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INFORMATION LAUNDERING IN GERMANY

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INTRODUCTION

Information laundering (IL) is a stratagem used by hostile actors within an information influence campaign. In this process, false or deceitful information is legitimised through a network of intermediaries that gradually apply a set of techniques to distort it and obscure the original source. In the context of this research, IL is leveraged by Kremlin-official or pro-Kremlin actors in a hostile information influence campaign (HIIC) to further their interests in Germany.

Information Laundering represents a relatively new approach to information influence activities targeting a particular media environment. In the context of this report, IL research allows governments, national institutions and civil society to reach a deeper understanding of the activity of domestic and transnational networks that enable the spread of the Kremlin's influence

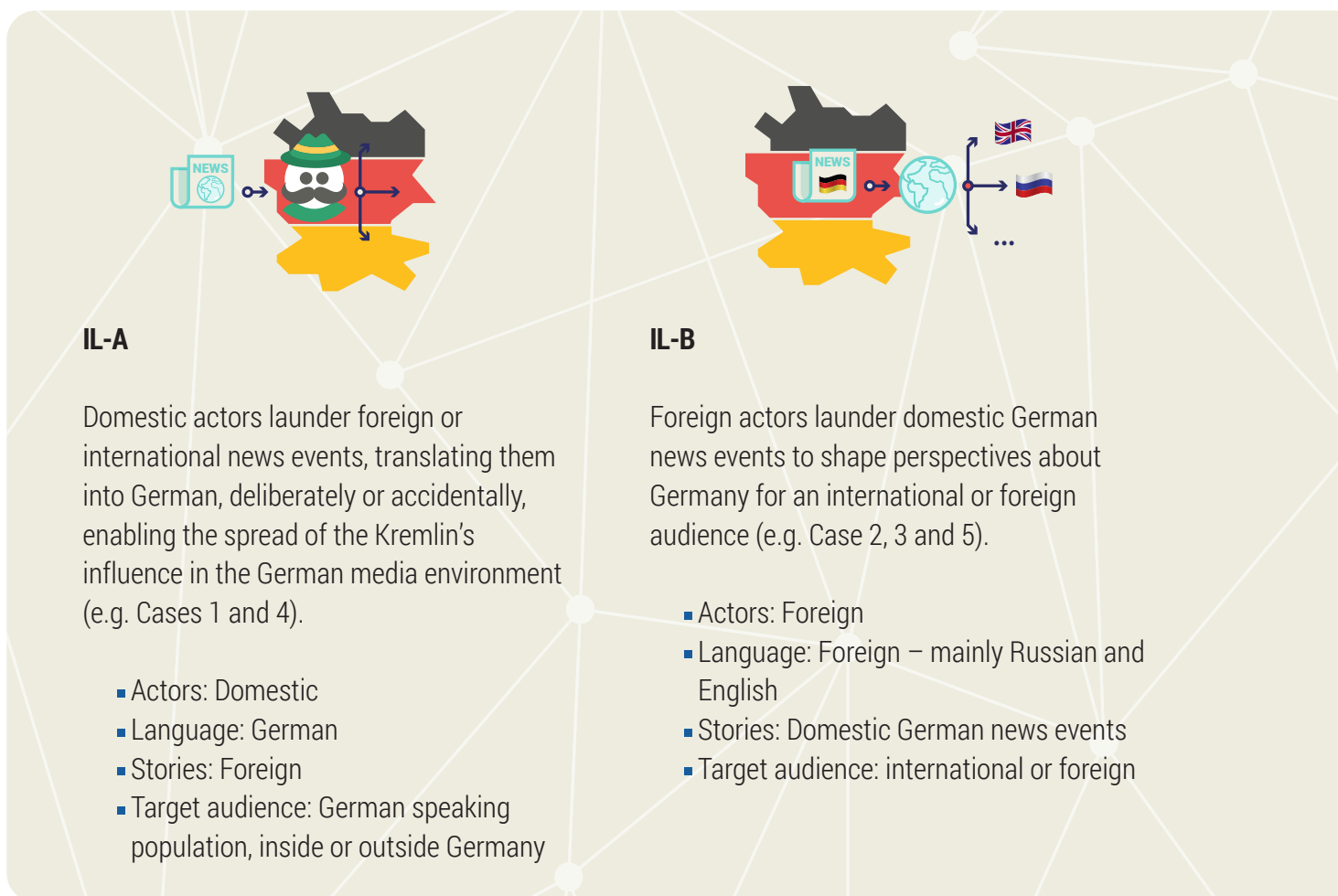
in a particular country, since it uncovers how actors gradually distort, disseminate, and legitimise a piece of information through the application of IL techniques. Actors conducting IL are generally supported by cyber capabilities that enhance the spread and amplification of a laundered piece, e.g. through the creation of fake personas and burner accounts, and sophisticated



methods for manipulation of information, e.g. through the distribution of forged letters¹. By exposing how these processes occur and who participates in them, EU institutions and national governments as well as civil society can build resilience against information influence activities, improving the understanding of the vulnerabilities of specific domestic media environments, and uncovering repeated patterns and connections between actors, media outlets, and influence techniques.

This research focuses on IL practices from Kremlin and pro-Kremlin actors targeting the German media ecosystem, analysing how domestic and foreign actors interact to enable the spread of pro-Kremlin influence in Germany, or to disseminate a particular image about Germany to foreign groups of audiences while laundering German news stories. This way, the Kremlin can strategically mislead audiences without incurring extensive political and military costs.

Our study on IL in Germany looked at two different types of Information laundering, with different target audiences and intended effects:



Methodology

In terms of methodology and approach, our research utilised a case study analysis to explore Information Laundering processes targeting German news or conducted by German actors. This involved the selection of five disinformation cases from the EUvsDisinfo database divided by topic, i.e. COVID-19, EU sanctions against Russia, Nord Stream-2 and the poisoning of Alexei Navalny followed by keywords-based research of articles directly related to the selected cases. In total, 97 articles were collected through manual advanced keyword-based research in search engines, supported by a mix of open source investigation tools utilised to leverage data, e.g. InVID Multimodal, WayBack Machine, BuzzSumo. After being collected, the news articles were organised chronologically by publication date within each disinformation case, applying the theoretical framework

constructed by the NATO Strategic Communications Centre of Excellence to analyse Information Laundering (explained in the following pages). This report frames the analysis through the theoretical construction of information laundering, developed from a metaphor of money laundering and the definition provided by the Swedish Civil Contingencies Agency (MSB) in 2018². The research in each case was conducted in three languages: a) in the domestic language, i.e. German b) in Russian, and c) in English. The case studies were selected according to the following criteria: a) Kremlin-official media (foreign or domestic) was involved; b) different techniques were applied, simultaneously or in quick succession, in order to gradually distort and disseminate the original information;³ c) a network of various types of actors participated in the process⁴.

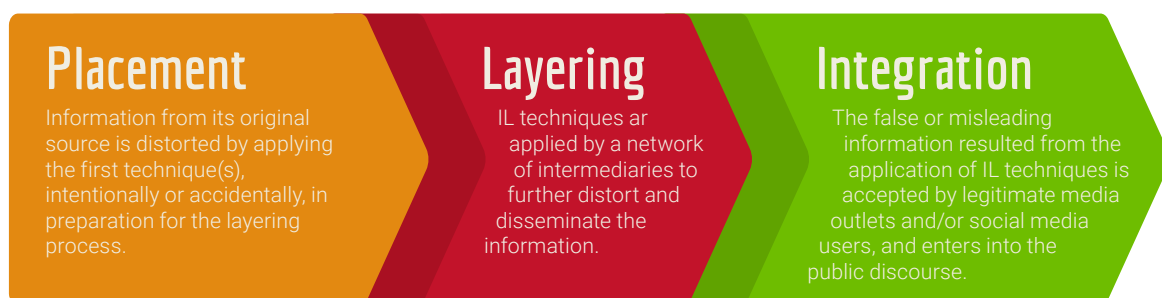


Figure 1. Phases of Information Laundering



Phases of Information Laundering

IL comprises three phases – placement, layering, and integration – including everything from first use of an IL technique by an actor, to the progressive distortion and dissemination of this information, which eventually gets legitimised and becomes part of the public discourse. The definition of information laundering involves the use of a set of techniques by actors that progressively distort the information (laundering) and obscure the laundered piece from the original source. These techniques are the following:



Automated translation: Articles are translated using machine translation services: these often contain grammatical errors and/or incoherent sentences.



Deceitful translation: Articles are translated imprecisely, excluding pertinent information or incorporating targeted messages in order to modify or spin the content, context, or meaning of the original text.



Disinformation: An article includes false or fabricated information meant to mislead or deceive a target audience.



Misappropriation: Factual data, contexts or connections are used strategically to mislead audiences; this may include incorporating unrelated information to frame a topic or event so as to align the message with aims of a HIIC; providing references that do not contain the alleged information; framing real information in a fabricated context; using headlines, pictures or other elements unrelated to the content to support the messages promoted by the HIIC.



Misleading headline: Biased or misleading 'click-bait' headlines are used to attract reader's interest; these may be ambiguous and sensationalised, but not necessarily false.



Potemkin Villages: Articles are created by a network of deceptive, illegitimate 'fact-producing platforms that endorse each other to create the appearance of truth and to build credibility to mislead target audiences. Potemkin villages attempt to hoodwink audiences into believing disinformation by leveraging the bandwagon fallacy; they directly contribute to source magnification.



Smurfing: Various accounts or websites controlled by the same actor (as opposed to a Potemkin village network of actors) to disseminate information that is difficult to attribute and thus difficult to debunk. Smurfing also contributes to source magnification.

Figure 2. Information Laundering techniques



This study considers five indicators that can be used to identify connections between laundered news items and to trace the exact route of the laundering process, taking into account the time frame and the application of laundering techniques. The following indicators can be used to help verify that suspicious news items have undergone the laundering process:

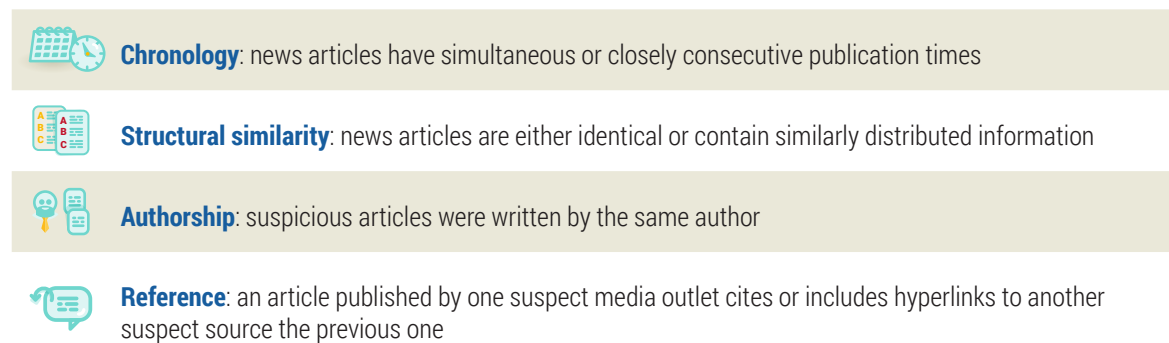


Figure 3. Indicators of connection between laundered news items

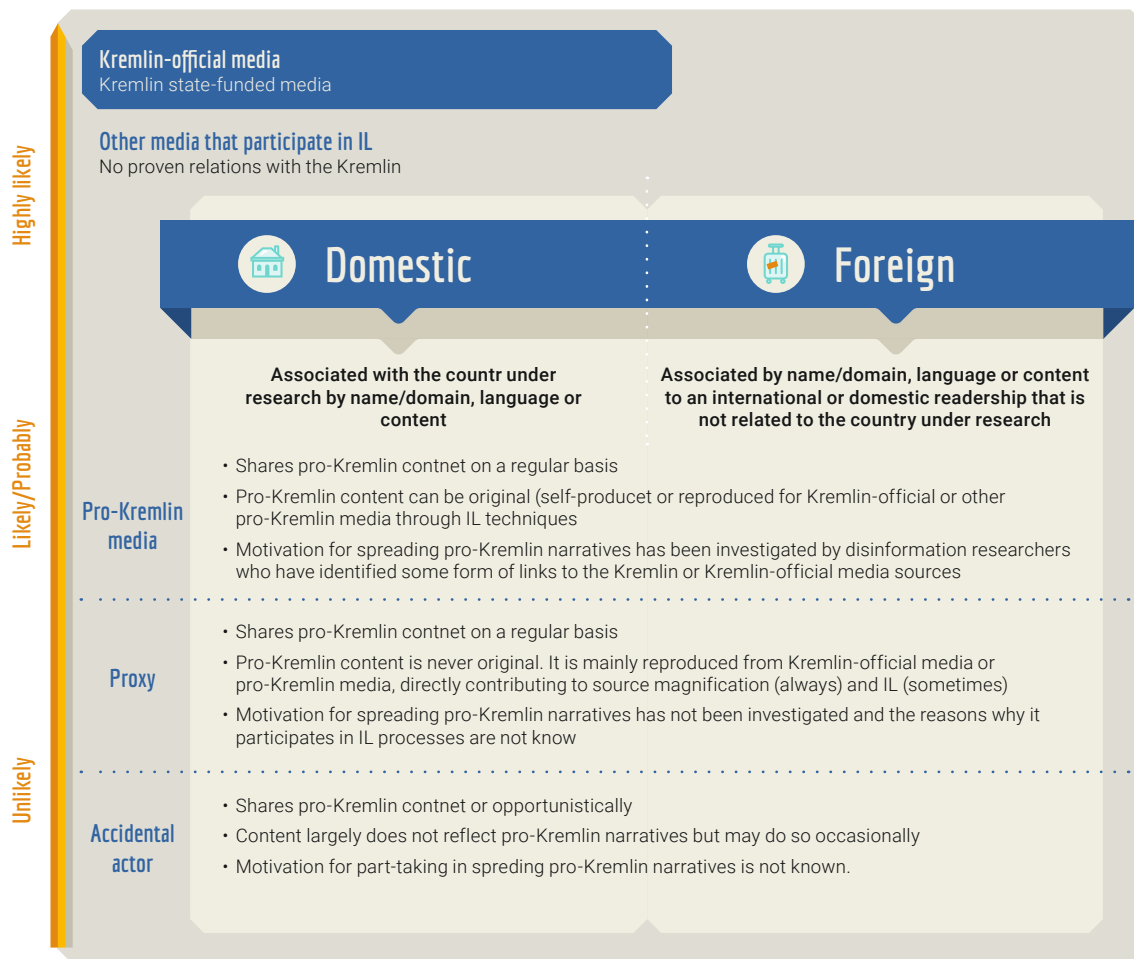
Actors who are part of the network of influence are involved in all three phases of information laundering. This paper proposes the following categorisation of the various actors so that researchers can better identify the roles each actor plays.

This categorisation is based on the experience of subject matter experts as shown in Figure 4 on the next page.

To gain an insight into Information Laundering in Germany using German domestic news events, the following theoretical framework was applied to a sample of five disinformation cases from the EUvsDisinfo database.

Source magnification (SM) – the process of increasing the number of information sources to enhance the impact of a manipulated piece of information regardless of quality or veracity⁵ – is necessary for effective IL, as it supports the construction of legitimacy. However, since SM does not necessarily involve distortion, it is not considered an IL technique. Simple shares without altering content or translations may be SM but not IL.





Estimative probability of links to the Kremlin or Kremlin-official media

Figure 4. Actors involved in IL networks

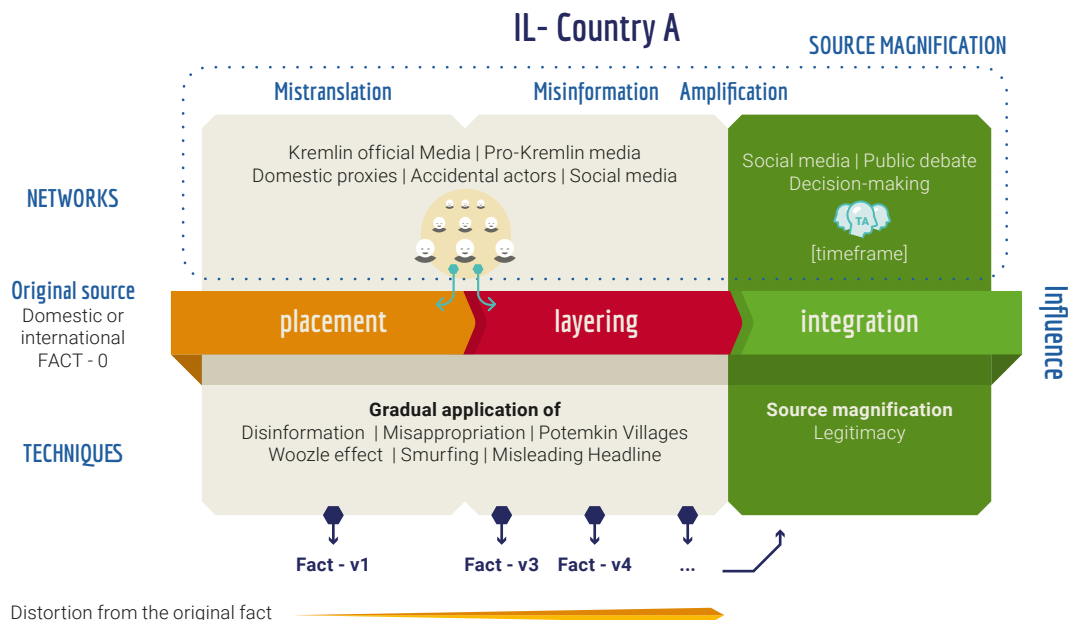


Figure 5. Model for understanding Information Laundering





Main Findings

Research confirms that Information Laundering is conducted in Germany by Kremlin and/or pro-Kremlin actors:

- Certain domestic outlets were seen to enable the spread of pro-Kremlin information influence in the German media environment, mainly among German audiences
- Research reveals that IL actors also target Germany by strategically exploiting domestic news exclusively about Germany, or conspiracy theories among domestic and international Russian and English-speaking audiences
- Some German-language outlets registered under a German domain were seen to actively conduct SM from German-language Kremlin-official media outlets

On average, 18 actors are involved in the cases investigated:

- Key relevance of pro-Kremlin (*News-Front*, *Topwar*, *SOTT*) and Kremlin-official media (*RT*, *Sputnik*) in German language
- In the IL cases under investigation, pro-Kremlin and Kremlin-official media repeatedly amplified the voices of German political and public figures, primarily from the far-right *Alternative für Deutschland* (AfD) and leftist *Die Linke*. These were utilised to provide credibility to the laundered content.

- A considerable amount of social media users amplified content from information laundering processes from Kremlin-official and pro-Kremlin sources.
 - These accounts largely share news from far-right or leftist German media, contributing to the polarisation of the debate in social networks
- Proxies that amplify laundered news stories inside and outside the country

Predictably, the main language used was Russian, followed by German (31%). Two reasons explain this:

- a. Due to the nature of IL, most of the processes are started by a Kremlin-official or pro-Kremlin source and then translated into other languages to increase the reach of the laundered content
- b. Kremlin-official or pro-Kremlin sources launder and translate non-Russian language news stories to influence Russian-speaking audiences.

Themes: COVID-19 stories are intimately linked to conspiracy theories and anti-Western narratives. Other themes of relevance: Nord Stream-2, Russophobia.

No purely domestic information laundering case has been identified. IL networks are generally transnational.



Key Actors Identified

The main actors participating in IL processes to enable the spread of the Kremlin's influence in Germany are Kremlin-official media and Russian or German-language proxies.

Regarding domestic actors enabling the spread of Kremlin IL in Germany, this research identified the following:

- International actors that publish in several languages, mainly in English and Russian, but also run German language platforms. E.g.: *SOTT*, *News-Front*, *Shafaqna*.
- German-language versions of Kremlin-official media, e.g. *RT* and *Sputnik*.
- Main proxy platforms: the wordpress' blog 'Co-op Anti-War Café Berlin' and Press24.net both share content from *Sputnik Germany* and *RT Deutsch*, as well as from the platform *Telepolis*.
- German actors that are generally mentioned or referenced in IL processes to provide credibility to IL techniques: Historian Alexander Rahr, who was also Senior Advisor on Russia for Wintershall Holding (2012–2015) and Gazprom (from 2015), AfD's Waldemar Herdt, and German-Russian Forum Chairman Matthias Platzeck.
- *Der Tagesspiegel* stories were used by Kremlin-official and pro-Kremlin media as a source for IL. This does not make *Der Tagesspiegel* an active part of IL – Kremlin and pro-Kremlin outlets take the accurate reporting of news events by the German reputed outlet and distort it through IL techniques.
- Keywords-based IL research identified actors publishing pieces that, for reasons of chronology and narratives pushed, could be somehow linked to laundering processes. However, IL techniques were not clearly identified and more research needs to be conducted to verify participation in German IL, e.g. *Junge Welt*, journalist Florian Rötzer in the blog *Telepolis*.



Table 1. Summary of the cases

| Case | Type of IL | Summary |
|--|---|---|
| Information Laundering targeting COVID-19 | | |
| 1. COVID-19 is the result of Bill Gates' depopulation policies and plans for world domination | Mostly IL-A (Domestic actors launder foreign news events) | The speech of Italian MP Sara Cunial about Bill Gates orchestrating COVID-19 as a depopulation policy was strategically picked, translated and amplified by IL actors to support popular conspiracy theories on social media platforms like Twitter or Facebook and blogs in Germany. |
| 2. Germany demands a repeal of anti-Russian sanctions | Mostly IL-B (Foreign actors launder domestic events) | During the COVID-19 crisis, a laundering process selected statements from several political and public figures mainly from Germany to legitimise the misleading news that Germany was asking the EU to lift sanctions against Russia. |
| 3. US biolabs are putting CSTO ⁶ countries and the Caucasus at risk and encircling Russia | Mostly IL-B (Foreign actors launder domestic events) | After <i>RIA Novosti</i> quoted Russian Foreign Affairs Minister Sergey Lavrov speaking about US biolabs located in Russia's neighbouring countries, different versions of <i>Sputnik</i> laundered the content mainly through misleading headlines and source magnification in different languages. |
| Information Laundering targeting Alexei Navalny | | |
| 4. Navalny's symptoms do not coincide with Novichok and this news story is a theatre orchestrated directly in Berlin | Mostly IL-A (Domestic actors launder foreign news events) | Kremlin-official media amalgamates two unchained IL processes to cast doubt among certain German audience groups about the idea that Navalny had been poisoned with a substance from the Novichok group, utilising for such purpose comments of alleged Novichok developers Leonid Rink and Vladimir Uglev. Both stated that Navalny's symptoms did not match those caused by Novichok. |
| Information Laundering targeting Other Domestic Cases: Nord Stream-2 | | |
| 5. Berlin murder linked to Nord Stream-2 | Mostly IL-B (Foreign actors launder domestic events) | Kremlin-official and pro-Kremlin media laundered a news story on the murder of Georgian citizen and former Chechen fighter Zelimkhan Khangoshvili to give an impression image that this was a Russophobic strategy employed by Western countries to disrupt the progress of Nord Stream-2 |



| Techniques (in order of appearance) | | Overview of IL networks | Theme/s |
|--|---------------------|--|---|
|     | Woozle effect | Total media involved: 12. Mainly proxies (64%). Mainly German language (92%). Other language: English. Strong role of YouTube and Telegram accounts to support IL. | COVID-19; conspiracy theories; deep state |
| | Misleading headline | | |
| | Disinformation | | |
| | Misappropriation | | |
|     | Woozle effect | Total media involved: 46. 39% proxy, 33% pro-Kremlin media. Main language: Russian. Other languages: German (15%) | EU sanctions against Russia; Ukraine; COVID-19; Russophobia |
| | Misappropriation | | |
| | Potemkin village | Total media involved: 17. 71% Kremlin-official media (fundamentally <i>Sputnik</i>), 29% proxies. Languages: Russian (65%), Romanian (29%), German (6%) | Conspiracy theory; anti-US; COVID-19; Russophobia |
| | Misleading headline | | |
|     | Woozle effect | Total media involved: 10. 60% proxies. Main language: German (80%). Other languages: Russian and English | Navalny; Russophobia; Nord Stream-2 |
| | Misappropriation | | |
| | Misleading headline | | |
| | Disinformation | | |
|    | Misleading headline | Total media involved: 7. Main language: Russian. Other languages: Georgian | Nord Stream-2; Russophobia; Conspiracy theories; Skripal case |
| | Disinformation | | |
| | Misappropriation | No domestic media. IL mainly conducted by proxy actors | |
| | | | |



INFORMATION LAUNDERING CASE STUDIES

Information Laundering Targeting Covid-19

COVID-19-related IL targeting German audiences or German domestic news stories leverages conventional conspiratorial theories, i.e. anti-vaccine movements, world elite domination, to disseminate the idea that COVID-19 has been artificially created and spread by the West to international and domestic audiences.

Information Laundering Case 1 COVID-19 is the result of Bill Gates' depopulation policies and plans for world domination⁷

Background. The COVID-19 pandemic is subject to several conspiracy theories. In one of the most popular ones, Bill Gates appears as the orchestrator of the pandemic, allegedly for world domination purposes. Sara Cunial, an independent member of the Italian parliament expelled from the Five Star Movement (Movimento 5 Stelle) in April 2019 for accusing the party of being tied to “agro-mafias”, addressed Italian President Giuseppe Conte on 14 May 2020, suggesting that Bill Gates was behind the pandemic. She proposed that the next time he received a letter from Bill Gates, he should address it to the International Court of Justice⁸. According to Reuters⁹, Cunial also publicly compared vaccines to “genocide” in a now-deleted post on social media.

Laundering. In the days following the parliamentary session, Sara Cunial's

speech was amplified by YouTube users in several languages: Italian, English and German. Analysis of these accounts shows anti-vaccine and conspiracy theories like Pizzagate¹⁰, but no clear links to Kremlin-official or pro-Kremlin media. Pizzagate is a debunked conspiracy theory started in 2016 that claims that Hillary Clinton, Barack Obama and other US political leaders (mainly from the Democratic Party) are running a child-trafficking ring out of the Washington pizza restaurant ‘Comet Ping Pong’.¹¹

The placement was conducted on 15 May, by English-language media outlet *News Punch*, formerly ‘Your News Wire’. This outlet has been identified by fact-checkers from CBS¹², BuzzFeed News,¹³ FactCheck.org,¹⁴ and Snopes¹⁵ as one that commonly spreads conspiracy theories like Pizzagate. *NewsPunch's* article already included the headline that German media outlets afterwards adopted during the laundering process: “Italian MP: Bill Gates Must Be Charged By International Criminal Court With ‘Crimes Against Humanity’” (“Italienische



Abgeordnete fordert Verhaftung von Bill Gates wegen "Verbrechen an der Menschlichkeit"). The news piece also contained quotes from Robert F. Kennedy Jr., a public defender of the anti-vaccine movement¹⁶ (placement by means of woozle effect and misappropriation). The coverage of Cunial's speech specifically focused on a quote addressed to the Speaker of the House and asked him to tell President Giuseppe Conte that, next time he received a letter from Bill Gates, he should send it directly to the International Criminal Court for crimes against humanity. She also questioned President Conte's motives if he was not willing to do it. In total, 12 outlets were involved in IL through laundering techniques or amplifying laundered piece via SM.

On 17 May, German version of *News-Front* selected and translated into German a part of *NewsPunch*'s article that covered Ms Cunial's speech. It also maintained the woozle effect. *News-Front*'s piece was amplified in *Boersenwolf.blogspot.com* (SM).

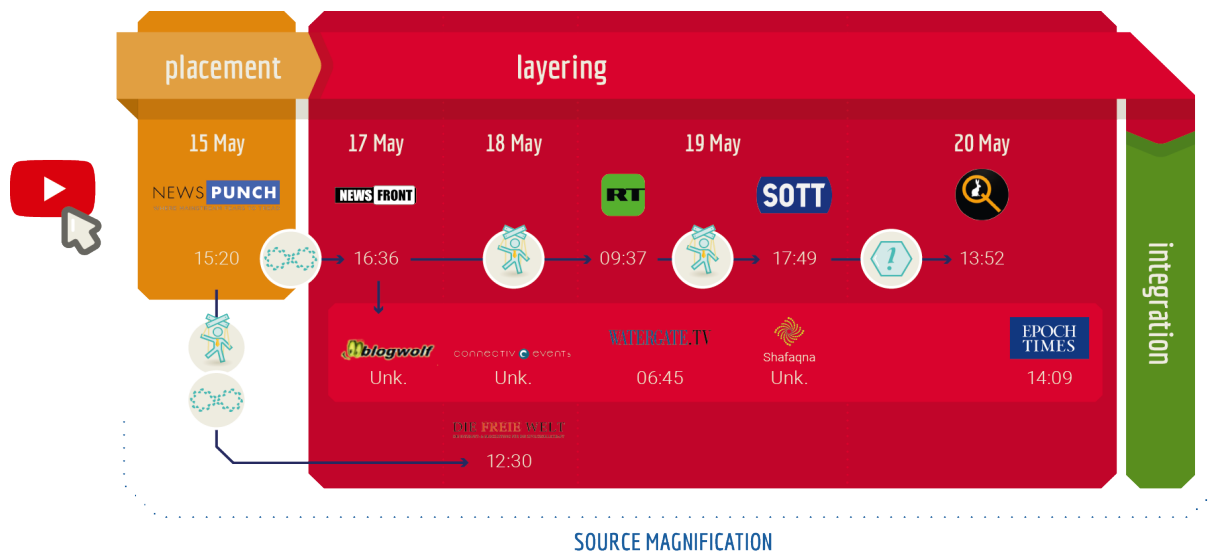
On 18 May, German far-right online media outlet *Die Freie Welt* wrote a highly misinforming article about the events, including a misleading headline with disinformation elements: "Prison camp conditions" in Italy: Bill Gates allegedly strives for absolute control" ("»Gefangenenlager-Verhältnisse« in Italien: Bill Gates strebe nach absoluter Kontrolle").

No connection with the *News-Front*'s article was found. However, on the same day, *Connectiv.events* shared a German version of *NewsPunch*'s article that was authored by *Qlobal-Change*¹⁷. Research identifies *Qlobal-Change* as a loudspeaker of QAnon conspiracy theories on Telegram¹⁸, YouTube, Bitchute, Twitter, and Facebook¹⁹, translating them into German and Italian, and via Telegram channels into Spanish and Portuguese. QAnon is a conspiracy theory that claims that a group of Satan-worshipping paedophiles is running a global child sex-trafficking ring and plotting against US President Donald Trump, who is allegedly battling them²⁰. *Qlobal-Change* amplified and translated the *NewsPunch* piece into German and Italian and disseminated it on their social media.

On 19 May, *RT Deutsch* shared and expanded *News-Front*'s article. This connection was identified by the identical headline that both share. However, *RT* expanded on the content, adding some extra information about COVID-19 conspiracy theories surrounding Bill Gates (misappropriation). Later on, the German-language version of pro-Kremlin media *Sign of the Times (SOTT)* conducted misappropriation by selectively reproducing parts of *RT*'s article. *RT*'s article was amplified by *Deutschland.Shafaqna.com*. On the same day, *Watergate.tv* continued amplifying *NewsPunch*'s version in German.



Figure 6. Information Laundering Case 1



Observations

While giving a speech, a single Italian politician called for former Microsoft CEO Bill Gates to be arrested. This position was not endorsed by the Italian government as a whole. This was a misappropriation conducted by proxy and pro-Kremlin actors to give her quotes more credibility.

The IL process was conducted mainly in German and spread in very specific conspiracy theory networks. The IL techniques utilised and the types of actors involved suggest that German audiences were targets of the process. There was a high activity of conspiracy theory websites both in German and English.

NewsPunch generally shares conspiracy theories like Pizzagate.

This is a case where pro-Kremlin or Kremlin-official media did not launder the content. The content was real and they just strategically amplified it – RT shared it on the RT Deutsch page, on YouTube²¹ and also on RT Podcast²² in German. It was also amplified by YouTube users who spread conspiracy theories. Research found similar process happened in other languages. For example, Romanian or Spanish – IL by Latin American media outlets.

Qlobal-Change's Telegram post was actively disseminated in conspiracy theory Telegram groups.

IL was also shared by German conspiracy theorists on their social media.²³

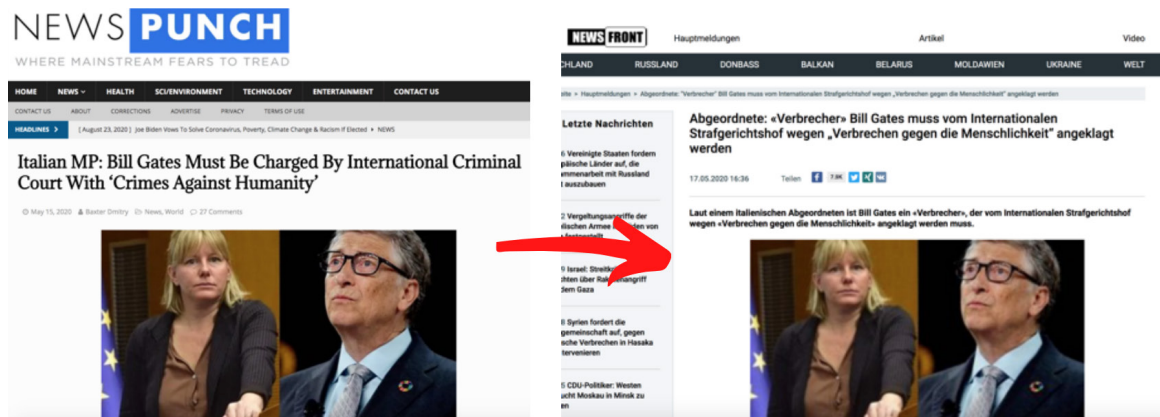


Table 2. Information Laundering Case 1

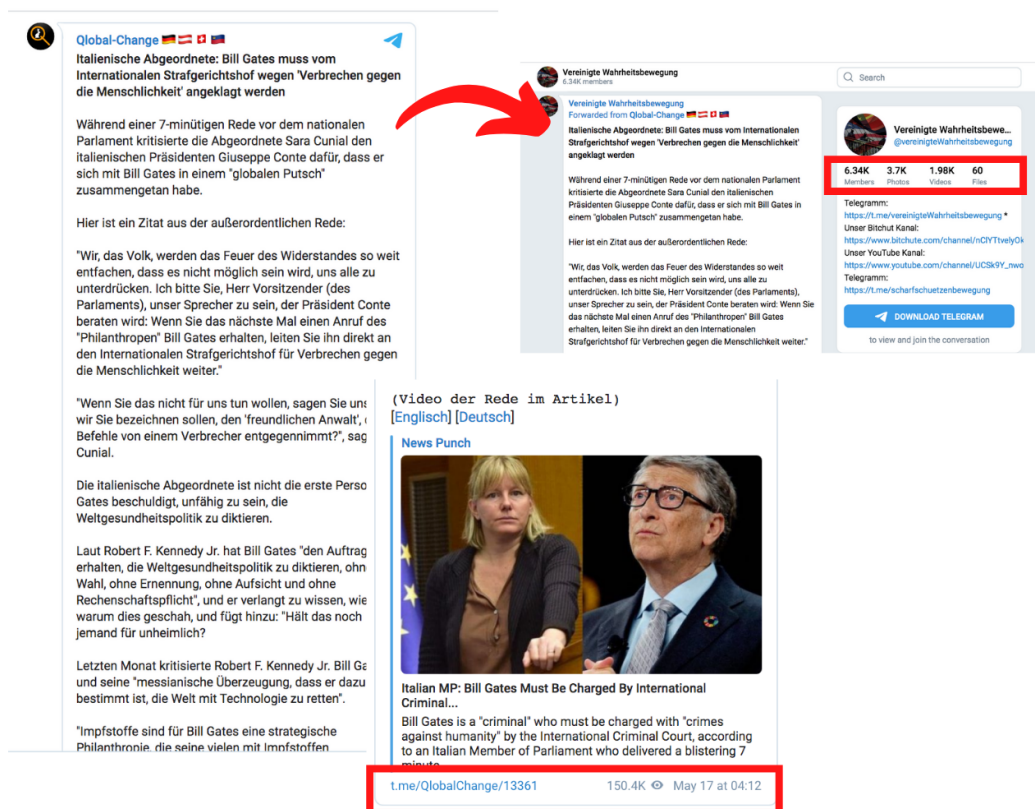
| Media outlet | Time | Process | Category (language of publication/ country of origin) |
|---|-------|--|--|
| 15 May | | | |
| NewsPunch ²⁴ | 15:20 | IL (🌀 woozle effect, 🐞 misappropriation) | Foreign proxy (EN/USA) |
| 17 May | | | |
| News-Front ²⁵ | 16:36 | IL (🌀 woozle effect) | Foreign pro-Kremlin media (DE/RUS) |
| Boersenwolf.blogspot.com ²⁶ | Unk. | SM | Domestic proxy (DE/GER) |
| 18 May | | | |
| Die Freie Welt ²⁷ | 12:30 | IL (📢 misleading headline, 🔍 disinformation) | Domestic accidental actor (DE/GER) |
| Connectiv.events (by Qlobal-Change ²⁸) | Unk. | SM | Domestic proxy (DE/GER) |
| 19 May | | | |
| Watergate.tv ²⁹ | 06:45 | SM | Domestic proxy (DE/GER) |
| RT Deutsch ³⁰ | 08:03 | IL (🐞 misappropriation) | Kremlin-official media (DE/RUS) |
| Signs of the Times (SOTT) ³¹ | 17:49 | IL (🐞 misappropriation) | Foreign pro-kremlin media (DE/RUS) |
| Deutschland.Shafaqna. com ³² | Unk. | SM | Foreign proxy (DE/Unk) |
| 20 May | | | |
| Qlobal-change.blogspot. com ³³ | 13:52 | IL (🔍 disinformation) | Foreign proxy (DE/USA) |
| 25 May | | | |
| The Epoch Times ³⁴ | 14:09 | SM | Foreign proxy (DE/USA) |



Translation from *NewsPunch* to *News-Front*




Example of *Telegram* group that shared *Qlobal-Change*



Quote from Sara Cunial selected by *News-Front* in German and English


| Original German text | English translation |
|---|--|
| <p>„Wir, die Menschen, werden die Feuer des Widerstands so weit ausbauen, dass es nicht möglich ist, uns alle zu unterdrücken. Ich bitte Sie, Vorsitzender des Parlaments, unser Sprecher zu sein, der Präsident Conte beraten wird: Wenn Sie das nächste Mal einen Anruf vom „Philanthrop“ Bill Gates erhalten, leiten Sie ihn direkt an den Internationalen Strafgerichtshof für Verbrechen gegen die Menschlichkeit weiter.</p> <p>«Wenn Sie dies nicht für uns tun, sagen Sie uns, wie wir Sie definieren sollen, den freundlichen Anwalt », der Befehle von einem Kriminellen entgegennimmt»,</p> | <p>“We, the people, will expand the fires of resistance to such an extent that it is not possible to suppress us all. I ask you, Speaker of Parliament, to be our spokesman who will advise President Conte: the next time you get a call from “philanthropist” Bill Gates, put it directly on the International Criminal Tribunal for Crimes against Humanity.</p> <p>“If you don't do this for us, tell us how to define you, the ‘friendly lawyer’ who takes orders from a criminal”.</p> |



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Italienischer Abgeordneter: Bill Gates muss vom Internationalen Strafgerichtshof wegen "Verbrechen gegen die Menschlichkeit" angeklagt werden

Laut einem italienischen Abgeordneten ist Bill Gates ein " Verbrecher ", der vom Internationalen Strafgerichtshof wegen " Verbrechen gegen die Menschlichkeit " angeklagt werden muss .

Während einer 7-minütigen Rede vor dem nationalen Parlament schlug der Abgeordnete von Sara Cunial den italienischen Präsidenten Giuseppe Conte dafür zu, dass er sich mit Bill Gates zu einem „ globalen Staatsstreich “ zusammengetan hatte.



Hier ist ein Zitat aus der außergewöhnlichen Rede:

" „Wir, das Volk, werden die Feuer des Widerstands so weit ausbauen, dass es nicht möglich ist, uns alle zu unterdrücken. Ich bitte Sie, Vorsitzender (des Parlaments), unser Sprecher zu sein, der Präsident Conte beraten wird: Wenn Sie das nächste Mal einen Anruf vom „Philanthrop“ Bill Gates erhalten, leiten Sie ihn direkt an den Internationalen Strafgerichtshof für Verbrechen gegen die Menschlichkeit weiter.

" Wenn Sie dies nicht für uns tun, sagen Sie uns, wie wir Sie definieren sollen, den 'freundlichen Anwalt', der Befehle von einem Verbrecher entgegennimmt ", sagte Cunial."

<https://newsfront.com/italian-mp-bill-gates-charged-international-criminal-court-crimes-against-humanity/>

See translation

IL was also shared by German conspiracy theorists on their social media.



Information Laundering Case 2. Germany demands a repeal of anti-Russian sanctions³⁵

Background. In March 2014, the European Council agreed on the first diplomatic measures (i.e. EU sanctions) in response to the illegal annexation of Crimea by Russia. During the COVID-19 pandemic, several German political and public figures asked for sanctions to be lifted, among them AfD's Waldemar Herdt, Die Linke's Aleksandr Neu, German historian Alexandr Rahr, and chairman of the German-Russian Forum and former Minister President of the federal state of Brandenburg Matthias Platzeck³⁶.

Laundering. Between 18 March and 4 May, different Kremlin-official and pro-Kremlin media actors disseminated the news that Germany called for the lifting of EU sanctions against Russia within the EU. These outlets utilised quotes from different politicians and public figures to support and provide credibility for their arguments. The placement was conducted by pro-Kremlin medium *Izvestia*, combining misappropriation and woozle effect with the use of AfD's Waldemar Herdt's comments as a uniform position from Germany / the Bundestag. Besides Mr Herdt, quotes from Die Linke's Aleksandr Neu and German historian Alexandr Rahr supported the information laundering process. In total, 46 media outlets participated in the process

On the same day as the placement, pro-Kremlin medium *Lenta.ru* shared *Izvestia*'s

article including a misleading headline that stated that Germany was urging the lifting of sanctions against Russia ("В Германии призвали снять санкции с России на фоне борьбы с коронавирусом"). The article summarised and referenced *Izvestia*'s piece, sustaining the woozle effect. *Lenta*'s headline was almost exactly reproduced 2 minutes later (02:22 am and 02:24 am) again by *Izvestia*. The timeframe and structural similarities between the three texts (*Izvestia*–*Lenta*–*Izvestia*) suggest a Potemkin Village where the two media outlets were reinforcing each other as well as increasing the visibility of the news. Hours later, *Argumenti i Fakti* amplified the laundered information, linking the first article from *Izvestia* but using the headline from the second article by the same outlet. The laundered information that resulted from the Potemkin Village was directly amplified via SM (copy-paste with no modification) by *M24*, *Wi-Fi.ru*, Kremlin-official *Sputnik Georgia*, *Rossiyskaya Gazeta* and *Business-gazeta.ru*. *Topwar* translated the same article with an almost identical structure and headline into German, adding a concluding paragraph on the sanctions against China and Iran. This was then amplified (SM) on the platform *Weaponews.com*. Following this, *FedPress* included misappropriation, adding a last paragraph presenting Poland as another EU country that could support the lifting of the sanctions, "if conditions were met".



While the Russian version of *RT* included misappropriation by mentioning a recent visit from French President Emmanuel Macron, *Gazeta.ru* applied a combination of several techniques. It added other comments to those made by Herdt himself to Russian media in 2018 (misappropriation), reinforcing the idea that the German politician is very supportive of Russia, and shifting the attention from the main issue. It also included comments by other German political figures supporting the idea of withdrawing sanctions, and data backing the economic gain that the lifting of sanctions would bring the country, without referencing or hyperlinking it to any source. The concept “new Cold War” was also introduced (misappropriation). The Estonian version of pro-Kremlin outlet *Baltnews Estonia* included a misleading headline that signalled that COVID-19 had opened Germany’s eyes regarding the sanctions. It also included claims that the index of investor confidence in the German economy saw the biggest drop since 1991, without referencing any source (misappropriation). *Sputnik Deutschland* mixed this content with comments by another AfD politician, Anton Friesen, to *RIA Novosti*, and added a misleading headline that stated that sanctions would involve “Billions of losses”. Although the woozle effect citing Herdt stopped largely after 19 March, the same news item using a very similar headline remained until May.

On 4 May, Kremlin-official media *RIA Novosti* released an article stating that

Matthias Platzeck had urged Germany to lift sanctions. Misappropriation was included when adding a paragraph discussing the identity of Eastern Ukrainians and inhabitants of the Crimean Peninsula. This was translated into German and amplified by *News-Front* within hours and by *Sputnik Deutschland* two days later. *Sputnik* inserted disinformation implying that due to sanctions, military tensions between Russia and the EU had increased, and misappropriation, claiming the EU cannot solve climate change and terrorism without Russia. This again configured a Potemkin Village where Kremlin-official and pro-Kremlin media reinforce each other. When sharing the news from *RIA*, *News-Front* changed the headline from “German politician urges lifting sanctions” (*RIA*) to “Germany calls for anti-Russian sanctions to be lifted” (*News-Front*).

On 5 May, *Sputnik Deutschland* amplified an interview with AfD politician Robbie Schlund on the sanctions, which was then picked up by *Vzglyad* on 7 May. Instead of commenting on the topic of the interview, the 75th Anniversary of the end of World War II, it only covered the issue of sanctions, which was a small part of the whole article. This was posted under a very similar headline, “AfD’s Robbie Schlund calls for Germany to lift sanctions”. The same misleading technique was utilised in the headline, generalising that it was the whole of Germany that requested the EU to lift the sanctions.



Observations

The main IL tactic was a combination by Kremlin-official and pro-Kremlin outlets of woozle effect and misappropriations, selecting quotes from public figures, i.e. politicians, journalists, etc. and mixing them with wrong or inaccurate content to enhance the credibility of their arguments.

Quotes from German politicians, primarily, but not limited to, AfD, were used to disseminate the idea that Germany was asking the EU for the removal of sanctions and not doing it was against common sense. Mr Herdt and Mr Rahr were portrayed as defenders of Russia within Germany.

Misleading headlines together with misappropriation were utilised to deceive audiences, making them believe that Germany had an official position and was thinking about lifting the sanctions.

This was a complex laundering process, with the most active networks identified during the last weeks of March and first weeks of May. AfD's proposal was also covered by the right-wing conservative newspaper, *Junge Freiheit*.³⁷

Kremlin official and pro-Kremlin outlets were seen to generously amplify AfD ideas and voices.

Potemkin Villages are a sign of coordinated activity. Two of these IL structures were identified in this case. The initial Potemkin Village between *Izvestia*, *Lenta*, and *Izvestia*.

Another Potemkin Village identified was the one between *RIA Novosti*, *News-Front* and *Sputnik*.

The closure of the EU's external borders was used strategically to disseminate the idea that the EU was not going to keep supporting third countries.

The EU, however, reinforced its willingness to continue supporting Ukraine during the pandemic.³⁸ In this process, EU sanctions overlap with COVID-19 narratives.

In German media: although there was no reference to Russian media, a keyword-based search demonstrates that similar news stories were disseminated in certain German media during the same period.

This confirms that certain political groups in Germany indeed proposed to lift the sanctions. However, asking to lift sanctions is not an official German government position, as pro-Kremlin and Kremlin-official media portrayed the situation.

No German medium was found which directly enabled this Kremlin story to penetrate the domestic media environment via IL techniques. However, the narrative was spotted, primarily in leftist media *Junge Welt*, which utilised misleading headlines and misappropriations to amplify voices from within the fundamentalist German Communist Party (DKP), asking for lifting of the sanctions during the same timeframe. However, a connection to this laundering process was not found.



Alle Sanktionen aufheben, die den Kampf gegen die Pandemie behindern

Außerdem: Wie geht's weiter mit dem Schuljahr? Kultusminister müssen sich einigen!

Die Deutsche Kommunistische Partei (DKP) hat am Donnerstag eine Petition an den Deutschen Bundestag gestartet: »Alle Sanktionen aufheben, die den Kampf gegen die Pandemie behindern«

Wir fordern den Bundestag und die Bundesregierung auf, mit sofortiger Wirkung: alle Sanktionen aufzuheben, die den weltweiten Austausch von Medizingeräten, Gesundheitsprodukten, Medikamenten, Erfahrungen und Vorgehensweisen behindern oder unmöglich machen.

Lift all sanctions that are hindering the fight against the pandemic

Also: what's next with the school year? Education ministers have to agree!

The German Communist Party (DKP) started a petition to the German Bundestag on Thursday: "Lift all sanctions that hinder the fight against the pandemic"






Junge Welt's coverage of the narrative (example)^{39 40 41}



Table 3. Information Laundering Case 2

| Media outlet | Time | Process | Category (language of publication/ country of origin) |
|---|-------|--|--|
| 18 March | | | |
| <i>Izvestia</i> ⁴² | 00:01 | IL (🌀 woozle effect, 🧬 misappropriation) | Foreign pro-Kremlin media (RU/RUS) |
| Lenta.r ⁴³ | 02:22 | IL (📰 misleading headline) | Foreign pro-Kremlin media (RU/RUS) |
| <i>Baltijas Bals</i> ⁴⁴ | 02:46 | SM (Lenta) | Foreign pro-Kremlin media (RU/LVA) |
| <i>Izvestia</i> ⁴⁵ | 02:24 | IL (🏰 Potemkin village) | Foreign pro-Kremlin media (RU/RUS) |
| <i>Federal Press</i> ⁴⁶ | 03:38 | IL (🧬 misappropriation) | Foreign proxy (RU/RUS) |
| <i>Komsomolskaya Pravda</i> ⁴⁷ | 04:11 | SM | Foreign pro-Kremlin media (RU/RUS) |
| <i>RIA Novosti</i> ⁴⁸ | 04:16 | SM | Kremlin-official media (RU/RUS) |
| <i>Regnum</i> ⁴⁹ | 04:33 | SM | Foreign pro-Kremlin media (RU/RUS) |
| <i>Argumenti i Fakti</i> ⁵⁰ | 05:08 | SM | Foreign accidental actor (RU/RUS) |
| RosBusinessConsulting ⁵¹ | 05:35 | SM | Foreign accidental actor (RU/RUS) |
| RT Russian ⁵² | 05:37 | IL (🧬 misappropriation) | Kremlin-official media (RU/RUS) |
| Topwar | 06:14 | SM (translation to German) | Foreign proxy (DE/RUS) |
| NSN ⁵³ | 06:19 | SM | Foreign pro-Kremlin media (RU/RUS) |
| M24 ⁵⁴ | 06:20 | SM | Foreign pro-Kremlin media (RU/RUS) |
| Krpress.ru ⁵⁵ | 06:20 | SM | Foreign proxy (RU/RUS) |
| <i>Rossiyskaya Gazeta</i> ⁵⁶ | 06:26 | SM | Kremlin-official media (RU/RUS) |
| <i>TV Zvezda</i> ⁵⁷ | 06:37 | SM | Foreign pro-Kremlin media (RU/RUS) |
| <i>Realnoevremya.ru</i> ⁵⁸ | 06:48 | SM | Foreign proxy (RU/RUS) |
| <i>Wi-fi.ru</i> ⁵⁹ | 07:14 | SM | Foreign proxy (RU/RUS) |
| <i>Sputnik Georgia</i> ⁶⁰ | 08:01 | SM | Kremlin-official media (RU/GEO) |
| <i>Business-gazeta.ru</i> ⁶¹ | 08:01 | SM | Foreign proxy (RU/RUS) |



| Media outlet | Time | Process | Category (language of publication/ country of origin) |
|--|-------|---|--|
| <i>Weaponews.com</i> ⁶² | 08:05 | SM (Topwar) | Foreign proxy (DE/RUS) |
| <i>NTV</i> ⁶³ | 08:16 | SM | Foreign pro-Kremlin media (RU/RUS) |
| <i>Avtoradio.ru</i> ⁶⁴ | 08:25 | SM | Foreign proxy (RU/RUS) |
| <i>Mosday.ru</i> ⁶⁵ | 09:00 | SM | Foreign proxy (RU/RUS) |
| <i>1prime.ru</i> ⁶⁶ | 09:09 | SM | Foreign proxy (RU/RUS) |
| <i>Kazan.Bezformata</i> ⁶⁷ | 09:20 | SM | Foreign proxy (RU/RUS) |
| <i>Gazeta</i> ⁶⁸ | 09:26 | IL ( misappropriation) | Foreign pro-Kremlin media (RU/RUS) |
| <i>1sn.ru</i> ⁶⁹ | 10:04 | SM | Foreign proxy (RU/RUS) |
| <i>Life</i> ⁷⁰ | 10:20 | SM | Foreign pro-Kremlin media (RU/RUS) |
| <i>Interaffairs.ru</i> ⁷¹ | 10:49 | SM | Foreign accidental actor (RU/RUS) |
| <i>Versia</i> ⁷² | 10:57 | SM | Foreign proxy (RU/RUS) |
| <i>Vesti FM</i> ⁷³ | 11:10 | SM | Kremlin-official media (RU/RUS) |
| <i>Baltnews Estonia</i> ⁷⁴ | 11:35 | IL ( misleading headline,  misappropriation) | Foreign pro-Kremlin media (RU/EST) |
| <i>Eer.ru</i> ⁷⁵ | 12:17 | SM | Foreign accidental actor (RU/RUS) |
| <i>izhevskinfo.ru</i> ⁷⁶ | Unk. | SM | Foreign proxy (RU/RUS) |
| 'Federation of the Trade Unions of the Republic of Tatarsan' ⁷⁷ | Unk. | SM | Foreign proxy (RU/KAZ) |
| 19 March | | | |
| <i>Sputnik Deutschland</i> ⁷⁸ | 08:32 | IL ( misleading headline) | Kremlin-official media (DE/RUS) |
| <i>Nao24.ru</i> ⁷⁹ | 08:56 | SM | Foreign proxy (RU/RUS) |
| 4 May | | | |
| <i>RIA Novosti</i> ⁸⁰ | 13:47 | IL ( misappropriation) | Kremlin-official media (RU/RUS) |



| Media outlet | Time | Process | Category (language of publication/ country of origin) |
|---|-------|--|--|
| <i>News-Front</i> ⁸¹ | 18:47 | IL (🗣️ deceitful translation, 📰 misleading headline, 🏠 Potemkin Village) | Foreign pro-Kremlin media (DE/RUS) |
| <i>Deutsch-Russisches Forum</i> ⁸² | Unk. | SM | Domestic proxy (RU/DEU) |
| 5 May | | | |
| <i>Sputnik Deutschland</i> ⁸³ | 09:00 | IL (📰 disinformation, 🗣️ misappropriation) | Kremlin-official media (DE/RUS) |
| 6 May | | | |
| <i>Sputnik Deutschland</i> ⁸⁴ | 08:30 | IL (🏠 Potemkin Village) | Kremlin-official media (DE/RUS) |
| 7 May | | | |
| <i>Vzglyad</i> ⁸⁵ | 10:05 | IL (📰 misleading headline, 🗣️ misappropriation) | Foreign pro-Kremlin media (RU/RUS) |

Information Laundering Case 3. US military biological laboratories encircle Russia⁸⁶ [29 May 2020]

Background. In recent years, the United States has built biological laboratories to foment research in Russia's neighbouring countries such as Kazakhstan, Armenia, Tajikistan, and Georgia. Pro-Kremlin and Kremlin-official outlets use those laboratories for their disinformation activities, e.g. claiming that COVID-19 was intentionally developed in one of those labs. In this case study, the reach of the content to German audiences is limited to the translation of an international laundering process by Kremlin-official media, *Sputnik*

Deutschland, and the dissemination of this piece in social media.

Laundering. The placement was carried out by Kremlin-official outlet *RIA Novosti*, by means of misappropriation and woozle effect in selecting quotes from Russian Minister of Foreign Affairs Sergei Lavrov. The process started again with a Potemkin Village in which *Sputnik* in different versions reinforced and amplified *RIA*'s article. The article also discussed a conspiracy theory about how COVID-19 in Kazakhstan was



associated with a biolaboratory built by the US in 2016 (e.g. “интернете поползли слухи, что вирус может быть связан с биолaborаторией, которую в 2016 году на юго-востоке республики построили американцы”). In total, 17 outlets were involved in the process, where more actors conducted SM than IL.

On the layering phase, the first outlet to amplify these declarations was *Sputnik Abkhaz*, followed by the Russian-language version of *Sputnik Georgia*. Interestingly, the latter reproduced RIA's piece but removed the section that spoke precisely about Georgia. *Sputnik Lithuania* conducted SM. *Sputnik Belarus* included a misleading headline: ‘Biolaboratories under the auspices of the United States: peaceful developments or dangerous experiments?’ (‘Биолaborатории под эгидой США: мирные разработки или опасные опыты?’), causing a potential bias for the reader from the beginning and suggesting that the US could be conducting dangerous experiments in the region. *Sputnik Deutschland* shared the same article but with a small change in the title: from asking why the US needs biolabs in Central Asia and the Caucasus to ‘Why does the USA need organic laboratories so close to Russia?’ (misappropriation). *Sputnik Moldova*'s article was amplified by proxies with a Romanian domain. *Sputnik Armenia* also included a misleading headline, reproducing the exact content but adding at the beginning of the title “Conspiracy you say!?”, aimed at refuting the idea that this is a conspiracy theory.

Observations






IL where most of the actors involved were Kremlin-official outlets. RIA Novosti conducted the placement, but the process happened principally in different versions of Sputnik (from Russia's neighbouring countries) in the course of one day. All were *Sputnik* versions in the region, i.e. in Russia's neighbouring countries, except Lithuania and Germany.

Although research does not reveal any tangible connection, previous information laundering research suggests it is likely that RIA Novosti's article from 29 May could have been inspired by an article first written by Alexei Mukhin, the Director General of the Centre for Political Information of Moscow's think tank The Valdai Discussion Club and a regular contributor to Russian outlets,⁸⁷ published on 20 May 2020 in ‘Arguments of the week’ (Аргументах недели)⁸⁸.

From official RU MFA sources, observed in multiple languages.



Table 4. Information Laundering Case 3

| Media outlet | Time | Process | Category (language of publication/ country of origin) |
|--|-------|--|--|
| 29 May | | | |
| <i>RIA Novost</i> ⁸⁹ | 08:00 | IL ( misappropriation,  woozle effect) | Kremlin-official media (RU/RUS) |
| <i>Sputnik Abkhaz</i> ⁹⁰ | 12:42 | SM | Kremlin-official media (RU/RUS) |
| <i>Sputnik Georgia</i> ⁹¹ | 13:19 | SM | Kremlin-official media (RU/RUS) |
| <i>Sputnik Lithuania</i> ⁹² | 13:35 | SM | Kremlin-official media (RU/RUS) |
| <i>Sputnik Belarus</i> ⁹³ | 13:52 | IL ( misleading headline) | Kremlin-official media (RU/RUS) |
| <i>Sputnik Uzbekistan</i> ⁹⁴ | 14:53 | SM | Kremlin-official media (RU/RUS) |
| <i>Saintbasil.ru</i> ⁹⁵ | 15:00 | SM | Foreign proxy (RU/RUS) |
| <i>Dp73.spb.tv</i> ⁹⁶ | 17:00 | SM | Foreign proxy (RU/RUS) |
| <i>Sputnik Deutschland</i> ⁹⁷ | 19:20 | IL ( misappropriation) | Kremlin-official media (DE/RUS) |
| <i>Sputnik Ossetia</i> ⁹⁸ | 20:11 | SM | Kremlin-official media (RU/RUS) |
| <i>Sputnik Moldova</i> ⁹⁹ | 20:52 | SM | Kremlin-official media (RO/RUS) |
| <i>Ziarelive.ro</i> ¹⁰⁰ | 20:54 | SM (Sputnik MDA) | Foreign proxy (RO/ROU) |
| <i>Sputnik Armenia</i> ¹⁰¹ | 20:55 | IL ( misleading headline) | Kremlin-official media (RU/RUS) |
| <i>Portal-ro.com</i> ¹⁰² | 21:00 | SM (Sputnik MDA) | Foreign proxy (RO/ROU) |
| <i>Sputnik Azerbaijan</i> ¹⁰³ | 22:51 | SM | Kremlin-official media (RU/RUS) |
| <i>SyFeed.com</i> ¹⁰⁴ | Unk. | SM (Sputnik MDA) | Foreign proxy (RO/ROU) |
| 30 May | | | |
| <i>Sputnik Romania</i> ¹⁰⁵ | 11:07 | SM | Kremlin-official media (RO/RUS) |



Information Laundering Targeting Alexei Navalny

Kremlin-official and pro-Kremlin narratives related to the poisoning of Alexei Navalny compile three of the big conventional topics of information influence activities in the German media environment: Nord Stream-2¹⁰⁶, EU sanctions and a Russophobic explanation of the Skripal case. IL processes targeting Navalny's poisoning try to deny the Russian origin of the poisoning as well as blaming Western Russophobia. The activity of IL actors is expected to grow as the story develops.

Information Laundering Case 4A&4B. Navalny's symptoms are not consistent with Novichok poisoning, and this is a political theatre orchestrated from Berlin [ongoing]

Background. On Wednesday 2 September, German government spokesman Steffen Seibert stated that toxicological tests on samples taken from Alexei Navalny had provided unequivocal evidence of a chemical nerve agent from the Novichok group^{107 108}. The Russian opposition leader was airlifted to Berlin's Charité hospital on August 22 after falling ill in Tomsk, a city in Siberia.

Laundering. This process combined two unchained IL sequences, starting with a German-language video published on *RT Deutsch* on 28 August (placement by means of disinformation and misleading headline), and incorporating later on a woozle effect with comments from Russian scientists made to Kremlin-official *RIA Novosti* and

Russian news agency, *Interfax*. In total, 19 media were involved. Between 28–30 August *RT Deutsch's* article was amplified by proxy platforms such as the blog *Co-op Anti-War Café Berlin* and *Press24.net*, *Ungeheuerliches*, and *Shafaqna*.

After the placement by *RT Deutsch* on 28 August, the domestic proxy platform *Friedliche-Loesungen* shared the exact content from the Kremlin-official outlet but deleted the first paragraph. This automatically emphasised the content of the second paragraph of RT's piece (misappropriation): the alleged lack of willingness of the Charité's doctors to collaborate with Russian doctors, with a component of Russophobia and





Image of Navalny utilised in Qpress.de

political interests aimed at jeopardising Nord Stream-2. Later that day, domestic marginal proxy *Berliner TagesZeitung* continued the laundering process by copy-pasting the same RT headline, text and video but adding a single modification: an “evil” (“böses”) before “political theatre” in the title (“DER RUSSISCHE PATIENT” – BÖSES POLITTHEATER IN DER BERLINER CHARITE’). By doing this, the author accused German doctors of being immoral, creating this alleged “political theatre”. This process was also amplified by SM by click-bait site *Der Nachrichtenspiegel* (domestic marginal proxy).

The English version of RT combined both articles from RIA and Interfax, continuing the woozle effect, to publish a news piece directed at rejecting the possibility of Novichok. This was amplified by several English-language proxies like Shafqna, News Factory, and Ozovc.

Two days later, on 4 September, the information was further laundered by the German version of RT, which included a misleading headline that stated the symptoms were “absolutely unusual” for Novichok (“Absolut unübliche Symptome”: Nowitschok-Entwickler bezweifeln Nervengift-Anschlag auf Nawalny”), continuing the woozle effect, and added several misappropriations, suggesting that Western authorities were unwilling to cooperate with Russian doctors as had happened with the cases of Litvinenko and Skripal. At the end of the article, RT *Deutsch* republished the video shared on 28 August, combining both laundering processes in a single piece. RT Deutsch’s article was amplified through SM by German-language platforms like *Staseve.eu* and *Press24.net*. The laundering process was continued by *Qpress.de*, in an article that discussed whether Navalny is a victim of Nord Stream-2. Besides a misleading headline (“Ist Nawalny Opfer der Nord Stream-2 Pipeline?”), it incorporated disinformation and was accompanied by visual support that discredited Navalny’s image.

Observations

This IL was the result of two separate IL processes, 4 a and 4b (see tables 5 and 6) that converged to disseminate the idea that Navalny was not poisoned with Novichok / cast doubt about it. *RIA's* and *Interfax's* pieces were laundered in other languages such as Russian and English. However, researching this exceeds the scope of this study.

IL was conducted mainly by foreign Russian-language and domestic German-language actors over seven days.

The woozle effect was reinforced when quotes from Leonid Rink and Vladimir Uglev were repeated by IL actors to provide legitimacy to the laundered content, but with a failure of maintaining the hyperlink to the sources of reference – i.e. *Interfax* and *RIA*.

This case illustrates how some IL actors simply launder the content by reproducing the exact information from the previous source and adding one subtle modification. In this case, the artificial incorporation of a word in the headline ("evil political theatre") reinforced the idea

of a strategy orchestrated to directly harm Russia. IL was also aimed at discrediting Navalny (e.g. see picture above). Some Kremlin-official media and pro-Kremlin sources label the Russian politician as a "blogger"

The level of distortion was high, from symptoms not entirely matching Novichok's effects to Navalny being a victim of Nord Stream-2.

German-language Press24.net, Friedliche-Loesungen, and Safaqna were seen again to act as proxies.

IL was widely amplified on social media. One of the Twitter users that amplified it was RT's collaborator, Bryan McDonald⁴

Keywords-based research on this laundering process shows that German journalist Florian Rötzer is taking a very active role in casting doubt on Navalny's poisoning in the platform *Telepolis* On several occasions, *Nachdenkseiten* has translated content about Navalny's case from the website of former British Ambassador Craig Murray.



Table 5. Information Laundering Case 4a





| Media outlet | Time | Process | Category (language of publication/ country of origin) |
|---|-------|---|--|
| 28 August | | | |
| <i>RT Deutsch</i> ¹¹⁰ | 10:33 | IL ( misappropriation,  misleading headline) | Kremlin-official media (DE/RUS) |
| <i>Friedliche-Loesungen</i> ¹¹¹ | 23:30 | IL ( misappropriation) | Domestic proxy (DE/GER) |
| <i>Press24.net</i> ¹¹² | Unk. | SM | Domestic proxy (DE/GER) |
| <i>Shafaqna</i> ¹¹³ | Unk. | SM | Foreign proxy (DE/PAK) |
| 29 August | | | |
| <i>Co-op News</i> ¹¹⁴ | 00:41 | SM | Domestic proxy (DE/GER) |
| <i>Ungehuerliches</i> ¹¹⁵ | Unk. | SM | Domestic proxy (DE/GER) |
| 30 August | | | |
| <i>Berliner TagesZeitung</i> ¹¹⁶ | 09:08 | IL ( misleading headline) | Domestic proxy (DE/GER) |
| <i>Der Nachrichtenspiegel</i> | Unk. | SM | Domestic proxy (DE/GER) |



Table 6. Information Laundering Case 4b

| Media outlet | Time | Process | Category (language of publication/ country of origin) |
|-------------------------------------|-------|--|--|
| 2 September | | | |
| <i>RIA Novosti</i> ¹¹⁷ | 10:33 | IL (🧠 woozle effect, 📰 misappropriation) | Kremlin-official media (RU/RUS) |
| <i>Interfax</i> ¹¹⁸ | 16:52 | IL (🧠 woozle effect) | Foreign pro-Kremlin media (RU/RUS) |
| <i>RT</i> ¹¹⁹ | 19:52 | IL (🧠 woozle effect, 📰 misappropriation) | Kremlin-official media (EN/RUS) |
| <i>News Factory</i> ¹²⁰ | 22:32 | SM | Foreign proxy (EN/RUS) |
| <i>Ozovc</i> ¹²¹ | Unk. | SM | Foreign proxy (EN/USA) |
| <i>Syria.Shafqna</i> ¹²² | Unk. | SM | Foreign proxy (EN/PAK) |
| 4 September | | | |
| <i>RT Deutsch</i> ¹²³ | 06:30 | IL (📰 misleading headline, 🧠 woozle effect, 📰 misappropriation) | Kremlin-official media (DE/RUS) |
| <i>Qpress</i> ¹²⁴ | 14:51 | IL (📰 misleading headline, 🧠 disinformation) | Domestic proxy (DE/GER) |
| <i>Staseve</i> ¹²⁵ | Unk. | SM | Domestic proxy (DE/GER) |
| <i>Press24.net</i> ¹²⁶ | Unk. | SM | Domestic proxy (DE/GER) |



Information Laundering Case 5.Targeting Other Domestic Topics: Nord Stream-2

The murder of a Georgian in Berlin is linked to Nord Stream-2 [5 December 2019]

Background. Georgian citizen and former Chechen fighter Zelimkhan Khangoshvili was murdered on 23 August 2019 in the centre of Berlin. Kremlin-official and pro-Kremlin media outlets in Russian and Georgian laundered the news in order to portray this case as a direct consequence of the deteriorating relationship between Germany and Russia, related to the Nord Stream-2 gas pipeline. After the murder of Mr Khangoshvili, Germany expelled two Russian diplomats as Germany's federal prosecutor stated that "there are sufficient factual grounds to suggest that the killing [...] was carried out either on behalf of state agencies of the Russian Federation or those of the Autonomous Chechen Republic, as part of the Russian Federation."¹²⁷

This laundering case combines widespread Nord Stream-2 related narratives with Russophobia, and Skripal case conspiratorial theories.

Laundering. The placement was conducted by pro-Kremlin media outlet *Vzglyad* on 4 December 2019, including a woozle effect quoting German historian Alexander Rahr

to support the connection between the murder and Nord Stream-2. Although there was wide coverage of this issue in Russian-language media, this analysis focuses on the information laundering process started by the distortion and selective use of Alexander Rahr's quotes to disseminate the message that the Russophobic West was blaming this "new Skripal case" on Russia to influence Nord Stream-2. The laundering was conducted mainly in Russian-language media by seven outlets.

In the layering phase, also 4 December 2019, *Vzglyad* again reproduced the previous article, applying the techniques of a misleading headline, misappropriation, and disinformation. The misleading headline directly linked Nord Stream-2 to the murder and referred to the case as 'the German Skripal'. Disinformation and misappropriation were combined when the author claimed that the source of this information provided was respected German news magazine *Der Spiegel*, including a hyperlink. However, the source was actually from the reputable German newspaper *Der Tagesspiegel*¹²⁸. Only the latter outlet published on the story. *Vzglyad's* author also declared that the piece proudly claimed that now Germany had its own Skripal case (Авторитетное немецкое издание





Screenshots from Sputnik Georgia

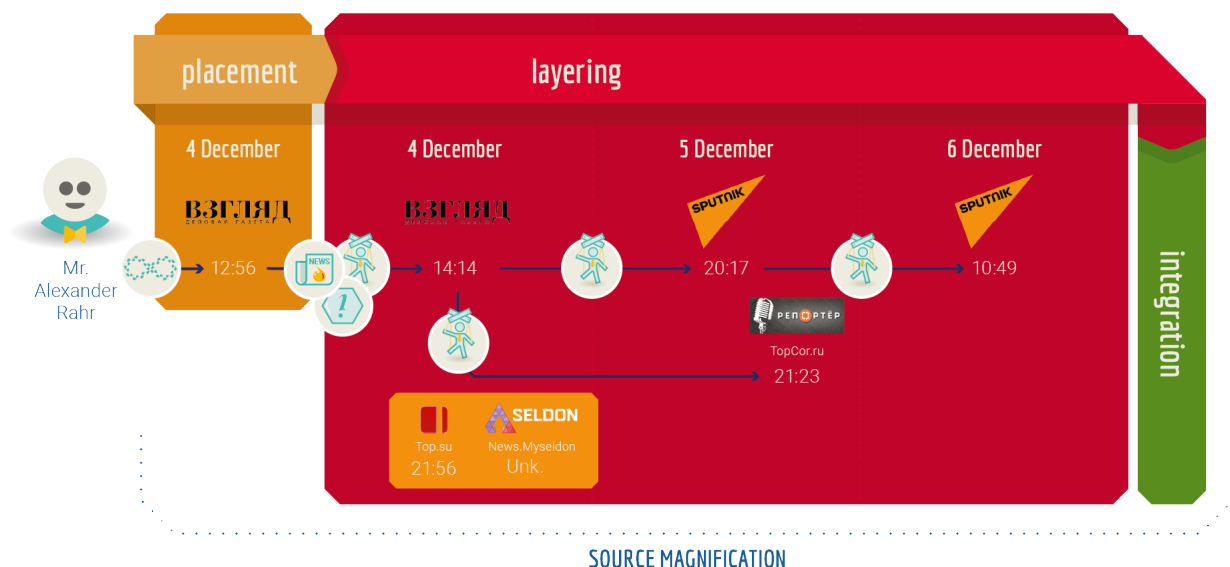
Der Spiegel в статье под заголовком «Российский государственный террор бросает вызов Германии» и вовсе с нескрываемой гордостью заявляет, что «теперь у ФРГ официально есть дело Скрипаля»), constituting misappropriation. According to SimilarWeb, while *Der Spiegel* has 112.35M monthly readers (data from July 2020), *Der Tagesspiegel* has 26.23M. Both are reputable publications, but the former is a news magazine published once a week and read across Germany, while the latter is a daily newspaper mainly distributed in and around Berlin. The similarities in the newspapers' names (primarily for non-German speaking audiences) was probably used strategically to appeal to a broader audience, since *Der Spiegel* is a more better known publication than *Der Tagesspiegel*.

Ostensibly, Mr Rahr casually stated that this event happened precisely when Russia and Germany were improving relations and completing the construction of Nord Stream-2. By selectively picking these quotes from the German historian, the newspaper *Vzglyad* created the perfect piece: appealing to audiences with a

misleading headline, increasing the possibility of the report being picked by one of Germany's most-read news magazines (disinformation), and selectively using experts' quotes to connect two separate events, i.e. the murder could have happened as a consequence of Nord Stream-2 (misappropriation). The newspaper also included other misappropriations at the end of the piece, using comments from AfD's Waldemar Herdt to that the accusation that the murder is linked to Russia was just but another case of Western Russophobia (misappropriation).

On the following day, Russian media outlet *Topcor.ru* amplified the content from *Vzglyad's* last article via SM, maintaining the woozle effect. Although the platform directly amplified the content from *Vzglyad*, again the link did not lead to the cited news piece. The final paragraphs of *Topcor.ru* included comments from Russian Minister of Foreign Affairs Sergei Lavrov on the events, defending Russia's innocence and comparing this with the case of the MH17 flight, i.e. the Russophobic West again blaming Russia without having proof to





back up their statements. On the same day, the Georgian-language version of *Sputnik Georgia* amplified the news on a video that once again linked the whole situation to the construction of Nord Stream-2. The video was published on *Sputnik's* website and disseminated through its YouTube channels and social media. The Russian-language version of *Sputnik Georgia* amplified a Russian translation the following day, with a misleading headline that stated that Germany and Russia were on the brink of a scandal.

Observations

IL techniques were mainly conducted by proxy actors. The absence of German-language media indicates that German-speaking audiences were not targeted. The media involved, the techniques applied, and the source magnification suggest that

German news stories were used strategically to influence international and Russian-speaking audiences.

The most relevant IL tactic was the combination of wozzle effect and misappropriation, including German experts and Russian political figures in order to legitimise misleading information: the idea that both the assassination and the blaming of Russia were linked to Western Russophobia and Nord Stream-2. This was reinforced by the strategic exploitation of the similarities in the names of *Der Spiegel* and *Der Tagesspiegel*.

Distortion of the facts was high, involving a mix of conventional disinformation pieces: the Skripal case, Nord Stream-2 and Russophobia.

Vzglyad (placement) is owned by Putin supporter Konstantin Rykov,



with connections to former Putin aide Vladislav Surkov.^{129 130} Rykov is a propagandist who organised the campaign 'Glory to Russia!' (Слава России!) and a Deputy of the State Duma of the Russian Federation.^{131 132}

The main language of the campaign was Russian. Georgian is secondary language.

Key experts mentioned: Alexander Rahr (German historian), Waldemar Herdt (German politician, AfD). Allegedly, Mr Rahr also commented on the incident on the pro-Kremlin outlet 360 TV¹³³, which was amplified by the Russian language outlet *Daily Storm*¹³⁴.

Table 7. Information Laundering Case 5

| Media outlet | Time | Process | Category (language of publication/ country of origin) |
|----------------------------------|-------|---|--|
| 4 December | | | |
| Vzglyad ¹³⁵ | 12:56 | IL (🧠 woozle effect) | Foreign pro-Kremlin media (RU/RUS) |
| Vzglyad ¹³⁶ | 14:14 | IL (📰 misleading headline, 🧬 misappropriation and 📢 disinformation) | Foreign pro-Kremlin media (RU/RUS) |
| Top.st ¹³⁷ | 21:56 | SM | Foreign proxy (RU/RUS) |
| News.myseldon.com ¹³⁸ | Unk. | SM | Foreign proxy (RU/RUS) |
| 5 December | | | |
| Sputnik Georgia ¹³⁹ | 20:17 | IL (🧬 misappropriation) | Kremlin-official media (GE/RUS) |
| Topcor.ru ¹⁴⁰ | 21:23 | IL (🧬 misappropriation) | Foreign proxy (RU/RUS) |
| 6 December | | | |
| Sputnik Georgia ¹⁴¹ | 10:49 | IL (📰 misleading headline) | Kremlin-official media (RU/RUS) |



CONCLUDING REMARKS

This research confirmed that Information Laundering processes take place in Germany, with national and foreign actors enabling the spread of the Kremlin's influence in the domestic media environment. Depending on their intended effects and the target audiences of each case, two types of IL have been identified in the country. As we can see in Cases 1 and 4, in IL-A, domestic actors launder foreign or international news events and translate them into German language, thereby deliberately or accidentally spreading the Kremlin's influence in the German media environment. Meanwhile, Cases 2,3 and 5 illustrate IL-B, where foreign actors launder domestic German news events to shape perspectives about Germany for an international or foreign audience.

In the context of IL, German actors interact with foreign actors to configure transnational networks that launder regular domestic disinformation topics, for example, conspiracy theories such as Pizzagate, Nord Stream-2, and more recently, COVID-19, and Navalny's poisoning. In total, 13 domestic outlets were identified as taking part in the process. They were mostly proxies:

In addition to the outlets mentioned in Table 8, the IL investigation also identified actors publishing pieces that could somehow be linked to laundering processes. More research needs to be conducted to verify participation in German IL by *Junge Welt* journalist Florian Rötzer in the blog *Telepolis*. Rötzer has recently taken a very active role in casting doubt on Navalny's poisoning on *Telepolis*. On several occasions, fringe media *Nachdenkseiten* has translated content about Navalny's case from the website of former British Ambassador Craig Murray.

Although they have a narrower audience, German fringe outlets could potentially be used as a gateway into Germany's (social) media environment. Finally, the activity of these domestic outlets was supported by pro-Kremlin (*News-Front*, *Topwar*, *SOTT*) and Kremlin-official media (*RT*, *Sputnik*) in the German language, while foreign pro-Kremlin and Kremlin-official media repeatedly amplified the voices of German political and public figures, mainly from the far-right *Alternative für Deutschland* (AfD) and leftist *Die Linke*.

In summary, IL research aims to contribute to the study of the Kremlin's information influence activities by mapping and assessing the hostile information environment of a particular country, taking a holistic approach to the life cycle of information influence campaigns. By exposing how these processes occur and who participates in them, EU institutions



and national governments, as well as civil society and journalists, can build resilience against information influence activities, improving understanding of the

vulnerabilities of specific domestic media environments, and uncovering repeated patterns and connections between actors, media outlets, and influence techniques.

Table 8. Domestic actors directly participating in IL in Germany

| Media outlet | Category |
|---|---------------------------|
| <i>Boersenwolf.blogspot.com</i> | Domestic proxy |
| <i>Die Freie Welt</i> | Domestic accidental actor |
| <i>Connectiv.events</i> (by <i>Qlobal-Change</i>) | Domestic proxy |
| <i>Watergate.tv</i> | Domestic proxy |
| <i>Deutsch-Russisches Forum</i> | Domestic proxy |
| <i>Friedliche-Loesungen</i> | Domestic proxy |
| <i>Press24.net</i> | Domestic proxy |
| <i>Co-op News</i> | Domestic proxy |
| <i>Ungehuerliches</i> | Domestic proxy |
| <i>Berliner TagesZeitung</i> | Domestic |
| <i>Der Nachrichtenspiegel</i> | Domestic proxy |
| <i>Qpress</i> | Domestic proxy |
| <i>Staseve</i> | Domestic proxy |



Endnotes

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