). "a success for Kremlin propaganda": How pro-Putin views permeate Italian media. The Guardian. <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2023/aug/31/a-success-for-kremlin-propaganda-how-pro-putin-views-permeate-italian-media>

320 Pasquale, M. D. (2017.). Perché la propaganda russa trova terreno fertile in Italia?. Strade. <https://www.stradeonline.it/55-numeri/2017/maggio-giugno-2017/2829-perche-la-propaganda-russa-trova-terreno-fertile-in-italia>

321 Chi sono gli italiani che combattono nelle fila dei Militanti in Donbas. seconda parte. Uacrisis.org. (2017, August 16). <https://uacrisis.org/it/59530-italiani-militanti-donbas-2a-parte>

Cesare Sacchetti: he is an Italian blogger and journalist who gained some prominence for his online presence and writings on *Fatto Quotidiano*, a large national newspaper. He initially focused on various topics, including politics and international affairs. However, in the last years Sacchetti's shift towards being part of the QAnon ecosystem through Telegram channels in the Italian language and promoting pro-Putin positions through social media³²².

Vittorio Nicola Rangeloni: he operates as both a war correspondent and a foreign fighter in Donbas. Paradoxically, he maintains the oldest YouTube channel in the Italian language focusing only on the Russian-Ukrainian war, reporting from the occupied Donbas since its establishment in 2015. His channel has garnered attention, leading to numerous interviews with various media outlets in both Italy and Russia. Vittorio Nicola Rangeloni is known for disseminating Russian war propaganda and presenting predominantly Russian perspectives on the situation in the occupied Donbas through his reporting³²³.

Case Study: Vitaly Markiv and the Ronchelli case

Andrea Ronchelli, an Italian photojournalist, lost his life in 2014 in Sloviansk, Ukraine, amidst a conflict

zone between regular Ukrainian troops and the so-called Donbas separatists. Alongside Ronchelli, his interpreter, Russian anti-Putin activist Andrei Mironov, also perished, while a French journalist, William Roguelon, was injured. The deaths of Ronchelli and his companions occurred in a complex context, steeped in the violence of the war between opposing factions and no hard evidences were found during on who killed him³²⁴.

Yet, a Ukrainian National Guard soldier Vitaly Markiv was initially implicated in the case through an article in *Corriere della Sera*, which linked him to the incident. The Italian judicial investigation heavily relied on this article, indicating Markiv as the alleged orchestrator of the firing on the journalists. However, the basis of the investigation was fragile, casting doubt on his actual responsibility in the tragic event. After some months of trial, an Italian court sentenced Markiv to 24 years in prison³²⁵.

Misinformation and political biases had a significant impact on the trial, resulting in a distorted perception of the case and influencing the direction of the prosecution. These political biases notably affected the initial verdict, unjustly labeling Ukrainian patriotism as “fascist,” while portraying pro-Russian separatism as “anti-fascist.”³²⁶

Subsequently, Markiv was acquitted on appeal in Milan. The grounds for his acquittal mainly revolved around the weak and ideologically skewed foundations that formed the basis of the initial conviction based on the artifice. The entire situation underscored the tendency to prematurely condemn the accused, often driven by political biases rather than substantial evidence that could establish guilt beyond a reasonable doubt. The trial, held amid a highly charged political environment, raised suspicions regarding Ukrainian politics and exacerbated tensions among the involved factions, each holding distinct political perspectives. Markiv's case serves as a stark example of how misinformation and biases can significantly sway the judicial process and hinder the delivery of justice under such pressures³²⁷.

The political dimension The Markiv trial emerged as a convergence of various political and social tensions, underscoring the susceptibility of the judiciary to the influence of political perspectives and misinformation. Pro-Russian media often portrayed Markiv as guilty and held the Ukrainian army responsible for the attack.

Markiv's case, culminating in his acquittal, prompted fundamental inquiries into the nature of the judicial process and its susceptibility to po-

322 Lanzavecchia, O. (2022, October 7). Cheering for Putin, disappointed by Meloni. exploring Italy's Qanon community. Decode39. <https://decode39.com/4505/qanon-italy-russia-disinfo-meloni/>

323 La Rete Fascista Al Servizio di Vladimir Putin in Italia, TRA propaganda social e Mercenari. *L'Espresso* - News, inchieste e approfondimenti. (n.d.). <https://lespresso.it/c/inchieste/2022/3/25/la-rete-fascista-al-servizio-di-vladimir-putin-in-italia-tra-propaganda-social-e-mercenari/22440>

324 Luca, di D. M. D. (2022, March 7). Lo Strano Caso di Vitaly Markiv. *Il Post*. <https://www.ilpost.it/2019/12/18/andrea-rocchelli-vitaly-markiv/>

325 Ecco perché vitaly Markiv è stato assolto per l'omicidio del ... (n.d.-a). <https://www.linkiesta.it/2020/11/andrea-rocchelli-vitaly-markiv-soldato-assolto/>

326 Come La Disinformazione del Cremlino ha influito sul Caso Markiv in Italia – ricerca. *Uacrisis.org*. (2021, April 13). <https://uacrisis.org/it/ricerca-disinformazione-cremlino-caso-markiv>

327 Ibid.

litical bias. The Supreme Court ruling upheld Markiv's acquittal, thereby officially concluding the case. The intricacies of the judicial process revealed limitations in applying strict legal standards to situations during wartime. Reconstructing the events faced insurmountable challenges due to the chaotic nature of the conflict, where emergencies and unforeseen circumstances complicated the differentiation of roles and actions performed by individuals in a war-time context.

The prosecution contended that Markiv was situated on Karachun Hill when he noticed the car transporting the journalists, allegedly choosing to target civilians deliberately. However, the absence of concrete evidence supporting these assertions has cast doubt on his alleged culpability. The details presented by the prosecution contradicted evidence and testimonies, emphasizing the difficulty in distinguishing actual actions and intentions due to the distance and confusion caused by the Russo-Ukrainian war³²⁸.

Country Summary

Italy stands as a crucial focal point for Russian propaganda and political influence, and while there's been a notable shift in approach towards Russia following the full-scale invasion of Ukraine, the memories of past relations continue to hold significant sway.

First and most importantly, Italy has historically maintained a deep-rooted connection with Russia, as its

relationship dates back to the era of the Soviet Union. Foremost, a notable number of influential Italian political figures have established closer ties with the Kremlin. Notably, during the tenure of the late Italian Prime Minister Silvio Berlusconi, relations with Russia deepened. In addition, several key political figures, including Matteo Salvini and Giuseppe Conte, have voiced admiration for Putin's Russia on multiple occasions, reflecting the shared inclination across Italy's political spectrum to build distinctive connections with Moscow.

Russian influence is also entrenched in Italy's economic sphere. The economic complementarity between Italy, known for its manufacturing sector, and Russia, a major hydrocarbon exporter, has expanded business relations from automotive and energy to various sectors like machinery, textiles, furniture, and pharmaceuticals. Therefore, the influence stems from enduring political and cultural connections, the economic relevance of Russia to Italy, and the presence of public figures advocating pro-Russian views. This blend of factors poses a challenge for Italians to discern Russian propaganda and disinformation. These circumstances allow Russian narratives to proliferate through Italian society, influencing public opinion in various spheres such as media, academia, and politics.

Russian influence is particularly observable in Italian news programs and media, shaping narratives around sensitive topics like migra-

tion, Ukraine, and Euro-Atlantic integration. Pro-Russian experts and propagandists have played a role in spreading Russian propaganda through Italian media, including prominent channels like Italian state TV Rai. For example, the Italian Parliamentary Committee for the security of the Republic highlighted Russia's efforts during the Covid-19 pandemic to project a favourable image compared to Western democracies, facilitated by media personalities with strong pro-Russian views. The influence in the media landscape has certainly influenced the country on multiple occasions, as reported in the case of Vitaly Markiv.

Different considerations should be made in relation to the current situation. It is certainly true that today, after the full-scale invasion, echoing Russian propaganda narratives and expressing loyalty toward Moscow's military actions in Ukraine appear primarily within extremely radical political factions, particularly in the extreme far-right or far-left. Yet, while some parties have distanced their leadership from open support for Russia and the Kremlin (such as Giorgia Meloni's Fratelli d'Italia), remnants of Russian narratives persist in the Italian political debate. These narratives advocate for "peace in Ukraine" at the expense of Ukrainian interests, criticize Italy's intentions to provide more arms and financial support to Kyiv, accuse the US of profiteering from the conflict, and highlight the "oppression" of Russian-speaking refugees in Italy.

328 Ecco perché Vitaly Markiv è stato assolto per l'omicidio del ... (n.d.-a). <https://www.linkiesta.it/2020/11/andrea-roccelli-vitaly-markiv-soldato-assolto/>

Another unique trait in Italy is the alignment of its cultural and academic intelligentsia, along with political philosophers and educators, often associated with left-wing organizations, with “peace initiatives.” These tendencies were present even before the breakout of the Russian full-scale war in Ukraine, but are nowadays particularly present in certain media and society. For example, organized “peace marches” and pro-Russian rallies, potentially

funded or inspired by Moscow, point to the significant resources invested and the maintenance of a vast network of “agents” in continuous mobilization.

Therefore, given how Russian disinformation and propaganda can disguise itself under the appearances of freedom of speech, the right to peaceful assembly, and defending diverse political views, one can anticipate further misuse and inten-

sified efforts by Russia to exploit any gaps within the Italian society designed to protect against disinformation and counter its harmful influence within Italy. Indeed, the deep historical, political, and economic bonds between Italy and Russia continue to wield substantial influence in Italian society across various domains, necessitating a nuanced understanding of Russia’s impact on Italy’s cultural, political, and economic landscape.



7. Russian influence in Ukraine

Country context: History

Development and dissemination of manipulative, misleading and false information has been one of the key pillars of Russian approach to political relations with Ukraine and its people long before the full-scale invasion of February 24th, 2022. This approach, targeting both audiences in Ukraine and in Russia, pertaining to the matters regarding Ukraine, has arguably become more systemic after the “Orange Revolution” of 2004 in Ukraine, which was perceived by the Russian leadership as a “color revolution” orchestrated by the US with an aggressive purpose of undermining Russian influence in the region³²⁹. Such perception can be estimated as one of the drivers of a more **centralized, narrative-based approach to information policy, with anti-Western sentiment and focus on historical manipulations at its center**, as it is largely interpreted today.

Within the time-frame of 2004 – 2022 the use of manipulative information by Russian and pro-Russian actors about Ukraine underwent radical transformation. Initial heavy reliance on “soft power” tools and

the broad picture of “brotherly nations”, often based on the Soviet-era narratives and stereotypes about relations between Russian and Ukraine, was combined with other means of hybrid influence targeting mostly Ukrainian government, usually in economic terms – blackmail and “gas wars”, the first round of which took place in winter 2005-2006, are perhaps the most vivid example³³⁰. **Over the years manipulative information designed, created and disseminated by Russian and pro-Russian actors to target Ukraine has become more systemic, more aggressive and more targeted with its role in Russian dealings with Ukraine drastically increasing.**

The highlight of this transformation manifested in (and has to a large extent led to) the Russian annexation of Crimea and start of the hybrid invasion of the eastern regions of Ukraine in 2014. A key component of the annexation, Russian hostile approach to handling information has given rise to the expert and political debates about disinformation and propaganda, the use of which have since become definitive on the Kremlin’s behalf in regard to

Ukraine for all three key audiences – internal Russian audience, international audience and Ukrainian one. It would be incorrect to claim disinformation came into existence as specific Russian strategy and set of tactics only in 2014; however, for independent Ukraine it ultimately marked one of the most important milestones in dynamics with its now official adversary.

The next milestone naturally arrived with the full-scale invasion of 2022, which has taken Russian disinformation to the next level. Largely **following the playbook that has been in place since 2014, Russian information influence was nevertheless subject to two most essential changes:**

- The increasingly **direct link between disinformation and harm** due to active hostilities;
- Pivoting from the idea of “brotherly Slavic nations” that “the collective West” attempts to divide to the **increasing amount of hate-speech, calls for violence and dehumanization of Ukrainians at large**, resulting in calls to actions that would fall under the category of genocide³³¹.

329 Mitchell, Lincoln (May 6, 2022). Putin’s Orange Obsession: How a Twenty-Year Fixation with Color Revolutions Drove a Disastrous War. Foreign Affairs. Access: <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/russia-fsu/2022-05-06/putins-orange-obsession>

330 Magda, Yevhen (2016). Hybrid War. CreateSpace Independent Publishing Platform.

331 Kovalev, Alexey (April 9, 2022). Russia’s Ukraine Propaganda Has Turned Fully Genocidal. Foreign Affairs. Access: <https://foreignpolicy.com/2022/04/09/russia-putin-propaganda-ukraine-war-crimes-atrocities/>

Country context: Structure of Information Influence Prior to the Full- Scale Invasion

Full-scale war has resulted in plummeting numbers of the openly Russian and pro-Russian actors, whose **operational area had already been consistently shrinking after the start of hybrid aggression in 2014**, when first systemic limitations on Russian media actors were imposed. In 2014, a number of Russian TV-channels were banned³³² with the list expanding in the following years, particularly in 2015-2016. In 2017, such limitations started extensively targeting online space with ban of social media platforms VK and Odnoklassniki³³³ being most well-known examples. Security concerns were key reason cited for the ban, with a particular emphasis on the ability of Russian intelligence to easily access users' personal data on Russia-based platforms and use it not only for extensive disinformation campaigns, but also for social engineering, targeted psychological operations and military purposes.

Therefore, first years after the start of hybrid aggression marked the emergence of new information en-

vironment in Ukraine, where **the Kremlin had to increasingly rely on the local proxies** to maintain access to Ukrainian audience and its trust. In 2019, only 13% of Ukrainian relied on Russian media as a primary source of news³³⁴ – which, however, does not equal to only 13% of Ukrainians being exposed to Russian disinformation.

Throughout the period of **2014 – 2022 the key traditional media actors disseminating Russian narratives in Ukraine were TV-channels linked to** a pro-Russian politician with personal ties to V. Putin – **Viktor Medvedchuk** (who was reportedly considered by the Kremlin to lead the new puppet government in case of the swift military victory and the following orchestrated regime change in Ukraine³³⁵). ZIK, 112 and NewsOne were consistently labeled by media watchdogs and counter-disinformation community as “hubs” of Russian disinformation, which would be among the centerpieces of an influence network in Ukraine³³⁶. With the general trend of declining traditional media consumption, however, online pro-Russian sources masquerading as Ukrainian were also gaining momentum. These sources included two key categories:

- **Online media** with Strana.ua – being the biggest news website consistently and explicitly disseminating the Kremlin talking points³³⁷. Important role of dissemination was played by the so-called “junk websites”: online media sources with no journalistic standards and prone to clickbait³³⁸.
- **Social media actors** such as personal accounts of pro-Russian politicians, influencers and bloggers as well as anonymous channels, predominantly on Telegram, providing pro-Russian “expert” commentary on political developments in the country.

This structure ensured that the Ukrainian audience was still exposed to the Kremlin's disinformation campaigns underpinning **5 most systemic narratives that still serve as pillars of Russian rhetoric** regarding Ukraine:

- “Ukraine is a fascist/Nazi state”
- “Ukraine is a Russophobic state”
- “Ukraine is a failed state”
- “Ukraine is a Western puppet”
- “Ukraine is historically Russian land”³³⁹.

These narratives embody **two key features of Russian disinforma-**

332 N/A (19 August 2014). Ukraine has banned 14 Russian TV channels. RL/RFE. Access: <https://www.radiosvoboda.org/a/26539960.html>

333 N/A (16 May 2017). In Ukraine, V Kontakte, Odnoklassniki, Yandex and 1C have been banned: key details. New Voice of Ukraine. Access: <https://nv.ua/ukr/ukraine/events/zaborona-vkontakte-jandeks-1s-ta-inshih-reaktsija-na-ukaz-poroshenko-1155835.html>

334 N/A. (22 October 2019). 13% of Ukrainians use Russian media as a source of news. Access: <https://www.ukrinform.ua/rubric-society/2803659-rosijski-zmi-ak-dzerelo-novin-viktoristovuut-13-ukrainciv.html>

335 Roth, Andrew (13 April 2022) Who is Viktor Medvedchuk and why does his arrest matter to the Kremlin? The Guardian. <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2022/apr/13/viktor-medvedchuk-arrest-matter-to-kremlin>

336 Sklyarevska, Hala (6 December 2019) Medvedchuk, Russian propaganda and Ukrainian media. Detector Media. Access: <https://detector.media/infospace/article/173031/2019-12-06-medvedchuk-rossyyskaya-propaganda-y-ukraynskye-smy/>

337 Center for Strategic Communications and Information Security (10 June 2021) How does Strana.ua mask enemy propaganda? Ukrinform. Access: <https://www.ukrinform.ua/rubric-antifake/3262290-ak-stranaua-maskue-vorozu-propagandu.html>

338 Texty.org. (28 November 2018) We've got bad news! Texty.org.ua. Access: <https://texty.org.ua/d/2018/mnews/eng/>

339 Hybrid Warfare Analytical Group (18 May 2018). Image of Ukraine on Russian TV. Ukraine Crisis Media Center. Access: <https://uacrisis.org/en/image-of-ukraine-on-russian-tv>

tion: its systemic nature and adaptability.

Since 2014 they have been voiced so consistently, often relying on the lack of knowledge about Ukraine and its internal dynamics as well as on exploiting the weaknesses of the international audiences, that they became inseparable from discussions about Russian disinformation targeting Ukraine. These systemic narratives are supported throughout the years by different pieces of “evidence”, either manipulated or fabricated, adapting to the dynamic information environment and seeking new

ways to instill themselves in the worldviews of target audiences when it comes to Ukraine. In the system of Russian disinformation, these core narratives are surrounded by those more specifically tailored to target audiences.

The discrepancies among them have reached their peak after the start of the full-scale invasion, with the violence unleashed leading to fundamental changes in public perceptions and attitudes both within Ukrainian and Russian societies, thus calling to use different tactics

and different channels of communication. These changes have also manifested in **two vastly different information environments emerging in Ukraine – one world in the government-controlled territories (GCTs) and the alternative reality in the temporary occupied territories (TOTs).** The research below will outline key actors and trends in the government-controlled territories for purpose of balance, yet will more extensively focus on the information environments of TOTs that, to a large extent, remains a black box.

The sample of selected pro-Russian actors in Ukraine

Table 4. Pro-Kremlin actors in Ukraine: The overall sample structure*

Russian organizations	2	“Russkiy Mir” foundation and “Russian House” as key state-linked organizations operating in the TOTs
Media	71	Local traditional media established by the occupying authorities in TOTs + pro-Russian media entities targeting GCTs
Experts	24	Identified individuals working for the traditional media outlets under occupying authorities in TOTs and pro-Russian experts active in GCTs media field
Army/Paramilitary groups	8	Unified “Cossack” squads and “Yunarmia” as leading paramilitary groups targeting children in the TOTs + other identified paramilitary groups
Total	105	

* We have included a minimal amount of entities, who were publicly active after February, 2022, so there might be even more, but this table provides a general overview of the structure. If there was a double categorised entity, we have collocated them only into one category.

**The list is not exhaustive as it concentrates on Russian and pro-Russian actors predominantly in the media field. It does not include the actors exercising Russian influence exclusively online; it also does not include a category of politicians due to the extensive list of collaborators and Russian nationals acting as representatives of occupying “governments” in the TOTs. Additionally, it only lists identified entities and/or individuals active as of October 2023 and does not list entities and/or individuals beyond the scope of this research.

Russian information influence in the government-controlled territories of Ukraine after February 24th, 2022

With the start of the full-scale invasion public sentiment towards Russia changed dramatically. In April 2023, 97% of Ukrainians described their perception of Russia as negative³⁴⁰. On premises so vastly different from 45% of Ukrainians pertaining positive perception of Russia in 2014³⁴¹, open promotion of pro-Russian sentiment became a failing strategy, which resulted in a substantial number of individuals formerly linked to Russian and/or pro-Russian actors attempting to now be perceived as pro-Ukrainian – and often continuing to work within Ukrainian media field.³⁴²

A number of political analysts, however, have retained their pro-Russian position, thus becoming recurring guests and commentators for the Russian propaganda sources. Mostly these individuals were among those who supported the above-mentioned Viktor Medvedchuk and were using TV-channels linked to him as a platform for political PR in his favor. The list of these persons includes:

- Denys Zharkikh
- Kyrylo Molchanov

- Olena Bronytska
- Pavlo Karnazytsky
- Glib Prostackov
- Vasyl Stoyakin
- Oleksandr Skubchenko
- Vasyl Vakarov
- Dmytro Perlin
- Olena Markosyan
- Andrii Mishyn
- Dmytro Korniiichuk
- Dmytro Spivak
- Kost' Bonadrenko³⁴³

Some of these individuals retained a presence in Ukrainian information environment as well, if on a lesser scale. Instead of TV studios, their key platforms have shifted online, in particular, to the YouTube channels led by their former colleagues dealing in political PR of the pro-Russian politicians such as [Oleksandr Shelest](#) (±495,000 subscribers) and [Max Nazarov](#) (±148,000 subscribers). At the same time, they maintain personal Telegram channels, which are also used to disseminate rhetoric often in line with the Russian narratives or beneficial to the Russian government, which may be nominally criticized by such actors.

This tactic is followed by other high-profile groups of pro-Russian media actors centered around Anatolii Sharii as well as around Svitlana Kriukova and Ihor Guzhva.

Guzhva is an owner of the above-mentioned online outlet Strana.ua, where Kriukova is an editor-in-chief. Long criticized for the outlet's reporting being in line with the Kremlin talking points and predominant narratives, the source was banned in Ukraine in 2021 according to the decision of the National Security and Defense Council³⁴⁴. The source, however, remains an important element of the pro-Russian media landscape, being available at the "mirror" web-sites, as well as on [YouTube](#) (±616,000 subscribers) and [Telegram](#), where it has ±255,670 subscribers. With the start of the full-scale invasion, Strana.ua issued an editorial criticizing Russian invasion³⁴⁵, which ultimately resulted in the web-site being blocked in Russia as well as in Ukraine. Strana, nevertheless, continues to pursue mildly pro-Russian rhetoric, in particular focusing on the issues of "Russophobia" in Ukraine. The same approach stands for Olesya Medvedeva, a host of the "Yasno.Ponyatno" program on [YouTube](#), where it has ±89,500 subscribers, being a special project for Strana.

Like Medvedeva, Anatolii Sharii is first and foremost a pro-Russian blogger, although he attempted to create a political party in 2019, which received 2,2% at the parlia-

340 N/A (5 April 2023) Foreign policy of Ukraine during the war: state, features and priorities. Ukrinform. Access: <https://www.ukrinform.ua/rubric-presshall/3686844-zovnisna-politika-ukraini-v-umovah-vijni-stan-osoblivosti-ta-prioriteti.html>

341 N/A (5 April 2023) Almost 80% of Ukrainians have negative attitude towards the citizens of Russia. Ukrinform. Access: <https://www.ukrinform.ua/rubric-society/3691923-majze-80-ukrainciv-negativno-stavlat'sya-do-gromadan-rosii.html>

342 Lygachova, Natalia. (7 May 2022) Shapeshifting opportunists and infomercials have no regrets. Detector Media. Access: <https://detector.media/blogs/article/199036/2022-05-07-pereobuvshyesya-konyunkturshchyky-y-dzhynsovyky-ny-v-chem-ne-kayutsya/>

343 Zoh, Orest. (14 June 2023). The market of pseudoexperts is on the rise. Texty.Org.Ua. Access: https://texty.org.ua/articles/109822/rynok-psevdоекспертів-озжив-чим-займаються-фіранти-нашої-базы-продавців-режтінхів-та-йіні-колей-під-час-війни/?fbclid=IwAR3UveNvEx-3oMhc3DFnXHv5kft_qdJJtggm0NiFTR-Ad9M5JP9IJXMU30M

344 N/A. (24 February 2022). False target. Why did Putin start an invasion while Zelensky didn't believe in it. Reconstruction of events. Strana.ua. Access: <https://ctrana.news/articles/istorii/426144-pochemu-putin-nachal-vtorzhenie-a-zelenskij-v-neho-ne-veril-rekonstruktsija-sobytij.html>

345 Ibid.

mentary elections the same year and didn't pass the electoral threshold of 5%³⁴⁶. The party, originally supported by Medvedchuk³⁴⁷, was banned in Ukraine after the start of the full-scale invasion³⁴⁸, but Sharii remained active in the information space. Some of the individuals his media enterprises and political ambitions were linked in, such as the lawyer of "Sharii's Party", cooperated with the Russian military intelligence to support the full-scale invasion³⁴⁹. Sharii himself is under suspicion for cooperating with Russian Federal Security Service³⁵⁰.

After February 24th 2022 his rhetoric became more ambiguous with Sharii and his wife Olga, an active and visible supporter of her husband's political views, starting to target not only Ukrainian, but Russian authorities as well, claiming they are simply "in favor of the people"³⁵¹. Having previously voiced key Russian talking points about Nazism in Ukraine, its loss of sovereignty under the rule Western puppeteers and Russophobia, after the full-scale invasion Sharii toned these messages down, although he still regularly accuses Ukrainian state and society of Russophobia and far-right sentiments³⁵². Instead, he focuses more

on allegations of corruption, claims that Ukrainian military provokes the destruction of civilian objects by Russia due to using these facilities, blaming Ukraine for Russian attacks on Zaporizhzhia Nuclear Power Plant and discrediting Ukrainian armed forces in general.

With the start of the full-scale invasion Sharii's audience has grown, arguably due to the influx of people who held mildly pro-Russian views before February 24th and were no longer capable to retain them, at the same time feeling highly skeptical and often negative about Ukrainian government and socio-cultural changes the society as a whole has been going through.

Declining public activity of some other pro-Russian figures is a striking contrast to this audience growth. In particular, individuals linked to "Ukrainskii Vybir", the political project of abovementioned Victor Medvedchuk, have largely disappeared from the public media field. Instead, some of them have decided to cooperate with Russia on the ground with such cooperation taking different forms. For example, one of the leaders of "Ukrainskii Vybir" was arrested under the charges

of preparing the overthrow of constitutional order in May 2022³⁵³. The party formed in 2012 and a network of organizations linked to it have a long history of pro-Russian activities, including but not limited to assistance in organizing the so-called "referendum" in Crimea in 2014³⁵⁴. While not publicly active, this network can be considered to still constitute a substantial threat to Ukrainian statehood and territorial integrity based on its members actions both before and after the full-scale invasion.

When overviewing the key clusters of pro-Russian influence in the Ukrainian information environment, it is worthwhile to also add the Ukrainian Orthodox Church of Moscow Patriarchate (UOC MP) to the list of actors forming a core of such influence networks. The issue of religion and the history of Russian use of religious organizations at home and abroad to promote pro-governmental policies is a topic of separate detailed discussion, of which the UOC MP peculiarities are but one element. Nevertheless, it should be established that UOC MP, up until 2022 being an integral part of the Russian Orthodox Church (ROC), has been one of the

346 N/A (23 November 2020). 5 parties have passed the barrier of 5% at the local elections. Ukrinform. Access: <https://www.ukrinform.ua/rubric-elections/3141454-na-miscevih-viborah-barer-u-5-podolali-pat-partij-rejting.html>

347 Motrunych Maryana (26 February 2020) "Sharii's Party" donors: who are they? Slidstvo.Info. Access: <https://www.slidstvo.info/articles/donory-partiyi-shariya-hto-vony/>

348 Mazurenko, Aliona. (6 September 2022). The Supreme Court has completely banned "Sharii's Party". Ukrainska Pravda. Access: <https://www.pravda.com.ua/rus/news/2022/09/6/7366350/>

349 Hamalii, Iryna (3 August 2023) "Sharii's Party" lawyer was working for the Russian military intelligence. LB.ua. Access: https://lb.ua/society/2023/08/03/568351_yurist_partii_shariya_pratsyuvav.html

350 Lysohor, Iryna (6 July 2023) SBU has found evidence of cooperation between Sharii and FSB. LB.ua. Access: https://lb.ua/society/2023/07/06/563919_sbu_znayshla_dokazi_spivpratsi_blogera.html

351 NGO "Detector Media" (20 March 2023). Yobbo-land, Nazis and brainless government: which messages "Ukrainian" blogger Anatolii Sharii shared throughout the year of war. Detector Media. Access: https://detector.media/propahanda_vplyvy/article/209098/2023-03-20-roguless-tan-natsysty-i-bezmozka-vlada-yakymy-mesedzhamy-ukrainskyy-bloger-milyonnyk-anatolii-shariy-dilyvsya-protiyagom-roku-velykoi-viyny/

352 Ibid.

353 Lysohor, Iryna (5 May 2022) In Kyiv, SBU detained one of the leaders of Medvedchuk's party "Ukrainian Choice". LB.ua. Access: https://lb.ua/society/2022/05/05/515826_sbu_zatrimala_kiievi_z_lideriv.html

354 Ibid.

paramount channels Moscow used to execute destabilizing influence in Ukraine for a long time.

Back in 2014, UOC MP as a structure was actively involved in Russian hybrid aggression against Ukraine with its activities tailored to specific regional circumstances. In the western regions of Ukraine, UOC MP clergy would often promote pro-Russian narratives about the hostile West trying to separate two “brotherly nations” of Russia and Ukraine³⁵⁵. In the eastern regions it would be more transparent and aggressive in its affiliation with Russia. Its actions ranged from encouragement to “kill fascists” and blessings of individuals in the so-called “DNR” and “LNR” to fight against Ukraine to more kinetic activities such as certain churches being used for storing weapons later to be used against the Armed Forces of Ukraine³⁵⁶.

It should be noted that UOC MP has traditionally being one of the most popular religious affiliations in Ukraine and, therefore, it would be incorrect to claim that all of its representatives are supporters of Russia against Ukraine. This was highlighted by a rift between UOC MP and ROC that occurred in May 2022, when UOC MP made a decision to

pursue “administrative separation” from ROC due to the latter’s support of the Russian full-scale invasion³⁵⁷. However, the scale of systemic problems within UOC MP as a structure with long history of pro-Russian perceptions and activities, both sanctioned at the highest level and pursued by clergy members and church-goers on a local level, makes this administrative separation insufficient to root out Russian influence.

Large number of individuals linked to UOC MP continue using their privileged position of community pillars to disseminate anti-Ukrainian rhetoric and take part in activities directly attacking Ukrainian statehood. To list but a few examples, a saboteur supporting Russian military in Hostomel airport in the early days of invasion was an UOC MP priest³⁵⁸; Russian artillery observer in Severodonetsk was another UOC MP priest³⁵⁹; another UOC MP representative was involved in Russian intelligence activities in Kyiv³⁶⁰. While increasing number of Orthodox Christian Ukrainians are leaving UOC MP in favor of the independent Ukrainian Orthodox Church established in 2018 and part of UOC MP actively opposes Russian invasion, as a structure it still maintains hotspots of pro-Russian influence, particularly strong in

the smaller rural communities. Given that church traditionally is one of the most trusted institutions in Ukrainian society³⁶¹, it is paramount to keep Russian access to religious communities in mind when discussing its influence on information environment in Ukraine.

The broader implications behind actions of pro-Russian actors on the GCTs can be roughly divided into two categories. The first category is constituted by consequences of a more kinetic nature, as evidenced by the actions of some of the individuals linked to clusters of pro-Russian influence such as “Ukrainskii Vybir”, “Sharii’s Party” and UOC MP. These clusters are at a center of informal networks that include people prepared to cooperate with the Russian military and intelligence, with such cooperation often entailing direct threat to the lives of Ukrainian civilians and military personnel via artillery observation, transfer of personal data, providing information on sensitive developments on the ground etc.

The second category of consequences is centered on shaping public discourse and sentiments directly or indirectly connected to the war. Despite the fact that relatively few

355 Konovalchuk, Pavlo (February 2018). Essence and key directions of the Russian Orthodox Church propaganda in the context of Russia’s hybrid war against Ukraine. *Strategichna Panorama* (2), pp. 31 – 36.

356 Ibid.

357 Romaniuk, Roman (27 May 2022). UOC MP will separate from ROC administratively, but will retain spiritual communications – sources. *Ukrainska Pravda*. Access: <https://www.pravda.com.ua/news/2022/05/27/7349010/>

358 N/A (25 February 2022). The saboteur detained near Hostomel turned out to be an UOC MP priest. *RBK-Ukraine*. Access: <https://www.rbc.ua/ukr/stylr/zaderzhannyi-gostomelem-diversant-okazalsya-1645775488.html>

359 Ranska, Olha (27 February 2022) In Severodonetsk, a priest was working for the Russian aggressors. *VChasPik*. Access: <https://vchaspiik.ua/kriminal/527822-navodchik-v-ryase-v-severodonecke-svyashchennik-rabotal-na-rossiyskih-zahvachikov>

360 Havryliuk, Yulia (16 March 2022) In Kyiv, an UOC MP priest helping Russian aggressors was detained. *Segodnya*. Access: <https://war.segodnya.ua/war/vtorzhenie/v-kieve-zaderzhali-svyashchennika-upc-mp-kotoryy-pomogal-rf-foto-1609161.html>

361 Razumkov Center (28 October 2022). Citizens’ evaluation of the situation in the country, trust towards social institutions, political and ideological orientation of Ukrainian citizens in the context of Russian aggression. *Ukrainian Center of economic and political studies of O. Razumkov*. Access: <https://razumkov.org.ua/napriamky/sotsiologichni-doslidzhennia/otsinka-gromadianamy-sytuatsii-v-kraini-dovira-do-sotsialnykh-institutiv-politykoideologichni-orientatsii-gromadian-ukrainy-v-umovakh-rosiiskoi-agresii-veresen-zhovten-2022r>

pro-Russian actors explicitly side with the aggressor state, their influence may still have negative implications for Ukrainian resilience. Key goals of Russian disinformation and propaganda in Ukraine have consistently been to demoralize, divide and polarize the local population thus weakening its capacity to resist malign external influence. Promotion of select narratives that have been used by the Kremlin for these goals, such as idea of Ukraine as a failed state, puppet of the West, Russophobic and dominated by far-right, is particularly dangerous against the backdrop of full-scale invasion, resistance to which requires a high level of solidarity. Strengthening “war fatigue”, distrust, internal polarization and subsequent aggression has potential to limit the capacity of Ukrainian society to withstand war of attrition waged by the Russian Federation.

Russian information influence in temporary occupied territories of Ukraine after February 24th, 2022

The media ecosystem and information field in the territories controlled by Russia is vastly different. Two key differences may be outlined:

- High level of control over media landscape and digital infrastructure in the TOTs enables a playbook disparate from operating in the environment where Russian agents of influence are required to camouflage and tone their rhetoric down;
- Communications are more of-

ten designed, developed and delivered not by Russian proxies, but by the Russian state and/or actors directly affiliated with this state.

Both differences are highlighted by the inclusion of Zaporizhzhia and Kherson oblasts in the list of “new regions” of Russia in addition to Crimea, Donetsk and Luhansk³⁶². Despite the fact that Russia does not have full control over Zaporizhzhia and Kherson, this declaration clearly marks **desire of the Russian government to solidify and streamline influence, including in the information field, on the territories it occupied.**

It should be noted here that all TOTs have distinct differences, and partially they have been formed due to the varying lengths of occupation as well as due to the different perception of the regions occupied since 2014 – while Russian Federation has made it a priority to incorporate Crimea since the very beginning, the so-called “DNR” and “LNR” were much more of a grey area where regional developments, if still overseen and curated by Russia, played a more substantial role than on the peninsula.

These regional differences and media disposition in each oblast under occupation will be analyzed in further detail below. However, the previously mentioned aim to centralize control over media and communications in the TOTs has resulted in the formation of several **key pillars of Russian information influence practiced across all 5 regions:**

The influx of Russian state-controlled media presence. Both traditional and online Russian media consistently promoting anti-Ukrainian and anti-Western rhetoric have been universally available in the TOTs occupied in 2014 and have also been imposed on the local media landscape in the territories seized by Russia after the start of the full-scale invasion. The in-depth analysis of the specific narratives promoted by the Russian state-controlled media and the ownership structure of such media is a subject to separate research; it has, however, been established that all major traditional channels of communication are involved in systemic promotion of propaganda and disinformation developed in accordance with the political objectives of the Russian regime³⁶³.

Limitation of access to Ukrainian and Western media. As Russian government considers TOTs the new parts of Russian Federation, all the media entities viewed by Roskomnadzor, a key body tasked with monitoring and censoring mass media, as violating Russian legislation are subjected to a risk of ban. As Russia tightened its criminalization of “fake news” in the early stages of the full-scale invasion³⁶⁴, in particular by introducing 15 years sentence for disseminating “false information” about the Russian military, Roskomnadzor has grounds for limiting access essentially to all sources of information that do not toe the official line. Legislative grounds for limiting media access (and jailing individuals consuming

362 Zamakhina, Tatyana (6 October 2022) Four new regions have been included in the list of the Russian federal subjects: what will change now. Regnum.ru. Access: <https://rg.ru/2022/10/06/chetyre-novyh-regiona-vkliucheny-v-perechen-subektov-rf-chto-teper-pomeniaetsia.html>

363 Hybrid Warfare Analytical Group (18 May 2018). Image of Ukraine on Russian TV. Ukraine Crisis Media Center. Access: <https://uacrisis.org/en/image-of-ukraine-on-russian-tv>

364 N/A (4 March 2022) Russia fights back in information war with jail warning. Reuters. Access: <https://www.reuters.com/world/europe/russia-introduce-jail-terms-spreading-fake-information-about-army-2022-03-04/>

and spreading relevant information) keep expanding – in particular, new laws were introduced in March 2023, making criticism of any mercenaries or other parties fighting on Russia's behalf a criminal offense³⁶⁵.

The imposition of digital control in the TOTs. Despite the fact that not all instruments of the Russian digital surveillance and repression have already been imported to the TOTs (e.g., the full launch of the facial recognition systems practiced across the Russian Federation requires more time), the regime's grip over Internet is rapidly solidifying. A special role in this process belongs to the System of Operative Investigative Measures (SORM), a "legal and technological architecture that allows the authorities to monitor, store, and filter information from commercial, mobile, internet, and phone traffic across Russian telecommunications networks"³⁶⁶. Reportedly it has already been used to track Ukrainians in the TOTs³⁶⁷. This expansion of digital authoritarianism has several major implications. Reroute of Internet traffic, among other factors, makes Ukrainian citizens who want to bypass the above-mentioned limitations imposed by Roskomnadzor extremely vulnerable. Not only can the consumption of information be monitored, so can be

personal communications, which poses a risk for anyone holding pro-Ukrainian position. Russian online sources banned in Ukraine for disseminating propaganda and Russian social media platforms such as VK and Odnoklassniki become available again – along with all the implications for personal data, which can be easily accessed by the Federal Security Service. Digital control is combined with the absence of the rule of law in TOTs and regular practices of checking the contents of one's phone to see if its owner consumes any "questionable" information³⁶⁸. Essentially, TOTs residents online are put in a digital cage where any information differentiating from anti-Ukrainian and anti-Western propaganda is not only hard to come by, but also poses a security risk for its consumer.

Media collaborationism (forced or voluntary) shaping information consumption at the local level. In 2022 74% of Ukrainians named online media as their key source of news³⁶⁹. Despite the domination of online sources, which mostly include the national-level ones, local media have traditionally been an essential and trusted source of information for the Ukrainian citizens, and this trend grew substantially with the start of the full-scale invasion, when

people were increasingly interested in finding up to date information about the military and economic developments in their communities. In 2022, the use of local TV has grown from 27% in 2021 to 44%, and a dramatic increase was observed in the consumption of local radio and print press³⁷⁰. Russian occupying authorities have exerted noticeable effort to control the local media infrastructure and, with it, the narratives broadcast at the local level. These attempts at establishing control are first and foremost exercised through bringing on board Russian personnel to seize the executive roles – cadres are imported to the newly occupied territories either from Russia itself or from the territories that have been under Russian occupation since 2014³⁷¹. Those media that made a collective decision to avoid collaboration with the occupying authorities in any way or form have either been exiled with their staff becoming internally displaced persons and operating from GCT or – and this is a wider trend – were forced to shut down. The process was swift, with more than 100 local media closing by April 2022, in less than two months after the start of the full-scale invasion³⁷². As a result, the remaining local media in TOTs have mostly come under the control

365 N/A (14 March 2023). Russian Lawmakers Approve Punishments for Criticism, 'Fake' Info on Mercenaries. The Moscow Times. Access: <https://www.themoscowtimes.com/2023/03/14/russian-lawmakers-approve-punishments-for-criticism-fake-info-on-mercenaries-a80478>

366 IPHR. (September 2023). Russia's digital authoritarianism: the Kremlin's toolkit. International Partnership for Human Rights. Access: <https://www.iphronline.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/09/Digital-Authoritarianism-Report-upd.pdf>

367 Smalley, Suzanne (16 June 2022). Mixed results for Russia's aggressive Ukraine information war, experts say. Cyberscoop. Access: <https://cyberscoop.com/russia-information-war-ukraine-cyber-command-sorm/>

368 Dotsenko, Margaryta (29 April 2023) In the Kherson region, the occupiers check locals' phones during the searches. Most. Access: <https://most.ks.ua/news/url/na-hersonschini-okupanti-pid-chas-obshukiv-perevirajut-telefoni-mistsevih-zhiteliv/>

369 N/A (29 November 2022) Almost ¾ of Ukrainians receive their news from the social media. Ukrinform. Access: <https://www.ukrinform.ua/rubric-society/3624224-majze-tri-cverti-ukrainciv-otrimuut-novini-iz-socmerez.html>

370 Ibid.

371 Chernetska, Svitlana (10 August 2023) Whom do the media collaborators work with? Natalia Lygachova about the new project of "Detector Media". Detector Media. Access: <https://go.detector.media/z-kim-spivpratsuyut-medijniki-kolaboranti-nataliya-ligachova-pro-novij-projekt-detektor-media/>

372 Kolykhayev, Ihor (27 April 2022). Almost 100 regional media in the TOTs have closed so as not to become collaborators. Chytomo. Access: <https://chytomo.com/ponad-100-rehionalnykh-media-na-tymchasovo-okupovanykh-terytoriiakh-zakrylysia-shchob-ne-buty-kolaborantamy/>

of occupying authorities that aggressively fill the relevant information landscape with Russian narratives via two key directions – employing a combination of Russian and collaborationist media workers to reroute the previously existing media (traditional and online) and creating new sources (also traditional and online).

Creation of new, pro-Russian media sources. Here, a methodological difficulty of making a clear distinction between the captured media and newly established media should be noted. It stems from the fact that newly founded pro-Russian outlets often rely on the sources, infrastructure and even collaborative personnel left from the Ukrainian media that was exiled or shut down (see above). For the purpose of this research, it is worthwhile to consider that if media source does not continue to use the same brand that was used before the capture by occupying authorities, it may be considered a newly founded one. The most illustrative example is a case of “Tavria24”, a local TV and radio company founded in March 2022 in the Kherson region on the basis of a former “Suspilne Kherson”, a branch of Ukrainian public broadcast provider³⁷³. Explored in more detail below, the case is yet another demonstration of the importance local media in the TOTs constitute for the occupying authorities. This is further highlighted by the creation of a vast network of online sources, in partic-

ular on the social media platforms, that target specific local communities. Newly available VK (see above) and Telegram are the key platforms, with at least 1,045 active VK groups and at least 640 active Telegram channels created after February 24th 2022 to target the TOTs³⁷⁴.

All of these trends outline Russian playbook in the media field of TOTs. Their key consequence is an attempted creation of alternative information reality in line with the overarching anti-Ukrainian, anti-Western and pro-Russian messaging designed by Moscow, and this attempt is implemented via creating a closed ecosystem where only “vetted” actors may function, be it traditional media or online sources. This approach is valid for all 5 regions of Ukraine under Russian occupation, which, despite the Russian attempts of introducing centralized information policy after the start of the full-scale invasion, have major differences further explored below.

Key principles and actors of the Russian information influence in Crimea

From the very beginning of the Russian hybrid aggression in 2014 Crimea was treated by the Russian leadership as a unique case, vastly different from Moscow’s previous experience of destabilizing its neighbors and violating their territorial in-

tegrity – the key difference, dictated by the importance of peninsula for the political mythology of Putin’s regime, was in the immediate attempt to fully incorporate Crimea in the Russian state. Russian proxies and local collaborators arguably later had a greater degree of autonomy in the so-called “DNR” and “LNR” than in Crimea, immediately dominated by the Russian authorities and recognized as an integral part of the Russian Federation.

As access to Ukrainian and international media on the peninsula was limited and the limitations have only been growing throughout the period of occupation, this space in the information field was filled by Russian sources – both traditional and online. The transfer was dramatic in terms of its implications but not as substantial in regard to the scope of the process as on the territories occupied after 2022. The reason for this characterization is that even prior to the annexation Russian media eco-system had a more extensive presence in Crimea than Ukrainian one and Russian sources were wider relied upon³⁷⁵ – which was a substantial element of success to the Russian influence operations that enabled the annexation itself. In addition to this, “Russian-language media content was dominant in Crimea, and the pressure against independent journalists has always been higher in Crimea than on the Ukrainian mainland”³⁷⁶.

373 Semeniuta, Iryna (8 August 2023). TRC “Tavria”. Hub of the Russian propaganda in the Kherson region. Detector Media. Access: <https://ms-detector.media/media-i-vlada/post/32635/2023-08-08-trk-tavriya-oseredok-rosiyskoi-propagandy-na-khersonshchyni/>

374 Loryan, Robert; Romaniuk, Anastasia and Snopok, Olha (17 May 2023). Information space of the TOTs: limitations on Ukrainian sources and occupying pro-Russian alternatives. OPORA. Access: https://oporaua.org/polit_ad/informatsiini-prostir-tot-obmezhenia-ukrayinskikh-re-sursiv-ta-okupatsiini-prorosiyski-alternativi-24714

375 Iasiello EJ (2017) Russia’s improved information operations: from Georgia to Crimea. *Parameters* 47(2): 51–63.

376 Ermoshina, Ksenia. (16 January 2023) “Voices from the Island”: Informational annexation of Crimea and transformations of journalistic practices. *Sage Journals*. Access: <https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/10.1177/14648849231152359>

While access to the national Russian media had already been broad, local Crimean media underwent a more dramatic change. Prior to 2014 there had been more than 3,000 media sources registered in Crimea, but by 2023 only 253 were able to renew their registration, which undoubtedly meant adherence to the pressure exerted by the Russian and occupying authorities on their editorial policies³⁷⁷. A variety of tools were used to force Ukrainian media (as well as Ukrainian activists in all fields) out of the peninsula, with kidnapping journalists, applying torture and physical violence against them, threatening media workers, conducting illegal searches, executing DDOS attacks against online sources, banning entry to Crimea being only some of them³⁷⁸. In 2023, approximately 280 local Crimean media [exist](#). Out of this list, 14 can be considered the leading ones in regard to the coverage of political issues, having [accreditation](#) with the so-called “State Council of the Republic of Crimea”:

- TV companies: LLC “Teleradiocompany ITV”, INPO “Teleradiocompany Crimea”, INPO “Public Crimean Tatar Teleradiocompany”, JSC “TV Center” in Crimea;
- Print press: Editorial Office of the “Russian Newspaper” in Simferopol, Weekly publication “Crimean Telegraph”, Editorial Office of the “Crimean Gazette”, Newspaper “Crimean Communist”;
- Information agencies: Regional division of MIA “Russia Today” in Simferopol, web-based media “Crimean Echo”, Information

agency “TAR-TASS”, Crimean Information Agency (CIA) “International Information Agency “Russia Today”.

The importance of local sources and branches of Russian nation-wide sources dedicated specifically to Crimea is underlined by the media consumption trends on the peninsula. According to Russian “Medialogia” company, in 2022 the top-10 list of most popular sources in Crimea was as follows:

- “Crimea24”
- Information agency “Crimealntorm”
- RIA “Crimea”
- Teleradiocompany “Millet”
- “Komsomolskaya Pravda – Crimea”
- State teleradiocompany “Tavrida”
- “Sputnik in Crimea”
- Sevastopol.su
- Radio “Crimea”
- Crimean Information Agency³⁷⁹ – although the information provided by Russian sources on media consumption is likely to be subjected to internal and state censorship and may not be fully reliable.

While local media are an essential element of the Crimean media eco-system, they do not overshadow the growing consumption of online sources, particularly on Telegram. As of October 2023, there were 166 Telegram channels and groups specific to Crimea, out of which 75 are [categorized](#) as news sources and media and

24 dedicated to politics – two leading categories. The top-10 most popular local channels are as follows:

- [“Crimea Incident”](#) – 236,544 subscribers, focus on local news, pro-Russian affiliation;
- [“Crimea #1”](#) – 169,972 subscribers, private channel, focus on local and Russian news, pro-Russian affiliation;
- [“RaZVozhaev”](#) – 143,358 subscribers, channel of the so-called Sevastopol governor Mikhail Razvozhayev, pro-Russian affiliation;
- [Romanov Light](#) – 133,008 subscribers, channel of military blogger Vladimir Romanov, pro-Russian affiliation;
- [“Aksyonov Z”](#) – 132,735 subscribers, channel of the so-called head of the Republic of Crimea Sergey Aksyonov, pro-Russian affiliation;
- [“TalipoV Online Z”](#) – 107,186 subscribers, channel of military blogger Aleksander Talipov, pro-Russian affiliation;
- [“Southern Tower”](#) – 103,487 subscribers, anonymous channel focused on local news and politics, pro-Russian affiliation;
- [“Incident Crimea RTC”](#) – 86,927 subscribers, focus on local and Russian news and traffic accidents, pro-Russian affiliation;
- [“Incident/Simferopol”](#) – 68,756 subscribers, focus on local news and traffic incidents in Simferopol, pro-Russian affiliation;
- [“Crimean Z Washer”](#) – 65,167 subscribers, anonymous channel affiliated with the military

377 N/A (7 February 2023). There used to be 3,000 media in Crimea before the occupation, only 250 are left after – Tasheva. Institute of Mass Information. Access: <https://imi.org.ua/news/do-okupatsiyi-u-krymu-bulo-ponad-3-tysyachi-media-pislya-zalyshylosya-blyzko-250-tasheva-i50595>

378 Hasprin, Artur (30 June 2023). Occupation of Crimea’s information space: lessons from resistance. RL/RFE. Access: <https://ua.krymr.com/a/okupatsia-informatsiynoho-prostoru-krymu-sprotyv/32484126.html>

379 N/A (2022) Republic of Crimea and Sevastopol: mass media ranking in 2022. Access: <https://www.mlg.ru/ratings/media/regional/11963/>

blogger Evgeniy Linin, focus on the military news, pro-Russian affiliation.

The ranking in general is dominated by channels focusing on the local and Russian news with lifestyle channels primary about tourism also enjoying wide popularity. The only notable exemption from the dominance of explicitly or implicitly pro-Russian sources in the ranking is Ukrainian channel “[Krym.Realii](#)” ranking 16th with 33,561 subscriber.

Traditional and online media, both Russian national and local, in Crimea constitute a vital, but not the only element of the vast system of propaganda that employs all the institutions available to the Russian and occupying authorities. The structure of this system is a subject of a separate research; however, it is worthwhile to at least introduce the importance of Russian GNGOs as well as formal and informal political networks present in Crimea and playing a crucial role both in the 2014 annexation and in the consolidation of Russian rule.

Substantial role prior to annexation

has been played by the above mentioned Ukrainian Orthodox Church of Moscow Patriarchate, and after 2014 the role Russian Orthodox Church itself as well as religious groups affiliated with it grew substantially. **Crimean Metropolia, created in June 2022³⁸⁰, is a leading institutional body to implement ROC influence on the peninsula.** Based on Simferopol episcopate directly subjugated to the head of ROC Patriarch Kirill, Crimean metropolia was led by Metropolitan Lazar (Rostislav Shvets) up until October 11 2023³⁸¹. Worthwhile to note that on April 24th 2014, a month after the so-called “referendum” to annex Crimea, Shvets was awarded with the badge of Saint Serafim of Sarov, a high-level ROC award.

Paramilitary groups exerted notable influence on the process of annexation and remained influential after it. **The most notable example is that of “Cossack squads”.** In addition to having a special Cossack-based battalion “Tavrida” (part of Rosgvardia) closely linked to the so-called Crimean governor Sergey Aksyonov himself³⁸², Cossacks also have a network of several dozen communities. In

2020 a process of unification started, with Cossacks forming a separate “Black Sea Cossack Army” – a paramilitary structure tasked first and foremost with “protecting borders and supporting public order”³⁸³. Special “Cossack” classes are also formed in some of the Crimean schools, being a part of the propaganda and indoctrination system targeting children in the TOTs³⁸⁴. In 2021, a special Cossack boarding school was opened in Crimea³⁸⁵. “Black Sea Cossack Army” also has a [separate youth unit](#), “Union of Cossack Youth in Crimea and Sevastopol”. The most noticeable individuals leading the “Cossack squads” in Crimea are Andrey Sirotkin, ataman of the “Black Sea Cossack Army”; Anatoliy Afroniev, deputy to Sirotkin; and Oleg Gasanov, commander of “Sevastopol” storm squad of “Tavrida” battalion³⁸⁶.

In addition to Cossacks, other paramilitary groups pertaining influence in Crimea are the semi-formal “fight clubs” that actively supported the annexation³⁸⁷ and organization “Oplot” that also originated as a fight club in Kharkiv in 2011³⁸⁸. “Oplot” was mostly active in the

380 Press Service of the Patriarch of Moscow and All Russia (7 June 2022) Journals of the Holy Synod for June 7 2022. Russian Orthodox Church, Official Web-Site of the Moscow Patriarchate. Access: <http://www.patriarchia.ru/db/text/5934527.html>

381 Press Service of the Patriarch of Moscow and All Russia (11 October 2023) Journals of the Holy Synod for October 11, 2023. Russian Orthodox Church, Official Web-Site of the Moscow Patriarchate. Access: <http://www.patriarchia.ru/db/text/6066199.html>

382 Roshchyna, Viktoria (22 May 2023). Private Armies of Aksyonov: How Russia-occupied Crimea prepares for the Ukrainian counter-offensive. Ukrainska Pravda. Access: <https://www.pravda.com.ua/articles/2023/05/22/7403217/>

383 N/A (18 January 2020) Cossacks of Crimea and Sevastopol united into the Black sea army. RIA.Novosti. Access: <https://ria.ru/20200118/1563575005.html>

384 Mokrushy, Serhii (29 April 2020) “Horror-stories about Banderovites have become a system”. How Russia brings up children in the occupied Crimea. Krym.Realii. Access: <https://ua.krymr.com/a/pravozahysnyky-pro-patriotychne-vykovannya-ditey-v-aneksovanomu-krymu/30582886.html>

385 Removska, Olena (22 December 2020). “State control over the force” how Russia uses Cossacks in Crimea. Krym.Realii. Access: <https://ua.krymr.com/a/krym-kazaky-rosia-kadetskyi-korpus/31013238.html>

386 Roshchyna, Viktoria (22 May 2023). Private Armies of Aksyonov: How Russia-occupied Crimea prepares for the Ukrainian counter-offensive. Ukrainska Pravda. Access: <https://www.pravda.com.ua/articles/2023/05/22/7403217/>

387 Center for Countering Disinformation (14 March 2023). History of the creeping annexation of Crimea 2004 – 2010. Center for Countering Disinformation at the National Security and Defense Council of Ukraine. Access: <https://cpd.gov.ua/main/istoriya-povzuchoyi-aneksiyi-krymu-2004-2010-roky/>

388 N/A (16 April 2014). Donetsk city council was captured by the Kharkiv group “Oplot”. BBC Russian Service. Access: https://www.bbc.com/russian/rolling_news/2014/04/140416_rn_donetsk_seizure_update

eastern regions of Ukraine and in addition to attempted countering of the Revolution of Dignity in 2013-2014 it became a basis of the “Oplot” battalion of the so-called DNR; however, its influence in Crimea should not be neglected³⁸⁹.

All of these structures led by the local authorities and media have been increased the output of anti-Ukrainian propaganda after the start of the full-scale invasion in 2022. While the key pillars of it are well in line with the overall Russian agenda regarding the war, some topics are specific to the region and concerns of the local authorities as well as citizens – although the last two categories are not always overlapping. **The most important narrative specific to the region after February 24th 2022 is “Crimea will not be impacted by the hostilities and Crimean people are safe”³⁹⁰.** Russian and local occupying authorities led by Sergey Aksyonov applied substantial effort to minimize and diminish the potential threat of combat spilling over to the territory of Crimea in any way. Attempting to portray the peninsula as a safe haven, in 2023 they faced increasing challenges posed by the effectiveness of the Western-supplied weapons and strikes on Crimea and “Crimean bridge” in particular. Social and economic consequences of war have also become increasingly evident, adding

to the growing dissatisfaction with the local authorities which have not prepared the local population for the impact of hostilities. It is highly likely that censorship in Crimea will only grow in attempt of the Russian authorities to quell any potential discontent in a region that is strategically important for the Russian military prospects as well as for the stability of Putin’s regime.

Key principles and actors of the Russian information influence in the so-called “DNR” and “LNR”

This section of the research should be preceded by an essential disclaimer admitting that some substantial differences in how Russian influence is exerted in the so called “DNR” and “LNR” exist. However, the initial model of hybrid aggression in 2014, Russian approach to managing the puppet “republics” and the general outline of the media eco-system that emerged in both regions allows for joint analysis of the key principles of Russian information influence in the temporary occupied Donetsk and Luhansk oblasts.

Similarly to Crimea, the so called “DNR” and “LNR” have been exposed to centralized and consistent Russian propaganda since 2014. The

key difference in the practice of this exposure is that prior to the declared inclusion of both oblasts to the Russian Federation in 2022, “DNR” and “LNR” maintained a façade of independent legislative and media systems – albeit much similar to and extensively reliant on Russian legislation, policies, personnel, practices and content. Key documents establishing the declarative pillars of media functioning in both regions are the local “constitutions” (developed directly by the Administration of the President of the Russian Federation³⁹¹) and laws “On Mass Media”, which have few differences³⁹². While these and other documents declare an array of democratic principles, including freedom of speech, the political practice is very different – according to Freedom House, “no free and independent media have operated in the occupied Donbas since 2014 and the local media landscape remains firmly in the hands of “official” DNR and LNR broadcasters, websites, and print media. Separatist outlets largely republish information and quotes from separatist and Russian officials.”³⁹³

Leading political bodies charged with control over media space in Donetsk and Luhansk are the so-called:

- “Ministry of Information of DNR” – led by Natalia Pershyna and her deputy Artem Olkhin;
- “Ministry of Digital Develop-

389 Horbulin, Volodymyr (18 February 2016) Theses to the second anniversary of the Russian aggression against Ukraine. Ukraine Crisis Media Center. Access: <http://uacrisis.org/ua/40347-gorbulin-tezy>

390 Veselova, Viktoria (11 October 2023). Aksyonov no longer guarantees security for Crimea? How was the rhetoric of Russian authorities changing in Crimea during the war. Krym.Realii. Access: <https://ua.krymr.com/a/aks'onov-bezpilotnyky-viyna-obstril-bpla-rozmova/32632759.html>

391 Shandra, Alya and Seely, Robert (16 July 2019) The Surkov Leaks: The inner workings of Russia’s hybrid war in Ukraine. Royal United Services Institute. Access: <https://rusi.org/explore-our-research/publications/occasional-papers/surkov-leaks-inner-workings-russias-hybrid-war-ukraine>

392 Sabura, Oleh (April 2020). Special features of media regulation in the temporary occupied territories of Donetsk and Luhansk regions. Vernadsky Taurida National University Bulletin. Access: <https://ekmair.ukma.edu.ua/server/api/core/bitstreams/cd34bcbf-f559-404f-9bae-bfa12b709d04/content>

393 N/A (2023) Freedom in the world – 2023. Eastern Donbas. Freedom House. Access: <https://freedomhouse.org/country/eastern-donbas/freedom-world/2022>

ment, Communications and Mass Communications of LNR” [the institution was renamed several times since 2014 with no solid record of changes available] – [led by](#) Andrei Yershov along with his deputies Aleksandra Veselova and Vladimir Kharitonov.

It should be noted that other bodies of authority, in particular “ministries” of education and culture, also play an important role in streamlining propaganda in “DNR” and “LNR”. At the same time, in the absence of rule of law and full dependance on Russian regime no “governmental body” in the occupied regions of eastern Ukraine is independent and has actual control over policy development, rather serving as tools to execute information influence as designed by Russian authorities. Personalistic influence of Denis Pushylin, the so-called head of “DNR”, and Leonid Pasechnik, the so-called head of “LNR”, also play a role in how the declared executive bodies exercise their influence.

In general, the practices of censorship and limitation of access to Ukrainian and Western media have been extensively implemented over the course of 9 years under occupation. While it took some time for the centralized system of communication to be established (and become

cemented by the full-scale invasion), the changes of the local media landscape were rather rapid. All the media infrastructure in the so-called “DNR” and “LNR” was seized by Russian hybrid forces in 2014. No reliable information could be found about the number of local media in the Luhansk region prior to 2014, however, at least 3 local TV channels functioned in Luhansk³⁹⁴. By 2016, at least 300 Ukrainian media were declared to be blocked in “LNR”³⁹⁵. It can be speculated that in line with the previously outlined Russian strategy, the majority of Ukrainian media were closed or exiled after the occupation in Luhansk region. Donetsk region has always had a wider network of local media compared to Luhansk, although there was traditionally less competition among different owners³⁹⁶. Before 2014 there were more than 1200 print media registered in the Donetsk region with 200 in Donetsk itself³⁹⁷. Grip on Internet traffic solidified slower, but by January 2019 all the backbone traffic from both regions was fully readministered to Russia³⁹⁸.

Limiting access to Ukrainian and Western media was the first step followed by the increasing exposure to the Russian national media. Much as in Crimea (and in all the newly occupied territories after 2022) Russian traditional media and online sources flooded the information field,

giving the local occupying authorities time to adjust and develop new local media instead of the flushed out Ukrainian ones. The popularity of these new local media would remain low compared to the Russian channels of communications mostly due to the inferior quality, however, these media still became an important tool of shaping the local agenda.

In “DNR” the leading local media [may be listed](#) as follows:

- TV channels: “Avesta”, “Gorlovka TV”, “Novorossiia TV”, “Oplot TV”, “Pervyi Respublikanskiy”, “TV-Sphere”, “Torez Television”, “Miners’ television studio”, “Union”.
- Print press: “Golos Respubliki”, “Debaltesvkiye Vesti”, “Donetsk Vechernii”, “Enakievskii Rabochii”, “Znamia Pobedy”, “Kochegarka DNR”, “Makeevskii Rabochii DNR”, “Nashe Vremya”, “Novaya Zhysn”, “Novaya Niva”, “Novye Gorizonty”, “Novyi Luch”, “Rodina”, “Rodnoye Priazovye”, “Snezhnyanskii Novosti”, “Torezskii Gorniak”, “Yasinovatskii Vesnik DNR”.
- Radio: “Papino Radio”, “Respublika”, “Stolitsa”, “Kometa”, “Radio TV”.

In September 2023 it was announced that all the local media will form a holding company – “Republican Media Holding”. While the declared

394 Kostiuhenko, Tetyana and Vitkovska, Anastasia (18 March 2016). Research on the media situation in the east and south of Ukraine: Luhansk region. Institute of Mass Information. Access: <https://imi.org.ua/articles/doslidjennya-media-situatsiji-na-shodi-i-pivdni-ukrajini-luhanska-oblast-i533>

395 NGO “Detector Media” (29 July 2016) Plotniskii announces hundreds of web-sites are blocked in the “LNR”. Detector Media. Access: <https://detector.media/infospace/article/117327/2016-07-29-plotnyskyi-zayavyv-pro-sotni-zablokovanykh-v-lnr-saytiv/>

396 Kostiuhenko, Tetyana and Vitkovska, Anastasia (11 March 2016). Research on the media situation in the east and south of Ukraine: Donetsk region. Institute of Mass Information. Access: <https://imi.org.ua/articles/doslidjennya-media-situatsiji-na-shodi-i-pivdni-ukrajini-donetska-oblast-i545>

397 N/A (18 August 2022) Losing media, but not giving up. P.Oryk Institute for Democracy. Access: <https://idpo.org.ua/articles/4765-vtrachayemo-media-ne-opuskayemo-ruk.html>

398 N/A (9 January 2019) LNR and DNR have fully switch their backbone traffic to Russia. CNews. Access: https://www.cnews.ru/news/top/2019-01-08_dnr_i_lnr_polnostyu_pereklyuchili_magistralnyj

aim of this unification is “to broaden audience engagement and spark creativity”³⁹⁹, the more likely reason is an attempt to further centralize control over the information flows in TOTs after the start of the full-scale invasion.

No publicly available record of the registered local media in “LNR” was found. The only estimate was given by Yuriy Pershykov, the former deputy of the “Minister of Mass Communications”, in 2019, who claimed that there were approximately 200 mass media functioning in “LNR”, out of which 133 were “state media” and 72 were private media (14 outlets were labeled as non-active)⁴⁰⁰. Pershykov himself was [leading](#) three information agencies: “Luhansk 1”, “Novoross Info” and “Okkupatsii Net”. The following traditional media were discovered in “LNR”, although the list may not be exhaustive:

- TV channels: “Luhansk 24”; “Televisionnaya initsiativa molodezhy” – a youth online-TV channel launched in 2020⁴⁰¹;
- Print Press ([excluding lifestyle press](#)): “Respublika”, “Nasha Gazeta”, “Vecherniy Lugansk”, “Yedinstvo”, “Molodogvardeets”, “Golos Donbassa”, “Izvestiya Luganshchiny”, “Sovetskaya Luganshchina”. In August 2022 it was declared that local newspapers were established in “all regions of the republic”⁴⁰², al-

though it is not possible to confirm this claim or get a record of these newspapers.

- Radio: “Lugansk”, “Svoye Radio”, “Frontovoye Radio”, “LNR.FM”.

A focal point of communications in “LNR” is Luhansk Information Center currently led by Sergey Meshkovoi. The agency was founded in 2014 and received a status of the “official electronic press organ of the head of LNR”⁴⁰³.

Online media and information sources play an essential role in the media eco-system of both regions with their “governmental bodies” and individual politicians extensively relying on Telegram. In both Donetsk and Luhansk Telegram may be considered a focal point for information flows, where Russian channels are consumed on par with the content from “military bloggers” and anonymous regional channels. It has been established that there are at least two dozen channels about life in the occupied Donetsk and Luhansk, which have been extensively used to promote propaganda and disinformation not only for the locals, but also for the residents of GCTs – often under administration from the Russian intelligence services⁴⁰⁴.

TGStat, Russian leading service on Telegram data analysis, does not rec-

ognize “DNR” and “LNR” as Russian regions – contrary to Crimea, which the service lists among those. Due to this, no exhaustive list of Telegram channels was found for both regions. However, it is possible to establish the top-10 sources on the platform for the administrative centers of both.

In the city of Donetsk, the top-10 channels are:

- [Typical Donetsk](#) – 574,000 subscribers, focus on the local news, pro-Russian affiliation
- [Incident Donetsk Z](#) – 315,268 subscribers, focus on local news, pro-Russian affiliation
- [Vacancies in Donetsk](#) – 133,274 subscribers, focus on the local job opportunities, pro-Russian affiliation;
- [Donetsk DNR News SVO](#) – 90,463 subscribers, pro-Russian affiliation;
- [Pushylin D.V.](#) – 81,441 subscriber, personal channel of the so-called “head of DNR”, pro-Russian affiliation;
- [Separ ZOV Lugansk Donetsk](#) – 79,994 subscribers, pro-Russian affiliation;
- [Military Z Donetsk](#) – 74,249 subscribers, focus on military news, pro-Russian affiliation
- [Donetsk | Incident Makeevka | Donbass](#) – 67,286, focus on local news, pro-Russian affiliation
- [Avtorynok DNR](#) – 66,094 subscribers, focus on car sales,

399 N/A (21 September 2023). Media-holding in DNR will allow to expand the audience engagement and spark creativity. Donetsk News Agency. Access: <https://dan-news.ru/exclusive/mediaholding-v-dnr-pozvolit-rasshirit-ohvat-auditorii-i-dast-impuls-tvorchestvu/>

400 N/A (17 July 2019) Approximately 200 mass media are active on the territory of LNR. Lugansk Information Center. Access: <https://lug-info.com/news/okolo-200-sredstv-massovoi-informatsii-vedut-deyatelnost-na-territorii-lnr-minkomsvyazi-46970>

401 N/A (11 April 2021) Leaders of the first youth channel in LNR: “TIM is a team that wants to create”. Lugansk Inform Center. Access: <https://lug-info.com/news/rukovoditel-pervogo-v-lnr-molodezhnogo-kanala-tim-eto-komanda-zhelayuschaya-tvorit-foto-66448>

402 N/A (12 August 2022). Local media have emerged in all the regions of the republic. Lugansk Inform center. Access: <https://lug-info.com/news/mestnye-gazety-poyavilis-vo-vseh-regionah-respubliki-minkomsvyazi-lnr>

403 N/A (9 December 2014). Head of LNR: state information agency was formed in the republic. TASS. Access: <https://tass.ru/mezhdunarodnaya-panorama/1634445>

404 Shtekel, Mykhailo (4 March 2021). Telegram channels about Donetsk and Luhansk are run for the IDPs and may be used for disinformation. RL/RFE. Access: <https://www.radiosvoboda.org/a/donbass-telegram-propaganda/31133547.html>

pro-Russian affiliation

- [Huyovyi Donetsk](#) – 65,241 subscribers, focus on the local news, pro-Russian affiliation.

In the city of Luhansk, the following channels constitute top-10:

- [Vacancies in Luhansk](#) – 180,670 subscribers, focus on the local job opportunities, sister channel of the Vacancies in Donetsk, pro-Russian affiliation;
- Separ ZOV Lugansk Donetsk – 79,994 subscribers, pro-Russian affiliation;
- Andrei Luganskiy – 53,265 subscribers, focus on Ukrainian internal political conflicts, pro-Russian affiliation
- [Incident Lugansk | LNR](#) – 51,620 subscribers, focus on the local news, pro-Russian affiliation
- [LuganskInformCenterZ](#) – 33,222 subscribers, channel of the above-mentioned Lugansk Information Center, pro-Russian affiliation;
- [Lugansk Today LNR | Donbass](#) – 30,061 subscribers, focus on the local news, pro-Russian affiliation;
- [News LNR](#) – 22,567 subscribers, focus on the local news, pro-Russian affiliation;
- [Leonid Pasechnik](#) – 18,667 subscribers, personal channel of the so-called “head of LNR”, pro-Russian affiliation;
- [Moscow Constructor](#) – 18,197 subscribers, personal channel of the supposed construction worker from Moscow who

moved to Luhansk to take part in rebuilding it; pro-Russian affiliation.

- [That very Lugansk](#) – 16,683 subscribers, focus on the local news, pro-Russian affiliation;

Dominance of pro-Russian sources is a basis for speculation that in other cities/settlements of the so-called “DNR” and “LNR” the online information environment is structured similarly. Presence of pro-Ukrainian online sources is likely to increase at the newly occupied territories of both regions that have not been subjected to occupation for extended period of time so far. Additionally, the online environment of both “DNR” and “LNR” overlaps substantially and given the broader selection of more active media sources in the Donetsk region it is likely that “DNR” actors may be a substantial source of information for the residents of Luhansk region.

Non-governmental actors linked to Russia, in particular paramilitary structures, have played an important role in the hybrid aggression of 2014 similarly to developments in Crimea, although their media presence has substantially declined over the years. Brief overview of their activity suggests that “Cossack squads” across Donetsk and Luhansk regions were among the most noticeable actors, led by the “Cossack National Guard of the All-Great Don Host” active in 2014-2015. Mostly involved in the military activ-

ities, Cossacks maintained a certain degree of influence in both regions, which started increasing again in 2022 – in particular, separate communities of “DNR” Cossacks announced they will be forming a joint Krasnoliman regiment⁴⁰⁵. Constituted by the Russian Cossacks and local pro-Russian volunteers, these unites, however, did not receive as much attention and influence as in Crimea. In Donetsk and Luhansk indoctrination of children and spread of propaganda in the educational facilities is led not by Cossacks, but by the youth military organization “Yunarmia” (also vastly represented in Crimea) as well as several other groups – “Youth Guard of Donbass”, “Patriot” and “Bastion”⁴⁰⁶ as well as [“Amazons”](#) and [“Korsa”](#) to name a few.

Another paramilitary organization of importance in “DNR” and “LNR” was the “Union of the Donbass Volunteers” led by a Russian alleged FSB officer Aleksander Borodai⁴⁰⁷, who took an active part in the hybrid aggression of 2014. Registered and located in Moscow, it unites some of the Russian and local militants who took part in the hostilities. Linked to Vladislav Surkov, former aide to Putin, and media oligarch, owner of the Orthodox “Tsargrad” TV channel Konstantin Malofeev⁴⁰⁸, the Union became increasingly detached from the local matters in Donetsk and Luhansk, although it still maintains some presence in the local information field – its active [VK page](#) has

405 Melnikov, Ruslan. (15 October 2022). In DNR, Krasnoliman Cossack squad is being formed. Regnum.ru. Access: <https://rg.ru/2022/10/15/v-dnr-nachali-formirovat-krasnolimanskij-kazachij-polk.html>

406 Mamedov, Hiunduz. (24 April 2022) “Zombification from the cradle”: Russia prepares teenagers for participation in the war against Ukraine. Krym.Realii. Access: <https://www.radiosvoboda.org/a/rosiya-militaryzatsiya-pidlitky/31817940.html>

407 Union of Donbas Volunteers (UDV). Global Security. <https://www.globalsecurity.org/military/world/russia/udv.htm>

408 N/A (14 March 2020) Surkov named the Union of the Donbass Volunteers as his only organization. Lenta.ru. Access: <https://lenta.ru/news/2020/03/14/wargonzj/>

±44,000 subscribers and 9,780 subscribers on [Telegram](#). The organization remains involved in hostilities, recruiting volunteers to fight for Russia during the full-scale invasion.

More influence in the information space, however, in Donetsk and Luhansk region is exerted not by the paramilitary groups, including those who have not been listed here, but by the branches of Russian NGOs and “cultural centers”. The leading body within them is “Russkiy Mir” foundation that has its offices in both Donetsk and Luhansk⁴⁰⁹ and has been actively involved with the local “ministries of education”; key individual responsible for the promotion of “Russkiy Mir” foundation in Donetsk and Luhansk is Vsevolod Zheleznev, Director of the Programs for Commonwealth of Independent Nations⁴¹⁰. “Russkiy Dom”, a flagman project of another organization tasked with the promotion of Russian soft power abroad, has also opened its office in Donetsk (2021)⁴¹¹ and planned to open one in Luhansk in 2022⁴¹². Both organizations are focused on the promotion of historical disinformation, whitewashing the role of the USSR and the use of “soft propaganda”

via cultural tools. Their expansion to the newly occupied territories of the Donetsk and Luhansk regions seems unlikely in the nearest future due to the military instability. However, should the current status quo be maintained the efforts to expand Russian presence in the information environment of these TOTs will only grow.

Key principles and actors of the Russian information influence in the temporary occupied territories of the Zaporizhzhia region

As of October 2023, more than 50% of the Zaporizhzhia region remains under the Russian occupation⁴¹³. The majority of control was established in the early stages of the full-scale invasion, with the city of Berdyansk being occupied on February 26th 2022, the city of Melitopol being seized on March 1st 2022, and the town of Enerhodar (where the Zaporizhzhia Nuclear Power Plant is located) on March 4th 2022. However, the administrative center of the region, city of Zaporizhzhia itself, has remained under Ukrainian control and became a major hub

for the internally displaced persons fleeing hostilities in the eastern and southern regions of the country.

Such military division led to the existence of two parallel realities within one region, where GCTs have full access to Ukrainian and Western media, while the typical Russian playbook of censorship and introduction of systemic propaganda is being introduced on the temporary occupied territories of Zaporizhzhia (TOTZ). In May 2022 passportization campaign started on TOTZ⁴¹⁴ and on September 30th 2022 the so-called “governor” of Zaporizhzhia region collaborator Yevgen Balitskiy, a former member of the pro-Russian “Party of Regions” in Ukraine, signed a decree according to which Zaporizhzhia region as a whole becomes a part of the Russian Federation⁴¹⁵ following the illegitimate “referendum” – despite Russian lack of control over part of the region. The case of TOTZ, as well as of the Kherson region, poses a stark contrast to the previously analyzed developments in Crimea, Donetsk and Luhansk regions. Both the model of the occupation that lacked “plausible deniability” observed in 2014 and the limited timeframe imply

409 Mostova, Daria (10 July 2021) “War for minds and souls”: in ORDLO the “Russkiy Mir” foundation is being created under Kozak’s leadership. *Liga.net*. Access: <https://news.liga.net/politics/news/voyna-za-razum-i-dushi-v-ordlo-sozdali-fond-russkii-mir-pod-nachalom-kozaka-razvedka>

410 N/A (7 November 2019) Russkiy Mir Foundation will continue cooperation with LNR and DNR – director of the CIS programs. *Lugansk Inform Center*. Access: <https://lug-info.com/news/fond-russkii-mir-budet-prodolzhat-sotrudnichestvo-s-lnr-i-dnr-direktor-programm-po-sng-50400>

411 N/A (30 November 2021) “Russian House” has opened in Donetsk: what is it for and how to sign up? *Donetsk News Agency*. Access: <https://dan-news.ru/russia/v-donecke-otkrylsja-russkij-dom.-dlja-chego-on-nuzhen-i-chem-budet-zanimatsja/>

412 Soroka, Ekaterina (1 December 2021) “Russian House” in Lugansk will be opened in 2022. *Komsomolskaya Pravda*. Access: <https://www.donetsk.kp.ru/online/news/4537293/>

413 Halich, Margaryta and Filonenko, Ella. (3 September 2023). In a week everything on the de-occupied territories of the Zaporizhzhia region will work. *Suspilne*. Access: <https://suspilne.media/564585-za-tizden-na-deokupovanih-teritoriah-zaporizkoi-oblasti-mae-zapracuvati-vse-golova-zova-malasko/>

414 Yankovsky, Oleksandr and Badiuk, Olena (25 May 2023) Blackmailing intensifies. Russia speeds up passportization under occupation before the elections. *RL/RFE*. Access: <https://www.radiosvoboda.org/a/novyny-pryazovya-shantazh-rosiyska-pasportyzatsiya-okupatsiya-vybo-ry/32426158.html>

415 N/A (29 June 2023) The pseudo-governor of Zaporizhzhia region Balitskiy was sentenced to 15 years and confiscation of assets. *Ukrinform*. Access: <https://www.ukrinform.ua/rubric-society/3729378-psevdogubernatora-zaporizkoi-oblasti-balickogo-zasudili-do-15-rokiv-z-konfiskacieu-majna.html>

that TOTZ is still undergoing a transit. Should the occupation continue, Russian cognitive control over the region is likely to solidify with less and less Ukrainian and Western media being available, while Russian propaganda takes root in the local media. The process has already started, with the seizure of media infrastructure immediately after the establishment of military control over TOTZ. Ukrainian broadcasting “has disappeared from Melitopol and berdyansk, Prymorsk and Tokmak, Bilmak and Dniprorudne, Enerhodar, Polohy and Vesele”⁴¹⁶.

During the initial phases of the occupation in Zaporizhzhia region, however, Russian forced and local occupiers had to rely mostly on the social media, which was the key source of information for 64% of the local population already⁴¹⁷. Active combat and proximity to the front-line were arguably the main reasons behind a relatively slow turnaround of the local media infrastructure – while seized early, only by the end of the summer 2022 was it systemically broadcasting Russian TV channels and radio⁴¹⁸. Works to repurpose the media infrastructure actively involved specialists from the occupied

Crimea, which became a “propaganda donor” for the newly occupied territories in a number of ways, from printing a propaganda newspaper “Zaporozhskiy Vestnik” for further distribution in Zaporizhzhia⁴¹⁹, to transferring people for participation in the so-called “referendum” and creating a picture of a well-attended and legitimate action⁴²⁰.

As a result of occupation, the following Ukrainian TV providers were closed down in TOTZ: teleradiocompany “Melitopol”, teleradiocompany “MTV Plus”, Berdyansk city teleradiocompany “TV-Berdyansk”, “Teleradiocompany YUG”, “Enerhodar Television systems”. Notable here is the case of “MTV Plus”, which has been repurposed for Russian propaganda purposes and is linked to the above mentioned Evgeny Balitskiy, giving him more personal control over the information landscape and local agenda in TOTZ⁴²¹. Similar approach has also been applied to print press – the outlets that were not closed or exiled became propaganda mouthpieces with the case of “Melitopolskie Vedomosti” being the most notable example. The newspaper currently exists in two versions, one issued on GCTs

and one on TOTZ. The publisher of original “Melitopolskie Vedomosti” Mykhailo Kumok was kidnapped by the Russian forces along with three of his journalists in March 2022⁴²². After being freed from captivity Kumok has left TOTZ and continued to publish the newspaper on GCTs while the brand on TOTZ has been captured by the occupying authorities.

New, pro-Russian media infrastructure is emerging in TOTZ, with the following key local sources identified:

- TV-channels: “MTV+”, “Melitopol TV”, “Za!TV”
- Radio: Za!Radio
- Print Press: “Melitopolskie Vedomosti”, “Zaporozhskaya Pravda”, “Komsomolskaya Pravda – Zaporozhye”.

“Komsomolskaya Pravda – Zaporozhye” is a local branch of a Russian propaganda newspaper which has many regional divisions usually run by local stuff. In case of Zaporizhzhia, however, the majority of contributions are made by the Russian nationals working at other KP branches. Two reporters are particularly noteworthy - Irina Herz and

416 Semeniuta, Iryna and Bohdanovych, Andrii (18 August 2023). Media collaborators of Zaporizhzhia: who, how and why collaborated with the enemy. Detector Media. Access: <https://ms.detector.media/media-i-vlada/post/32724/2023-08-18-mediyni-kolaboranty-zaporizhzhya-kh-to-yak-i-chomu-spivpratsyuvav-iz-vorogom/>

417 Internews. (November 2021) Attitude of the population to media and consumption of different types of media in 2021. Internews Ukraine. Access: <https://internews.in.ua/wp-content/uploads/2021/11/Opytuvannya-stavlennya-naselennya-do-media-ta-spozhyvannya-riznyh-typiv-media-2021.pdf>

418 N/A (18 August 2022) The Ministry of Defense showed footage of the work of specialists of the mobile radio complex ZVO. VPK.News. Access: https://vpk.name/en/623879_the-ministry-of-defense-showed-footage-of-the-work-of-specialists-of-the-mobile-radio-complex-zvo.html

419 N/A (19 July 2022) At the occupied territories of Zaporizhzhia region, a propaganda newspaper printed in Crimea is distributed. Institute of Mass Information. Access: <https://imi.org.ua/news/na-okupovani-j-chastyni-zaporizkoyi-oblasti-rozpovsyudzhuyut-propagandyst-sku-gazetu-nadrukovanu-v-i46830>

420 Hordiichuk, Ivanna (23 September 2023) “Referendum” in Zaporizhzhia – Rashists have brought extras from Crimea. Glavkom. Access: <https://glavkom.ua/country/incidents/referendum-na-zaporizhzhji-rashisti-privezli-masovku-z-krimu-877294.html>

421 N/A (2 August 2022) In the occupied Melitopol, a propaganda TV channel was launched. Chytomo. Access: <https://chytomo.com/v-okupovanomu-melitopoli-vidkryly-propahandystskij-telekanal/>

422 N/A (21 March 2022) Russian occupiers have kidnapped female journalists and the owner of publishing holding in Melitopol. Suspilne. Access: <https://suspilne.media/219874-rosijski-okupanti-vikrali-zurnalistok-ta-vlasnika-vidavnicogo-holdingu-v-melitopoli/>

Anatoly Vasilyev, authors for Crimea and Donetsk branches respectively⁴²³, whose engagement with “Komsomolskaya Pravda – Zaporozhye” again highlights Russia’s readiness to import media workers from the previously occupied territories to reinforce its influence in the newly seized regions. The declared outreach of this newspaper is high, with the first issue reportedly having 705,000 and the second 735,000 copies⁴²⁴.

Local outlets of the special importance for the occupying authorities are “Za!TV” and “Za!Radio”, parts of the ZaMedia holding controlled by Aleksander Malkevich, closely linked to the former head of PMC “Wagner” Evgeny Prigozhyn⁴²⁵. Malkevich is among the leading figures exercising influence over the media fields of the newly occupied territories of Ukraine, and his links to Prigozhyn stipulate his involvement in the spread of disinformation online via the use of bot farms and trolls that Prigozhyn was famous for. Malkevich founded ZaMedia during the summer of 2022 and has been consistently attempting to expand the

influence of the new propaganda network, in particular by launching “school of journalism” to train new personnel for it⁴²⁶. Key people enabling ZaMedia are Vadim Kucher, the formal owner of this entity; Vadim Ivanov, director of “Za!TV”; Egor Poberey and Vladimir Andronaki – identified propagandists working for the holding, with Andronaki also an active participant of “Radio Krym”⁴²⁷. Other individuals, mostly local collaborators working for the new propaganda outlets in TOTZ, are Dmytro Pereverzev, Dmytro Pysanets, Serhii Mnazkanov, Hennadiy Nikitenko and Vadym Konovalsky⁴²⁸.

Another entity essential for the spread of propaganda in TOTZ is the Zaporozhye News Agency. Launched in July 2023 with the support from the so-called “Union of Journalists” and “New Media Development Foundation” in Zaporizhzhia, both entities formed by the occupying authorities⁴²⁹, the news agency is part of the family that includes similar “Donetsk News Agency”, “Lugansk News Agency” (albeit not active in the media field with LuganskInformCenter taking the lead instead)

and “Kherson News Agency”. The agency in Zaporizhzhia widely broadcasts news from the Russian national sources and is closely linked to ZaMedia.

As mentioned above, social media have been an essential source of news for the residents of the Zaporizhzhia region. To address this trend, Russian authorities have created a network of Telegram channels to promote propaganda and disinformation online. Leading top-10 Russian channels targeting the region are provided below based on the adjusted list from the IMI investigation of 2022⁴³⁰:

- [Vladimir Rogov](#) – 125,680 subscribers, personal channel of the head of “Together with Russia” movement, pro-Russian affiliation;
- [Melitopol City Administration](#) – 41,787 subscribers, official channel of the occupying Melitopol city administration;
- [Balitskiy Evgeny](#) – 33,165 subscribers, personal channel of the so-called “governor” of Zaporizhzhia region, pro-Russian affiliation;

423 Vyhovska, Natalia. (2 January 2023) Newspapers and occupation: what Russian “Komsomolka” poisons the minds of the region residents with and who does it? Institute of Mass Information. Access: <https://imi.org.ua/blogs/gazety-i-okupatsiya-chym-rosijska-komsomolka-otruyuye-mozok-zhyteliv-oblasti-i-hto-tse-robyt-i49932>

424 Vyhovska, Natalia (8 November 2022) Pathos and Incapacity: how propagandists develop their media in the occupied Zaporizhzhia region and why this is dangerous. Institute of Mass Information. Access: <https://imi.org.ua/blogs/pafos-i-nikchemnist-yak-na-okupovanomu-zaporizhzhii-propagandysty-rozvyvayut-svoyi-media-i-chomu-tse-i48851>

425 Yankovsky, Oleksandr and Badiuk, Olena (15 May 2023). “To destroy Ukrainian past”. What do the Russian media tell about in the occupation? Krym.Realii. Access: <https://www.radiosvoboda.org/a/novyny-pryazovya/32411999.html>

426 Reporters Without Borders (21 April 2023) The Malkevich Propaganda Machine, the Wagner-allied network in Ukraine. Reporters Without Borders. Access: <https://rsf.org/en/investigation-mysterious-alexander-malkevich-kremlin-propagandist-ukraine>

427 Vyhovska, Natalia (8 November 2022) Pathos and Incapacity: how propagandists develop their media in the occupied Zaporizhzhia region and why this is dangerous. Institute of Mass Information. Access: <https://imi.org.ua/blogs/pafos-i-nikchemnist-yak-na-okupovanomu-zaporizhzhii-propagandysty-rozvyvayut-svoyi-media-i-chomu-tse-i48851>

428 Semenuta, Iryna and Bohdanovych, Andrii (18 August 2023). Media collaborators of Zaporizhzhia: who, how and why collaborated with the enemy. Detector Media. Access: <https://ms.detector.media/media-i-vlada/post/32724/2023-08-18-mediyni-kolaboranty-zaporizhzhya-khto-yak-i-chomu-spivpratsyuvav-iz-vorogom/>

429 N/A (12 July 2022). Zaporozhye News Agency was launched in Russia. ZOV.Kherson. Access: <https://zp-news.ru/society/2023/07/12/167960.html>

430 Vyhovska, Natalia (1 September 2022). Collaborators’ meaning juggling: how the minds of ukrainians in the occupied parts of zaporizhzhia oblast are being poisoned. Institute of Mass Information. Access: <https://imi.org.ua/en/blogs/collaborators-meaning-juggling-how-the-minds-of-ukrainians-in-the-occupied-parts-of-zaporizhzhia-i47475>

- [Berdyansk Up to Date](#) – 18,073 subscribers, focus on the local news;
- [Polite and Careful](#) – 14,146 subscribers, focus on military news, the name derives from the 2014 euphemism for the Russian forces – “polite people”;
- [South Foothold](#) – 13,304 subscribers, focus on the local to south-eastern regions and military news;
- [Our Energodar](#) – 10,008 subscribers, focus on the local news;
- [Dneprorudny Today](#) – 4,358 subscribers, focus on the local news;
- [New Melitopol](#) – 1,785 subscribers, although the channel was moved several times and as of July 2022 had 18,956 subscribers, focus on the local news;
- [Tokmak Today](#) – 1,527 subscribers, focus on the local news.

All of these sources, both traditional and online, are aimed not only at promoting the key narratives of Russian propaganda, but also at ultimately creating the impression that Ukraine has abandoned the locals and future under the Russian rule has no alternatives. This role is extensively painted as a benevolent

one and Russia is portrayed as a “savior” that takes care of the needs of the local population.

Key principles and actors of the Russian information influence in the temporary occupied territories of the Kherson region

As of January 2023, 20-30% of the population of the Kherson region remained under Russian occupation⁴³¹, which has shrunk substantially after the liberation of the Kherson city in November 2022 and currently expands over 49 territorial communities⁴³². Russian occupying authorities have declared the city of Henichesk a temporary administrative center, although retaining territorial claims over the whole Kherson region, according to the so-called “press secretary of deputy chair of the regional government” Alexander Fomin⁴³³. Similarly to the Zaporizhzhia region, Russian occupying authorities have staged an illegal “referendum” in September 2022, following which the region was declared a part of the Russian Federation despite lack of control over all of its territory⁴³⁴. On par with Zaporizhzhia, forced passportiza-

tion campaign has been ongoing on the temporary occupied territories of the Kherson region (TOTK)⁴³⁵. While Ukrainian collaborator Volodymyr Saldo has been named the “head of the civil-military administration” and is leading the local occupying authorities, the substantial number of positions within the new so-called “government” of TOTK has been taken by the Russian nationals⁴³⁶ - which is well in line with Russia attempting to establish full control over the local agenda and information flows.

Russian playbook in TOTK has few differences from strategies and tactics applied in TOTZ due to the similar context of the occupation. Slight differences in the local media landscapes and media consumption habits prior to the occupation (e.g., as of 2021 social media was the leading source of news for 69% of the locals, 5% higher than in the Zaporizhzhia region⁴³⁷) do not outweigh said context. In particular, exposure to the Russian media and trust towards them were lower in Zaporizhzhia and Kherson at the moment of occupation than in Donetsk, Luhansk and Crimea in 2014. Active resistance and strong partisan movement in the Kherson region

431 Shwarz, Kateryna (17 January 2023). 20-30% of the population remain on the occupied territories of the Kherson region. Unian. Access: <https://www.unian.ua/society/na-okupovaniy-chastini-hersonshchiny-zalishayetsya-20-30-naselennya-12112497.html>

432 Ministry of Healthcare of Ukraine (5 December 2022) The list of communities in the combat areas, in the TOTs and in surrounding has been updated. Government Portal of Ukraine. Access: <https://www.kmu.gov.ua/news/onovleno-aktualnyi-perelik-hromad-u-raionakh-boiovykh-di-i-na-tot-i-tykh-shcho-v-otochenni-05122022>.

433 N/A (12 November 2022). Occupation ‘government’ of Kherson region announces temporary relocation of regional capital to Henichesk. Novaya Gazeta Europe. Access: <https://novyagazeta.eu/articles/2022/11/12/occupation-government-of-kherson-region-announces-temporary-relocation-of-regional-capital-to-henichesk-en-news>

434 N/A (27 September 2022). As a result of the referendum in the Kherson region more than 87% of the locals are in favor of joining the Russian Federation. Interfax. Access: <https://www.interfax.ru/world/865198>

435 Hlushchenko, Olha (2 June 2023) Occupiers in the Kherson region come up with the new methods of enforced passportization. Ukrainska Pravda. Access: <https://www.pravda.com.ua/news/2023/06/2/7404933/>

436 N/A (4 July 2022) Russian occupiers have created the so-called “government of the Kherson region”. Suspilne. Access: <https://suspilne.media/257019-rosijski-okupanti-stvorili-tak-zvanij-urad-hersonskoi-oblasti/>

437 Internews. (November 2021) Attitude of the population to media and consumption of different types of media in 2021. Internews Ukraine. Access: <https://internews.in.ua/wp-content/uploads/2021/11/Opytuvannya-stavlennya-naselennya-do-media-ta-spozhyvannya-riznyh-tipiv-media-2021.pdf>

have arguably led to lesser trust towards the local collaborators, while the nature of the full-scale military conflict has also impacted the pace and manner in which control over the local media infrastructure was imposed.

As on all newly occupied territories, in order to quickly establish influence over the information field the Russian occupying authorities prioritized seizing control over the local media infrastructure.⁴³⁸ As of April 2022, more than 20 Russian national channels were broadcasted in TOTs, including TOTK⁴³⁹, thus substituting access to Ukrainian and Western media, limiting which was one of the most important steps. At the same time, extensive steps were taken to repurpose the local media infrastructure and either use the previously existing local media for propaganda purposes or create new outlets on their basis. One of the key ways to reach this goal was kidnapping, blackmailing and threatening the local publishers, editors and journalists – as of June 2023, at least 7 such cases were recorded in TOTZ and 6 in TOTK⁴⁴⁰, marking similar approach to

both regions. As evidenced by the local journalist Oleh Baturin, who survived Russian captivity in the town of Nova Kakhovka, the occupying authorities used torture to force him and his colleagues to collaborate⁴⁴¹.

In such circumstances, the majority of the local media were exiled, closed down or seized as in other TOTs. Prior to the occupation, there were 6 local TV channels and 15 radio stations in the Kherson region. The only local TV channel that kept functioning after the start occupation was VTB+, which in early May 2022 started collaborating with the occupying authorities under the leadership of Tetyana Kamenska⁴⁴². Soon after, TV channel “Krat” became collaborative as well, owned by Vyacheslav Horlovsky, who was closely linked to a deceased collaborator Kirill Stremousov⁴⁴³. The office of the local branch of public broadcaster “Suspilne TV” was captured and became a basis for “Tavria TV”, a new local propaganda channel established by Aleksander Malkevich⁴⁴⁴, who remains in control over the majority of developments in the information field of the TOTZ and TOTK.

Similarly to Zaporizhzhia, in Kherson Malkevich was faced with a lack of personnel, in response to which he established another “school of journalism” to prepare new cadres while the substantial part of media workers for new outlet were imported from Russia⁴⁴⁵. Arguably for the same purposes, as well as to facilitate the indoctrination of youth, Malkevich was also appointed the head of journalism department in the Kherson State Pedagogic University⁴⁴⁶. To further highlight this point, it is essential to note that the head of “Tavria TV” is Ismail Abdullayev – who has also been in charge of the “Oplot TV” in the so-called “DNR”, thus constituting another case of bringing propaganda workers from other TOTs to establish informational control.

Malkevich has far more influence over the flows of information and shaping the local agenda than the newly established “governmental bodies” in TOTZ and TOTK. In particular, the occupying authorities have established “Ministry of the Information Policy of the Kherson Region” in July 2022. The so-called “Ministry”, however, has not been involved in public com-

438 Dankova, Natalia (5 August 2023). Media collaborators of Kherson: who, how and why collaborated with the enemy? Detector Media. Access: <https://ms.detector.media/media-i-vlada/post/32614/2023-08-05-mediyni-kolaboranty-khersona-khto-yak-i-chomu-spivpratsyuvav-iz-vorogom/>

439 N/A (23 April 2022) Ukraine war: How Russia replaces Ukrainian media with its own. BBC News. Access: <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-61154066>

440 Yankovsky, Oleksandr and Bdiuk, Olena (6 June 2023) “Kidnappings, tortures, threats, blackmail”: Ukrainian journalists under occupation. What threats are there? RL/RFE. Access: <https://www.radiosvoboda.org/a/novyny-pryzovyya-zhurnalisty-okupatsiya-zahrozy/32445855.html>

441 Kornienko, Yanina (8 June 2023). “We will cut your head off”: how Russian tortured a Ukrainian journalist during the occupation”. Slidstvo. Info. Access: <https://www.slidstvo.info/warnews/my-tobi-vidrizhemo-holovu-iak-rosiiany-katuvaly-ukrainskoho-zhurnalista-pid-chas-okupatsii-khersonshchyny/>

442 N/A (2 May 2022) The Kherson TV channel “VTB+” has started cooperating with the Russian occupiers”. Interfax Ukraine. Access: <https://ru.interfax.com.ua/news/general/829026.html>

443 N/A. (25 May 2023) The Kherson journalists who remained in the city during the occupation, refused to work for the occupiers – media worker. Institute of Mass Information. <https://imi.org.ua/news/zhurnalisty-hersonu-yaki-pid-chas-okupatsiyi-zalyshalys-u-misti-vidmovylys-pratsyuvaty-na-i53142>

444 N/A (3 June 2023). Malkevich’s media projects: Prigozhyn’s ally was recruiting teenagers for propaganda in Kherson. BBC Russian service. Access: <https://www.bbc.com/russian/news-65790415>

445 Center for National Resilience (11 August 2023). In the Kherson region occupiers develop a network of propagandists to control the local “media”. Bukvy. Access: <https://bukvy.org/na-hersonshhyni-okupanty-rozhortayut-merezhu-propagandystiv-dlya-kontrolyu-misczevyh-media-czns/>

446 Kuzmina, Elena (31 October 2022). Aleksander Malkevich will lead the department of journalism in the Kherson university. Novgorod News. Access: <https://novvedomosti.ru/news/society/83294/>

munications and its official [VK page](#) has only 42 subscribers – with another formally existing “Ministry of the Digital Development of the Kherson Region” [having](#) 87 subscribers. No information regarding the personnel of both bodies was found, and the primary source of information about few respective developments is the [web-site](#) of the occupying administration, its [Telegram channel](#) with 23,725 subscribers and [VK page](#) with 15,595 subscribers.

As a result of influence exerted by Malkevich and actions of the occupying authorities, the following traditional media were identified in TOTK:

- TV channels: “Tavria TV”, “VTB+”, “Krat”, “Kherson24”.
- Print Press: “Mayak”⁴⁴⁷, “Naddneprianskaya Pravda”⁴⁴⁸,

Local media from Crimea and so-called “DNR” and “LNR” were also available in TOTK along with the national Russian media. While the list above is not exhaustive, it demonstrates a trend confirmed by Ukrainian media experts – in TOTK, the occupying authorities made emphasis on the use of the local television. It proved to be an inefficient tactic, since, according to Petro Kobernyk, a local member of the “Center of Journalistic Investigations”, “the majority of the population in the Kherson region does not have TV sets ... Of course, there are those who keep receiving news from the TV broadcasts, but the percentage [of

such people] in the Kherson region is minimal”⁴⁴⁹.

In attempt to dominate over the online sources of information, the occupying authorities have taken several steps. One of them was the launch of the “Kherson News Agency”, a sister project of similar “Donetsk News Agency” and “Zaporizhzhia News Agency” mentioned before. The agency was launched in June 2023 and proved to be less popular than its counterparts in Donetsk and Zaporizhzhia, having only 74 subscribers on its [VK page](#) and 2,136 subscribers on [Telegram](#). Another on Kherson-centric online outlet set up by the occupying authorities is the web-site [ZOV.Kherson](#), which also has regional sections dedicated to key towns of the Kherson region. The source also has [VK page](#) and [Telegram](#), both created in May 2022 with 1,693 and 3,723 subscribers respectively. Serving as a pro-Russian news aggregator to a large extend, the source also features a ranking of top media influential individuals in the region – a list that needs to be accessed critically, but which nevertheless highlights the trends in the pro-Russian local media environment. As of October 2023, the following individuals were included in the top-10 of [this ranking](#):

1. Vladimir Saldo
2. Vladimir Putin
3. Andrei Alekseenko (the so-called “chairman of the government of the Kherson region”)

4. Igor Kastyukevich (the secretary of “United Russia” regional branch in Kherson)
5. Artysh Sat (the so-called “Minister of healthcare of the Kherson region”)
6. Roman Mrochko (head of the Ukrainian city military administration of Kherson)
7. Racoon from Kherson (a racoon that was stolen from the Kherson zoo before Russian military left the city)
8. Volodymyr Zelensky
9. Aleksander Malkevich
10. Mikhail Mishustin.

The ranking mirrors the number of publications featuring public figures, and presence of Ukrainian individuals (Mrochko and Zelensky) demonstrate that intended full separation from Ukrainian information space in TOTK is not possible.

Part of the network of Telegram channels, which was created early during the full-scale invasion for the Kherson region, is no longer functional. Originally, however, the Kherson region was among prioritized directions for the creation of pro-Russian Telegram channels⁴⁵⁰. Liberation of Kherson, which was one of the most significant Russian losses during the war, has changed the media landscape in the region substantially even before the new order was properly enforced there by the occupying authorities. As such, only approximately 80 channels re-

447 N/A (9 August 2022). Russians have stolen a raion newspaper brand in the Kherson region. Ukrinform. Access: <https://www.ukrinform.ua/rubric-regions/3546407-rosiani-vkrali-brend-raionnoi-gazeti-na-hersonsini.html>

448 N/A. (28 June 2022) Occupiers have stolen the brand of yet another newspaper for their propaganda – this time in the Kherson region. Chytomo. Access: <https://chytomo.com/okupanty-vkraly-shche-odyn-brend-hazety-dlia-svoiei-propahandy-tsoho-razu-v-khersoni/>

449 Yankovsky, Oleksandr (30 April 2022). Russian media propaganda in the south. Which fakes are broadcast at the occupied territories of Ukraine? RL/RFE. Access: <https://www.radiosvoboda.org/a/khersonshchynv-mariupol-melitopol-propahada-rosiyi/31828320.html>

450 Drosdova, E., Kelm, N., Dukach, Y. (29 October 2022). Telegram-occupation. How Russia was building a network, but ended up having a “potyomkin village”. Texty.Org.Ua. Access: <https://texty.org.ua/projects/108016/telehram-okupaciya-yak-rosiya-vybudovuvala-mediamerezhu-vy-jshlo-potomkinske-selo/>

mained active out of several hundred functional during the early stages of the full-scale invasion⁴⁵¹.

Leading top-10 Russian channels targeting the region as of October 2023 are provided below:

1. [Glavnoye v Khersone i Oblasti](#) [The most important things in Kherson and the region] – 296,585 subscribers, focus on the local news
2. [Khersonka.ru](#) – 123, 141 subscribers, focus on the local news
3. [Enot is Khersona](#) [Racoon from Kherson] - 76,738 subscribers, focus on the military news and life of the racoon stolen from the Kherson zoo
4. [Tricolor nad Khersonom](#) [Tricolored flag over Kherson] – 72,842 subscribers, focus on the general Russian propaganda against Ukraine
5. [Vladimir Saldo](#) – 52,579 subscribers, official channel of the so-called “governor” of the Kherson region
6. [Khersonkiy Vestnik](#) [Kherson Messenger] – 51,090 subscribers, focus on the local news
7. [Administratsiya Khersonskoi Oblasti](#) [Administration of the Kherson region] – 23,724 subscribers, official channel of the occupying administration in TOTK
8. Tavia. Novosti Khersonskoi Oblasti [Tavria. News of the Kherson region] – 21,757 subscribers, channel of the “Tavria” channel
9. [Novosti Khersonshchiny](#) [News of the Kherson region] – 10,548 subscribers, focus on the local news

10. [Kherson.live](#) – 10,358 subscribers, focus on the local news.

The majority of sources listed as well as those that ceased to function after de-occupation of Kherson have directed substantial resources in the early stages of the full-scale invasion to promote the key regional narrative of “Russia is here forever”. The withdrawal of Russian troops from the right side of the Dni-pro river and Ukrainian liberation of Kherson have severely undermined the power of this narrative, which, however, is still applied at TOTK along with other most crucial talking points of the Russian propaganda. The case of Kherson region should be a focal point of further studies detailing and documenting the Russian propaganda playbook on TOTs due to the availability of data. Additionally, better understanding of the current challenges faced by national and local media as well as by the local consumers of these media in the Kherson GCTs may prove to be useful for the future de-occupation and rebuilding Ukrainian media on other TOTs.

Country Summary

The efficiency of Russian influence in Ukraine is determined by two key factors: the longevity of exposure and its scale. Both factors have been amplified, throughout the period of Ukraine’s independence, by the extensive presence of Russian media, pro-Russian politicians and Ukrainian media outlets, both traditional and online, linked to the latter. The more aggressive turn in Russian information influence in Ukraine can

arguably be dated to 2004, the year of “Orange revolution”, which was perceived by the Kremlin with hostility and urged it to implement more dramatic measures to curb the alleged anti-Russian processes in the neighboring country.

Pro-Russian political and media actors formed a network in Ukraine, which aimed to polarize and destabilize the country, promote anti-Western and essentially anti-Ukrainian messages in line with the key Russian narratives. Russian hostile activity in the information space of Ukraine rose dramatically before 2014, enabling the start of hybrid aggression that resulted in annexation of Crimea and proclamation of the so-called “LNR” and “DNR” in the temporary occupied territories of Luhansk and Donetsk regions. Since then, Russian disinformation and propaganda became one of the leading challenges for the country.

Key focal point of the Russian influence network after 2014 and before the start of the full-scale invasion in 2022 was Viktor Medvedchuk. Traditional media linked to him as well as other pro-Russian groups such as a network of Anatolii Sharii held substantial presence in the information landscape of Ukraine. Their increasing influence was a result of the Kremlin’s emphasis on the use of local proxies due to the declining access to and trust into traditional Russian media after 2014. Additionally, more efforts were put into utilizing online sources of information with a particular focus on exceedingly popular Telegram, which became a platform for a vast network not only

451 Ibid

of openly Russian and pro-Russian figures, but also for the anonymous channels targeting Ukrainians and likely being coordinated by the Russian intelligence services.

The start of the full-scale invasion on February 24th 2022 constituted another major shift in the tools used by Russia and its goals in Ukraine. This shift, however, was shaped differently in GCTs and TOTs due to vast discrepancies in level of control Russia had over the media infrastructure (and local population in general) at the territories it occupied. If on GCTs Russian propaganda again had to adapt and mostly avoid openly pro-Russian sentiment and links to the Russian Federation, on TOTs the limitation of access to Ukrainian and Western media, censorship, digital authoritarianism and influx of Russian media were aimed at openly creating an alternative reality for the locals.

Both at the territories occupied in 2014 and after 2022 occupying

Russian authorities applied roughly the same playbook of substituting Ukrainian media with the Russian ones via seizing the respective infrastructure and creating new propaganda outlets at the local level, usually based on the resources from the Ukrainian local media that has been exiled, closed or forced to collaborate. Establishing control over the local outlets and ensuring they are loyal to the occupying authorities has been one of the priorities for Russia on TOTs due to their importance for the population in the regions. In order to reach this goal, media workers from Crimea and “LNR”/“DNR” have been brought into the new TOTs (specifically in Zaporizhzhia and Kherson), where much of the media control is exercised not by the formal new “authorities” but by the Russian propagandist Aleksander Malkevich, linked to the former head of PMC “Wagner”.

In addition to repurposing traditional media infrastructure, Russia has also expanded its presence on

social media platforms in the TOTs. VK and OK platforms, banned in GCTs, became available anew – yet the key focal point of Russian propaganda and disinformation online is Telegram.

The narratives promoted by Russian propaganda sources online and via traditional media, the tactics behind creation of those narratives, the operation of media infrastructure on TOTs – all these and other aspects of Russian information influence are better uncovered due to the extensive experience shared by the survivors of the occupation, with Kherson region being a case of particular importance. In depth study of Russian tools and tactics on liberated TOTs should be further pursued to expand one’s understanding of how Russian propaganda machine functions, how it can be countered to enhance public resilience and, ultimately, how it should be dismantled after Ukraine regaining control over its internationally recognized borders.

8. Conclusions

Apparently, the most profound difference in Russia's influence is between the target European Union member states and Ukraine. Therefore, these should be viewed and treated separately.

In the examined European Union member states (France, Germany, Italy), in the post-World War II period, Russia has had a rather remote yet profound influence. It has been facilitated by pro-Russian sentiments of parts of academic, cultural, and political elite circles, and strengthened by the dependency of business on Russia's relatively cheap energy supplies. Since 2022, the EU invested significant effort in reducing the consumption of Russia's gas and oil but did not succeed in eliminating completely. Most importantly, Russia directly imposed its propagandist narratives in the analysed EU member states by broadcasting its framed news via RT channels, online, and social media. Furthermore, Russia exerted its cultural, business, and political influence via clearly Russia-affiliated or pro-Russian "cultural" organisations, lobby groups, politicians, and political parties. In addition, parts of Russian diaspora in European countries, due to their cultural, value-related, and sometimes organisational ties,

reinforce Russia's influence through the image of a "genuine" intra-country pro-Russian attitudes and even pro-Russian rallies. Although after Russia's explicit occupation of parts of Ukraine in 2022 pro-Russian rhetoric became politically problematic in the EU, some politicians and parties do voice pro-Kremlin narratives, though in a rather disguised form. Pro-Kremlin actors in EU countries exploit the debatable agendas of spending public funds on arming Ukraine and on Ukrainian war refugees. These topics appeal to the audiences who value personal and more immediate interests of lower prices, taxes and more jobs more over a more forward-looking and pan-European values of inclusivity, diversity, democracy, and the rule of international law.

In France, the key points of Russian influence remain local far-right and far-left politicians, think tanks, Russian and pro-Russian media, and local Russian community organisations. Pro-Russian entities in France are disseminating several narratives, including advocating for France's neutrality in providing arms and political backing to Ukraine. They emphasize the importance of reducing sanctions and strengthening cultural connections with Russia. In

their portrayal, Russia's aggressive war in Ukraine is depicted as being instigated by NATO and the USA, who are accused of exerting their dominance over a helpless Europe. Within Ukraine, they label certain groups as "Nazis" committing "atrocities" in Donbas. Additionally, there are prevalent conspiracy theories suggesting the war has led to the enormous financial gain of Western elites. These narratives also assert the Russian military's invincibility and urge immediate peace talks, ideally acknowledging Russia's territorial demands. These messages closely align with those propagated by pro-Russian factions in other nations.

Although the presence of pro-Russian politicians, media, and experts in France is notable, it hasn't significantly swayed the official stance of Paris towards Russia, Ukraine, the war, sanctions, arms supplies, or other key issues. However, the future remains uncertain. Pro-Russian, anti-American, and anti-Western views have considerable backing, as evidenced in the 2022 presidential elections where candidates like Marine Le Pen, Jean-Luc Mélenchon, and Éric Zemmour collectively secured over 52% of the votes in the first round, compared to 27.85% for

the incumbent, Emmanuel Macron. In the second round, Le Pen garnered over 41% support, indicating that Macron's leadership isn't overwhelmingly dominant.

In Germany, the main players in pro-Russian propaganda include the business community, right- and left-leaning political groups, Russian community organisations and movements, numerous Russian and pro-Russian media outlets, individual journalists who broadcast Russian narratives, a number of political commentators, and "Russia-friendly" public associations.

While Germany currently plays a significant role in supporting Ukraine against Russia, there is notable political backing for groups opposing this support. These groups are poised to hinder or reduce this aid and influence the Ukrainian government to engage in peace negotiations under disadvantageous conditions. The growing support for these factions may be encouraged by Russia. In contrast to France, where military veterans and various scientific and analytical institutions are the primary advocates, in Germany, the push for Russian interests is more associated with business leaders and numerous 'peace movements' linked to both far-right and far-left political groups. Their followers are readily influenced by propaganda narratives about the global West's interest in a war with Russia, the perceived invincibility of the Russian army, corruption within the Ukrainian government, and the objection to financing arms supplies to Ukraine using German taxpayers' money. Furthermore, several German regions, historically benefiting from energy-related corruption

schemes, might continue to subtly support Putin and his policies, despite the atrocities committed by the Russian army in Ukraine.

By the end of 2023, echoing Russian propaganda and supporting its military actions has become characteristic of extremely radical political and public entities, likely funded or ideologically tied to the Kremlin. For mainstream politicians, any praise for Putin risks political ruin. The influence of these radical groups should not be underestimated, as parties like AfD and Die Linke garner roughly 30% voter support. Despite their leadership's formal opposition to the Russo-Ukrainian war, elements of Russian narratives persist, advocating for "peace in Ukraine" at the expense of Ukrainian interests, criticizing Germany's military and financial aid to Kyiv, blaming the US for profiting from the conflict, and portraying Russian-speaking refugees in Germany as oppressed, potentially targeting them as voters.

In Germany, a notable trend is the alignment of cultural, academic, and left-wing political intelligentsia with "peace initiatives". Russia's disinformation efforts, including fake websites and propaganda videos suggesting that support for Ukraine harms German citizens, underscore its commitment to influencing German public opinion. Pro-Russian rallies and "peace marches", likely backed by Moscow, demonstrate a readiness to invest heavily in this sphere and maintain a network of influencers.

In Ukraine, due to the centuries of imperial rule, Russia's "soft" cultural influence has been much stronger and remained high during the first

decades of independence and even after the 2014 annexation of Crimea and the invasion of Donbas. One of the biggest challenges is the prevalence of the Russian language that was systematically enforced on the vast territory of Ukraine during the rule of both Russian empire and the Soviet Union. This is indicated by the large share of the country's population who self-identify as Ukrainians, but speak Russian, while ethnic Russians constitute a small minority. Additionally, because of a centralised state-owned system of education, music and film production, and cultural events, Soviet times created a unified cultural space resulting in an artificial sense of common (post) Soviet peoplehood. Because of this linguistic and cultural vulnerability, the Russian-speaking and especially Soviet-raised population of Ukraine is susceptible to Russia's vast cultural and ideological influences exerted via Russia's cable TV, Ukraine-registered pro-Russian mass media, and especially through Russian and nominally Ukrainian pro-Russian social media channels and groups. Although some of them were officially banned and even technically blocked in Ukraine since 2017, some still continue broadcasting via virtual private networks and especially on temporarily occupied territories. The public attitude towards Russian language and culture in Ukraine has worsened dramatically after Russia's full-scale invasion in 2022, but it still remains a problem due to Russia's massive efforts of mimicking its online and social media as native Ukrainian ones.

Moreover, Russia has maintained a rather "hard" influence on Ukrainian business and politics for decades.

After the collapse of the Soviet Union, Ukraine remained tied with Russia's economy by dependence on Russia's gas, common production chains, linked logistical routes, and mutual international trade. The situation changed substantially after Russia's annexation of Crimea and the invasion of Donbas in 2014, when Ukraine's business massively re-oriented towards EU markets and eliminated its reliance on Russia's gas. This trend intensified after Russia's full-scale warfare with Ukraine in 2022. Still, sometimes journalist investigations reveal schemes of illegal trade of Ukrainian business with Russia, even in the military industry. In the political domain, Russian was represented by individual influencers and political parties masking their goals under the unconditional "peace" rhetoric. Investigative journalists regularly find Ukrainian businesspersons, politicians, and even high-ranking civil servants, judges,

and military officers holding Russian passports. Strangely enough, they are rarely prosecuted by Ukrainian law enforcement authorities and after being denounced they either flee the country unharmed or even continue holding their offices despite questionable ties with the Russian Federation.

The situation in the studied countries revealed the analytical and political challenge of distinguishing endogenous (in-country) from exogenous (out-of-country) actors and raised multiple questions. For instance, how can we assess the actions of EU multinational corporations doing business in Russia, sometimes via proxy companies, paying taxes to the Russian state and thereby indirectly funding Russian war atrocities in Ukraine? What policies can stop and prevent such malpractice? What reputational or legal penalties should be applied to politicians jus-

tifying and indirectly facilitating Russia's invasion of Ukraine and disrespecting Ukraine's right to project its territorial integrity? Where lies the loyalty of citizens of the EU countries who used to be Russian nationals and persist in voicing pro-Kremlin narratives? What journalist ethics standards should be applicable to national media disseminating foreign belligerent propaganda? How should Russia's malign information influences and interventions into EU politics be classified? What are the tolerable limits of the freedom of speech in the times of an intrusive Russia's large-scale international hybrid warfare in Europe? Overall, how the EU can ensure military, cyber, economic, political, and mass media security of EU member states and neighbourhood countries, including Ukraine, in front of Russia's aggression? These are complicated questions, which we will try to address in the next section.

9. Recommendations

To support Ukraine and to prevent Russia's influence in Europe, we would like to propose a set of recommendations to the institutions of the European Union. Specifically, it is advisable to reduce and subsequently eliminate funding Russia's budget, develop and implement further EU-wide sanctions against both Russian companies and EU-based businesses trading with Russia. Furthermore, to prevent Russia-backed political activity in the Union, it is worthwhile to introduce rules prohibiting politicians spreading pro-Kremlin disinformation, propaganda, and political activities from balloting and occupying EU offices.

Similarly, we would like to suggest several recommendations applicable and useful at the level of national governments both of the EU member states and of neighbouring countries. To counter Russia's malign influence on national politics and strengthen national security, adopt and enforce stricter national laws prohibiting and prosecuting pro-Kremlin disinformation, propaganda, and political action. To resist Russia's hostile hybrid operations on the EU soil, strengthen the mandate and efforts of intelligence and national security agencies in analysing and bringing to court cases of

Russia's intrusion in internal affairs of sovereign nation-states.

Enhancing resilience within European societies is a crucial strategy to effectively counter Russian propaganda. This can be achieved through a dual approach that encompasses both increased research funding and the amplification of authentic voices affected by such propaganda. Primarily, European governments and the education ministries should allocate greater resources to support comprehensive research on the adverse impacts of Russian propaganda, specifically its implications for democratic institutions. By fostering a deeper understanding of these dynamics, policymakers can devise more informed strategies to safeguard societal resilience.

Moreover, while accounting for sensitivity of some of the information and intelligence data in regard to monitoring and analyzing malign Russian influence, it is crucial to boost cooperation and coordination of such efforts across the EU member states and neighboring countries. Designated governmental agencies and bodies tasked with monitoring disinformation and misinformation should set a framework for regular internal communication

for two primary reasons: to avoid the duplication of work, seeing how the Russian playbook relies on similar principles in the majority of target societies, and to have a broader, more strategic view of the current trends and potential threats by being informed of the respective phenomena in other states. To ensure this mechanism is consistent and effective, it is essential that cooperation among governmental bodies can withstand regular rotation of personnel and is institutionalized.

Furthermore, it is imperative to empower academia and research centers to conduct thorough analyses of how Russian propaganda influences European societies. This involves investigating the methods and extent of its impact, enabling a proactive stance against potential threats for both public and private institutions. This analytical capacity is vital for anticipating and mitigating the multifaceted challenges posed by disinformation campaigns. On a parallel track, European academia should play a pivotal role in amplifying the voices of those directly affected by Russian propaganda, both outside and inside the EU. This entails not only organizing conferences, forums, and public debates that shed light on Russia's full-scale aggres-

sion, such as its actions in Ukraine, but also giving a platform to individuals who have personally experienced the effects of Russian propaganda. By showcasing firsthand accounts, academia can effectively raise public awareness about the tangible consequences of Russia's interference in sovereign states.

Finally, recognising the role of independent organizations, we would like to offer some recommendations to think tanks, civil society organizations, and mass media. To effectively identify and uncover

Russia's foreign influence, perform more numerous applied studies and journalist investigations of covert Russia's influencers abroad. To prevent Russia's agents of influence from continuing their malign activity, perform background checks of public figures and introduce reputation measures such as a publicly available blacklist, a set of media publications, and a boycott of organisations working with Russian agents of influence. Civil society organizations as vanguards of counter-disinformation efforts can still do much more to improve

their efficiency. While each state has distinctive local context and specific challenges to the operation of CSOs, there is still room for exchange of information and lessons learned as well as for streamlining regional efforts to monitor malign Russian influence, the actors of which often act at the cross-regional basis. Joint cross-regional projects and informal coordination hubs may empower CSOs to be more informed and more efficient both in their research and in the advocacy of counter-disinformation measures to their respective governments.

