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Russia's Information Influence Operations in the Nordic – Baltic Region

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Executive Summary

This publication has been prepared in the framework of the NATO Strategic Communications Centre of Excellence's (NATO StratCom COE) project, which explores foreign hostile influence in the Nordic-Baltic region since 2016. This paper looks at Russia's information influence operations in each of the eight countries (Denmark, Estonia, Finland, Iceland, Latvia, Lithuania, Norway, and Sweden – the NB8) by explaining the historical context and drawing on a number of case studies (2018 – 2023). The authors have dived into nuances of their own domestic sociopolitical environments and their country's relationship with Russia, and incorporated the effects of the ongoing Russian invasion of Ukraine. The publication explores the factors for the success or failure of Russia's information influence in the respective countries, as well as assessing the measures countries are taking to mitigate the hostile influence.

The introductory chapter of the publication, co-authored by Kamil Mikulski, research fellow at the NATO StratCom COE, and Elina Lange-Ionatamishvili, a senior expert at the NATO StratCom COE, looks at the term 'information influence operations' and its relationships with other concepts such as hybrid threats, hybrid warfare, influence operations, and cognitive warfare. The authors explore existing definitions and usage in Western scholarship, look at security strategies of the NB8, and compare those with the interpretations found in Russia's strategic thinking.

The chapter on Denmark by Jeanette Serritzlev of the Royal Danish Defence College reveals that instead of directly targeting the Danish population, Russia mostly focuses on spreading disinformation about Denmark. Although Denmark has not been among the top targets of Russia's influence, Russia has attempted to exploit discussions on the future status of Greenland, to challenge Denmark's stance on Ukraine, and to damage its international image. The author has also looked at how old disinformation networks (a common trend in Europe), such as the Covid-19 vaccine sceptics, have turned towards supporting anti-Western or anti-Ukraine narratives, which plays to the Kremlin's advantage in domestic information spaces. The author concludes that Danish society is rather resilient against Russian malign influence operations due to the strong democratic institutions of the country, its stable political landscape, and its lack of proximity to Russia both geographically and linguistically.

Professor Holger Mölder of the Tallinn University of Technology and Vladimir Sazonov of the Estonian Military Academy and the University of Tartu in their chapter about Estonia pay special attention to how Russia is using local alternative political movements and Russian media channels to exert influence on Estonian society. The authors conclude that, while blocking access to Russian state media channels in 2022 made direct interference more difficult, it did not prevent them from reaching Estonian audiences via other information channels, social media in particular. The authors discuss how turbulence in geopolitics and subsequent economic rifts have caused Estonian far-right and far-left political forces to adopt pro-Kremlin narratives. Although their influence can be deemed as minimal compared with the consistent support of the majority of the population towards Ukraine and the West, some parts of Estonian society remain susceptible to Russia's influence attempts, faced with domestic and international socio-economic challenges.

Finland, as noted by author Anneli Ahonen, former head of EEAS East StratCom Task Force and research associate at Cardiff University, stands out as an example of where Russia has adapted its influence campaigns to suit different strategic objectives. Russia has historically framed Finland as a friendly neighbour, while at the same time making repeated intimidating statements to deter Finland from joining NATO. As the geopolitical reality changed with Finland's application to NATO in May 2022, Russia had to adapt its narrative frameworks and influence tactics. The case studies about migrants on the Finnish border, Finland's aid to Ukraine, and the process of accession to NATO illustrate Russia's current approach. While there is strong resilience in Finnish society against Russia's

malign influence, the author notes the intensification of hybrid threats in the region and against Finland in particular, signalling a future trend.

Professor Silja Bára Ómarsdóttir and Assistant Professor Jón Gunnar Ólafsson of the University of Iceland use the case study of Russia's invasion of Ukraine and the Icelandic response to it to analyse the level of societal resilience against hostile information influence campaigns. While they point to the often reactive and small media landscape in Iceland and high reliance on social media, strong support for NATO and Ukraine has been consistent, thus making the population less prone to accept Russia's purported narratives. In addition, the authors note the unique nature of the Icelandic language and the geographical distance from Russia act as deterrents to Russia's broader information influence operations. Yet, continuous caution should be exercised, as it would require little resources for a hostile foreign actor to penetrate Iceland's information ecosystem.

The case study on Latvia by Juris Jurāns, researcher at the Centre for East European Policy Studies, takes a thorough look at Russia's influence operations vis-à-vis Latvia in the political, diplomatic, economic, and media domains. The author discerns the main narratives undermining Latvian national interests and describes how those are promoted in society. Against the historical background of deteriorating diplomatic relations between Latvia and Russia, the author outlines the increasing aggressiveness in portraying Latvia as a failed state and efforts to divide society over the problem of integrating the Russian-speaking population. Some of the most frequent narratives and tactics used by Russia are explored through case studies of Covid-19 disinformation networks and political forces that mirror pro-Kremlin propaganda. The author also points to the continuous threats stemming from the Kremlin's agents of influence and the instrumentalisation of Soviet heritage to incite contentious memory politics.

The Lithuanian case study by Balys Liubinavičius, former senior analyst at Debunk.org, explores current trends of Russia's information influence operations in light of the long history of such influence in the Baltic States. The author considers various local proliferators of Russian messaging and domestic-facing and foreign-facing Russian media, to better comprehend the complex media landscape. The chapter explores factors for Lithuania's resilience against information influence operations by referring to case studies of Russian disinformation campaigns, such as the use of social media and domestic-facing media channels, portraying Lithuania as a morally depraved and failed state. A common trend is established to be Russia's opportunism in exploiting situations like the Belarus – EU border crisis and aid provision to Ukraine.

In the case study about Norway, Professor Gunhild Hoogensen Gjørv and doctoral research fellow Arsalan Bilal of UiT The Arctic University of Norway discuss Russia's increasing ambitions towards the Arctic and how this affects Norway, taking a closer look at the cases of Svalbard and Kirkenes. They find that there is a strong centre – periphery relationship in these parts of Norway vis-à-vis the rest of the country, which makes them more vulnerable to Russian influence operations. They note the primary tools currently employed by Russia are disinformation and distortion of events, exploitation of academic cooperation and science diplomacy, and soft economic power and memory politics, particularly in the regions geographically proximate to Russia.

The Swedish case study by Dr Martin Kragh of the Swedish Institute of International Affairs introduces the history of Russian information influence operations in Sweden and outlines the ways the Kremlin has managed to insert itself into contentious areas, such as immigration, crime, and Sweden's response to the COVID-19 pandemic, among others. In addition, this chapter points to Russia's strategic failure in preventing Sweden's NATO accession, while emphasising the Kremlin's consistent efforts to undermine public trust in Sweden's institutions and its alignment with the West. According to the author's assessment, Swedish society overall is not susceptible to Russian influence. However, this does not mean that Russia does not have ambitions to target Sweden also in the future.

What Are 'Information Influence Operations' and Where Do They Fit Conceptually?

Elina Lange-Ionatamishvili and **Kamil Mikulski**

Introduction

Following the 2014 annexation of Crimea by the Russian Federation, the terms 'hybrid warfare' and 'hybrid threats' were revived in Western discourses. This included multiple references to such affiliated terms as 'disinformation', 'deception', 'information influence operations', and 'reflexive control', among others.

Frank G. Hoffman in his 2007 seminal piece on hybrid warfare emphasises that perception matters more than results in the (physical) battlefield.[1] The psychological effects one is able to inflict on an adversary are as important as the physical ones. The creation and exploitation of societal vulnerabilities to exert information influence is a hybrid warfare tactic that deserves heightened attention.

Hybrid warfare's amorphous nature and element of plausible deniability makes it difficult to pre-empt, combat, and define. Yet, by 2024, a broad agreement has emerged among Western political and military organisations: foreign actors targeting Western societies present a permanent and acute challenge. One way to refer to this phenomenon by researchers and journalists is 'information influence operations'[2] or 'influence operations'[3] where information plays a key role to exert power, erode the target's willpower, confuse and constrain the target's decision-making, and influence public opinion.[4]

Among the targets of hybrid threats[5] and hybrid warfare[6] are state decision-making institutions, public opinion, and human security, including psychological resilience of populations.[7] The adversary operates in the 'grey zone' to exploit national and pan-national information environments. Such activity can include propaganda and disinformation campaigns, psychological operations, and influence operations. The aim is to create or increase ambiguity, hinder democratic processes, erode popular trust in public institutions, induce polarisation, and challenge social norms and values.[8]

The presence of hybrid threats is well documented throughout history. For instance, the use of propaganda in the times of ancient Greece was reported by Herodotus and Thucydides,[9] while disinformation played a role in Joshua's strategy to undermine the morale of the defenders of biblical Jericho.[10] These long-standing manipulative behaviours have been continuously adapted to the technological advancements of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, expanding through new communication mediums.

A binary historical analysis of manipulative behaviours (old versus new) has been addressed in the literature,[11] leading scholars to formulate new frameworks and concepts that aim to encapsulate the ever-evolving and elusive nature of hybrid threats. One such concept is the redefined notion of information influence operations.

For the purposes of this chapter, an information influence operation is understood as 'an organised attempt to achieve a specific effect among a target audience, often using illegitimate and manipulative behaviour'.[12] This understanding hinges on two dimensions: the intentional and deceptive activity of

a hostile actor, coupled with the employment of disruptive and often illegitimate means.[13] The concept of 'legitimacy' is used to draw attention to the fact that activities constituting information influence operations may 'mimic legitimate forms of communication such as advocacy, public relations, lobbying, advertising, and public debate on social media platforms to undermine and pervert the rational formation of opinion'.[14] While such activities may correspond to existing legal frameworks, they are illegitimate in their essence because 'they use falsehoods to poison the principles of communication essential to the healthy functioning of democracies, such as free deliberation and debate, factual bases for claims/knowledge, rational public opinion formation, and mutual trust'.[15] An activity can be considered illegitimate in the case of not conforming not only to the law but also to a set of rules and moral principles, if it is unethical and illicit (again, not only from a legal standpoint).[16] Thus, information influence operations can make use of legal means and employ identifiable actors, including media personalities, political actors, or academics to build influence across various public information-sharing platforms.[17]

James Pamment's initial definition of information influence operations[18] was placed under the umbrella of 'information influence activities' and defined as operations 'conducted by foreign powers to influence the perceptions, behaviour and decisions of target groups to the benefit of foreign powers'.[19] In the current definition, Pamment has omitted references to 'foreign powers' and focuses on the means and desired effects. That has positively affected the conceptual understanding of information influence operations as those are no longer viewed as the prerogative of foreign powers. The current definition also allows inclusion of non-state[20] actors without whom modern-day politics and conflict are difficult to imagine, particularly in the context of hybrid warfare.

Understandings of information influence in the West and the Nordic-Baltic in particular

The digital age has exacerbated security concerns of national governments: the *modus operandi* of hostile actors evolves as new technologies present unforeseen possibilities to access and influence populations and their governments across geographical borders. Yet, despite a shared understanding of the problem, national and sectoral approaches to defining the phenomenon lack uniformity.

The term 'information influence operations', or closely affiliated terms, has been used sporadically in broader Western (especially Nordic) literature, as seen in: Kari and Hellgren (2021), Morin (2021), Mustonen-Ollila, Lehto, and Heikkonen (2020), and Saressalo and Huhtinen (2022).[21] Nevertheless, the term itself appears to be largely promoted by Pamment (Pamment, Nothhaft, and Fjällhed, 2018; Pamment, Nothhaft, and Fjällhed, 2018a; Pamment, 2022; Pamment and Smith, 2022).[22]

One can observe variations of interpretations and definitions depending on the country or sector in question. For example, French author Daniel Ventre discusses information operations from a military perspective by placing them in the broader context of information war as 'actions taken to affect the decision processes, information and information systems of the enemy, while defending our own information and information systems'.[23] The RAND international think tank draws parallels between information operations, information warfare, and influence operations, all of which encompass 'the collection of tactical information about an adversary as well as the dissemination of propaganda in pursuit of a competitive advantage over an opponent'.[24] In its 2009 publication,

however, RAND broadens the scope by defining influence operations as a 'nation's capabilities to influence others' by the use of public diplomacy, strategic communications, information operations, and 'other means that can be used to influence attitudes, behaviours, and decisions – i.e., "win hearts and minds" – without resort to (or excessive reliance on) the use of force'.[25] An adversary's intent to affect a target's decision-making process and gain advantage by using information influence are common criteria in these references. The scope varies from military operations to soft and sharp power in international politics.

Reviewing Nordic-Baltic strategic approaches to security reveals a shared recognition of the problem, although it is defined differently. Sweden, for instance, employs the term 'information influence activities' (*information-påverkan*) in its handbook for communicators distributed by the Swedish Civil Contingencies Agency and the Swedish Psychological Defence Agency.[26] In its National Security Strategy, Sweden speaks of 'hybrid threats' and describes those as 'persistent actions' which undermine democracy and essential services.[27] It appears to use the terms 'hybrid threats' and 'hybrid attacks' interchangeably, by naming the following as constituting parts: 'cyberattacks and disinformation; influence operations, disinformation, attempts to affect critical information flows and critical infrastructure; strategic investments; infiltration of, for example, higher education institutions, and theft of technology and innovation'.[28] The strategy sets the safeguarding of 'openness, democracy and unity in Swedish society' as one of its priority areas, and states that not only all levels of the Swedish public sector but also civil society, the private sector, and individuals can be targets of hybrid attacks by hostile foreign actors.[29]

The Danish Review of National Security and Defence references 'hybrid threats' as an overarching term encompassing 'very varied, non-military security policy instruments used by opponents against the West' and lists 'cyber-attacks, disinformation, manipulation of the democratic debate, influencing electoral actions, genuine sabotage, and economic measures, also in the form of investments and corruption' as examples.[30] The Danish Foreign and Security Policy states that 'Russia in particular makes use of hybrid tools such as influence campaigns with the aim of undermining our [Danish] democracy and our cohesion'.[31] In general, the strategy refers to hybrid threats without going into detail in terms of definition, but mentions 'influence campaigns', 'sabotage [of critical infrastructure]', and 'cyber-attacks' to contextualise them and give examples.[32]

Finland in its Security Strategy for Society refers to the need to prepare for different types of 'hybrid influencing'.[33] It defines it as 'an action in which the aim of the instigator is to achieve its aims by using a multitude of complementary methods and exploit the weaknesses of the targeted community'.[34] The term is linked to 'information operation', which is understood as a systematic action with the aim to change the information environment and public opinion in the target community.[35] In its National Risk Assessment, Finland has included a section on 'hybrid influencing' which is defined as an attempt by an actor (governmental or other) to influence a target's vulnerabilities via a wide range of legal and illegal means, which can include 'political, diplomatic, economic and military means, as well as information and cyber influence'.[36] It goes on to say that 'hybrid influence' can target political decision-making, critical services and infrastructure, and public opinion and trust in the authorities and Finland's policies.[37] Importantly, it links 'hybrid influence' to the concept of reflexive control by stating that typically the aim is to make the target take voluntary decisions that are harmful to the target and supportive of the goals of the hostile actor.[38] A notable goal of 'hybrid influence' is to 'weaken society's decision-making ability and functionality and erode the national value base'.[39]

Estonia in its National Security Concept highlights the Russian Federation as an existential threat to Estonia's security, and notes that Russia 'makes continuous use of hybrid attacks' to achieve its objectives – 'to influence political and social choices in a way that is favourable to the Russian Federation and to undermine trust

and unity both within and between countries'.[40] As examples of 'hybrid attacks', the concept lists 'information influence activities, energy dependency, engineered migration or destabilising activities in cyberspace'.[41] It includes disinformation within information influence activities.[42]

Iceland in its National Security Council's assessment speaks of '*fjölþáttaógnir*' (multi-factor threats), a concept similar to 'hybrid threats', which it defines as coordinated actions of hostile states or entities aimed at exploiting specific systemic weaknesses of states and their institutions.[43] Those are exemplified by 'cyber-attacks, economic sanctions, and targeted economic operations, espionage, disinformation, fake news, and interference in the internal affairs of another state' targeting the decision-making of the authorities, weakening resilience of the society, and undermining democracy, trust, and societal cohesion.[44]

Lithuania in its National Security Strategy states that foreign actors increasingly use non-military subversive measures to affect the security interests of the Euro-Atlantic community. It highlights societal resilience as one of the priority areas for state security, noting challenges posed by digitalisation and the spread of disinformation.[45] The strategy proposes a 'targeted fight against disinformation' through early detection, and strengthening of society's resilience to disinformation and other informational threats through cross-sector cooperation for educational and informational efforts.[46]

In its National Defence Concept, Latvia has included a separate section on the protection of the national information space from 'various manipulations, including disinformation and information influence operations'.[47] It highlights the importance of societal psychological resilience in crises and societal awareness regarding threats to national security and intentions of the potential aggressor. The term 'information influence operations' is not defined in the document and is used alongside other terms such as 'information warfare' and 'hybrid attacks'.[48]

Despite a variety of definitions and approaches, the main idea remains: a concern with the protection of the cognitive domain of national populations from foreign hostile influence. The risk of a fragmented society living in an informational fog and becoming susceptible to foreign manipulation leaves countries particularly vulnerable to hybrid attacks due to their ambiguous nature and difficulty of attribution.

Unwrapping the understandings of information influence operations and influence operations

The two terms 'information influence operations' and 'influence operations' do not have universally accepted definitions. Nonetheless, most authors and Western nations broadly recognise their constitutive elements in terms of their essence or manifestations.

The names of these terms include concepts that do not carry independent malign connotation: 'information', 'influence', and 'operations'. 'Information' in itself is neutral; it pertains to knowledge communicated concerning a particular subject, fact, or event. 'Influence' signifies an effect (a change) resulting from an action. One may argue that to inform is to influence: any form of communication aims at creating an effect, and thus at influencing. An 'operation' is a condition of functioning and it can signify an organised activity with the aim to achieve a particular effect or end state. But does it necessarily imply a malign intent?

The Carnegie Endowment for International Peace (2023) suggests a differentiation between malign and non-malign (acceptable in the context of democracies) influence operations. The main differentiation criteria are: transparency in origins, quality of content, and calls to action. Their argument follows the idea that 'to inform is to influence', but the concern should be with how, why, and by

whom it is done to determine whether this influence can be considered malign.[49] The European Centre of Excellence for Countering Hybrid Threats also emphasises that if a hostile actor is unable to exert its desired influence over a state, interference will be used to build influence, and thus 'influence' loses its benign connotation.[50]

The two terms differ not only in the addition of the word 'information' to one of them. Influence operations appear to cover a broader spectrum of actions and areas of national power. RAND, for example, has proposed that 'influence operations are the coordinated, integrated, and synchronized application of national diplomatic, informational, military, economic, and other capabilities in peacetime, crisis, conflict, and post-conflict to foster attitudes, behaviors, or decisions by foreign target audiences that further [national] interests and objectives'.[51] This suggests that influence operations are a way for any nation state to advance its own interests. The key difference with the definition proposed by James Pamment to define information influence operations is the element of 'often using illegitimate and manipulative behaviour', which goes against the principles of liberal democratic governance. That is an important difference. NATO StratCom COE has proposed that strategic communications, examined through a normative prism, is embedded in liberal democratic values and personal freedoms,[52] where there can be room for influence operations but no room for 'illegitimate and manipulative behaviour'.

The last point to highlight is the relationship between information influence operations, influence operations, and disinformation. Disinformation, understood as the manipulation of information that purposefully aims to mislead and deceive,[53] can be part of the aforementioned operations. However, it is not a prerequisite. Disinformation does not necessarily imply an organised or orchestrated nature. It is important to note that disinformation can exist outside such operations, and information influence operations or influence operations can be conducted without employing disinformation.

Broader conceptual frameworks

Information influence operations can be placed as a subcategory within a broader concept of hybrid threats, defined by NATO StratCom COE's Terminology Project as threats 'of mixed origin that [avoid] declaration of war and accountability'.[54] The European Centre of Excellence for Countering Hybrid Threats explains the concept as including many types of activity: 'interference, influence, operations, campaigns and warfare/war. All of these activities can be seen as unwelcome interventions of one sort or another to a country's internal space'.[55]

The concept of hybrid threats carries inherent ambiguity, partly due to the 'grey zone' and 'under threshold' nature of these activities, and partly because of lack of clarity and coherence in defining and applying the concept. A 2023 report issued by the European Commission's Joint Research Centre offers a comprehensive overview of thirteen domains targeted by hybrid threats: political, public administration, legal, intelligence, diplomacy, military defence, infrastructure, economy, space, cyber, information, social/societal, and culture.[56] The report suggests interlinkages between multiple domains – hybrid threats are not confined to one domain and will affect others. Importantly, it highlights that the majority of domains pertain to – or overlap with – what can be referred to as the 'civilian space' where the core foundations of democracy are being targeted.[57] In this model, the information domain is identified as the most used by hybrid threat actors to cause disruptions; it amplifies the impact of other malign tools (or actions) and creates a cascading effect across other domains.[58] The majority of activities amounting to hybrid threats take place during a priming phase, targeting potential and actual vulnerabilities or political cleavages in a society or state in order to test and assess effects.[59] Priming is then followed by a more intense 'destabilisation' phase

with measures that have a demonstrated effect to polarise a society or state, before moving into a more substantial conflict or 'coercion' phase.[60] This model is illustrated by several case studies, demonstrating how a variety of activities amount to a hybrid threat targeting several domains. Importantly, the information domain is targeted across all examples examined in this report.

In an attempt to present the multidimensionality of hybrid threats, the NATO StratCom COE has also offered a typology and case studies. For instance, malign actors can exert influence over another country's society through often illegitimate means, such as: direct influence of public opinion, agitation and civil unrest, interference in elections, and decreasing public trust in institutions.[61] These illegitimate means fit well into the understanding of information influence operations. Hybrid threats can also encompass other means such as terrorism, violent extremism, and territorial disputes which only partly overlap with the concept of information influence operations.[62]

The other broader concept that may encompass information influence operations is cognitive warfare, where information is used to influence the target's cognitive functions, ranging from peacetime public opinion to wartime decision-making.[63] This is another term with no universally accepted definition. The Geneva Centre for Security Policy has pointed out elements coherent across scholarship focusing on cognitive warfare: 'cognitive warfare is any subversion operation aimed at affecting the mechanisms of understanding and decision making of individuals and/or populations, in order to achieve strategic objectives'.[64] Its paper highlights the subversive nature of cognitive warfare, stating that in a highly interconnected and technologically advanced world it is 'increasingly effective at meeting the objectives of subversion – i.e. manipulation, disruption or overthrowing governments'.[65]

Bernard Claverie and François du Cluzel have further emphasised the integral role of technology by defining cognitive warfare as 'an unconventional form of warfare that uses cyber tools to alter enemy cognitive processes, exploit mental biases or reflexive thinking, and provoke thought distortions, influence decision making and hinder action, with negative effects, both at the individual and collective levels'.[66] Górnikiewicz et al. (2023) also emphasise the effects originating from operations conducted using cyber space and new technologies.[67] They differentiate between conventional information impacts, primarily from mass media, and those originating from non-conventional sources, encompassing social media and direct messaging applications. Certain operations can merge both types, resulting in what they define as 'hybrid information operations' under the larger framework of hybrid warfare.[68]

The current working definition within NATO describes cognitive warfare as 'deliberate, synchronized military and non-military activities throughout the continuum of competition designed to shape the Information Environment and affect audience attitudes, perceptions and behaviours to gain, maintain and protect cognitive superiority'.[69] Although the concept discusses technology and subversion, the definition focuses on the ability to gain advantage over an adversary, be it in defensive or offensive contexts. NATO comprises countries subscribing to *the principles of democracy, individual liberty, and the rule of law, which determines* when and how cognitive warfare can be deployed. NATO's potential adversaries, however, may not be bound by such principles.

In summary, the conceptual similarities between influence operations, information influence operations, and cognitive and hybrid warfare contribute to the previously highlighted terminological ambiguity. Still, these overlaps not only witness the development of broader conceptual frameworks but also emphasise the need for further conceptualisation. Once codified in strategies, guidelines, and manuals, these official definitions guide institutional practices and shape capability development.[70] One should also not overlook the significance of formalisation for wider standardisation and international policy-making. Consistent use of specific terminology contributes to the clarity of policies and other measures aimed at countering hybrid threats.

Understanding of information influence in Russia

The Russian Federation's Doctrine of Information Security (2016)[71] describes information security as key to the survival of the Russian worldview and way of life. One of the threats it identifies is 'a growing information pressure on the population of Russia, primarily on the Russian youth, with the aim to erode Russian traditional spiritual and moral values'. It also implies the Russian worldview should not be questioned, particularly through 'biased assessments of State policy of the Russian Federation' and 'blatant discrimination' of Russian mass media abroad. The doctrine presumes that Russia is under threat from 'certain states' (infer Western democracies) that 'seek to undermine the sovereignty, political and social stability and territorial integrity of the Russian Federation and its allies, and pose a threat to international peace, global and regional security'. Such a view is consistent with the narratives Russian-sponsored state media and affiliated proxies, as well as state officials, have been promoting about Western democracies for over a decade.[72]

The NATO StratCom COE has discussed the overarching Russian concept of 'information confrontation' (*informatsionnoe protivoborstvo*), defined by the Russian Ministry of Defence as 'the clash of national interests and ideas, where superiority is sought by targeting the adversary's information infrastructure while protecting its own objects from similar influence'.[73] The practice of information confrontation is a continuous process to ensure Russia's strategic advantage in the global arena and particularly in what it considers its 'legitimate sphere of influence' – a loose concept primarily targeting territories formerly under the rule of the Russian Empire or the USSR, but increasingly also Western countries and beyond.[74]

The information confrontation encompasses information war, defined as 'the ability to undermine political, economic, and social systems; carry out mass psychological campaigns against the population of a state in order to destabilize society and the government; and force a state to make decisions in the interest of their opponents'.[75] Ofer Fridman argues that 'when Russian scholars talk about the different dimensions of information war, they refer not only to direct political, diplomatic, financial-economic or military activities, but also – and most importantly – to the manipulation of the informational impact of these activities on the targeted audiences to gain political benefits'.[76] This includes applying information manipulation, disinformation, blackmail to extract information, and denial of the adversary's narrative. According to Jolanta Darczewska, the Russian understanding of information warfare echoes the principles of information confrontation, omnipresent in Russian strategic thinking, as it implies 'influencing the consciousness of the masses as part of the rivalry between the different civilizational systems adopted by different countries in the information space by use of special means to control information resources as "information weapons"'.[77] Lieutenant General H.R. McMaster (retd) has noted that 'Russian information operations are part of sophisticated campaigns designed to sow divisions in society, cloud reality, stoke conspiracy theories, and, above all, create crises of confidence in democratic principles, institutions and processes'.[78]

These doctrinal conclusions have to be considered in conjunction with the duality of the Kremlin's understanding of hybrid warfare. In the Russian doctrine, security policy, and scholarly works, manipulative activities pertaining to the information space follow separate naming conventions, depending on whether those operations target Russia or are actually orchestrated by it. Hence, Russians might invoke the notion of information warfare when feeling targeted but opt for alternative terminologies when they are the initiators. This results in a bidirectional, context-sensitive terminology prevalent in the Russian literature. For instance, the new generation warfare (*voyna novogo pokoleniya*) coexists with, but is not equivalent to, the term hybrid warfare (*gibridnaya voyna*). Here, new generation warfare has an outward-looking focus (how to proactively engage with foreign

adversaries), whereas hybrid warfare looks inward (how to defend against perceived threats from the West).[79]

Russia predominantly portrays itself as a victim of foreign interference, interpreting its own activities as proportional and justified reactions to alleged Western (especially American) malevolence. Some Russian scholars argue that resistance to Western interference materialised in the form of concerted state efforts echoing a newfound patriotic rebirth.[80] While lauding the newfound Russian assertiveness and criticising the 'collective West's' hostilities, the authors use divergent terminology, such as 'disinformation' and 'influence operations',[81] 'hybrid warfare',[82] or 'information warfare'.[83] The Russian 'assertive stance' is sometimes linked to the contested concept of the Gerasimov doctrine, which grew out of Mark Galeotti's commentary on a 2013 article by the Russian Chief of the General Staff.[84] General Valeriy Gerasimov pointed to blurring lines between the states of war and peace and the role of non-military means such as subversion, disinformation, and sabotage in achieving strategic objectives. While Galeotti publicly regretted coining the term,[85] it was nevertheless picked up by some Russian analysts. For instance, A. Manoylo and A. Goncharenko use it as an example of a commensurate institutionalised response to Western information war.[86]

The term information influence operations is only sporadically used with reference to the international context, for instance by O. Leonova, who primarily analyses it in the context of political risk and electoral interference.[87] Leonova suggests that operations of information influence are 'aimed at interfering in a system of national elections, forming public opinion and destabilizing the socio-political situation in a country'.[88] Information influence operations are also described as a *modus operandi* inherited by the presidential administration from the former Politburo and Central Committee. These institutions were in charge of conducting information influence operations domestically and abroad.[89]

Conclusion

Information influence operations can be understood as a subset of the broader category of non-kinetic hybrid threats and of cognitive warfare. Although not overly popular in the Western academic literature, the term allows the conceptualising of organised attempts to influence audiences by the use of illegitimate and manipulative means.

The Western and Russian understandings alike imply that 'illegitimate and manipulative means' are only what the adversary employs to exert influence. Yet, multiple studies have shown that Russia does not shy away from the broad application of such means in what could be defined as information influence operations targeting states across the world. Due to a lack of transparency and accountability, Russia as an authoritarian or a hybrid totalitarian state[90] does not have the inbuilt safeguards of a democratic governance system to prevent such actions, and has established internal processes and control measures alongside an operative mindset that encourages them.

The terminological discrepancies in the Western scholarly literature, policies, and doctrines make it hard to place information influence operations within the hierarchy of other terms and define their relationship. The consideration that information influence operations sit within the broader framework of hybrid threats highlights difficulties with detection, comprehension of scale, and evaluation of impact, since denial of attribution and amorphousness are key elements of hybrid warfare. Nonetheless, the term can serve as a theoretical starting point to analyse Russia's influence attempts in the Nordic-Baltic region and beyond.

Denmark

Jeanette Serritzlev

Introduction

This chapter will look into Russia's aims and objectives in influencing the Danish information space and take a deep dive into three cases. The chapter is based on the author's own research in the field, non-classified reports from the Danish intelligence services, and interviews with Danish experts and informal conversations with people actively engaged in the public debate about Russia's war in Ukraine.

While the general threat in the information space from Russia is acknowledged in Denmark, there are few well-known cases of Russian-attributed disinformation campaigns targeting a Danish audience during the last 10 years. Exposed Russian disinformation regarding Denmark has mostly seemed to be ***on*** Denmark instead of ***in*** Denmark in order to shape the perception of the country abroad.[91] A Danish version of Sputnik only survived for half a year when it first appeared back in 2015.[92] A well-known Danish example of Russian disinformation is from 2017, when a Russian news site published a story about Denmark opening a state-accepted animal brothel. In the Danish media coverage, it became a big story about fake news with Denmark as the object. Nevertheless, it was also ridiculed, because it was so obscure and obviously false.[93] Nevertheless, this is just one example of fake stories about Denmark used as examples of liberal countries in moral decay, not only to a Russian domestic audience, but also to other countries in the EU.[94]

However, this does not mean that Russian information influence operations do not exist in or affect the Danish information space. Because they do. As the global information infrastructure crosses borders, so do influence operations and activities, and Russian influence campaigns with other primary target audiences can still have an effect on a Danish audience through a variety of digital platforms, online gaming communities, and social media. As difficult as it might be to attribute concrete Russian disinformation activities targeting Danish audiences, the footprints of themes and narratives are visible in the Danish information space. In the wake of the Russian full-scale invasion of Ukraine, it quickly became clear that segments of very vocal social media accounts in the Danish language took a strong anti-Ukrainian stand and repeated pro-Kremlin narratives in the Danish information space. This was not just the judgement of this author, but documented by the Danish fact-checking media TjekDet[95] as early as March 2022.

New and old distribution networks

The anti-vaccine movement has proven to be a useful distribution network for Russian messaging and influence, regardless of whether it is decidedly pro-Russian, anti-Ukrainian, or anti-American. This digital pattern in Denmark is coherent with the patterns seen in other Western countries.[96]This demonstrates how Russian messaging and disinformation have found different channels for distribution other than its own propagandistic media or fake accounts on social media. Having fuelled anti-vaccine movements during the pandemic, Russia gained an advantage of amplifying narratives within certain informational ecosystems. Most of the anti-Ukrainian sentiments in Denmark still come from more fringe communities, but the constant repetition of pro-Kremlin narratives risks affecting larger parts of the information space. Another kind of influence, which is hard to measure, is more related to the concept of reflexive control – forcing an opponent to act to their own disadvantage. As explained by Estonian prime minister Kaya Kallas in a BBC interview in March 2024, Putin uses fear of nuclear weapons to deter Western countries from decisions they would otherwise make.[97] This type of Russian activity is also apparent in Denmark.

Russian influence also finds its way not only through direct influence activities, but also indirectly, when pro-Kremlin messaging is being reproduced. That includes, this author will argue, defeatist arguments about an unwinnable war and acceptable territorial losses for Ukraine, about economic sanctions not working, and about the need to appease Russia. These are of course legitimate arguments, which may not be influenced through subversive or overt Russian influence activities, but the correlation between Russian official narratives and appeasement arguments like these at least makes it relevant to address this potential blind spot in assessing Russian influence at a broader scale. However, it is beyond the scope of this report to explore this further. It is just important to understand malign influence as something more than a troll or a bot on social media trying to create an immediate effect. Russian influence activities can take many forms and shapes, and with the intent to achieve both short-term and long-term objectives.

Interviews and case studies

To support a general assessment of the Danish information space, the author conducted interviews in March 2024. All references to these experts in the text are from the interviews.

The experts are as follows:

- **Yevgeniy Golovchenko,** PhD, Assistant Professor at the Department of Political Science, University of Copenhagen, specialising in disinformation.98
- **Søren Liborius,** Senior Advisor at the European External Action Service (EEAS), who has a profound knowledge of Russia and Russian disinformation.99
- **Thomas Albrechtsen,** Co-founder of the digital analysis company Common Consultancy, specialising in social media analysis, including online polarisation, and misinformation.100
- **Thomas Hedin,** Editor-in-Chief at the independent Danish fact-checking media TjekDet, which was founded in 2016.101

To exemplify Russian information influence operations in or about Denmark, the following case studies will be presented:

- The **Greenlandic letter (2019):** An example of a direct attempt at influence

in the form of a forged letter distributed online in order to sow discord within the Kingdom of Denmark between Greenland and Denmark and/or Denmark and the United States.

- **From anti-vaccine to anti-Ukraine (2022):** An example of how pro-Kremlin narratives are spread through anti-vaccine networks, indicating either direct or indirect influence.

- **The African diplomat turning out to be a 'Russian prank' (2023):** An example of what on the surface can look like a 'prank' on the Danish minister of foreign affairs, but serves several purposes: undermining trust in state institutions and/or politicians within Denmark, exploiting the narrative of Denmark as a morally depraved country to a Russian audience, and within the Ukraine-Western allied community creating doubt about long-term support.

The three case studies illustrate the variety of Russian information influence operations, not only in regard to themes and means, but also in regard to a direct and an indirect approach.

Russia's aims in the Danish information space

At the 2018 parliamentary election in Denmark, the Russian embassy in Denmark made a since 'famous' tweet (Figure 1) about the pointlessness in interfering in Danish politics – 'Since there is no difference in russophobic approach between #DK Government and opposition, meddling into DK elections makes no sense'[102] – as a response to an announcement from the head of the Danish Defence Intelligence Service warning about the risk of Russian interference before the election.[103]

Despite the tweet being from 2018 and despite the irony, there is some truth in it still today, as there is a high degree of consensus across all parties in the Danish parliament in regard to Russia and questions about Ukraine. As Søren Liborius points out, one of the reasons that Denmark is not a high-priority target for influence is exactly due to the high degree of cohesion and trust in society: 'It is not important to Russia who is in power, as it will not fundamentally change Danish foreign policy in the case of a new government.'

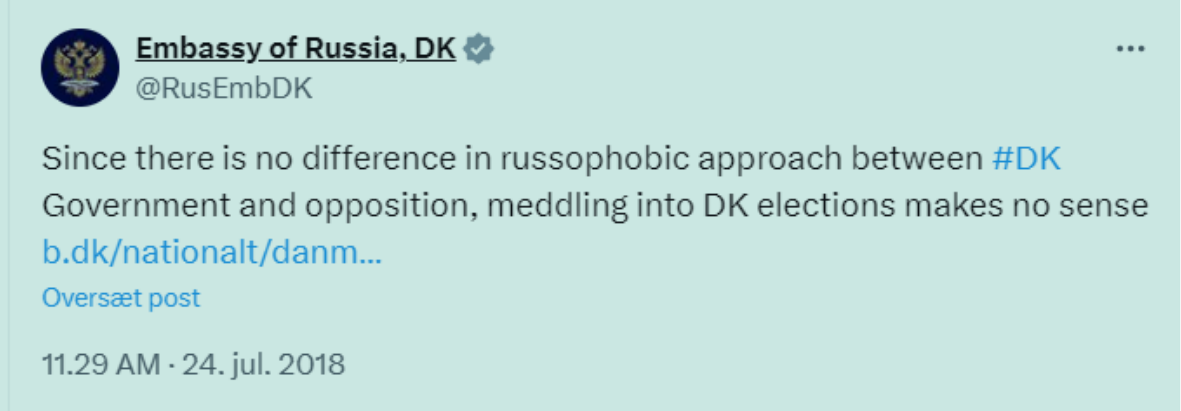


FIGURE 1. Tweet from the Russian embassy in Denmark

Danish intelligence services' overall informational threat assessment

In the yearly published non-classified assessment from the Danish Defence Intelligence Service (DDIS), it is stated that Russia still constitutes the most serious challenge to the West in regard to influence operations. It also states that Russia 'uses influence operations to increase discord among NATO member states and EU member states in order to undermine the West's ability to pursue a united policy towards Russia'.[104]

The assessment further states that Russia's overall ability to conduct influence operations has been reduced since its invasion of Ukraine, due to not only isolation and sanctions, but also the increased focus on pro-Russian activities within Western communities. Based on that, the DDIS assesses that Russia is highly likely to use other means, including more clandestine methods, in its influence activities.[105]

The DDIS explicitly highlights this risk for Denmark in the light of an increased level of conflict in the Arctic, as Denmark is an Arctic country with overlapping continental shelf claims.[106] It also highlights Russia's use of information as a weapon and the risk for Western countries, as Russia uses these means in order to destabilise Western countries and alliances and to undermine unity in support of Ukraine.[107]

However, the concrete assessed threat to Denmark remains vague, which is consistent with the public Joint National Threat Assessments of Russian influence prior to the Danish parliamentary elections in 2019 and 2022 and the European Parliament elections in 2024. In the assessments prior to the 2019 and 2022 elections the DDIS concluded that Russia's interference in Danish parliamentary elections was possible but 'less likely'.[108]

Consistent wording was used in the 2024 assessment for the election to the European Parliament in June, with the addition that the threat of Chinese influence activities was also assessed.[109] After the election the security services issued a press release confirming the assessment: no systematic and coordinated influence on the Danish election to the European Parliament was identified.[110] While the threat assessment considered Denmark and the Danish population as less susceptible to Russian influence as the main reason for not being its target, the post-election press release concluded that it was rather due to Russia's prioritisation of other countries.

Nevertheless, the Danish election to the European Parliament was affected, if not by Russian influence, then at least by the perception of the threat of it: two candidates with Russian roots from different political parties, one of whom was a candidate of a party in the current government, withdrew their candidacy due to their affiliation with Russian organisations. The candidate for the Alternativet political party withdrew soon after media coverage of her being the chair of a Russian state-controlled organisation on the EU's sanctions list.[111] The other candidate, from the Venstre political party – a party which is part of the Danish government – was less willing to give up her candidacy after media coverage of her participation in meetings organised by the European Russian Forum, which, according to experts, is supported by the Russian mission to the EU.[112] The hesitation to withdraw the candidacy of course only increased public interest in her and questioned her vetting by the party. When she finally did withdraw from running, the chairman of Venstre, who is also the deputy prime minister and minister of defence, called it a 'wise decision'.[113]

These two cases illustrate that, although the threat assessment was reminiscent of those from previous elections, the situation in 2024 was nevertheless different, and Russia's influence attempts did play some role in the Danish election campaign.

Russia's main objectives in Denmark's information space

Russian's current main influence and messaging effort in Denmark is thought to be focused on undermining support for Ukraine, which can be achieved through various means. Most Danes do not respond well to explicitly anti-Ukrainian sentiments, nor to anti-sanction rhetoric,[114] which seems to have been more effective in other parts of the European Union. An example is the deterrence messaging in the form of nuclear threat rhetoric which is articulated regularly by the Russian embassy in Copenhagen. As this is overtly expressed, it is also much easier to address and assess. In the end, it does not seem to have had a huge impact on the outcome of the decision-making of the Danish government. Looking at the overall timeline of Western aid to Ukraine, however, it seems fair to assess that the Kremlin's use of nuclear threats has had an effect on the decision-making process, at least in the sense of prolonging decisions on donations of tanks and F-16 fighter jets, as leaders in both Europe and the United States may have feared these were steps Russia could portray as Western escalation.[115]

Søren Liborius finds that in general the influence on Danish public opinion is more subtle: 'From a Kremlin standpoint, if you can get anybody to doubt if Russia can be defeated, just keep on pushing.' Liborius also stresses the importance of the perception of defeat and warns that it is crucial not to fall into this 'discursive trap'. According to him, this is Russia's trump card – to sow doubt and induce defeatism to weaken public morale.

FIGURE 2. Five pillars of Russia's disinformation and propaganda ecosystem (United States Department of State, 2020)

Russia's main methods of influence in the Danish information space

The US government's body for countering foreign disinformation and propaganda, the Global Engagement Center (GEC), suggests the framework shown in Figure 2 to illustrate Russia's disinformation and propaganda ecosystem.[116]

Using this categorisation when looking at the Danish information space, the first pillar, official government communications – primarily through the Russian embassy – stands out as the clearest proven method of influence as it is visible. The Russian embassy in Denmark is on social media, as are most other embassies, but only with a limited level of activity on X (formerly known as Twitter; 5800 followers) and Facebook (1300 followers). The embassy also has a presence on Telegram, which indicates that the intended audience is not Danish, as it is very little used in Denmark and not even assessed in the yearly report of Danes' media habits produced by the Danish broadcasting corporation Danmarks Radio.[117] However, the ambassador, Vladimir Barbin, is certain to get media coverage when he raises his voice, and this means of communication is – cleverly and in a well-orchestrated manner – used for strategic messaging.

Looking at the second pillar, state-funded global messaging, Denmark does not have its own version of RT or Sputnik, but in 2023 a national Danish newspaper, *Jyllands-Posten*, covered how the current pro-Russian network in Denmark operates across social media platforms to spread pro-Russian messages.[118] The newspaper's mapping showed that these networks consisted of private individuals, online communities, and a Russian cultural institution representing the state-controlled organisation Rossotrudnichestvo. The EU sanctioned Rossotrudnichestvo in 2022 for running a network of agents of influence who spread Russian propaganda. Other new examples are Danish versions of two Russian disinformation networks claiming to be news websites: one is part of the Pravda network[119] and the other is part of the Euromore sites.[120] Even though both webpages have an amateurish look and the quality of language is poor, they are at least an indication of Denmark not being totally eliminated from the map of Russian influence interest: if that were the case, they simply would not exist.

The third pillar, cultivation of proxy sources, also exists in Denmark. In 2023 the Danish broadcasting company DR, together with other Nordic partners NRK, YLE, and SVT, aired the documentary *Shadow War* (original: *Skyggekrigen*).[121] The team behind the documentary spent more than a year researching and filming across Europe in order to investigate how Russian assets operate undercover within Europe and especially in the Nordic countries. Among their findings, the TV team's sources attribute a specific webpage to the Russian military intelligence service, the GRU, according to their sources.[122] The site Independent North[123] publishes articles in different Nordic languages and in English. The website is not very professional in appearance, but it exists nevertheless and has a related profile on X created in 2020 with about 3000 followers. From its profile it can be assumed that at least some of its followers consist of interlinked profiles and bots. This is also supported by the fact that outreach, interaction, and likes on its tweets are low.[124] There is a broad variety of themes in its articles, but defence issues and Ukraine seem to be among the most popular. In March 2024 the website posted a link to a video about an event organised by a Danish peace movement initiative, Tid til fred – aktiv mod krig (Time for peace – active against war).[125] The topic was the Danish-American Defence Agreement announced in December 2023, allowing US soldiers and equipment on Danish soil. The title of the event was 'US soldiers in Denmark – Security guarantee or occupation?' and is a familiar medley of excusing Russia's invasion of Ukraine, praising the Wagner Group in Mali, blaming the US for blowing up Nord Stream II, and accusing the Ukrainian president of corruption.[126] The Independent North wrote 'We were there' and linked to a YouTube post[127] by dk.dox, which is an alternative Danish niche platform

flirting with conspiracy theories, including anti-vaccine ones during the pandemic, and since 2022 with several examples of anti-Ukrainian viewpoints[128].

The fourth pillar, weaponisation of social media, is the most difficult one to prove. It does not require much time spent on social media like Facebook, X, or other platforms to find examples of accounts promoting pro-Kremlin talking points in Danish. It is important to note that amplifiers of pro-Kremlin narratives in the Danish information space do not have to be Russian linked. Some accounts may be trolls or bots, but some are clearly not.[129] It might be Danish citizens with values resembling those of the Kremlin. But when not only the overall lines of messaging, but also the language and rhetoric echo RT and TASS in Danish translation, it could be an indication of at least indirect influence from Russian sources. This is, however, a hypothesis, as – to the knowledge of this author – no research has been done in this field in regard to a Danish context.

The fifth pillar is cyber-enabled disinformation. As one of the case studies will show, the example of a forged letter from a high-profile Greenlandic politician to an American senator fits here. DDoS (distributed denial-of-service) attacks, even though they are not specified in this category, are arguably more of an information activity intended to create a cognitive effect, as they often get media attention and through that potentially trigger a sense of fear in the population.[130] Danish authorities' websites have been the target of several DDoS attacks in recent years. Among these a more curious one took place in 2023, when a hacker group claiming to be 'Anonymous Sudan', attacked, among others, Danish webpages because of alleged anti-Muslim actions in Denmark and Sweden.[131] The group pretended to be affiliated to Anonymous, an internet hacktivist community, which has been anti-Kremlin throughout the war on Ukraine. Not long after the DDoS attack, cyber security experts rejected that affiliation, calling it a 'Russian information operation'.[132]

Strengths and vulnerabilities of Denmark vis-a-vis Russia's influence in the information space

Denmark is a small country of about 43,000 km^2, excluding the land mass of Greenland and the Faroe Islands. The Danish population is approximately 6 million people. The Danish economy is currently healthy and the economic outlook is good. The unemployment rate is low and Danish companies and industries are prosperous. Denmark's security and foreign policies are firmly rooted in its NATO membership and international institutions such as the UN and EU. Denmark is a strong and long-time advocate for international law and rule-based order. However, Denmark is just one (small) voice among many.

Danish is primarily spoken in Denmark and partly in Greenland and the Faroe Islands. Even though the Danish, Swedish, and Norwegian languages are close, they are also distinct from one another, not only in pronunciation, but also with grammatical differences. Denmark is one of the top three countries in terms of foreign language proficiency in English.[133] With these facts in mind, it seems obvious that Denmark is of less interest to a potentially interfering foreign country, as there are fewer people to target, combined with the smaller size of the economy and minimal international political outreach. These elements create both strengths and vulnerabilities for Denmark as a nation.

A resilient society

In many ways Denmark is considered a resilient country: there is a high degree of trust between the Danish population and the authorities, as is the case with the other Nordic countries.[134] In addition, the Danish population is in general considered well educated, with

critical thinking as a core skill taught in the public education system.

According to Transparency International's Corruption Perceptions Index for 2023, Denmark ranks number 1.[135] Corruption is almost non-existent and most Danes considered it as something primarily happening in other counties. Freedom of the press is ranked number 3 in the world, according to Reporters Without Borders in their 2023 assessment.[136] A study of the Danish population's use of and trust in news media in 2022 shows an increase in general trust in news media since it was first measured in 2016.[137] In the 2022 study 58 per cent trusted news media in general, while 63 per cent had confidence in those they chose themselves. The study also looked at political polarisation and found that in countries like Denmark, Norway, and Finland it was only a limited proportion of users who responded that they experienced politically divided news media. The study concludes that Denmark maintains a high level of trust in the news media, which differentiates it from the other countries in the survey, as trust in news media is declining in 21 out of the 46 countries participating in the international analysis.[138] The most trusted Danish media brands are the two news agencies DR and TV 2.[139]

Internationally, fear and concern about fake news fell between 2021 and 2022. In Denmark there was a decrease from 40 per cent to 36 per cent from 2021. Researchers explain the decrease as follows: first of all, 'fake news' has become something familiar and often discussed, which is why it may not be perceived as worrying any longer. Second, users may have become better at identifying fake news online, and, third, the social media platforms have become better at identifying fake news and either remove these or warn against them.

Denmark is not a high influence priority for Russia

In the overall European information space, there has been a notable increase in Russian information activities since[140] the Russian full-scale invasion of Ukraine. This is confirmed by Søren Liborius, who covers openly Kremlin or pro-Kremlin sources as well as the use of covert amplifiers, trolls, and other inauthentic activity on social media and so on. 'We see a significant increase, also when looking outside Europe,' he says, with reference to RT's presence in, for instance, Africa and South America. As the level of activity has been high throughout the war, Liborius says that it looks like 'the order to turn up the volume' was given in the autumn of 2023. However, he and other experts agree that Denmark does not currently seem to be a prioritised target of influence. Compared to larger EU countries such as Germany and France, Denmark was not as important ahead of the European Parliament 2024 elections. In the European Parliament, Denmark has only 14 members out of 705, meaning in order to affect European politics, other countries might better serve the Russian end state.

Liborius adds that there are also fewer voices in the Danish information space to amplify Russian narratives and messages. Such 'amplifiers' would typically include not only political parties, prominent personalities, and grassroots activists, but also entities like unions and certain mobilised activists in agricultural organisations during heated demonstrations. 'I would argue that the Danish information space from the Kremlin viewpoint actually is relatively hard to penetrate,' Liborius says, adding that this does not mean that Denmark cannot become a future target, which is why continuous monitoring is important.

Thomas Albrechtsen says, 'We should not underestimate the potential risk, but neither should we be too alarmist.' He also stresses that since the war in Ukraine, the potential targets of Russian propaganda and disinformation have increased to a much larger part of society in search of information about the war on social media and so on.

Danish support for Ukraine is still unwavering. The support among the population is at an all-time high. There is no indication that Danish support for Ukraine will change, even if another coalition is put in charge, according to Liborius. He refers to the relatively coherent political landscape when addressing the Danish approach to Ukraine. While the overall aim of

Russian war influence themes is to undermine Western trust in Ukraine, Danish civilian support remains strong. In February 2024, 51 per cent of the responders in a survey confirmed that Denmark should be among the top donors to Ukraine.[141] Anti-Ukrainian sentiments do not seem to have expanded beyond the voices repeating pro-Kremlin narratives since the first day of the war. The Israel – Hamas war has been shown to have much more potential in dividing groups of the public than has Russia's illegal invasion of Ukraine. This implies that the Danish public is more susceptible to other themes than the anti-Ukrainian narratives, as it does not seem to be successful. Issues of division and undermining trust in general, however, are more likely to prove successful, as well as Russia's strategic messaging of deterrence, in the form of nuclear threats. According to Liborius, previous Danish opposition to nuclear weapons can be reused by Russia, recalling that the Cold War logic of mutual assured destruction (MAD) still has a place in public memory, including Denmark. Putin and the Kremlin try to scare the public in Western societies.

Countering Russian information threats

In September 2017 the then Danish government set up 'Task Force Influence',[142] consisting of the Ministry of Justice (chair), the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, the Ministry of Defence, the Danish Defence Intelligence Service, and the Danish Security and Intelligence Service. The aim of the task force was the coordination of Danish efforts against foreign state influence and to ensure that the authorities collectively could act effectively and in a well-coordinated manner. In this context, foreign influence was defined as the overt or covert activities of state actors with the intent to influence public opinion and decision-making processes in Denmark, or the global perception of Denmark, in order to promote their own interests at the expense of the Danish ones.[143]

Following the Brexit referendum and the American presidential election in 2016, the Danish government issued an election action plan in 2018 in order to be prepared for the coming parliamentary election, which was to be held in 2019.[144] The election plan consisted of 11 actions, including a governmental task force that was intended to strengthen the authorities' coordination and efforts in counter-influence campaigns, including in connection with Danish election action. A strengthened monitoring of disinformation in the media aimed at Denmark – following inspiration from other Nordic countries – involved taking the initiative to train the state authorities' communications staff in relation to the ongoing handling of disinformation. The plan included strengthening their focus on influence activities of hostile foreign actors in and against Denmark, for example in connection with the upcoming parliamentary election. The action plan also included training of political parties and communications personnel in their awareness of disinformation. Furthermore, it addressed the need for dialogue between the authorities and tech companies.

While the action plan encompassed many important steps, a future framework for countering Russian informational threats needs to go further, this author would argue. Such a framework needs to be intergovernmental and to encompass a broad spectrum of means and activities, taking into account Russia's ability to find new ways and methods, including working more clandestinely within all five pillars of disinformation and propaganda.

Denmark's strengths and vulnerabilities

Russia's influence activities in Denmark face a hard surface that is difficult to penetrate: first, the country has a unique language with a limited number of speakers globally, in an ethnic population, which is relatively homogeneous; second, within Danish society there is a high level of trust in the political establishment and the media; third, the country has a low unemployment rate, a healthy economy, and a limited international political outreach.

However, there are possible cracks and wedges. The Danish information environment is wide open and unrestricted. The population has a high language proficiency, which means that society can be targeted directly and indirectly

through international media outlets and niche distribution networks. The Danish peace movement, which during the Cold War held anti-American views and was sympathetic to the former Soviet Union,[145] has been relatively invisible since the 1990s. However, something seems to have changed since the outbreak of Russia's war on Ukraine. As an example, the Danish movement mentioned above, Tid til fred – aktiv mod krig, published a statement two days after Russia's illegal invasion of Ukraine, initially advocating for withdrawal of the Russian troops and expressing solidarity with the Ukrainian people. But in the next lines of the statement, the blame changed:

> *The huge expansion of NATO since the end of the Cold War has played a critical role in leading to the present crisis – for true peace and security in Europe, diplomacy and mutual respect must replace threats and militarism. Let's come together to say No to War, No to NATO.*[146]

Also in 2022, Tid til fred – aktiv mod krig published a flyer including this text:

> *The situation in Ukraine is violently inflamed and tormented by the past years' change of government and fascist groupings both in the military and in government, with foreign interference – especially from the USA. Furthermore, Ukraine has also become a pawn in NATO's expansion to the East.*[147]

The movement does not seem to be very large and is more like an example of a larger peace movement ecosystem. What is striking in the quotes above is how they echo pro-Kremlin narratives.

Possible blind spots?

There are a number of potential blind spots in assessing Russian influence activities, if we focus only on Danish-language platforms, accounts, and content. As Thomas Hedin explains: 'By far the largest part of the disinformation I have noticed stems from attempts to influence other European countries or specifically the EU as a whole. This disinformation is then "imported" by Danish users of social media and put into circulation.'

Hedin elaborates that when Russian disinformation is directed at one or more EU countries or the EU as a whole, it very often also spreads to Denmark, but in general with little impact, measured in quantity. As Hedin notes, Denmark seems more often to be the subject of disinformation directed to a Russian home audience – portraying Denmark as a nation which is morally depraved.

On the basis of several conversations with people from the media and academia in Denmark, there is a shared perception of an increased presence of both pro-Kremlin trolls and amplifying/replicating bots, starting from the autumn of 2023. The labelling of them as 'pro-Kremlin trolls and bots' is not the same as claiming that they are paid or controlled by or from Russia. The categorisation is solely based on their behaviour and attitude.

The discrepancy between what researchers and analysts can verify and the perception of what is going on in the digital space is striking. It leads to the question: are we, when monitoring, analysing, and assessing influence activities, constrained by our own blind spots?

These challenges will likely also affect our efforts in other areas and arenas. For example, how do we monitor and assess the growing offline and online gaming communities? In addition, how can we, in a timely way, identify and protect ourselves against the growing threats from agents of influence coming from third-party countries spreading Russian disinformation and propaganda?

In the interviews both Yevgeniy Golovchenko and Thomas Albrechtsen address the need for access to data, if we want to monitor and analyse content and users on social media. The social media platform X has removed access to its analytical tools and limited access to data on the platform, which has made it more difficult for researchers and data analysts to monitor and extract data for validation and evaluation. Both interviewees expect that the implementation of the EU's Digital Service Act (DSA) will help, but the impact is not yet visible.

The experts interviewed for this report all address the difficulties of labelling 'foreign influence', as it applies to not only overt and covert actions, but also direct and indirect influence. As Golovchenko puts it: 'Covert activities are covert by design. Either they are not there, or they are good' – as this is the nature and purpose of these kind of activities.

It becomes even more difficult to identify foreign influence when it is distributed by and through a state's own citizens who, based on an ideological worldview, become amplifiers of Kremlin propaganda and disinformation. This is not in itself a blind spot, but may be simply a condition of liberal democracy in opposition to authoritarian regimes.

Recent case studies

The Greenlandic letter (2019)

In 2019 the American president Donald Trump was about to make an official visit to Denmark. Before the visit he had aired thoughts about buying Greenland. Unsurprisingly the response was a clear rejection from the Danish prime minister Mette Frederiksen. Due to this public dispute and the prime minister calling it 'an absurd discussion', the state visit was cancelled (Figure 3).[148]

Trump's proposal also increased the public debate in Denmark about the future of Greenland. Not long after the cancellation, a forged letter found its way to the media (Figure 4). The letter was attributed to Ane Lone Bagger, then politically responsible for foreign affairs in Greenland and popularly referred to as Greenland's foreign minister. The letter was addressed to the American senator Tom Cotton. According to his own statement, Senator Cotton was the person who inspired President Trump to talk about buying Greenland.[149]

The letter addressed a desire for closer cooperation between Greenland and the USA, as well as the Greenlandic political aspiration of declaring independence from Denmark, which was explicitly stated: 'Our government is going to overcome all legal and political barriers on that way [*sic*] and to organize the referendum of independence of Greenland from Denmark as fast as possible.' In addition, it claimed that the Greenlandic authorities had 'considered the U.S. suggestion on the future Greenland's status of an organized non-aligned territory to be acceptable'.

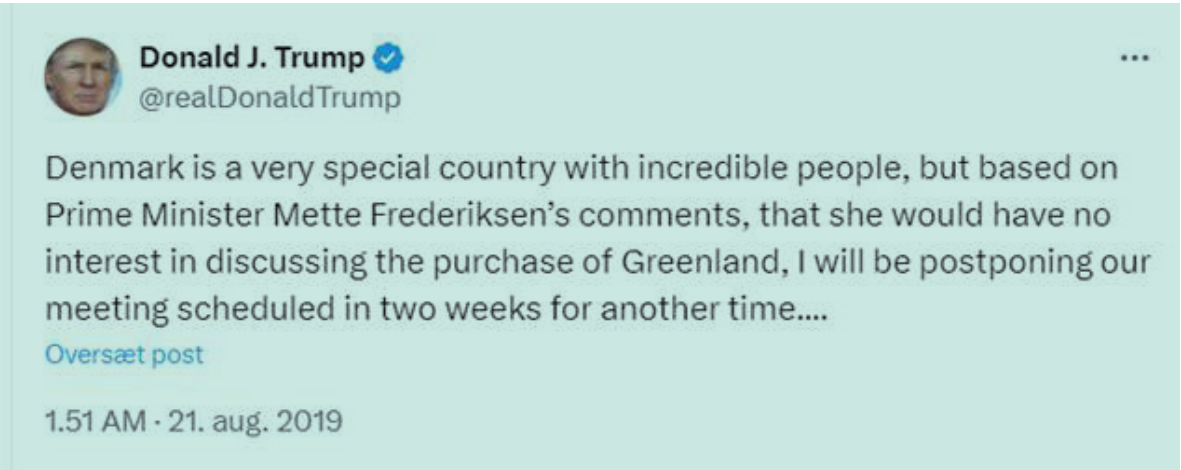
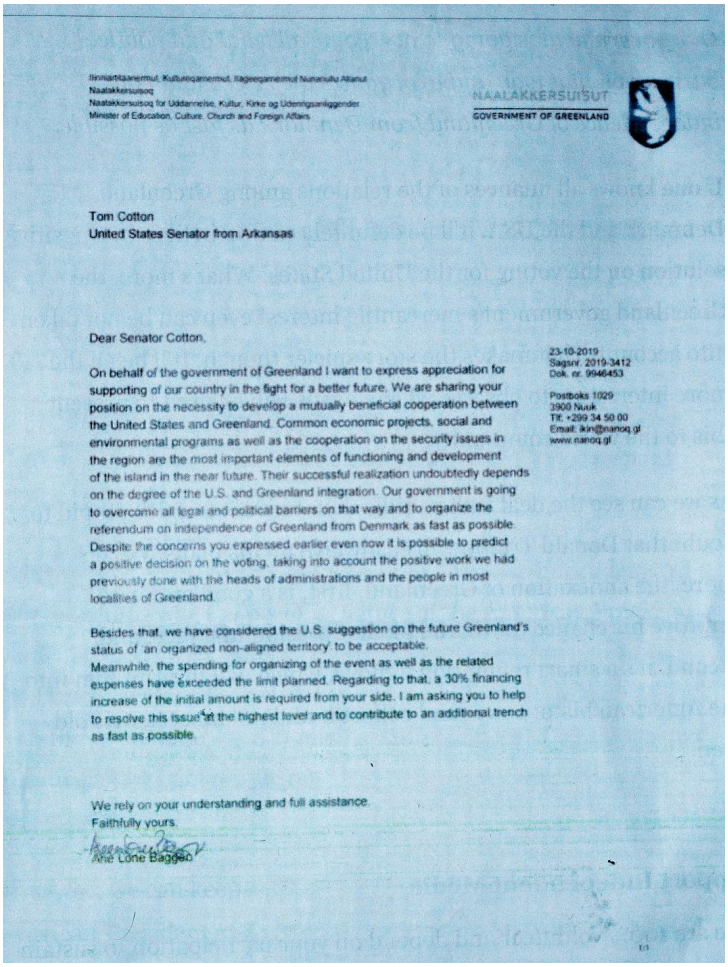


FIGURE 3. Tweet sent by Donald Trump
https://twitter.com/realDonaldTrump/status/1163961882945970176

The letter was quickly declared a forgery. However, its purpose was not to appear genuine; the fake letter managed to spread the message about possible weakness in the Danish-Greenlandic relationship with very simple means: uploaded on user-driven forums like Reddit and IndyBay, it travelled from internet platforms to the front page of a leading Danish newspaper, *Politiken*, in November 2019.[150] The story was also taken up by the international media.

According to the Danish Security and Intelligence Service, the purpose of the forged letter was to create confusion and a possible conflict between Denmark, the USA, and Greenland.[151] Distribution of fake documents as letters was one among other well-known Soviet methods during the Cold War.[152] Fake documents can easily create media coverage and can thus be useful as means of disruption, doubt, and confusion. There are numerous examples from recent years: a Swedish study identified 26 forgeries related to Sweden in 2015 and 2016.[153]

Any disinformation campaign, to be effective, must be based in whole or in part on facts or generally accepted views.[154] That also includes this letter, which is not trying to invent any new issues, but instead uses existing tensions in discussing the future of Greenland. The strengths of the disinformation letter are the fact that Greenlandic independence aspirations exist and are articulated, and, based on the former president's comments, it also potentially speaks to anti-American sentiments and doubt about the reliability of the United States as a firm ally. Even though it was debunked as a forgery, because the letter came in the immediate aftermath of Trump's proposal to buy Greenland it touched on the question of whether or not *it could be true*.



Inatsisartitaanermut, Kultureqarnermut, Ilageegarnermut Nunanullu Allanut Naalakkersuisoq
Naalakkersuisoq for Uddannelse, Kultur, Kirke og Udenrigsanliggender
Minister of Education, Culture, Church and Foreign Affairs

NAALAKKERSUISUT
GOVERNMENT OF GREENLAND

Tom Cotton
United States Senator from Arkansas

Dear Senator Cotton,

23-10-2019
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On behalf of the government of Greenland I want to express appreciation for supporting of our country in the fight for a better future. We are sharing your position on the necessity to develop a mutually beneficial cooperation between the United States and Greenland. Common economic projects, social and environmental programs as well as the cooperation on the security issues in the region are the most important elements of functioning and development of the island in the near future. Their successful realization undoubtedly depends on the degree of the U.S. and Greenland integration. Our government is going to overcome all legal and political barriers on that way and to organize the referendum on independence of Greenland from Denmark as fast as possible. Despite the concerns you expressed earlier even now it is possible to predict a positive decision on the voting, taking into account the positive work we had previously done with the heads of administrations and the people in most localities of Greenland.

Besides that, we have considered the U.S. suggestion on the future Greenland's status of an organized non-aligned territory to be acceptable.
Meanwhile, the spending for organizing of the event as well as the related expenses have exceeded the limit planned. Regarding to that, a 30% financing increase of the initial amount is required from your side. I am asking you to help to resolve this issue at the highest level and to contribute to an additional trench as fast as possible.

We rely on your understanding and full assistance.
Faithfully yours,

Ane Lone Bagger

FIGURE 4. The forged Greenlandic letter as published on social media

From anti-vaccine to anti-Ukraine (2022)

The next case is not exclusive to Denmark, but the same pattern was very visible in the Danish information space, and it is included here to illustrate one of the methods of Russian disinformation to find its way across borders, within different communities and ecosystems, including more fringe ones, like this one. Shortly after Russia's invasion of Ukraine in February 2022, a pattern of transformation became visible in the Danish social media space: former anti-vaccine groups founded and growing during the COVID pandemic were now focusing on discrediting Ukraine and distributing pro-Russian messages. TjekDet wrote in March 2022:[155]

> *Russia had barely sent its forces over the Ukrainian border before the war was the focal point of numerous corona-sceptic Facebook and Twitter profiles and in corona-sceptic groups on social media. The message among others is that the media, the experts, and the Danish authorities are lying about the war in Ukraine.*

TjekDet reviewed a large number of Facebook groups used by corona sceptics during the pandemic, as well as profiles on X and Facebook belonging to 50 people central to the 'Danish rebellion' against the corona restrictions. TjekDet used previous network analysis done by two Danish media, Altinget and Mandag Morgen, during the pandemic in 2021.[156] A clear trend emerged when looking at these groups and profiles: TjekDet found that content questioning the media and authorities' views of the war in Ukraine was common, and that half of the profiles shared conspiratorial content, including the whole war being described as a 'false flag operation' devised by a global elite.[157] As TjekDet put it:

> *In both groups and on Facebook profiles, a clear trend emerges. Among opposition to face masks, criticism of vaccines, and scepticism towards the government's corona handling, the war in Ukraine has now gained a prominent place in several places. A large number of the profiles now feature content that calls into question the media and authorities' interpretation of the war in Ukraine, and almost half of the profiles share outright conspiratorial content.*[158]

The Danish online newspaper Altinget wrote that in 'networks, online groups and chat forums that were previously dedicated to spreading corona-sceptic conspiracy theories, there now abound misinformation and conspiracy theories about the Ukraine war'.[159] Altinget specifically mentioned groups on Telegram, which is considered a niche platform in Denmark, and does not even appear in surveys about Danes' use of social media.[160] The same pattern was observed in many other countries. One of the points often mentioned is that while more mainstream platforms during the pandemic increased focus on content moderation, a lot of the more conspiracy-related content moved to other platforms, such as Telegram. As an article about the topic in Politico states:

> *Multiple misinformation analysts and fact-checking groups told POLITICO there was no evidence of direct coordination between Russia and these groups to spread online falsehoods. Instead, groups already enmeshed in fringe narratives that question mainstream thinking are more inclined to believe other variations of the anti-Western themes coming from Russia.*[161]

The common denominator is the idea of a larger conspiracy. As the article puts it, there are 'common ideological roots between anti-vaxxers, QAnon believers and the Kremlin, including a distrust of traditional media and political elites, and a hatred of either NATO or the U.S.'.[162] The article describes how Russian state-linked media platforms like RT have become alternative news sources for many conspiracy groups and thus brought them closer. The common denominators between anti-vaccine movements, QAnon, and pro-Russian sympathisers are typically distrustful of traditional media and political elites, frequently in combination with anti-NATO and anti-American sentiments. The sanction of RT by the EU limited the outreach, but it might also have strengthened the community feeling among those left using the platforms, amplifying their perception of being in opposition to more traditional media broadcasters.

The anti-vaccine community is of course not the only segment affected by Russian influence. However, it is clearly observable as an example, and it suggests that Russia uses these kinds of ecosystems, which were strengthened during the pandemic, as tools of influence and as distribution networks. An Austrian corona research project investigated in 2022 the correlation between vaccine status and views on who was responsible for the war in Ukraine. The results indicate that while 88 per cent of the vaccinated believe that Russia is to blame for the war, the figure is just over 60 per cent for the non-vaccinated. Conversely, more than 60 per cent of the non-vaccinated believe that the United States is primarily responsible, while the figure among the vaccinated is less than 30 per cent.[163] A similar trend is found in a Canadian survey conducted shortly after the Russian 2022 invasion, which concluded that a 'plurality of vaccine refusers are much more sympathetic to Russia'.[164]

The COVID pandemic reinforced the infrastructure between various critical voices who were against restrictions, disapproved of vaccines, or directly saw the pandemic and shutdowns as part of a larger conspiracy – in Denmark too.[165] Together with conspiracy theories such as QAnon and the Great Reset, both of which assert that the world is ruled by an international elite, this created the possibility for these various stakeholders to form fringe communities of interest. These examples become extra relevant when research indicates that Russia had been amplifying not only anti-vaccine movements but also conspiracies such as QAnon.[166]

The outreach of conspiracy thinking was new in a Danish context. COVID vaccine support was very high in Denmark,[167] but the country was not immune to influence from international anti-vaccine movements. This was voiced in some political movements and parties, of which one, Nye Borgerlige, which was represented in parliament, for a short period had a deputy chairman who – prior to holding that position – had expressed anti-vaccine messages online.[168] In 2022, for the first time, a chapter in the threat assessment from the Danish Security and Intelligence Service was dedicated to new inhomogeneous groups under the label of 'anti-establishment extremists', who had a shared interest in conspiratorial thinking and distrust in the authorities and media.[169] These 'anti-establishment extremists' are also addressed in the threat assessments from 2023 and 2024. According to the latter assessment, the level of activities in the physical domain within this community has declined since the pandemic, but it has maintained a high activity level in the digital domain, characterised by several parallel wide-ranging and changeable agendas. Furthermore, key individuals within the environment have engaged in the Danish debate about the conflict in Gaza with conspiracy theory narratives about the existence of Jewish elite controlling the Danish government.[170]

Another common conspiracy theory in these kinds of fringe groups concerns Freemasons, which of course is not exclusive to Denmark, and their influence on the Danish government – an issue which is often mentioned in a Danish conspiracy-minded Facebook group, Kend Din Grundlov (Know your constitution).[171] Furthermore, the anti-establishment extremist community finds information sources in alternative media, including international conspiracy theory online forums. The intelligence service assesses it as highly likely that this community could be susceptible to disinformation spread

with the intent to destabilise Danish society.[172] Thomas Hedin supports the assessment of the risk:

> *Although we do not seem to be obvious targets for frequent disinformation, I am far more worried today than I was before the corona pandemic. Never in my life did I think I would experience such a fierce system-critical debate emerging in Denmark, as has happened especially since 2020. After all, I helped establish TjekDet in 2016 and did not see at all the disturbing trends that I am experiencing now.*

As noted, the case of anti-vaccine segment becoming anti-Ukraine is not unique to Denmark, but part of a larger trend. Nevertheless, it was a clear trend in the Danish information space from the early phase of Russia's illegal invasion of Ukraine, when looking at actors identified as part of the Danish corona-sceptic environment, according to the network analysis carried out by the Altinget and Mandag Morgen, as earlier described and reviewed by TjekDet in the light of the war in Ukraine. The network consisted of individuals, groups, and movements as well as alternative media, all active when mapped in 2021.[173] The latter includes the niche media platform dk.dox, which in March 2022 put out a programme about Ukraine with the subtitle 'Det som NEWS ikke fortæller os' (What NEWS [a Danish news channel] does not tell us), which provides – to put it mildly – an alternative version of the war.[174] In April 2022 another part of the network, the small political party Frihedslisten (Freedom List), posted a meme on Facebook indicating that COVID, anti-Putin, and pro-Ukrainian sentiments are related in a kind of mind-control scheme.[175] The same trend is mentioned in the TjekDet article about corona sceptics after the Russian invasion pushing anti-Ukrainian content. TjekDet used anonymised examples from Facebook and X, all from the first month of the war in 2022, that indicated that the war in Ukraine was part of a globast elite's agenda, and that both COVID and the war were attempts to brainwash the population.[176]

This case study shows the possible impact of a more indirect influence: Russia can push pro-Kremlin narratives towards individuals interested in other topics and/or looking for information from more fringe news providers. It is actually possible, in a country such as Denmark, to sell the idea of Vladimir Putin as a 'hero' in a war against Ukraine and the West to certain groups, because in these ecosystems the fundamental common focal point is being anti-establishment: anti (Western) authorities, anti-politician, and anti-media.

The African diplomat turning out to be a 'Russian prank' (2023)

In October 2023 the Danish minister of foreign affairs, Lars Løkke Rasmussen, was subject to a phoney video conference call from the so-called 'Russian prankster duo' Vovan and Lexus, real names Vladimir Kuznetsov and Aleksey Stolyarov, pretending to be Moussa Faki, commission chairman for the African Union. The meeting took place on the Teams online platform with an artificial impersonation of Moussa Faki.

During the conversation, Rasmussen was asked about prospects for ending the war. 'It is not easy for me to predict, but at some point I guess the Ukrainian president will adjust the situation and declare that the time has now come to start negotiations,' he answers. This remark made it into a TASS report under the headline 'Zelensky to agree to peace talks, top Danish diplomat says in call with Russian pranksters'.[177]

Vovan and Lexus are known to make scam calls to, among others, Western political leaders in opposition to the Kremlin. Prior to the call to the Danish minister, the duo held a similar prank call with the Italian prime minister Giorgia Meloni. In both conversations the question of Ukraine allowed the politicians to admit to war fatigue, which differed from official statements.

The Norwegian prime minister Jonas Gahr Store was also tricked into a scam call in October 2023, also with the war in Ukraine as a topic.[178]

Of course, an incident such as this is an embarrassment to the Danish Ministry of Foreign Affairs, which afterwards announced that efforts would be made in order to prevent this kind of event in future. The call to the minister of foreign affairs happened only a few years after Vovan and Lexus made a similar call, in 2020, to the Danish foreign policy committee in the Danish parliament, pretending to be Belarusian opposition leader Sviatlana Tsikhanouskaya.[179] A common denominator for the two calls to the Danish politicians was a focus on issues concerning animals, which is a recurrent theme in Russian disinformation about Denmark. Storylines within this theme include a fake news story from 2017 about state-sanctioned animal brothels and the exploitation of true events when a giraffe was killed in Copenhagen Zoo back in 2014. The rationale for the latter was a reduction in the giraffe population at the zoo. In the prank call to the foreign minister in 2023, the story of the giraffe was brought up once again.

The Russian duo has previously been suspected of being linked to the FSB Russian intelligence service. In a 2016 interview with Meduza, they were asked directly why this was the case: 'We overlap with [their] main media agenda. And that, apparently, means that the FSB has given us a mission,' they answer, keeping their answers open to interpretation all through the interview, ending with the indication that they were heading to the Lubyanka, the headquarters of the FSB in Moscow.[180] Whereas there is doubt over the intelligence affiliation of Vovan and Lexus, the appreciation from the Kremlin is unquestionable: in 2022 they were awarded a 'secure desktop telephone of the type that's used in government communications' by the Russian Foreign Ministry spokeswoman Maria Zakharova, according to a TASS report.[181] In June 2024 Vovan and Lexus were awarded the 'Order of Friendship' at a ceremony in the Kremlin, an order allegedly given to 'Russian and foreign nationals for strengthening peace, friendship, cooperation and understanding between Russia and other nations, among other criteria,' according to Reuters.[182]

The 2023 call got a lot of attention in the Danish media, which ridiculed the security at the ministry and highlighted the discrepancy between what was said in public and what seems to have been said behind closed doors. What might be most remarkable is that the press coverage did not really change from 'fake Sviatlana Tsikhanouskaya' in 2020 to 'fake Moussa Faki' in 2023. The general discourse was that the Danish Ministry of Foreign Affairs had been 'fooled' by 'Russian pranksters', followed by mentions of other prominent politicians who had also been 'fooled'. In both cases the calls were mentioned on a popular late-night show, *Tæt på Sandheden* (Close to the Truth), which aired on Danish national television on Saturdays; the host, Jonatan Spang, even invited the Russian duo to the show. In 2020, in the case of the fake meeting with Sviatlana Tsikhanouskaya, they attended in an online humoristic interview with Spang, and again in 2023, after the call with Rasmussen, they were invited to do a 'New Year's greeting' in a New Year special edition of the show. As Yevgeniy Golovchenko points out, such activity is mostly perceived as a 'joke', which indicates a somewhat naive approach in Denmark to such issues, and a lack of understanding of foreign interference and influence.

What is interesting in the prank call case is that it fits three purposes. First, it targets the Danish population in order to undermine trust in state institutions and/or politicians, as the minister of foreign affairs answered differently than he would in public statements. The minister himself also made the point of distrust.[183] Second, to a domestic Russian audience, it is exploiting the narrative of Denmark as a morally depraved country, once again addressing the issue of bestiality. Third, within the Ukraine-Western allied community it serves the purpose of creating doubt about whether the allied countries are willing to support Ukraine as long as is needed. All of that delivered by two Russian 'pranksters', whose ability to fool the Danish Ministry of Foreign Affairs was celebrated on Danish national television.

Outlook

The limited number of attributed cases of malign interference indicate that Denmark, even though it has been identified as an unfriendly state by Russia,[184] is not a prioritised target for Russian influence activities. Nevertheless, Denmark is part of a Western information space, where Russian information operations can affect and influence audiences not targeting specific nationalities, but rather segments with specific interests. However, Russia has both directly and indirectly targeted Denmark and conducted influence activities, as the three case studies show.

Russian information influence operations towards Denmark and the West are done through a broad variety of means, with the use of all instruments of power. Those operations can take many shapes and forms, and include both overt and covert activities. This includes for example diplomatic work, such as public statements and other legitimate activities, but it also encompasses military posturing and intimidation, subversive activities cultivating Danish nationals sympathetic to Russia's worldview, and activities in the cyber domain potentially affecting Danish authorities and industry, economic outlook, and international standing.

Not being a prioritised country for Russian information influence operations does not necessarily mean Denmark will stay that way. Finland and Sweden's admission to NATO could change Russia's priorities, and Denmark must therefore continue to strengthen its ability to monitor and counter future Russian activities in the Nordic region. This includes possible Russian attempts to sow discord within the Kingdom of Denmark, as well as between the Nordic countries. Denmark's continued support for Ukraine is also a possible threat vector. If Russia's priorities change, Denmark and its allies must be ready to confront a more aggressive Russia not always adhering to international norms and the rule of law. Russia could potentially carry out more targeted information influence operations, including the use of its military capabilities in order to intimidate Danish policymakers or the public, with the intention of either delaying or withholding aid deliveries to Ukraine.

A change in Russia's priorities can be indicated by an increase in more hostile cyber activities, such as clandestine intelligence operations including increased support to amplifiers within Denmark. It can also be done covertly or through proxies targeting Danish infrastructure or industry and economy. Some of these types of activities have already taken place. Russia's use of its military jamming capabilities has increased in the Baltic Sea region, potentially affecting air traffic. Russian navy vessels transiting through the Danish straits are already adopting a more aggressive military posture. As a sovereign and Arctic nation with overlapping claims to the region with Russia, Denmark needs strong allies and alliances to counter and confront these types of activities. Otherwise these Russian activities combined and directed towards Denmark can potentially influence Danish security and foreign policies.

Currently it would be difficult for Russia to generate or stir up anti-Ukraine sentiments within the Danish population or at the political decision-making level, but it is important not to neglect the risk, over time, of Russia being able to influence and increase arguments for appeasement and to use these voices in the public Danish debate as amplifiers. This point is also made by Søren Liborius: 'If people start to believe that Ukraine cannot win, continued support can be questioned.' Perception could become reality.

Not being a prioritised target of influence does not mean that the Danish information space cannot be polluted by Russian disinformation and propaganda. Examples and case studies in this report show that it can. As difficult as it might be to pinpoint exact attempts at Russian influence, its footprints are too visible to ignore.

Estonia

Holger Mölder and Vladimir Sazonov

Introduction

The Kremlin has actively disseminated a strategic narrative that NATO's enlargement in Eastern Europe is directed against Russia's security and preserved a myth of Baltic States as the Western outpost against Russia.[185] Russia – NATO relations have been strained since the 'Orange revolution' in Ukraine and the 'Rose revolution' in Georgia in 2003 – 4, and this has significantly aggravated tensions in bilateral relations between Estonia and the Russian Federation. Estonia's strategic position as a former Soviet republic and a part of the Russian Empire in the past, with a large Russophone community (around 30 per cent of population is Russian-speaking),[186] may have seemed to the Kremlin authorities as a suitable platform for the development of confrontation with the Western countries, especially after Estonia became a member of NATO and the European Union in 2004.

Russia's actions against Estonia may follow a broader strategic agenda based on its great power ambitions and hostility against European liberal democratic values. In his recent interview (February 2024) with US alternative right journalist Tucker Carlson,[187] Vladimir Putin denied again having intentions to attack the Baltic States,[188] but Russia certainly identifies Estonia as a representative of the 'other side' hostile to Russia regarding its strategic confrontation with the West.[189] The first signs of Russia fuelling the confrontation appeared in the mid 2000s. For example, in 2005 the Estonian Parliament made an attempt to connect the Tartu Peace Treaty[190] with the border agreement between two countries, which was met with a severe backlash from Russia and the failure to ratify the signed bilateral agreement. It can be taken as an early warning of conflict escalation between Russia and the West, which led to the Bronze Night riots in Estonia (see below), Putin's hawkish speech against the West at the Munich Conference in 2007, and the Georgia – Russia war in 2008. Therefore, we should assess tensions in the bilateral relationship between Estonia and the Russian Federation in the broader strategic context.

A status-related confrontation between Russia and Western institutions (the EU, NATO) started to expand with the proposed European Union – Ukraine Association Agreement of 2013 which was actively opposed by the Russian Federation. Russia's strategic ambitions since early 2014, after the fall of the pro-Russian presidency of Viktor Yanukovich in Ukraine, the annexation of Crimea, and war in Donbas, indicate a movement towards a new and more polarised world order, where the influence of international organisations (the UN, the EU, NATO) will decline and great powers will share their influence in a multipolar world divided into spheres of influence, as it was during the height of colonialism in the nineteenth century.

From the strategic perspective, the Baltic States, including Estonia, have always been less integrated with Russia than other regions of the empire. During the Russian Empire (1721 – 1917), the *Baltic special order* set rules for municipal administration and entrepreneurship according to local traditions. Therefore their removal from the Russian sphere of influence has been to some extent less painfully accepted than, for example, has the case of Ukraine, which is deeply inscribed in Russian historical narratives. However, Russian strategic thinking appeals to Estonia as 'a vulnerable part of the West' which can be efficiently used for influence operations against Western countries and institutions due to its Russian-speaking population[191] and historical connections. The myths of 'discrimination against Russian speakers' and 'a spread of Russophobia' have often been referred to in the

Kremlin narratives disseminated in the West by claiming that the Baltic states are consciously inciting hatred towards Russia and Russians[192]. The successful introduction of Western liberal democratic norms and values in Estonia also stimulated a value conflict between the countries. The Freedom House index of 2023 describes Estonia as a country with strong democratic institutions where both political rights and civil liberties are widely respected.[193]

The Kremlin's official strategic narratives before the war no longer spoke about the Baltic States as an integral part of the Russian Empire, but they were certainly interested in their connection with Russia's sphere of influence in that Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania would possibly become a 'window to Europe' allowing Moscow to put constant pressure on Western political institutions such as the EU and NATO.[194] For this reason, the Putin regime is interested in fostering an unstable region with strong Eurosceptic sentiments, in which political and economic narratives that shape the international system and strategic ambitions of Russia, and anti-Western narratives that emphasise the failure of international organisations (EU, NATO) to cope with the crisis, emphasise the decline of European identity and Western liberal democratic values.

G.H. Karlsen analyses intelligence reports from various countries and argues that Russia has three primary strategic goals: ensuring the power and security of the Putin administration in the country; maintaining influence in the 'near abroad' (former USSR countries except the three Baltic states); and securing the status of a great power internationally.[195] Russia's influence operations outside the post-Soviet space disseminate strategic narratives that amplify or shape perceptions of the world and political preferences in line with the Kremlin's foreign policy goals.[196] Since 2014 Russia has openly challenged international security governance, and has been actively involved in several conflicts around the world (the annexation of Crimea, Syria, operations in Africa, internal crises in Belarus and Kazakhstan). The Russian authorities have actively supported diverse hostile attitudes towards vulnerable NATO nations in its close neighbourhood, including Estonia. Additionally, there are signs of increasing activities of Russian intelligence services in Estonia.[197]

In its influence activities against the West, the Russian Federation often targets various alternative and anti-establishment groups, which may represent both the right and left side of the political spectrum (e.g., Eurosceptic, anti-American, anti-immigration, and anti-globalisation movements).[198] Populist politicians in the West often express views close to those that characterise the Kremlin's strategic narratives.[199] Relying on their support, the Kremlin is actively spreading conspiracy theories claiming Western civilisation's hostile ambitions against Russia and its sphere of influence.[200] A strong affiliation with conservative, nationalist, and traditional values appeared in Putin's understanding of how the world system operates. In 2013 Putin claimed at his meeting at the Valdai International Discussion Club that many Euro-Atlantic countries 'are denying moral principles and all traditional identities: national, cultural, religious and even sexual', which is why there was the need to preserve identity and traditional values in a rapidly changing world.[201] Nevertheless, even if the current Kremlin administration pretends to become a worldwide defender of traditionalist and conservative values, in practice it is ready to collaborate with anyone who fights against Western liberal democratic values.[202] Therefore, in Estonia it has found support and understanding in political circles from the alt-left to the alt-right.

The selection of case studies below refers to various channels that Russian influence operations may use in entering the Estonian information space. Up to the start of the full-scale war on Ukraine in February 2022, Russia had direct access to influencing an Estonian audience by its media channels, which is analysed in the first case study. Estonia, with a third of its population Russian-speaking, was late to develop its own Russian-speaking channels to counter Russian propaganda and cultural influence. The public Russian TV channel was established just in 2015, almost 25 years after independent statehood was established. The next two case studies indicate how alternative

political movements (alt-left and alt-right) have supported pro-Kremlin narratives in Estonia in the course of the war on Ukraine. Estonia has a strong alt-right movement, which gets support from 15 – 25 per cent of the population.[203] In terms of public support, the alt-left seems to be less powerful, but sometimes it can contribute to the pro-Kremlin strategic agenda as well.

Case study 1:

The influence of Russian media in Estonia before 2022

Kremlin influence operations target the Estonian political and economic establishment, especially paying attention to issues concerning the local Russophone community. The Russian-speaking audience in Estonia has been influenced by the Russian media discourses and narratives spread by Russia's media channels for decades, since the restoration of independent statehood in 1991, which made them open to Russian propaganda narratives.[204] These narratives tell us about the 'immorality' of the West (the so-called *Gayropa* narrative[205]) or about the 'misdeeds' and 'aggression' of NATO.[206] Russian influence operations are stoking fears of migrants and refugees, about the foundations of the architecture of the Euro-Atlantic political and security environment and its institutions (e.g. NATO, the EU), and about Western identity, liberal ideas, and values, and spreading the image of the 'declining West'.

Russia constantly accuses Estonia of encouraging anti-Russian feelings and emotions: Russophobia, Nazi-sympathy, xenophobia, and discrimination against Russophone minorities.[207] In February 2016 the Russian propaganda channel *Sputnik* opened a branch in Estonia and started publishing fake news and propaganda messages by reproducing pro-Kremlin narratives about Estonia.[208] Sputnik's actions in Estonia were terminated in 2019 after sanctions were brought against the Kremlin propaganda channel *Rossiya Segodnya* (*Russia Today*) which owns the agency.[209]

Russian TV channels and online media portals were banned in Estonia in February 2022 after the Russian Federation launched its full-scale military invasion of Ukraine. Before the ban, Russia's media sources were widely followed in Estonia. Saar Poll OÜ media monitoring was carried out in 2014, just before the Estonian Public Broadcasting (ERR) television channel in Russian, ETV+, was launched. It shows that Russian television channels (PBK, RTR) remained the most important source of information (73 per cent), followed by Estonian news sites in Russian (Delfi, Postimees: 56 per cent) and Russian news sites (43 per cent), Raadio 4 (ERR radio station in Russian: 42 per cent), international channels and sites (42 per cent), social media (32 per cent), ERR channels (ETV, ETV2: 32 per cent). This allows us to conclude that there existed contrasting information spheres for Estonian and non-Estonian speakers, and a large amount of non-Estonian speakers got their information from channels owned or managed by the Russian Federation. In February 2021 the time spent watching TV was mainly divided between Estonian channels ETV (26.5 per cent), Kanal 2 (10.9 per cent), and TV3 (9.1 per cent) for Estonian speakers, and Russian channels RTR Planeta (13.8 per cent), PBK (9.4 per cent), and NTV Mir (8.9 per cent) for non-Estonian speakers.[210]

After the 2007 Bronze Soldier monument riots[211] in Tallinn, the information for the Russophone community in Estonia has been discussed more intensively. In 2007, TV broadcasts from Russia were easily accessible in Estonia and local Russian speakers watched them, including news reports. According to the TV Audience Review of March 2007 (TNS EMOR 2007), the average non-Estonian speaker spent 4 hours 49 minutes a day in front of the TV set, and the most popular channels were two Russian channels, Pervyy Baltiyskiy Kanal (PBK) and RTR Planeta, with viewing-time shares of 28.9 per cent and 9.6 per cent respectively, which tends to the conclusion that the Russophone community in Estonia was under the influence of pro-Kremlin media outlets.[212]For

a long time the authorities tried to convince the public audience that the Estonian channels were not able to compete with the Russian channels, and there was no need to spend resources on Russian-language public TV channels in Estonia. Television is the prime source of information for both Estonian- and Russian-speaking communities, and whereas the majority of Estonians consider Estonian Television to be their main source, the Estonian Russophone community watch Russian state television channels.[213] As a result, the Russian Federation nearly gained control over the Russian-speaking information space in Estonia. After more than two decades of political debate around the need for a Russian-language TV channel,[214] the first public Russian TV channel was launched in 2015, but 'the ground-breaking political decision was not made on the basis of the recognition of the minority language group's information needs but was driven by the events in Ukraine and increasing wave of Russian propaganda'.[215]

Nevertheless, many Russian speakers in Estonia have problems with integration into Estonian society, often remaining nostalgic about Soviet times, and Moscow uses that to further its own interests, especially in propaganda.[216] For a long time the pro-Kremlin media channels controlled the Russian media space in Estonia, especially TV, which has been a main channel for older people without internet access. Among the Russian-speaking target audience, Russian-oriented patriotic feelings are incited and attempts are made to evoke fears in them about the possible loss of their ethnic identity.[217] Popular narratives emphasise the violation of the rights of Russian-speaking people in education, culture, society, and political life (e.g. the authorities' decisions to limit Russian-language media and school education) and present an image of the local Russian-speaking people as 'a hated minority who have been deprived of many basic rights due to their national identity'.[218]

In addition, threats could also come from social media such as the Russian-based networks VKontakte and Odnoklassniki, but Facebook, X (Twitter), Telegram, and others play an important role as well.[219] According to a report by NATO StratCom COE, VKontakte in Estonia has approximately 327,000 and Odnoklassniki 250,000 users, respectively.[220] For example, social media manipulation was observed prior to the European Parliamentary elections in May 2019.[221]

When Russian media were banned in Estonia in early 2022, the Estonian government stopped broadcasting several Russian TV channels in Estonia, among them *Rossiya 1, Rossiya 24, NTV, and REN TV,* and some pro-Kremlin online portals and websites were also banned, including *RuBaltic.ru, ntv.ru, ren.tv, 5-tv.ru, 78.ru, 1tv.com, lenta.ru,* and *tass.ru*.[222]

After Russian TV channels were banned on Estonian territory, the media space became more balanced for the Russophone community. However, measuring the direct influence of banned channels is complicated and difficult to implement, as the Russian channels are publicly accessible through the internet, a VPN, and satellite. In addition, social media to some extent can be still used to mitigate the impact of the ban and to promote Russian narratives.[223] Propastop analysis indicates that the influence of Russian TV channels has dropped by nearly 50 per cent since restrictions were imposed on them. Of course, the change here may be due to a variety of factors: for example, the decline in viewership of TV channels had already started before the restrictions.[224]

Recent integration and media studies in Estonia indicate that the war on Ukraine has changed the media consumption of both Estonian- and Russian-speaking people in many ways. It brought a part of the Russian-speaking population closer to the Estonian media space and made some residents give up watching Russian media, while alienating others.[225]

Balint et al. analysed the impact of access restrictions on the Kremlin's propaganda channel RT (Russia Today), and the results show that web traffic to RT's websites from the EU decreased by up to 75 per cent due to the restrictions.[226] However, a study commissioned by the Friedrich Ebert Foundation indicates that the number of people in Estonia who share the values and attitudes of the Kremlin information space is still large. The confusion and fragmentation of the Russian-speaking population is evidenced by the fact that only 40 per cent of them consider Russia

a threat to European security, and 54 per cent do not.[227] According to the study, Russians in Estonia are generally critical of the media when it comes to covering the war on Ukraine. More than a third of them do not trust the Estonian media, but even more do not trust the official Russian media or Russian independent or opposition media, and neither do they trust Western media channels. This may confirm that alternative information channels and social media to a certain extent can substitute for the influence of TV channels.[228]

Estonian media and communication expert Ilmar Raag warns that blocking Russian media is just 20 per cent of the goal in fighting against Russian influence operations and does not impact the quantity of disinformation that reaches its audience, as the existence of accurate information does not prevent its misinterpretation. However, action taken by the Estonian authorities will deter and put pressure on violent domination of hostile information by sending the message that justification of the war on Ukraine will not be allowed in Estonia.[229]

Case study 2:

Pro-Kremlin political discourses during the war on Ukraine – The case of the alt-left (the United Left Party/Koos)

The elections to the Estonian Parliament, the Riigikogu, in 2023 showed that support for pro-Kremlin forces in Estonia has grown. The leftist political party the United Left Party (ULP)[230] formed a coalition with the pro-Kremlin movement Koos/Vmeste (Together)[231] led by Oleg Ivanov[232] and Aivo Peterson.[233] Ivanov has called the Bucha massacre in Ukraine 'staged', and compared the situation of the Russians in Estonia to Jews in Nazi Germany.[234] Peterson, who has had political ambitions for a long time and named Winston Churchill, Edgar Savisaar,[235] and Vladimir Putin as his biggest role models in politics, has stood out for repeating pro-Kremlin views on the war on Ukraine.

In the elections of 2023 the ULP received 2.39 per cent of the votes cast (14,605 votes in total), which was still below the 5 per cent threshold to get representation in the Parliament, but significantly increased the number of votes compared to previous elections in 2019, when it received just 0.1 per cent of the votes (510 votes in total). It received 14.9 per cent of the votes in Constituency No. 7 of Ida-Virumaa (the second-best result after the Centre Party) and increased the number of votes in two Tallinn constituencies (Nos. 2 and 1) with respectively 4.9 per cent and 3.3 per cent of the votes, which demonstrates that the ULP has become more popular in areas with a Russian-speaking population.

The majority of the ULP votes went to Aivo Peterson, who was the leading candidate of the party in the Ida-Virumaa constituency; he took 3968 votes, which was the second-best individual result after an independent candidate, Mikhail Stalnukhin, in the Ida-Virumaa electoral district.[236] Even though this was not enough to get into the Riigikogu, it was one of the big surprises of the elections, and Peterson, whose assets were an Estonian-looking background and experience in Estonian politics, built his image as the best-known Putinist in Estonia.[237] Peterson described his success in the elections: 'The votes were lying on the ground, and someone had to pick them up.'[238]

Also in 2023 Peterson travelled to Moscow and Russian-occupied Donetsk. In his public appearances he blamed the Estonian press for its biased coverage of the war in Ukraine and supported several conspiracies disseminated by Russian media. 'We have all heard about the uprising in Donbas, that the uprising itself has bombed its own town, its own residential districts, its own nurseries, schools, hospitals.'[239] In Moscow, Peterson and Ivanov took part in the popular show *Solovyov Live*, one of the best-known YouTube channels in Russia for spreading pro-Kremlin propaganda. Peterson started the interview with a statement: 'There is a feeling that all pro-Western Estonian

parties are fighting against us. You can't imagine the pressure we're under.'[240] Next, he claimed an uprising or guerrilla war should be organised to change the situation in Estonia.[241]

On 10 March 2023 Peterson was arrested together with another pro-Kremlin activist from the Koos/Vmeste movement, Dmitri Rusti, and a Russian citizen, Andrey Andronov. The Estonian minister of the interior Lauri Läänemets said that Peterson's activities could pose a threat to Estonia's security and that he had had to cooperate with Russian special services to get to the front line in Donetsk.[242] According to the indictment, from October 2022 to 10 March 2023 Peterson and Rusti, following instructions received from the Russian Federation, organised non-violent activities against the independence, sovereignty, and territorial integrity of the Republic of Estonia. On 7 September 2023 the State Prosecutor's Office sent the criminal case to court.[243] Peterson ran as the sole member of the Koos party list in the 2024 European Parliament elections in Estonia, collected 11,503 votes and was not elected.

Sergey Seredenko, a member of the ULP and an activist of the pro-Russian group 'Immortal Regiment', was detained on suspicion of anti-Estonian activities, and later in 2022 he was convicted of treason against Estonia and imprisoned. According to the indictment, between November 2009 and March 2021 he collaborated with persons who acted on behalf of Russian government agencies and assisted them in non-violent actions against the constitutional order, sovereignty, and territorial integrity of Estonia and supported their anti-Estonian intelligence activities, conveyed their information, prepared and published articles following their guidance, and participated in events organised by them and their organisations.[244]

Seredenko actively cooperated with Russian propaganda channels by constant efforts to alienate the Russian-speaking population from the Estonian one, claiming that Estonia was a Russophobic country that discriminated against the Russophone people:

> *For example, when Estonians say, why should we pay for your Russian schools? And few people dare to answer that, excuse me, what about 'you' when WE pay taxes, and in turn ask the question – why should we pay for your defence, and in this case, indeed, YOUR defence?*[245]

Seredenko called the Estonian people Nazi sympathisers:

> *Estonian Nazism, like Latvian and Lithuanian Nazism, has long deserved its own term, which I had the opportunity to report on at the conference on countries with problematic democracies, which was held at St Petersburg State University at the end of January this year [2015]. Nazism is characterised by phase-by-phase development, and now Estonia has approached the phase that has been described as follows: when the greys dominate, sooner or later the blacks come to power. Estonian Nazism has come face to face with the prospect of war, which young hotheads who had never smelled 'Soviet' gunpowder were ready to go to. Until now, Estonian Nazism was very convenient, profitable and unburdensome: as the President of Estonia T.H. Ilves said, 'We enjoy our freedom.'*[246]

According to the 2021/22 annual review of the Estonian Internal Security Service, Seredenko maintained active relationships with Russian special services in supporting hostile influence operations against Estonia.[247]

In November 2023 the ULP elected new leaders and rebranded the party as a leftist organisation called the Left (in Estonian, Vasakpoolsed).[248] The new leadership comes from the left wing of the Social Democratic Party, which may produce fundamental changes in supporters of the ULP, which so far was supported mostly by the Russophone community. Nevertheless, it is premature to draw far-reaching conclusions from recent processes, especially about the influence of leftist ideologies on the Russian population in Estonia.

Case study 3:

Pro-Kremlin political discourses during the war on Ukraine – The case of the alt-right (EKRE)

The alt-right parties in Europe may also share the strategic narratives actively disseminated by the Russian Federation. They often criticise their governments for their support for Ukraine and claim that Ukraine is helped at the expense of their own country's citizens' welfare.[249] The most prominent alt-right party in Estonia, the Estonian Conservative People's Party (EKRE), has sometimes disseminated controversial messages regarding the war on Ukraine.[250] This does not necessarily mean that the party supports the Russian Federation in its political discourses, but its views on several societal issues can be similar to those supported and disseminated by Russia. Some EKRE politicians do not hide their sympathy towards the conservative stances of Kremlin ideology.[251]

Views on the global political landscape have been often shared by the Kremlin and alt-right politicians in the West. The main strategic narrative of both claims that the Western liberal democratic order is weak and declining. One of the EKRE leaders and a vice chairman of the party, Mart Helme, claims that war in Ukraine will lead to a more pragmatic and multipolar new world order, in which international organisations will lose their influence, unsustainable countries will disappear, and several other countries will follow the example of the Russian Federation in increasing their influence by territorial acquisitions.

> *The dismantling of the previous international balance and the organisations that were supposed to ensure this balance will be followed by the next phase of shaping a multipolar world, the liquidation of artificial and unsustainable countries or their steering into a new orbit. It is very likely that, for example, the integration of Abkhazia and South Ossetia, which were conquered from Georgia, into the Russian Federation has essentially been decided and only momentum is being chosen. It is very likely that the Bosnian state will cease to exist in the foreseeable future. It is very likely that Serbia will annex the northern part of Kosovo and the rest of Kosovo will join Albania. It is very likely that the Azeris will conquer the southern part of Armenia with the support of Turkey and Russia's happy-go-lucky improvement in order to get a land connection with Nakhchivan and Turkey. It is very likely that Turkey will officially annex Northern Cyprus. What does the OSCE do in such cases? What does NATO do? What does the European Union do? What is the United States doing? They protest, adopt resolutions, demand the restoration of the former situation, call for diplomatic solutions, and impose sanctions. Everyone agrees that stopping the current world order from collapsing by force is more dangerous than its gradual reorganisation into a complex but ultimately pragmatic new world order … In this situation, we have three options: we can stay on the side of the winners (read: we will not be sold), we can remain a grey zone useful for the big parties, but unfortunately we can also become a Russian vassal state.*[252]

This description refers to Russia's invasion of Ukraine as a sample of the new normality, which corresponds to a new multipolar world order. Like Russia, Helme recognises the post-Cold War cooperative international order as a failure. On 14 February 2022, 10 days before the invasion, Mart Helme said in the Riigikogu:

> *Ukraine is finished, this panicked escape shows it. Everyone gathers their soldiers, everyone gathers their diplomats, everyone gets their capital out of there. Twelve billion capital, as of a few days ago, had been taken out of Ukraine. Done with Ukraine, what else are we talking about? There is no need for the Russians to invade there. They are taking over this country, little by little; they have basically achieved their goal.*[253]

In October 2022 Helme told the Rus.err news portal that EKRE had maintained a neutral stance on the war: 'We think that the best solution is a peace agreement, however difficult it may be for both sides, so at least people don't drown. We're not for Russia or for Ukraine, we're for peace.'[254]

In January 2023 the Estonian newspaper *Eesti Ekspress* wrote that EKRE member Vsevolod Jürgenson[255] claimed in Estonia's largest Russian-language social media group, 'Tallintsy' on Facebook, that 'The president of Ukraine [Volodymyr Zelenskyy] is a drug addict!' and 'Our aid [to Ukraine] won't get there – maybe it will be stolen in Latvia, maybe in Poland.'[256] According to Jürgenson, helping Ukraine is pointless because it is the most corrupt country in the world. Shortly thereafter, EKRE expelled Jürgenson and announced that he did not represent the party in any elected representative body, and stated that 'EKRE unequivocally supports Ukraine's fight for its state, its people and its independence' and 'many members of the party are making personal efforts to support Ukraine by collecting donations and taking them to Ukraine themselves'.[257]

In April 2023 Andres Raid, a former journalist and EKRE candidate for the Estonian Parliament, said in an interview with the Kuku radio station that he had visited the Russian-occupied Donetsk region to investigate whether rumours of Ukrainian children being kidnapped might turn out to be true. He said that he was in several places in the Russian-occupied territory, including Mariupol: 'I also went to Mariupol, one thing was to investigate the alleged child abductions, so I also went to the school to see if anything like that had been observed and how.'[258] Speaking about the refugees, Raid stated that the local people did not know anyone who had escaped from Mariupol: 'Being on the spot, it comes out quite clearly that we have been told a lot of other things. There was indeed one person known to have fled to Europe via Estonia.'[259] He said that the situation was not as bad as it had been portrayed, many schools in Mariupol were well organised, and there were no reports of child abductions. Answering a question about Mariupol, Raid said that the city was being restored at an amazing speed and that a lot of builders had been brought from Russia to help the rebuilding of the city. He claimed that many districts had been built from scratch, but, unfortunately, foreign journalists hunted for places bombed to the ground, which of course there were.[260]

Fear-inducing narratives about the negative impact of Ukrainian refugees on European societies are intensively used by pro-Kremlin media outlets in their disinformation campaigns, fake news, public statements by Russian officials, and manipulative comments by pro-Kremlin pseudo-experts, which are attempting to capitalise on the scepticism about refugee integration that has grown since the peak of the EU migration crisis.

An alt-right politician from the Alternative *für Deutschland* (AfD), Alice Weidel, claimed that the German coalition government had 'not only created a massive asylum industry, but it has completely overburdened municipalities with migrant housing, and the German taxpayers will suffer'.[261] Russian propaganda disseminated similar narratives for years.[262] Some EKRE members actively promoted a culture of fear against Ukrainian war refugees in Estonia. Mart Helme said in the Estonian Parliament in early April 2022 that war refugees from Ukraine brought

infectious diseases to Estonia and might start engaging in prostitution:

> *I have one son, a doctor, I communicate with doctors. The doctors say that this picture of health is terrible. HIV is coming back. Infectious diseases are being brought in from Ukraine which we thought would never exist in Estonia again. No, they're coming back to us because tens of thousands of people are coming and bringing them here.*[263]

Kertu Luisk, a former member of the EKRE faction of Võru City Council, spread pro-Russian and anti-Ukrainian narratives in social media.[264] In 2023 Luisk joined a new openly pro-Russian alt-right party ERE (the Estonian People's Party). It includes former EKRE members and people with pro-Kremlin positions, including some former members of the Koos movement. The party has a conservative worldview and its political programme states that Estonia should be neutral in Russia's aggression against Ukraine. One of the leaders of the party, entrepreneur Harry Raudvere,[265] said at the party's first meeting that Russia had helped Estonia's economy, 'synchronised electricity', and provided cheap fuel and gas; that is, Russia had not done anything bad to Estonia after the collapse of the Soviet Union, and instead relations with the Russian Federation should be improved.[266] Again, as in the case of the ULP, it is too early to draw far-reaching conclusions on the ERE's potential influence because polls and elections have not yet been conducted.

Assessment

Support for the Russian Federation and its influence activities has not grown as it has constantly found it difficult to become attractive to the majority of the Estonian public audience. Nevertheless, the influence activities have been much more successful at inciting anti-Western and anti-democratic sentiments, especially after the economic situation worsened.

Russia does not provide credible alternatives to the Western-led democratic world order, but is rather focused on creating mistrust, uncertainty, and fear aimed at destroying the internal stability of Western societies, and in this respect Estonia is seen as a representative of the Western world which has been very active in supporting Ukraine.

There are certain patterns which characterise Russian information influence operations. As well as pro-Russian propaganda, these include more covert and invisible actions which aim to destroy trust in the Estonian authorities, from reputational attacks to information manipulation. The closure of Russian information channels should not be seen as guaranteeing that the information they transmit by direct or indirect means (e.g. social media, internet sources, satellite TV, interpersonal contacts) will no longer reach potential consumers who are motivated to find alternative sources, but the information influence can take a much more hidden form.

The alternative movements, regardless of whether their actions in supporting Russia are conscious or not, may become useful tools which may hide the origin of their information manipulation, and the potential consumer may not associate the provided information with the Russian Federation. Information influence operations can be targeted against those who may threaten Russia's strategic goals, that is, Western institutions, the liberal democratic worldview or the politicians who convey it, the organisations that provide assistance to Ukraine and many others. For example, attacks against Estonia's prime minister Kaja Kallas[267] and her government and its members intensified after she spoke very strongly in support of Ukraine and condemned Russia's actions. Russia was also attacking Kallas personally in its information campaigns: for example, in February 2023 the names of Kallas and Secretary of State Taimar Peterkop were added to the Russian Interior Ministry's wanted list.[268] Similarly, Sweden and Finland were criticised after joining NATO, and liberal Western leaders like Joe Biden, Olaf

Scholz, or Emmanuel Macron were attacked following their pro-Ukrainian decisions. Criticism of them may not be squarely based on actions directed against Russia, but the attempt is made to create a negative image of them as weak, selfish, and indecisive politicians.

There are some measures by which the effect of Russian influence operations in Estonia can be still mitigated. Frequently the crisis escalation process is initially latent, but the intensity may change over time. By identifying information influence operations at a very early stage, we can prevent them or at least minimise their harmful impact. An effective strategic communication system covering all segments of society, including its Russophone community, would help Estonia counter Russia's information influence and improve society's resilience to Russian actions.

Conclusions

Three case studies were developed to study Russia's information influence activities by exploiting alternative political movements and the influence of Russian media channels on Estonian society.

We conclude that up to 2022 the Russian-speaking media space was dominated by media channels from the Russian Federation, especially by TV channels. Estonia's first public TV channel in the Russian language, ETV+, was founded in only 2015, a year after Russia's annexation of Crimea, but the situation has gradually started to improve since February 2022, as more people have started to watch this TV channel since then.[269] The influence of Russia's media in Estonia has been decreasing since the ban, but there are plenty of opportunities to turn to alternative channels through the internet (e.g. by using a VPN or social media platforms and channels such as YouTube, Telegram, and others) and satellites which are very efficient for spreading Russian narratives in Estonia.

The worsened economic situation in Estonia since the COVID-19 pandemic and war on Ukraine may facilitate the spread of various fear-inducing narratives and provoke social unrest, but it may also increase support for alternative movements, which may become less critical of the Russian Federation. Only minor political movements openly support Russia – the Koos/Vmeste movement and the new pro-Russian alt-right party ERE – and their influence on Estonian society is limited. However, the last parliamentary elections in 2023 showed that support for pro-Kremlin politicians has grown to some extent, and that pro-Kremlin politicians and their activities have attracted more attention in the Estonian media. At present the political support for pro-Kremlin movements is hard to estimate. The leaders of the Koos/Vmeste movement have either left Estonia or been detained due to their pro-Russian activities, and it is hard to know whether their influence is increasing or decreasing in Estonian society, as the polls overwhelmingly cover only the parties represented in the Parliament. The same concerns the ERE, offspring of the major alt-right party in Estonia, EKRE, as it did not participate in any elections, making its support unmeasurable. The Koos movement set up Aivo Peterson's candidacy in the European Parliament elections in June 2024. His support has fluctuated at around 3 per cent in the polls, which is probably not enough to secure a mandate, but it still shows some solid support for the Russian Federation, which includes the predominantly Russian-speaking population. Russia used Aivo Peterson's candidacy in the European Parliament elections in June 2024 in its anti-Estonian influence activity against Estonia and the EU, representing him as a political prisoner.[270]

The influential alt-right EKRE shares the same conservative populist agenda which often characterises Russia's strategic views about the global world order and the decline of the West. However, EKRE is split in its attitude towards the war on Ukraine. While several EKRE politicians have demonstrated sympathy towards the fight against the Russian invasion of Ukraine after the war started in 2022, some

controversial statements made by several EKRE politicians offer direct or indirect support for strategic narratives promoted by Russia, especially concerning assistance provided to the Ukrainian government or fear about Ukrainian refugees.

In the face of disinformation campaigns coming from the Russian Federation, it is important for Estonia to provide reliable sources that offer comprehensive information to counterweigh the misinterpretation of facts and spread of fake news, even if the opponent has many opportunities to increase the efficiency of its influence campaigns; otherwise they can quickly break the resilience of society and lead it to irrational solutions. Alternative movements, which skillfully take advantage of new media solutions, may become direct or indirect collaborators of hostile powers in influence campaigns because of their dissatisfaction, shared with Russia, with Western liberal democracy. Under certain circumstances fear can certainly encourage social consolidation, but only in the short run. We should be aware that polarisation within society makes it weaker and more accessible to those who might have unfriendly intentions. That is why coherent and functioning societies are more sustainable than those that feed off cultures of fear and uncertainty.

The main intention of Russia's influence activities in Europe is to promote a powerful image of the 'declining West' and to strengthen the societal polarisation process by enforcing distrust in the liberal democratic value system. The same strategic goal applies to Russian influence activities in Estonia. Digitalisation has opened various doors for dissemination of disinformation and fake news that can reach the target audience covertly without connections to the source of the information being clearly identifiable. The blocking of Russian media channels in 2022 made direct interference more difficult, but did not stop Russia's influence activities in Estonia.

The Russian Federation has strategically promoted collaboration with alternative movements, regardless of whether it is a conscious action towards a common goal or an overlap of similar ideologies. The increasing polarisation in Estonian society could also support Russia's strategic efforts to influence information dissemination. Support for alternative and populist movements in Estonia remains relatively stable, but unlike some other East European countries, these movements have not become dominant yet. The more the war in Ukraine escalates or is prolonged, the more economic and social vulnerabilities may arise in Estonia that can cause general social dissatisfaction, which may feed Russia's influence operations, but also increase support for alternative movements critical of Western liberal democracy.

Finland

Anneli Ahonen

Russia's main aims, methods, and influence channels in Finland

For the purposes of this report, we provide an overview of Russia's information influence in Finland over recent years with some brief historical contextualisation. Three case studies focusing on the immediate aftermath of Russia's invasion of Ukraine in 2022, Finland's NATO accession, and Russia's hybrid operation at the Finnish border in late 2023 contribute to a deeper understanding of the different methods, channels, and aims Russia is using in influencing Finland, as well as strengths and potential gaps in Finland's countermeasures against these influence attempts.

One of Russia's main policy goals towards Finland throughout the post-Cold War period was to maintain the convenient security arrangement where the neighbouring country, with its 1300 kilometres of shared border with Russia, was outside any military alliances.[271] This policy was strengthened with repeated public statements attempting to intimidate Finland about the consequences in case it planned to join NATO, including President Vladimir Putin's position spelled out in 2016, that 'things would change' if Finland joined NATO and that Russian troops would no longer stay 1500 kilometres back from the Finnish border.[272] The biggest change to Russia's influence strategy targeting Finland came with Finland joining NATO.

Finland and Sweden publicised their wish to join NATO via several statements on 12 – 15 May 2022, with both countries officially handing in their applications on 18 May. Since Russia's invasion of Ukraine and ahead of the application, Kremlin and other Russian official political messaging focused on threatening the Nordic countries with the consequences of such a decision, emphasising repeatedly the nuclear threat. For example, the deputy chair of the Security Council Dmitriy Medvedev warned in April that Russia would have to bolster its defences in the Baltic Sea region, including by deploying nuclear weapons, if Finland and Sweden were to join NATO.[273] In May similar statements were repeated by other government officials and politicians.[274] Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MFA) spokesperson Maria Zakharova raised the 'military and political consequences' of NATO membership several times.[275]

It took time for Russia to reshape its influence strategy targeting Finland and adapt to the new reality. The level of Russian state influence activity surrounding Finland's immediate NATO application period in spring – summer 2022 and its eventual achievement of membership in April 2023 can be assessed as moderate.[276] We have witnessed the intensification of Russia's influence, including cyber and hybrid activity, since summer 2023. It remains to be seen whether the higher intensity of influence has become a new norm. Russia's measures included closing Finland's general consulate in St Petersburg in autumn 2023[277] and later pushing migrants to the Finnish border to apply for an asylum, which led to Finland gradually closing its border with Russia (covered in case study 3).

Distribution, messages, and aims of coordinated influence campaigns

The target audiences of Russian state influence aimed at Finland can be roughly divided into Finnish domestic audiences, Russian domestic audiences and Russian speakers outside Russia, and international audiences. Often these different segments get mixed or are targeted simultaneously, but these divisions are noteworthy and highlighted where necessary in this report.

Bigger campaigns that have a Finnish angle have often focused on targeting Russian domestic audiences and their views about Finland, and a range of actors (state TV propagandists, leading politicians, intelligence services, historians, commentators, websites, different Russian organisations, think tanks, groups, and social media accounts) have taken part in them. However, often these campaigns have also had a parallel objective in influencing Finnish decision-makers, politicians, and the general public.

While the aim of Russia's information influence when it comes to Finland and Finnish audiences has been to keep Finland as close a neighbour as possible and especially outside NATO, other aims of the most visible disinformation campaigns domestically in Russia have been to sow doubt regarding the positive image of Finland among the Russian domestic audiences. Further aims have been to test the Finnish government and authorities' resilience, decision-making ability, and operationality, exploit the Russian-speaking community in Finland, and silence Russia critics and journalists in the Finnish domestic debate.

Research predating Finland's NATO accession has analysed in a comprehensive way the narratives which are recycled and repeated by Russian channels related to Finland. The emphasis on different aspects of these narratives has varied over the years, with the same messages returning in slightly different forms:[278]

- Finland is a fascist country due to its role in WWII
- Finland and Russia are good partners no matter what; there is a special relationship between the two countries
- NATO is luring Finland and Sweden to join/NATO is training aggressive manoeuvres against Russia
- Refugees and migrants/Islam as a destabilising factor
- Child welfare issues: Finland discriminates against Russian children
- The Russian threat is ridiculous
- Sanctions are Russophobic
- Liberal gender policy/extreme human rights and liberalism

During the NATO accession period, pro-Russian narratives claimed that NATO membership threatened Finnish independence and that Finland should avoid provoking Russia, resume friendly economic and political ties, and not become a puppet of the United States and a NATO member. One of the repetitive claims was that Finland had been pressured by the US to apply and that in reality most Finns opposed NATO membership. As an example, multiple Russian-linked media outlets falsely reported that Finland was moving its tanks to the eastern border in a massive mobilisation effort against Russia. The claim was based on social media videos showing Finnish tanks being transferred westward to partake in a military exercise, as EU DisinfoLab highlighted.[279]

The largest coordinated Russian disinformation campaigns in the past focused on child custody disputes (since 2009, peak 2012, from thereon regularly but less intense) and on history: Finland as a Nazi ally in WWII, the siege of Leningrad, Finnish appetite to get back lost territories/or create Great Finland uniting the Finno-Ugric people, the depiction of Stalin's mass graves in Russia's Karelia as graves of Soviet soldiers Finns would have shot. The friendship narrative was strong as well ('Russia gave Finland its democracy').

COVID-19 attracted different Finnish social groups behind the anti-vax sentiment, including pro-Russian actors.[280] Many of these same social media accounts and groups later switched to amplifying Russian messages about the war in Ukraine.[281] A similar phenomenon was identified across different countries in Europe.[282] One explanation is that disinformation players exploit major news events in their coverage. In addition, groups promoting COVID-19 disinformation typically shared strong distrust in authorities, governing bodies, the media, science, and anyone labelled as 'elites in power'. Condemning Russia's invasion unified the majority of the audiences, while those positioning themselves in the margins engaged in amplifying the pro-Russian messaging. Some of the pro-Russian actors in Finland continue amplifying COVID 19-related disinformation (see case study 1).

Hybrid operations such as taking migrants to the Finnish border,[283] jamming,[284] attempting to buy land close to military properties,[285] cyberattacks,[286] and airspace violations have been used.[287]

There are signs that with Finland's NATO membership it has taken time for Russian propaganda to rearrange its channels and messaging, but now the new messaging is achieving gradual results, especially among Russian domestic audiences (see case study 2).

Finland's strengths and vulnerabilities

Finland scores high in international rankings measuring democratic freedom and is ranked fifth in the latest Democracy Index[288] and the World Press Freedom Index,[289] and second in the Corruption Perceptions Index.[290] Though it is a relatively small market, Finland has a strong, diverse, and independent media system where politicians influencing media is not tolerated and the number of media outlets compared to the population size is one of the highest in the world. Finland is the leading EU country in terms of press readership, with 58 per cent of Finns say they read a press title daily.[291] However, SLAPPs (strategic lawsuits against public participation) remain a problem, and female journalists especially are at risk of online harassment.[292]

Finland has relied on proactive public diplomacy and a networked and coordinated response to foreign information influence, with the Prime Minister's Office and its strategic communication team in the lead.[293] Since 2014 communicators from ministries and state authorities have formed a network for addressing information influence, which meets regularly under the leadership of the Prime Minister's Office to exchange experiences.

Government officials take part in regular training and exercises with international partners. In 2016 the European Centre of Excellence for Countering Hybrid Threats, open to EU and NATO member states, was established in Helsinki. The Finnish National Emergency Supply Agency is piloting a competence centre with data analysis capability, as well as training support.[294] Jyväskylä University is developing research and education in the field of cognitive security, closely related to defence against influence operations.[295]

After Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine, several media which were blocked in Russia stepped up their translation from Finnish and started publishing Russian-language content. Previously with the Russian child dispute disinformation campaigns, Finland had reached out to Russian journalists and the Russian-speaking population to communicate the facts of the Finnish childcare system in Russian, and stepped up the communication capacity to react immediately when a new campaign started. Russia's closure of the Finnish general consulate in St Petersburg and Finnish businesses leaving Russia decreased the possibilities to impact Russian domestic views about Finland.

President Sauli Niinistö has raised concerns about Finland's capabilities in cyber defence. The Finnish government is renewing the national cyber security strategy and updating the operating model of strategic communication. This includes 'information defence' as part of the cyber security strategy. It also promises to consider both Finnish and Swedish language content, as well as communication in other languages in these updated measures, and strengthen teachers' capabilities to educate students in critical media literacy.[296]

With 'Finlandisation' in its historical package and a long-held policy of trust in the eventual benefits of interdependency in bilateral relations with Russia, there have been legitimate questions raised on exactly how vulnerable Finland is to Russia's information influence.

Behind the scenes Russia has been using its political and economic leverage over Finland in various ways, one of the most prominent recent examples being the nuclear power plant project by Rosatom in Pyhäjoki, which was stopped only after Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine.[297]

Blatantly overt interference attempts by Russia have historically had the tendency to backfire in the Finnish public debate.[298] This has likely led to seeking ways around it behind the scenes and in public messaging to strengthen the narrative about the 'good and friendly neighbour' – which will eventually align its decisions on crucial matters with Russian interests.[299] For example, former Finnish prime ministers Esko Aho and Paavo Lipponen both worked as lobbyists for Russian businesses until the invasion.[300]

One of Finland's strengths – strong, independent, and actively consumed media – is also its close attention to any Russian influence attempts targeting Finland. Major campaigns and smaller propaganda pieces are exposed routinely. Previous research[301] showed that the Finnish media's news coverage about Ukraine in the early stages of Russia's aggression in 2014 was mostly neutral. Russian metanarratives were present in direct quotations from Russian government officials, while some key terms like 'the Kyiv government' were used inconsistently and provided indirectly for the creation of confusion. 'Thus, deriving from the analysis of Russia's strategic deception scheme, it can be argued that in the case of Finland, potential vulnerabilities relate to this general constellation of bilateral relations, rather than to the functioning of the media as such,' Innola and Pynnöniemi conclude. Perhaps even more importantly, they argue, it is worth paying attention to the representation of the Finnish debate and political decisions in the Russian state media and official commentary. Lessons learned from Russia's information campaign in Ukraine before its military aggression from 2014 onwards have shown that early detection and analysis of those elements signalling potential aggressive behaviour within the Russian narrative is critical.[302]

The case studies conducted for this report were chosen to highlight recent key developments in Russia's information influence directed at Finland after February 2022. The first illustrates the role Russian messaging about Ukraine plays in the Finnish domestic online information space. The second case study goes to the roots of the Russian disinformation campaign and analyses how Russian key propaganda channels covered Finland's NATO accession, on one hand, and what new tools Russia has at its disposal on the other. The third case study offers a brief look at the information campaign which has accompanied the hybrid operation of orchestrating migrant flows at the Finnish border.

Case study 1:

Pro-Kremlin messaging about Ukraine in Finland

In the run-up to Russia's invasion of Ukraine and continuously throughout the war, key pro-Kremlin outlets and channels in Finnish have frequently published material in support of Russia's interests. As mentioned above, there is relatively little access for pro-Kremlin propaganda narratives regarding Ukraine in the Finnish media landscape, and journalists and media had gradually grown increasingly aware of state actors' manipulation tactics over the years since Russia's aggression in Ukraine in 2014.

However, this doesn't mean that pro-Kremlin narratives haven't penetrated the Finnish information space. To illustrate how this is done, in this case study we focus on two channels amplifying pro-Kremlin messaging in Finnish. This doesn't provide a comprehensive view on the role of narratives serving Russia's interests in the Finnish public debate, but it gives a useful example of the tactics commonly used in relation to Finland.

One of the channels highlighted here is MV-lehti, an outlet whose editor-in-chief is Janus Putkonen, who lives in Donbas and takes part in Russia's aggression via supporting the latter's propaganda efforts.[303] He has been on Ukraine's sanction list since 2019, after he 'observed' the illegitimate election in Donetsk.[304] According to Similarweb, the MV-lehti website gets 730,000 visits monthly and almost all its traffic (98.5 per cent) comes from Finland. In the category 'News and Media Publishers in Finland', MV-lehti ranks 41st in terms of web traffic.[305]

To complement the analysis and showcase how pro-Kremlin discussions are organised on social media platforms, we analysed the 'Help Donbas' Facebook group (4000 members).[306] It supports Russia's war efforts and publishes content in English but also occasionally in Finnish and Swedish.

We collected the publications on MV-lehti pages from 1 February to 31 May 2022. This covers the period when Russia was preparing for the invasion but it was not publicly confirmed, the start of the war, masses of Ukrainians fleeing the fighting as refugees elsewhere in Europe, revelations of Russia's war crimes and atrocities in Bucha and elsewhere in the Kyiv suburbs, and the start of Finland's and Sweden's NATO accession period.

The data collection captured 975 articles, and the main topics identified in the articles were Ukraine, Russia, Finland's NATO accession, and COVID-19 and vaccinations (Figure 5).

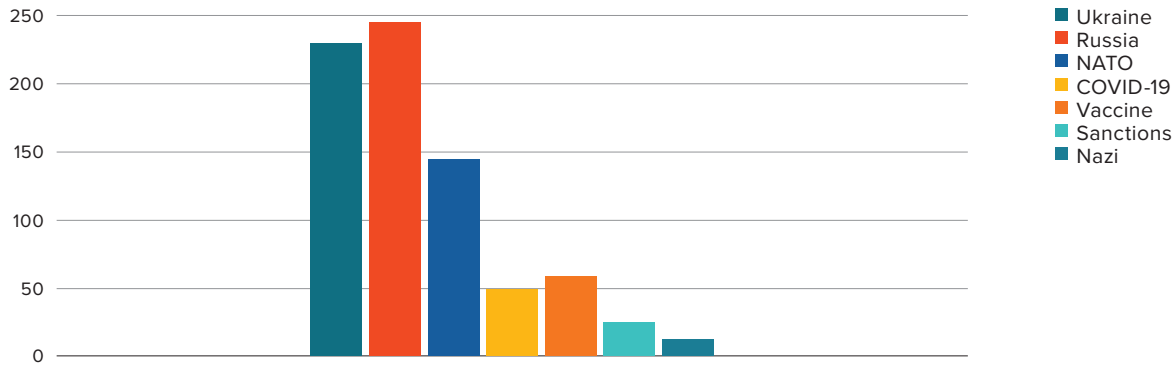


FIGURE 5. Mentions of keywords in the headlines of 975 MV-lehti articles, 1 February to 31 May 2022

MV-lehti faithfully repeated Russian narratives on key themes regarding the invasion and war in Ukraine. On 15 February it laughed at the Western 'mainstream media' that announced so many times that Russia would invade Ukraine but it didn't seem to happen – in line with Russian state media behaviour and messaging ahead of the invasion (Figure 6).[307] Soon MV-lehti with its editor-in-chief was delivering online streaming from Luhansk about Russia's 'counter-attack'.[308] Russia's attempts to deny war crimes in Bucha and elsewhere in the Kyiv vicinity were repeated and quoted similarly.[309]

The language is largely adapted from Russian propaganda narratives: NATO is 'provoking' Russia with 'expansion' to Finland, Ukraine's soldiers are Nazis, neo-Nazis, or nationalists committing atrocities and killing Russian prisoners of war, and Europe's economy is failing and people are suffering from unwise Russian policies of their leadership, while Russia is managing well despite the heavy sanctions imposed on it. The main conspiracies about global elites managing world finances, as well as COVID-19 vaccination dangers, are repeated at the same time.

One of the aims of Russian propaganda has been to distract audiences and avoid taking responsibility for the war crimes Russia has been committing in Ukraine. Part of Russian messaging has therefore focused on Ukrainian refugees, claiming that refugees bring crime and chaos, as well as saying they are treated badly in Europe.

In MV-lehti's case four articles were specifically about the Ukrainian refugees and cover the propaganda narratives about Finnish help being given to Ukrainians in Donbas,[310] Ukrainian refugees being threatened by forcible vaccination in Germany (citing InfoWars),[311] Ukrainian refugees in Latvia receiving food instead of the Finnish poor,[312] and Ukrainian kids being sexually abused by an Afghan guard in a refugee centre.[313]

It is interesting to consider another example where pro-Russian narratives prevail, namely social media discussions on Facebook. We looked at the 'Help Donbas' Facebook group for 1 to 31 December 2023, which yielded 232 posts. The majority of the posts were in English and Russian, and there were eight posts in Finnish published during this time period (Figure 7).


Early-year news duck: Russia's invasion of Ukraine - Covering up the state of emergency in the West | UMV Report

Published 15.02.2022 12:18, 5383 reads, 6 comments

This is how things are going in Finland today, February 15. Of course, they're just following orders and their situation is dire, but I guess the people have a say too? In Canada, the thought that he is serving the people cannot fit into Trudeau's head. On the contrary, the people serve him. The UMV Report was written by Jonathan Widell.

FIGURE 6. On 15 February 2022 MV-lehti doubts Russia would attack Ukraine (machine translated from Finnish to English)

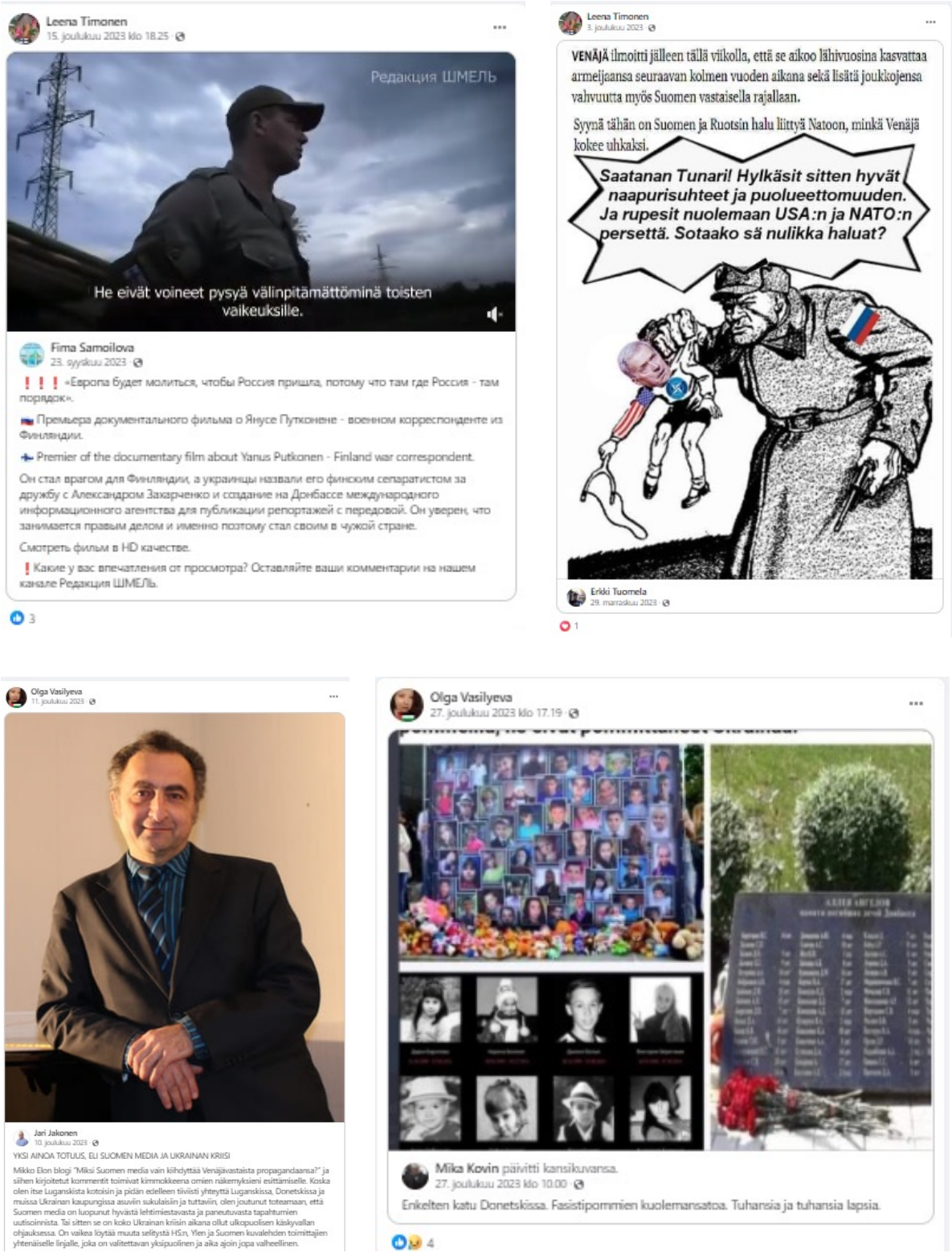


FIGURE 7. Examples of posts in the 'Help Donbas' Facebook group. Most of the posts are about Ukraine and criticise the Finnish media for 'Russophobic coverage', threaten Finland with war due to NATO membership, promote a documentary film by Janus Putkonen, and accuse Ukrainian 'fascists' of killing children.

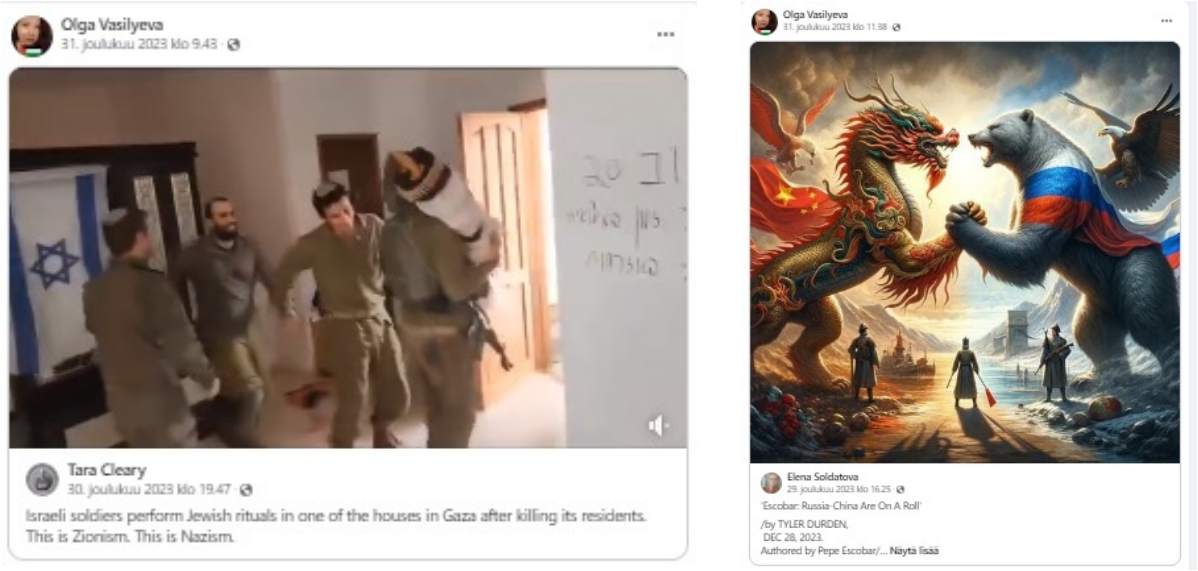


FIGURE 8. Examples of social media posts in the 'Help Donbas' Facebook group

Categorising the posts by topics shows quickly how sources focusing on pro-Kremlin messaging shifted their emphasis to Israel and Gaza after 7 October 2023. Out of 232 posts in December 2023, 74 were about the Israel – Gaza conflict and supported the anti-Israel pro-Palestine views. The group illustrates how multilanguage online communities advocate for pro-Kremlin messaging and reach also Finnish audiences. It is also in line with other reporting on the Russian state media's use of propaganda and disinformation regarding the Israel – Gaza conflict to justify the invasion of Ukraine and to create an impression that the West has abandoned Ukraine.[314] In our conclusion below we dive deeper into the impact of anti-Ukraine messaging targeting Finnish audiences.

Case study 2:

Finland's NATO accession

This section analyses the main tools of influence used by Russia during Finland's NATO accession period. One of the main propaganda channels is Russian state TV, which aims mainly at managing Russian speakers' views domestically and abroad, but is also used to signal shifts in Russian propaganda messaging towards political leaders abroad. To complement the picture, we provide a brief look at online outlets in Russian and social media, as well as attacks by 'hacktivist' groups. Especially during spring 2022, the main Russian propaganda resources were occupied with Ukraine, and major attempts to prevent Finland and Sweden from applying to NATO were not implemented. Instead the influence activities focused on managing Russian domestic opinion by presenting Finland's NATO application as a hostile act, keeping up increased tension and pressure directed at Finnish audiences, and attempting to weaken the support for Ukraine by targeting Finnish journalists.

In mid May 2022 Finland and Sweden publicised their wish to join NATO first in a series of public statements, and then by handing in their official applications on 18 May. Russia's official reaction focused on threatening Finland and Sweden with the consequences of membership, putting special emphasis on nuclear threats. In April, Medvedev, deputy chair of the Security Council, said that Russia would have

to bolster its defences in the Baltic Sea region, including by deploying nuclear weapons, in case Finland and Sweden joined NATO.[315] Other government officials and politicians repeated similar statements in May.[316]

However, as soon as Finland's membership was inevitable, the Kremlin had little incentive to turn attention to the embarrassing fact that Finland was joining NATO. On 16 May, Putin set a new tone to the discussion with his commentary,[317] stating that Finland's and Sweden's NATO membership would not be an immediate threat to Russia, but instead expanding military infrastructure would provoke a response from Russia. The propaganda channels followed suit and messaging took a pause from emphasising the nuclear threat. Later, defence minister Sergei Shoigu said that Russia planned to form 12 military units and divisions in the Western Military District by the end of the year.[318] Russian MFA spokesperson Zakharova's reaction claimed the Swedish people's opinion was not asked when the decision was made.[319]

The Russian state-controlled TV channels broadcasting especially at domestic audiences and Russian speakers abroad repeated similar messaging about Finland's and Sweden's NATO accession. We used transcribed monitoring of Russian state TV channels' main political news programmes[320] between 1 February and 31 May in both 2022 and 2023, and searched with the keyword 'Finland' to see how state propaganda had discussed Finland's NATO accession during the accession period. The method does not provide a comprehensive picture of Russian TV's coverage regarding Finland, but it does capture the moments where special attention was paid to Finland in the propaganda programmes.

Throughout February, March, and April 2022, Russian TV did not pay attention to Finland at all. Finland's NATO membership became a more prominent topic only on 13 May, on the eve of Finland's official application five days later. Then, the nuclear threats similar to Medvedev's and other high officials' statements were repeated across the different state channels and programmes.

For example, popular weekly show *Vesti nedeli*, hosted by Dmitriy Kiselyov, put Finland and Sweden seeking to join NATO in the context of nuclear threats he earlier expressed towards the UK (Figure 9). 'The northerners themselves wanted to be under fire. Again, we don't want to scare anyone. Not our choice. But on the territory of Sweden and Finland there will be our legitimate targets. Up till now, they have not been there.'[321]

FIGURE 9. The Nordics wanted to have it hot?' Screenshot from Vesti nedeli, Rossiya 1, 15 May 2022.

Also on 13 May 2022 one of the pundits on the NTV show *Mesto vstrechi* proclaimed that Finnish and Swedish people would have to be told that 'one small nuclear missile' on their territories would leave enough radiation for more than 15 years to turn their lands into territories impossible to grow anything on.[322] He called for this kind of rhetoric to be used to explain the situation to these people, while several other guests opposed his views.

Commentator Yakov Kedmi on *Evening with Vladimir Solovyov* noted that the Soviet leader Joseph Stalin took pity on the Finns in vain: 'I hope the next time they sign the surrender agreement, there will be no gestures of goodwill and no desire to meet them halfway in the hope that they will understand this.'[323]

After the Nordic countries had handed in their NATO applications and Putin had toned down the nuclear threats, the TV channels' messaging shifted to emphasising how the US was an imperial power under which Swedish and Finland were now colonised, and how Russian military reaction would be triggered only if NATO or the US brought its military infrastructure to Finland or Sweden.

For example, Aleksei Zhuravlyov, first deputy chairman of the State Duma Defence Committee, stated on TV channel Rossiya 1 that Sweden and Finland met three criteria for admission to NATO – complete subjugation by the US, the presence of wild Russophobia in the country, and proximity to Russia.[324]

The host of the *Polnyy kontakt* programme Vladimir Solovyov noted that NATO was a new form of US colonialism, and that the US empire and NATO were digesting Europe and violating Swedish and Finnish neutrality.[325]

Finland and Sweden joining NATO was unquestionably a defeat for the Kremlin's strategy in the north and likely was not factored in as potential consequence of launching an invasion of Ukraine. For the propaganda machine, it has therefore been essential to blur Russian domestic audiences' understanding of the cause and effect. The shift in the messaging makes it possible to blur the causality, when Russia's aggression in Ukraine caused Finland and Sweden to change their military alignment policy and apply to NATO. The manipulation of the cause and effect later continued in the communication directed at the Russian domestic audiences, as we can see when comparing the coverage on Finland on Russian state TV in spring 2022 to that of 2023.

Between 1 February and 31 May 2023, Russian TV channels continued following Finland's NATO path and emphasised the different sides of already familiar narratives. It covered the project to build a fence on the Finnish – Russian border as an expensive waste of money[326] and covered Prime Minister Sanna Marin's visit to Kyiv and linked it to Nazism.[327]

On 4 April 2023, when Finland officially joined NATO, all the main Russian TV channels covered the topic. Examples of different narratives include:

- NATO has been moving to the east since 1999; there will be no peace in Ukraine and it will become a NATO member; NATO's missiles will be near Russia's borders, unlike during the times of the Cold War; Finland doesn't have any choice but to become a NATO member; NATO's words cost nothing; NATO's security will not increase by accepting Finland as a member; any threat towards Russia will be parried; Russia will use 3M22 Zircon and RS-28 Sarmat to parry; Finland has not stopped the development of neo-Nazism since WWII; Finland joins NATO without asking the Finnish people their opinion; Finland wants part of the natural resources of the Arctic which NATO wants too; Finns unlike Ukrainians have never been friends or brothers with Russia (*Vremya pokazhet*[328])
- Now that Finland has joined NATO there will be NATO rapid deployment forces and naval and air bases; the Russian army should be strengthened in the north-west; the Finnish prime minister claims Finland joined NATO in response to Russia transferring its

tactical nuclear weapons to Belarus, but chronologically this was the opposite (*60 minut*[329])

- With Finland joining NATO, Russia will be forced to apply necessary countermeasures; Finland has put an end to the neutrality policy that it had been pursuing for 75 years and this will weaken Europe's security; NATO could deploy nuclear weapons in Finnish forests (*Vesti*[330]).

Using all the different core propaganda narratives about hostile, anti-democratic NATO which had expanded to the east for more than 20 years, Russian TV attempted to create a story where Finland's NATO accession was inevitable and the natural consequence of Western anti-Russian policies.

To complement the findings of Russian messaging about Finland's NATO accession especially towards domestic audiences, additional material was collected using Russian-language search engine Yandex. Search for 'Finland NATO' from 1 to 30 April 2023 yielded 200 articles. Nuclear weapons were discussed in 11 reports, and commentary by well-known Finnish pro-Russian actor Johan Bäckman was used eight times.

Other means of influence were also in use during and after Finland's NATO accession. During the 2023 Finnish parliamentary elections, dozens of X/Twitter accounts pretending to belong to MP candidates and experts were created. In poor Finnish, the accounts posted repeatedly on how NATO accession did not make any sense for Finland. Their origin is unknown.[331]

There were also some trolling and attempts at brigading[332] during Finland's NATO accession. For example Cyber Front Z, a coordinated trolling and brigading operation at least partly run openly on Telegram, targeted Finnish journalists and a politician (Figure 10). Users were told to comment on these people's accounts about Ukraine's alleged war crimes.

Russia-aligned 'hacktivist' groups that have been actively targeting Ukraine have also engaged in influence activities targeting NATO and Finland.

The hacktivist group NoName057(16) has had an especial interest in the Nordic countries. Since August 2022 it has posted on Telegram[333] at least 45 times about claimed DDoS (distributed denial of service) attacks on websites in Finland, often coinciding with high-level visits or political events (Figure 11).

FIGURE 10. Following Cyber Front Z's instructions (on the left), a user posted on the Instagram account of Arto Satonen, minister of employment

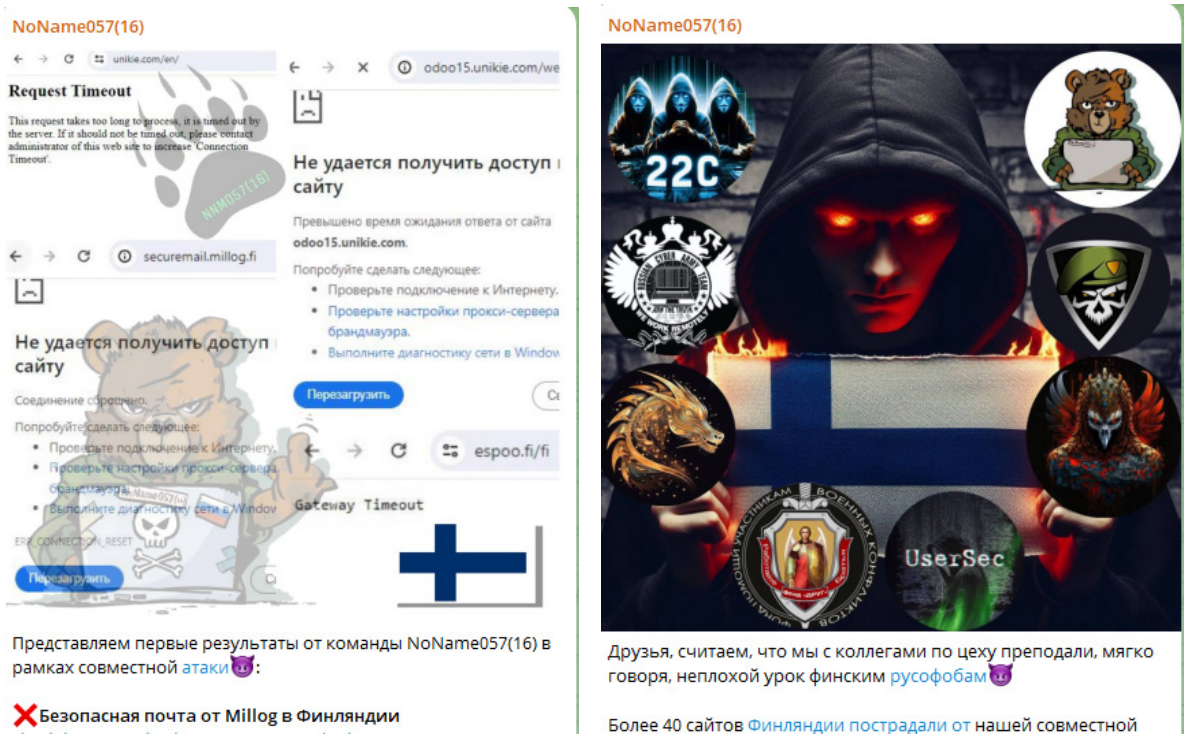


FIGURE 11. Hacktivist group NoName057(16)'s posts on Telegram promoting its claimed DDoS attacks on Finland

Case study 3:

Migrants on the Finnish border

When Russia started directing migrants to the Finnish border in late summer – autumn 2023, Finland was significantly better prepared than when Russia last used similar tactics, in 2015 – 2016.[334] Awareness of coordinated and organised action behind the hybrid activity was now high among the political leadership and general public, and legislation had been updated to allow the possibility of closing border crossings 'if it is necessary to prevent a serious threat to public order, national security or public health'.[335]

The hybrid activity was likely part of Russia's intensified reactive measures to Finland's NATO membership, and part of what remained in Russia's toolbox for attempting to influence the West amid its invasion of Ukraine.

When hundreds of third-country migrants started making their way to Finland through Russia and asking for asylum in late 2023, Finland gradually closed its border crossings with Russia. The Finnish authorities and the government assessed that 'instrumentalised migration from Russia and the escalation of the situation pose a serious threat to national security and public order'.[336] The migrants' travel had been enabled and assisted by the Russian border guard, part of the FSB security service. The border guard, for example, arranged people's travel in Russia from a motel in Kandalaksha to the border. The same method was used in 2015/2016.[337]

Social media played a key role in spreading the message of a new route to Europe in the north (Figure 12). On Facebook, Arabic-language groups shared information about the route and offered people visas, transport, and transfer to the border for several thousand euros. Private Facebook groups were involved in spreading the message,[338] and some used a messenger chat.[339] TikTok,[340] Telegram, and WhatsApp[341] were also used as promotion platforms.

While closing the borders managed to slow the migrant flows from Russia to Finland, information influence activities continued. Early on the governor of Murmansk accused Finland, 'a NATO country', of causing a 'humanitarian crisis' by leaving the migrants in trouble.[342] Claiming Finland is breaking its international commitments and discriminating against Russian speakers in the country are part of the continuous narrative.

As of April 2024, Finland has kept the border closed, which has helped regulate the issue. However, the fundamental debate in Finland around justification of some of the further measures continues. Returning migrants back to Russia without conducting an asylum process is one of the proposed measures seen as conflicting with the constitution and international commitments.[343] The risk of Russia exploiting the situation and directing migrants to unofficial border crossing points has not faded.

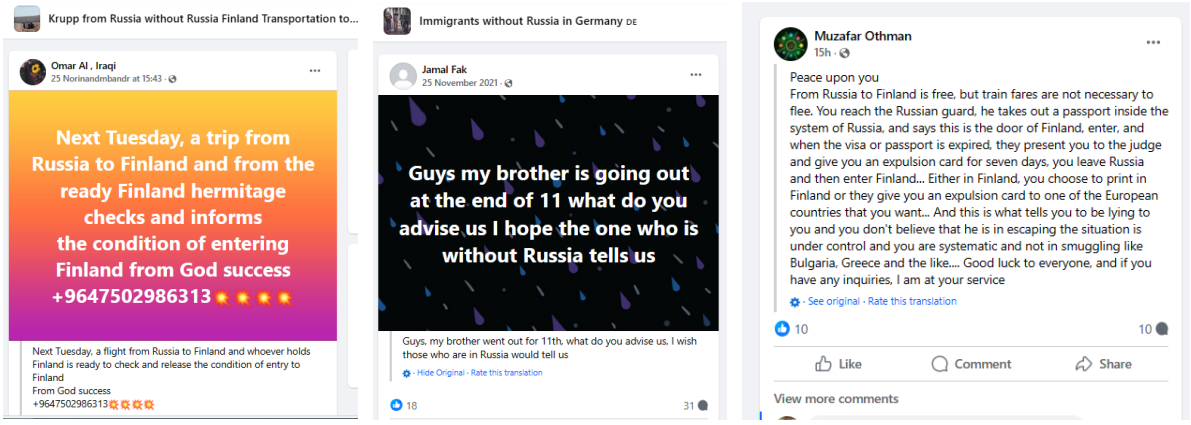


FIGURE 12. Examples of Facebook posts promoting information about the route to Finland (automatic translation from Arabic to English)

Conclusion

Finland's general approach to addressing Russia's information influence focuses on network-based preparation; coordinated proactive communication supported by the population's high trust in the authorities, media, and army; updating the legislation where necessary; and increasing resilience through joint exercises and international cooperation. The general conscription model means every male Finnish citizen is liable for military service, which contributes to high figures in willingness to defend the country: a survey found 79 per cent answered 'yes' to the question 'If Finland were attacked, should Finns, in your opinion, take up arms to defend themselves in all situations, even if the outcome seemed uncertain?'[344]

The Finnish media plays a key role in following and exposing Russian propaganda and disinformation. However, compared to other European countries, there are relatively few initiatives focusing on tracing online information operations on social media. The Finnish National Emergency Supply Agency's pilot project setting up a competence centre with data analysis capability is aimed at addressing this need.[345]

With the changing dynamics in Finnish – Russian bilateral relations post-invasion and the deteriorating security situation, some of the traditional vulnerabilities to Russia's information influence have diminished with Finland joining NATO and political and economic relations halting due to the invasion. It took time for Russia to rethink its strategy towards Finland, but since summer – autumn 2023 the influence activities and hybrid attempts have intensified. Messaging towards domestic audiences in Russia achieves results with people's views on Finland turning more negative, which helps ensure their support in case of increased aggression against Finland.

In a survey done by Levada for the Finnish government in late 2021, just before Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine and the upcoming NATO application, 68 per cent of Russians had a positive attitude towards Finland and 5 per cent a negative one. In Moscow, 79 per cent had a positive view about Finland. In St Petersburg and near the Finnish border, where there are more contacts with Finland, the figure was 89 per cent. In St Petersburg, 44 per cent said their opinions about Finland were based on their own trips to Finland.

Regarding Finland's military alliances, more than half of Russians described Finland as a neutral or non-military aligned state: 11 per cent of respondents considered Finland to be a close partner of NATO and 7 per cent of respondents believed that Finland was a member of NATO. A third (29 per cent) of the respondents estimated that the most weakening factor in Finland's relations with Russia would be Finland's accession to NATO.[346]

These views were reflected in the surveys that followed in 2022 and 2023. The latest survey[347] shows that only 37 per cent of Russians were positively disposed to Finland, compared to 51 per cent in 2022 and 68 per cent in 2021. Only 27 per cent of Russians aged over 55 years felt positive about Finland. However, 54 per cent of the youngest group (18 – 24-year-olds) said they had a positive attitude towards Finland. In 2023, 28 per cent of all respondents had a negative attitude towards Finland, compared to 22 per cent in 2022 and only 6 per cent in 2021. In Moscow, 48 per cent still held positive attitudes towards Finland, 40 per cent held negative attitudes, and 12 per cent were unable to give their opinion.[348] The Levada Center researchers assessed that Finland's decision to join NATO and the following negative coverage in the Russian media may be the biggest reason for Russians' negative attitudes towards Finland, while Russia's aggression against Ukraine and the rise in anti-Western attitudes can be seen as the root cause for the change.[349]

There is no similar updated data about the views of Russian speakers resident in Finland, of whom there are approximately 87,000; 18 per cent considered Russia's invasion of Ukraine justified in 2022.[350]

Within Finland, pro-Russian messaging has little space in the public debate or main, credible media, but it has its niche audiences through Finnish-language websites and social media networks. Many of these networks are international and follow the general pro-Kremlin propaganda agenda, as shown with the switch from Ukraine-related messaging to Israel/Gaza posts in the 'Help Donbas' Facebook group.

Overall, Russia's influence attempts have had little impact on Finnish audiences' views, and post-invasion these views have so far remained relatively unified. Back in autumn 2021, half of Finns opposed NATO membership and only a quarter supported it.[351] A 2024 survey[352] shows how dramatically the invasion changed views, with nine out of ten Finns supporting NATO membership. Similarly, nine out of ten think other NATO allies would support Finland if necessary, and nine out of ten feel that Finland is obliged to assist other allies. Six out of ten think that the military situation in Finland's vicinity is increasingly threatening, and 0 per cent think Russia has a positive impact on Finland's security. The majority of respondents think that both economic and military assistance to Ukraine should continue at the current level or increase, and more than half would like to see more EU sanctions imposed on Russia; 9 per cent want to decrease economic assistance to Ukraine and 8 per cent want less armed support for Ukraine (Figure 13).

While it might seem that the effect of the 'good old friendly neighbour' narrative has decreased or even nearly disappeared post-invasion, it remains to be seen what kind of role it will play in the future.

Figure 40A. Assisting Ukraine 2022-2023

"Because of the war started bu Russia, the European Union and its Member States, including Finland, have helped Ukraine both economically and militarily and by imposing sanctions on Russia. In your opinion, should Finlaand and the European Union continue to hepl Ukraine?"

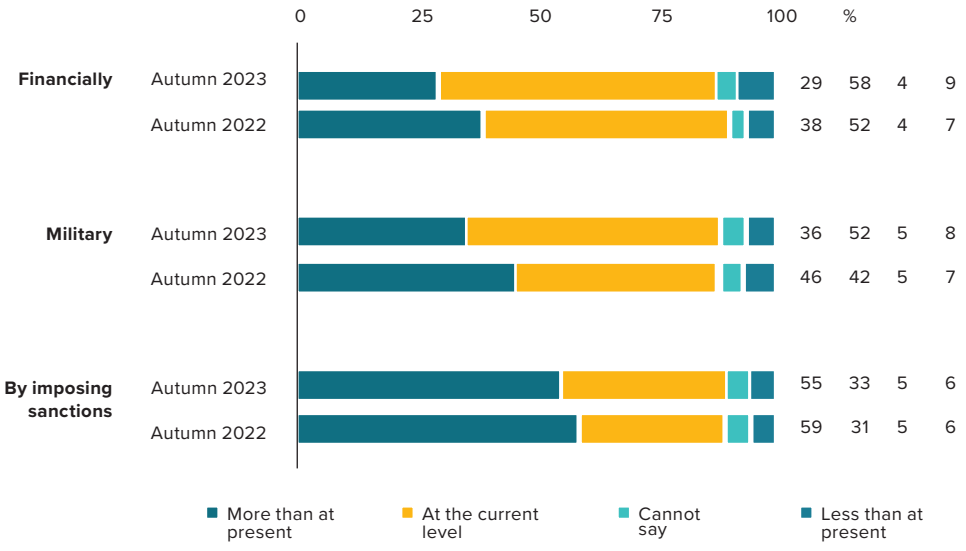


FIGURE 13. Finnish respondents' views on assistance to Ukraine, according to a survey commissioned by the Advisory Board for Defence Information. Source: Advisory Board for Defence Information, Finns' Opinions on Foreign and Security Policy, January 2024.

Iceland

Silja Bára Ómarsdóttir and Jón Gunnar Ólafsson

Iceland is by far the smallest of the Nordic countries, and while it is a fully fledged member of both the Nordic Council and NATO, it is often forgotten in comparative studies. This can be an inconvenience when trying to provide a complete overview of a political or policy issue that affects all the Nordics, but it must also be acknowledged that due to this exclusion, Iceland additionally seems to be overlooked when it comes to threats from state actors. This appears to be the case with regard to information influence campaigns by Russia, both before and after its invasion of Ukraine. While there are credible reports of campaigns conducted in the four larger Nordic countries,[353] no such reports have been made public in Iceland. During the writing of this chapter, we were unable to verify any such claims either. This does not mean that Iceland is insulated from the problems associated with disinformation, as we will discuss in the two case studies to follow, one addressing Iceland's information space and the other covering Iceland's response to the invasion of Ukraine, both at the social and at the political level.

In our estimate, the Icelandic information space is especially vulnerable. The media landscape is small, with regard to the number of both media outlets and journalists working in newsrooms. The population of Iceland is extremely engaged online and on social media, which has been identified elsewhere as an increasing threat to national security, where dissatisfaction with information from traditional news outlets commonly leads people to distribute misinformation and disinformation on social media.[354] Icelandic media coverage is reactive and often based on posts from social media, which means that false narratives can easily spread. Iceland does have a unique defence mechanism, however, as there are very few native speakers of Icelandic and automated translations, at least so far, are of poor quality, making them immediately untrustworthy in the eyes of an Icelandic speaker. Any deliberate disinformation campaign would therefore require a human touch, which is possibly outside the scope or ability of any but the largest and most powerful foreign actors.

It is also important to note that although the Icelandic language may serve to protect the population from disinformation campaigns, the presence and potential success of such campaigns in the other Nordic countries is likely to reach Iceland, as many Icelanders live there, access the Nordic press, and even share social media networks with people who are exposed directly to these campaigns. It is therefore reasonable to expect at least a spillover effect from disinformation in the Nordic countries (and other neighbouring countries) to Iceland. There was, for example, noticeable support in Iceland for Russia's revisionist claims to Ukraine, a manipulated narrative well described by Arribas et al.[355]

It must also be considered that Iceland has had issues with disinformation in the past. In the 2016 and 2017 parliamentary elections, a Facebook page titled *Kosningar,*[356] or simply *Elections* (followed by the year concerned), was set up. This page shared content deliberately intended to discredit the left and focused quite a bit on the then leader of the Left-Green Movement, Katrín Jakobsdóttir. The fact that the posts were all in Icelandic, and the issues addressed indicate that the creators were Icelandic, illustrates that actors do not need to be foreign for disinformation to become a problem in Iceland. In one video Jakobsdóttir was pictured in a miner's hat and with soot on her face, as if she had been working in a coal mine or possibly an oil field.[357] The picture was part of a campaign portraying the Left-Greens as a movement that could be trusted only to raise taxes and go back on their promises to voters, and another video labelled Jakobsdóttir as a politician whose only goal was to raise taxes. This would not be an unexpected campaign on behalf of an opposing party, but as this was done anonymously it raised concerns.

In 2018 MPs from four different parties in parliament requested a report be written on the potential connections between the Facebook

page and political parties. They also requested that a study be done on the impact of foreign actors on the previous elections.[358] One of the MPs behind the request later noted that such anonymous advertising posed a danger to democracy, both because of the anonymity of those who pay for campaigns, but also due to mis- and disinformation. She went on to argue that there were lurkers following many Icelanders on social media, and that they could be activated at short notice to do damage to Icelandic democracy.[359] Following the signing of the Code of Practice on Disinformation between the EU and the online platforms Facebook, Google, Twitter, and Mozilla, as well as advertisers, in 2018 (Microsoft and TikTok joined later), the spreading of anonymous advertising and propaganda on social media became more difficult to carry out in the EU (and the EEA countries Norway, Iceland, and Liechtenstein).[360] This led to Facebook opening its 'Ad Library' in Iceland prior to the parliamentary elections of 2021, increasing transparency in advertising. Anyone who buys adverts on Meta platforms must now register to show the entity or person responsible for running the advert. Advertisers must moreover comply with applicable laws and regulations. Following changes in 2021, Icelandic law now prohibits the spread of anonymous paid content after election day has been announced.[361] There was much less discussion concerning anonymous content during the 2021 election in Iceland compared to the 2016 and 2017 elections, with the changes in Icelandic law and on Facebook linked to anonymous content being less of a problem than previously. Despite the changes that took place, around 20 per cent of Icelandic voters said they had seen anonymous propaganda on Facebook during the 2021 election campaign, according to the Icelandic National Election Study.[362]

Iceland has of course had conflictual politics, like most other countries. Questions about the presence of a foreign military in the country were pervasive throughout the Cold War, and later issues regarding environmental protection vs the building of more hydropower plants in the country took over as one of the most divisive issues in social debates. In these cases the opposing viewpoints could usually be identified and argued, but it was a question of priorities and not foundation or fact that was being debated. This has started to change, perhaps most visibly in the discussion of the number of refugees and asylum seekers in the country, as will be reflected in the case study on Ukraine later in this chapter. In this instance, misinformation, if not disinformation, is clearly present. The number of people who have sought asylum in Iceland is not in question, but arguments fly stating that their number is greater than in the Nordic countries, without making appropriate allowances for the fact that arrivals are categorised differently in each country. This has led to a polarised societal debate where people cannot speak to each other on the basis of shared understanding, and this has not been helped by the fact that politicians are employing an 'us vs them' approach, contrasting the needs of Icelandic people living in poverty or with disabilities against those newly arrived in search of protection. A discussion of the information space, as well as the public and political response to Russia's invasion of Ukraine, thus provides a useful insight into the potential impact of disinformation in Iceland. This chapter starts with an overview of our approach and data employed, followed by a case study on the Icelandic information space, after which we discuss the Icelandic response to Russia's invasion of Ukraine. We conclude that the weakness of Iceland's information space, coupled with the Icelandic population's heavy online media use, results in a tendency for the population to align behind a 'single truth' where a healthy debate becomes problematic. When high reliance on social media is added, people can be more likely to be exposed to, and believe, false news and conspiracy theories. This, in turn, makes Iceland vulnerable to disinformation campaigns, even though such campaigns have not been identified or successful so far.

Data used in the case studies

In this chapter we rely on relevant published studies for our two cases. Moreover, we use findings from several representative surveys. We discuss each survey in more detail when highlighting the findings we use in our analysis. The surveys were carried out in Iceland for the Institute of International Affairs at the University of Iceland (IIA), the Icelandic Ministry for Foreign Affairs (MFA), and the Icelandic Media Commission. All the surveys were conducted in 2021 – 23. Moreover, we rely on findings from several other published surveys, as well as the Icelandic National Election Study.

Two of the surveys we highlight were carried out by the Social Research Institute at the University of Iceland (SSRI). Both were administered through the SSRI's online panel. The panel is composed of a random sample from the census, acquired from Statistics Iceland. Members of the online panel are recruited on a regular basis and its composition is monitored to adequately reflect the distribution of sex, age, residence, education, and income of the general population of Iceland. All the other surveys were administered through the survey company Maskína. As with the SSRI's online panel, the surveys by Maskína were administered through its online panel, which is based on the Icelandic national registry and representative of the total population aged 18 and over. The data in the surveys has been weighted according to census-accepted data, such as age, gender, and education, to ensure the results represent the population of the country.

Case study 1:

The Icelandic information space

The Nordic countries share various similarities concerning their media and communication environment and are therefore commonly grouped together in studies examining developments in their information landscapes. Iceland, however, is routinely absent and completely overlooked in the literature examining the media and information environment in the Nordic region.[363] It is much smaller in population than the other four Nordic states, and, as a result, has a smaller media market. Puppis has illustrated how small media systems in states like Iceland are particularly vulnerable.[364] Resource constraints impact production, and small audience and advertising markets lead to much less income for media outlets compared to those operating in larger markets. The Icelandic media landscape has seen dramatic changes in recent years. The economic situation of private media is precarious and has been for the last two decades, and mergers, lay-offs, and bankruptcy have been frequent.[365] The Icelandic advertising market was small to begin with and has in recent years dramatically shrunk. Figures from Statistics Iceland have shown that close to half of all advertising money in Iceland now goes to foreign companies like Meta and Google.[366]

Up until recently, there were two national daily newspapers in Iceland, with one of them, *Fréttablaðið*, ceasing publication in early 2023, after its publisher, Torg, went bankrupt. Around 50 journalists lost their jobs. In addition to *Morgunblaðið*, the only daily newspaper still published in Iceland, there are three weekly newspapers in the country. There are several television and radio stations, but only two provide news services. Compared to private media outlets, the Icelandic National Broadcasting Service, Ríkisútvarpið (RÚV), has enjoyed a strong and stable position in the media market. Around 95 per cent of the adult population in Iceland use RÚV's services every week, with over 76 per cent doing so on a daily basis. These are some of the highest numbers among public service broadcasters in Europe. Recent figures have shown that journalists working in Iceland are only around 450 in total.[367]

With traditional platforms like newspapers struggling, more and more Icelanders now receive most of their news online, both from websites but also from social media platforms, particularly Facebook. According to Eurostat, people in Iceland even outperform citizens in the other Nordic states in terms of social media usage, with over 90 per cent of Icelanders using social media regularly, according to figures from 2021.[368] Facebook is by far the most popular social media platform in Iceland, with around 91 per cent of adults using it. Comparable numbers for Facebook usage in Norway, Sweden, Denmark, and Finland are around 70 per cent. Moreover, other social media platforms like Messenger, Instagram, and Twitter (X) are also more popular in Iceland than in the other four Nordic states.[369] Younger Icelanders are flocking to platforms like TikTok, with over 80 per cent of Icelandic teenagers using it regularly.[370]

According to findings from a survey conducted by the survey company Maskína for the Icelandic Media Commission in 2022, a large majority of Icelandic adults access news through online news sites and social media platforms, with radio and television remaining popular. Figure 14 shows the platforms respondents had used to access news in the week prior to answering the survey. Close to 96 per cent of people had used online news sites, 84 per cent had listened to the radio, 82 per cent had used social media platforms, 80 per cent had watched television, but only around 53 per cent had read a newspaper.

Most people in Iceland access news across different media platforms, both online and offline, but as the figure illustrates, online sites and social media platforms have become very popular in the country.

International trends have shown that the news environment is becoming increasingly fragmented in many countries. The changes that have taken place in the news media ecosystem have been defined in terms of a move away from a low-choice to a high-choice media environment.[371] With the greater choice we now have, there is a need to be more selective concerning our media consumption. As Strömbäck and colleagues point out, this new high-choice media environment means that virtually anyone can find information about almost any topic.[372] Moreover, this means that people's motivations and abilities assume greater importance. While some citizens have the motivation and resources to seek out and understand high-quality information, others can lack the same motivation and resources. Research suggests that factors such as political interest, education, age, and political preference have become increasingly

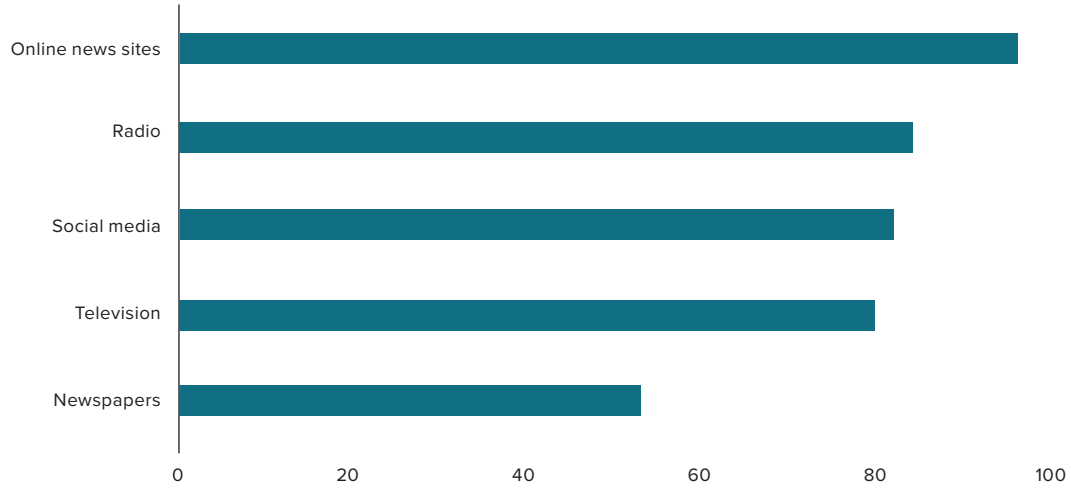


FIGURE 14. Use of platforms to access news in Iceland in the week prior to answering the survey, 2022 (%). Source: Fjölmiðlanefnd, *Traust í íslensku samfélagi: Niðurstöður spurningakönnunar Maskínu fyrir Fjölmiðlanefnd. Hatursorðræða, skautun, upplýsingaóreiða og traust* (Reykjavík: Fjölmiðlanefnd – Icelandic Media Commission, 2023).

more important predictors of news media consumption.[373]

The only academic study to date on news consumption patterns in Iceland, published in 2021, illustrates that most Icelanders still appear to be very interested in news and very enthusiastic news consumers. Moreover, the study showed that news is widely consumed in Iceland, irrespective of age, gender, education, or income. Findings suggest that newer platforms (online and social media) are taking over as people's main news source, with television having lost its centrality in that regard. Interestingly, even though people in Iceland are increasingly accessing news on online news sites, it is still the case that they are mainly reading the news on there from the main traditional news outlets in Iceland. Most people in Iceland are still receiving news from the same domestic newsrooms as before, but they are increasingly turning to their online news sites, with Mbl.is, linked to the *Morgunblaðið* newspaper, and Vísir.is, linked to the Stöð 2 (Channel 2) newsroom, being the two most popular news sites. Icelanders use the online news sites of traditional news providers much more than people in the other four Nordic countries do.[374]

As the above findings highlight, most people in Iceland receive news produced by journalists working for the same few news outlets. There can be various limitations related to the material produced by these journalists, linked to the structural vulnerabilities of the small media landscape in Iceland. Journalists in small media systems can be seen to be less autonomous than journalists in larger countries. Journalists are seldom specialists, which may make them more dependent on their sources, including high-level politicians, and the small job market can make them less resistant to commercial pressures and ownership power. Small audience markets and small advertising markets translate into small job markets, which in general means fewer employers, fewer senior positions, and fewer alternatives in terms of career routes and progression.[375]

As a recent study in Iceland illustrates, resource constraints limit possibilities for specialisation in newsrooms at Icelandic outlets and most journalists in Iceland need to be multifunctional generalists. One of the key democratic roles of the news media and journalists is to hold those in power to account. The small size of the Icelandic media market and news outlets problematises this role, since the lack of specialisation found in Icelandic newsrooms commonly leads to shallow reporting.[376] How are journalists supposed to cover important topics in-depth, disseminate important information, and hold those in power to account if they do not know the topics they are covering? Another study in Iceland found that journalists, politicians, and the public were in general agreement regarding the fact that political news coverage in Iceland is commonly superficial and shallow and, linked to this, reactive. Again, this was connected to the small size of the Icelandic media market. The reactive aspect of the political coverage is an important point to stress since this can affect who sets the agenda and plays the role of gatekeeper in Icelandic society. According to respondents in Iceland, Icelandic political coverage is heavily 'event based'. This was compared to political coverage in larger European countries. In the larger states, the media is also often focused on pre-planned events, but, at the same time, it also initiates coverage. The initiative for political stories seldom comes from the Icelandic media, but rather from events that have been planned ahead, often by government ministers and political parties. The journalists then show up to cover these events or cover them from their desks, as is increasingly common.[377]

Icelandic journalists usually work under immense pressure and do not have time to work on their stories properly. The watchdog role, then, is often not really carried out by the journalists. Instead, special interest groups, opinion leaders, and members of the public can put issues on the agenda, and they are frequently allowed to say what they want in news reports, somewhat unfiltered. One group says one thing, and someone from another group says the complete opposite. The journalist disseminates the material to the public, and then the story is usually over. What is often lacking is input from the journalists themselves, in-depth analysis and critical questions.

What is described here in relation to superficial political coverage and shortage of resources is, of course, not unique to Iceland. However, the small size of the media market there means that the situation in Iceland is more extreme than in many other countries.[378] This raises an important point: to what extent could particular narratives be put on the agenda in the Icelandic media and 'controlled' by outside forces? The structural vulnerabilities of the small media market clearly illustrates that a well-thought-out and executed information campaign could, at least in theory, be highly successful.

Increased news consumption on digital and social media has arguably exaggerated the reactive aspect of news coverage in Iceland even further. As mentioned earlier, most Icelanders are active social media users and many use online and social media outlets to follow news. Icelandic politicians use social media to promote their work, and status updates they post on Facebook are often quickly disseminated on the most popular online news sites in the country, sometimes without much extra context or input from journalists. Social media has become a commonly used source of material for journalists, particularly those working on online news sites that need to be updated throughout the day.[379] Studies have shown that material on online news sites tends to be short and commonly lacking in context when compared to that in more traditional outlets like printed newspapers. Moreover, online news consumption can be quite superficial, since people tend to scan it rather than read it carefully.[380]

As has been documented extensively, social media outlets are ideal avenues to spread false and misleading narratives and information. Studies have shown how misinformation (false or misleading information that is spread without intent) and disinformation (false or misleading information that is spread with intent) easily spreads online, particularly on social media.[381] At first glance, Iceland would appear to be quite immune to this, since most people use social media but also get their news from more traditional news outlets, as previously shown. However, if these traditional outlets, particularly online news outlets (which are the most popular source for news in Iceland), are increasingly using information from social media as source material, then the situation becomes more complicated. Add to this the fact that Icelandic news outlets commonly employ overworked journalists who do not necessarily have the resources and time to fact-check material properly, and what we end up with is an Icelandic information environment being potentially vulnerable to information influence operations originating from social media.

Studies have shown that people who use and trust information on social media are more likely to believe false news and conspiracy theories, which has been linked to a 'spiral of distrust'. The more citizens perceive the traditional mainstream media to be dishonest and inaccurate, the more likely they are to turn away from it to various alternative sources, commonly through social media, that adhere less to standards of established journalism. This can intensify beliefs in false information.[382] In this regard, Icelandic society still appears to be quite resilient, since surveys have shown that most people in Iceland still get their news from traditional news outlets.[383] Studies from larger democracies have also shown that those who are less educated are less interested in traditional news, and are more likely to use social media for information gathering and believe in false or misleading information and conspiracy theories.[384] Interestingly, studies in Iceland and Norway have not shown that education plays the same role in social media and news consumption habits compared to the larger democracies commonly studied,[385] which could be related to the fact that social media usage for news consumption is close to universal, as is general news consumption, and the education level in these Nordic states is in general higher than in most countries. This illustrates that it could be somewhat difficult for disinformation campaigns to be successful in Iceland compared to countries with lower levels of education and where certain segments of the population are more closed off in echo chambers on social media.

Another point to consider in terms of Iceland's potential resilience concerns language. Most people in the country speak Icelandic and the vast majority of the news content produced and shared on social media is

still in Icelandic, even though some news outlets produce material in other languages, most notably English and Polish (e.g. RÚV, Mbl.is and Vísir.is). For a successful disinformation campaign to be conducted in the mainstream discourse in Iceland, it would therefore need to be spread, to a large degree, in Icelandic. Translations and material available through chatbots and other technology using artificial intelligence (AI) have yet to reach the stage where they would be persuadable in a disinformation campaign. As we have seen, AI technology has been developing at a rapid pace, so this assessment would need to be updated on a regular basis.

Case study 2:

The Icelandic response to Russia's invasion of Ukraine

As soon as news broke of Russia's invasion of Ukraine in February 2022, it was clear where Icelanders' support would lie, whether it be formal support of the authorities or the emotional support of the Icelandic public. As Ukraine had been leaning closer to NATO, the Icelandic authorities automatically accepted that responsibility for the war lay with Russia and proceeded to align themselves with NATO's responses. The argument was made that the attack was an act of aggression against democracy and liberty, and that Iceland's security was at stake and so solidarity with Ukraine was required – or, as the minister for foreign affairs argued, Ukraine needed to win the war for the sake of humanity.[386] Before too long, the Icelandic government announced it would open its borders to those fleeing from Ukraine, and the social response was generally positive as groups started spontaneous support for both Ukrainian refugees arriving in Iceland and sending support to Ukrainian soldiers.[387] As the numbers of refugees in Iceland grew, however, in large part due to the great numbers of Ukrainians arriving in the country, support started to sour.[388] Polarisation became evident as politicians and members of the public pointed out that the support was costly, and it would be necessary to decide whether to 'support our own people' or assist those coming from abroad. While this

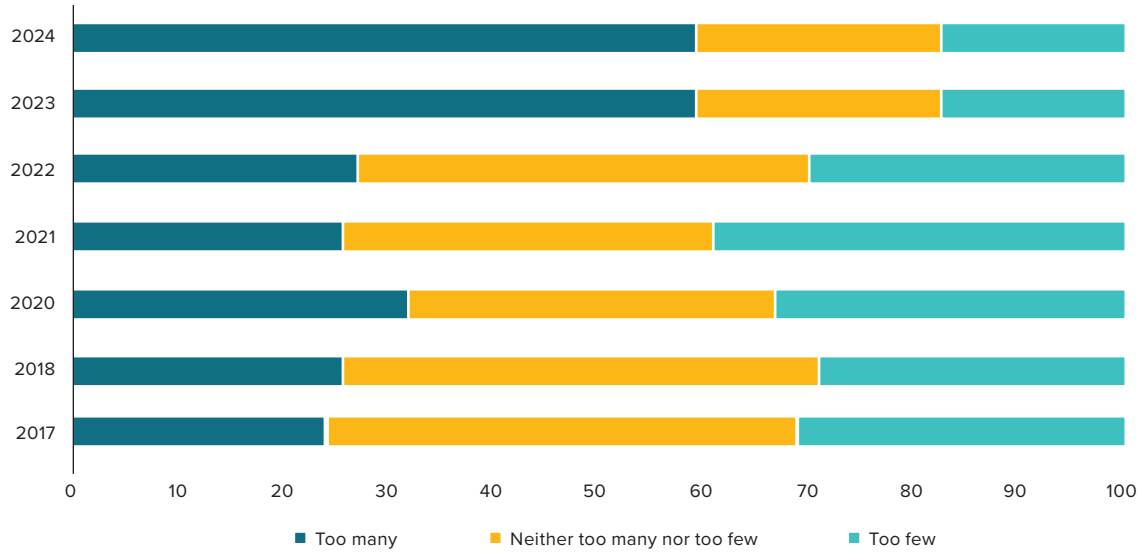


FIGURE 15. Icelanders' perception of the numbers of people receiving asylum in the country (%).
Source: Maskína, 'Mikill meirihluti telur fjölda flóttafólks of mikinn', *Maskina.is,* 2024, https://maskina.is/mikill-meirihluti-telur-fjolda-flottafolks-of-mikinn/.

argument has been made more strongly against migrants arriving from Venezuela (who for some time have also received temporary protection in Iceland during a mass exodus) and in particular from the Middle East and Central Asia, opposition to migration in general is based on the big increase in the number of immigrants and asylum seekers in Iceland as a whole – 60 per cent of the population now think too many receive asylum in Iceland. This is shown in the results of surveys conducted by Maskína, which has been tracking Icelanders' views on the number of people receiving asylum in the country since 2017 (only excluding the year 2019). As shown in Figure 15, the numbers were quite steady between 2017 and 2022, but in 2023 there was a big shift in public attitudes, when the number of respondents saying that too many people receive asylum in Iceland jumped from 27 per cent to 60 per cent. And the most recent survey conducted in 2024 shows that this number has held steady.[389]

It is important to recognise that Icelanders have long had favourable views of doing business with Russia. Iceland and the Soviet Union had a strong trading relationship despite Iceland being solidly in the NATO camp, and this carried over into the post-Cold War environment. This enduring connection is reflected in a survey conducted in Iceland in 2020 for the IIA, with almost 48 per cent of respondents indicating support for continued cooperation with Russia and a significant number, 19 per cent, even wanting to expand it. What is more striking at this time is that 78 per cent of respondents prioritised maintaining good economic relations with Russia over taking a tough stance against the country on foreign policy issues, with only 22 per cent supporting the latter option.[390] Increasing tensions with Russia were also considered less of a threat to Iceland's security than the power and influence of the United States at that time, with only around 13 per cent feeling that the threat from Russia was high and just over 30 per cent thinking it was medium.[391]

It is unsurprising to see a significant shift in attitudes towards Russia after the invasion of Ukraine. In a survey conducted in 2023, nearly 40 per cent of respondents in Iceland identified increased tensions with Russia as a high threat to Iceland's security. And whereas nearly 20 per cent wanted to expand cooperation with Russia in 2020, less than 5 per cent wanted to do that in 2023 (see Figure 16), with less than 10 per cent wanting to maintain the same level of cooperation. The invasion can also be seen to have had a marked impact on Icelanders' willingness to maintain economic ties with Russia. In an almost complete reversal, we see 85 per cent favouring a tough stance towards Russia on foreign policy issues in 2023, and only 15 per cent wanting to maintain good economic relations.[392]

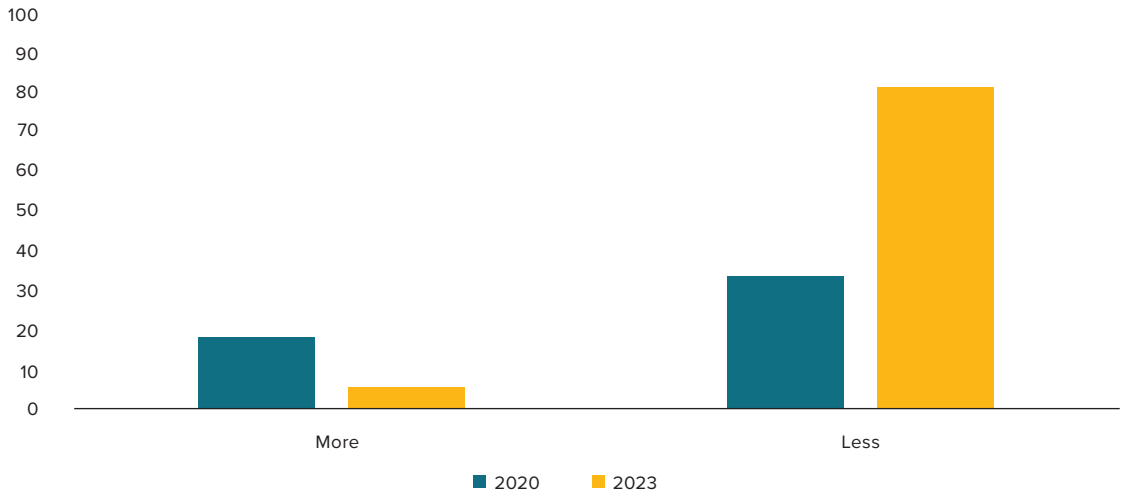


FIGURE 15. Icelanders' views on more or less cooperation with Russia in the future (%). Source: Silja Bára Ómarsdóttir, Leaning into Cooperation: *Changes in Icelanders' Perspectives on International Politics after Russia's Invasion of Ukraine* (Reykjavík: Institute of International Affairs, 2023), https://ams.hi.is/en/publication/109/.

There might have been a reason to ask about support for Ukraine or Russia in 2020, as Russia had then already invaded and annexed Crimea, but unfortunately we do not have data on that question. The 2023 survey for the IIA, however, included questions on Icelanders' views on the response of various actors – individual countries, groups of countries, or alliances – to Russia's 2022 invasion of Ukraine. In this instance respondents were asked about their views on the reactions of Iceland, the Nordic countries, NATO, the US, the EU, Turkey, and China. Here it becomes very clear that Icelanders align with the attitudes of the Western bloc of countries and resist the responses of the countries that are most perceived as being supportive of Russia, whether it be directly for the invasion or by continuing trade. Over 70 per cent of respondents viewed the responses of the Nordic countries and Iceland very or rather favourably, almost 65 per cent agreed with those of the EU and NATO, and just over 60 per cent agreed with those of the US. The tables are turned when it comes to China and Turkey – just about 10 per cent viewed Turkey's response very or rather favourably, and only about 3 per cent had that view of China. Around 60 per cent viewed Turkey's response rather or very unfavourably, but China was clearly seen as even more supportive of Russia here, with over 80 per cent of the respondents in Iceland viewing its responses to the war rather or very unfavourably.

Finally, the survey attempted to test whether Icelanders were supportive towards Russia. The questions were formulated as neutrally as possible, referring to 'the war between' Russia and Ukraine rather than an invasion, and asked how much or how little respondents thought Iceland should support one party or the other. The responses were quite clear – almost 90 per cent felt Iceland should support Ukraine a great deal or completely, whereas only 2 per cent wanted to provide that level of support to Russia. On the other side, around 92 per cent felt Iceland should show little or no support at all to Russia, and only around 3 per cent wanted to provide little or no support to Ukraine. Testing whether the support was limited to the ideological or emotional sphere, respondents were also asked whether they would be willing to provide financial support to the Ukrainian authorities for the war. A survey experiment was then used in an attempt to tease out whether the support would go down if respondents were primed to think of the direct impact such support might have on their way of life, for example through increased inflation. In short, the idea of such an impact did not affect the level of support for economic assistance: around 70 per cent of the respondents were somewhat or strongly supportive of providing such assistance.[393]

In addition to these surveys, it is worth looking into surveys conducted on behalf of the Icelandic MFA, since they provide additional insights into our case study. In 2022 its annual survey included a question on attitudes towards collaboration with Russia and military support for Ukraine, but in 2023 it added some layers to the questions about Icelanders' support for Ukraine in its war against Russia, and repeated those questions in 2024. The results are in line with the survey discussed earlier, with over 80 per cent of respondents opposing cooperation with Russia in both 2022 and 2023, and just under 80 per cent in 2024. In 2022 the MFA survey only asked about direct military support for Ukraine, which resulted in far less favourability, or only 52 per cent. In 2023 the question first asked about support for Ukraine in general, resulting in nearly 82 per cent favourability, which dropped to 75 per cent in 2024. The MFA's survey then broke down the type of support and asked about economic, humanitarian, and direct military assistance. In this, some interesting differences emerged. Just over two thirds of the respondents, or 69 per cent, were rather or very much in favour of providing economic assistance to Ukraine in 2023, and 63 per cent in 2024. However, over 86 per cent supported providing humanitarian assistance in 2023, and 86 per cent in 2024, or a nearly identical proportion of respondents.

Support for providing direct military assistance, however, was much lower. The question suggested that direct military assistance could include soldier training, military equipment, or the transport of such equipment. In 2023 just over a third of the respondents, or 36 per cent, were somewhat or strongly in favour of this type of support, whereas nearly 39 per cent

somewhat or strongly opposed it. This is the only question about Ukraine that was included in the MFA's 2022 survey, and at that point there was even less support for it, with only 21 per cent in favour and 52 per cent opposed. In 2024 the favourable attitudes towards military support had dwindled again, with just around 30 per cent of respondents agreeing that Iceland should provide that kind of assistance. It is thus clear that Icelanders are now more willing to contribute to military support for Ukraine, but there is still significant resistance, and some fatigue appears to have set in among the public.[394] This may be related to the fact that Iceland has never had a military of its own, and respondents may interpret 'direct military support' as something akin to Icelanders being involved in direct fighting, but this cannot be ascertained without further investigation.

It should be noted that while there is very little support for Russia's war against Ukraine in Iceland, there are those who believe that Russia is being wrongly accused of violating international law and that it has a right to defend or even reclaim its territory based on agreements established after the end of the Cold War. One medium, albeit a marginal alternative outlet, Fréttin.is, supported two people who travelled to Russia to 'monitor elections' in Kherson, Ukraine, and published reports on the good standing of democracy in Russia. The individuals were later said to be at risk of sanctions and travel restrictions, and the Icelandic MFA made it clear to the mainstream press that these individuals were not election observers working for the Icelandic state as they had not been trained to do so.[395] It is also worth noting that the one remaining daily newspaper in Iceland, *Morgunblaðið*, has published articles by Putin himself[396] and by the Russian ambassador to Iceland,[397] rather than conducting interviews and analysing their arguments. This can be related to the reactive aspects of working practices in Icelandic news outlets previously discussed.

Initially the Icelandic population was quite supportive of Ukrainians' arrival in Iceland. Signs with a QR code were placed at the airport instructing those fleeing the conflict on how to access services. In addition to formalised support through municipalities, government agencies, and the Red Cross of Iceland, groups formed organically to coordinate assistance to the new arrivals and to those remaining in Ukraine, for example by knitting socks and jumpers to send to Ukrainian soldiers.[398] Since early March 2022 the Icelandic government's information website has stated that there is great goodwill among Icelanders due to the situation in Ukraine and its neighbouring countries accepting refugees, with a special link guiding individuals who want to provide direct assistance.[399]

When the numbers of Ukrainian refugees grew beyond what was expected, and the Icelandic government decided to open its borders to Venezuelans as well, tolerance for migrants in general started to drop. As Icelanders became more willing to support military measures, their acceptance of refugees dwindled. Attitudes towards refugees have been measured by Maskína since 2017, at which time 24 per cent felt that there were too many refugees in Iceland and 31 per cent too few, and the numbers have been relatively stable. As Figure 15 shows, this changed dramatically in 2023, when 60 per cent of survey respondents stated that too many people were granted asylum in the country and only 17 per cent said too few, with the same attitudes reflected in a 2024 iteration of the survey.[400] This reflects the social and political discourse, which frequently emphasises the weakness of national infrastructure and inability to adequately welcome refugees in Iceland. The number of refugees and asylum seekers in Iceland multiplied after the attack on Ukraine, going from 1000 to almost 5000 (with nearly half of that number coming from Ukraine alone) over the course of only a few years.[401]

To date this topic remains probably the most polarising issue in Icelandic society and is likely to be affected to an extent by information disorder. Those opposing increased arrivals of refugees and asylum seekers – generally on the right wing of Icelandic politics – point out that, in relative numbers,[402] Iceland accepts more people than do neighbouring countries. Those in favour of welcoming them – generally on the centre and left wing in Icelandic politics – argue that the categories are misleading: in Iceland those arriving under temporary collective protection in the context of a mass exodus

(in Iceland covered by Article 44 of the Act on Foreign Nationals) are counted with asylum seekers, whereas they are outside that system in some neighbouring countries.[403] This suggests an unwillingness to debate the issue on a factual foundation, and rather on the basis of feeling or opinion.

With this overview of public attitudes towards support for Ukraine completed, it is now useful for our analysis to turn to government actions. Within days of the invasion, Iceland decided to activate Article 44 of the law on foreigners no. 80/2016,[404] which provides collective protection. This meant that assistance was quicker and more effective, and Ukrainian citizens received immediate, albeit temporary, protection upon claiming asylum in Iceland. One year after the invasion, 812 Ukrainian citizens out of the 1900 people aged 18 – 67 who had claimed asylum in Iceland had been granted work permits.[405]

Iceland has participated in most international efforts to support Ukraine. Its humanitarian assistance and emergency response have for example been directed towards electricity production and the strengthening of energy infrastructure in Ukraine. Assistance in the form of food, medicines, and prosthetics is also categorised as humanitarian. While Iceland does not have a military, it is a member of NATO and as such has provided military assistance of many kinds. The grassroots 'Send Warmth' initiative, which has sent warm winter supplies, mostly woollen goods, to the Ukrainian armed forces, is categorised as military assistance,[406] and Iceland also contributes to the International Fund for Ukraine and the organised transport of military supplies from NATO allies. Iceland also initiated a plan to train Ukrainian soldiers in demining, but this was a collaborative effort between the Nordic countries and Lithuania and was conducted in 2023.[407] Iceland also announced at the end of 2023 that it would participate in two country groups supporting Ukraine's defence capabilities, in information technology and demining, as well as making a special contribution to NATO's Comprehensive Assistance Package. In total, Iceland's financial contributions to Ukraine's defence amounted to ISK 5.5 bn at the end of 2023.[408]

Iceland also participates in economic sanctions against Russia and its allies. It has restricted travel against specified individuals and frozen their assets, and applied wide-ranging sanctions that extend to both import and export to/from Russia and Belarus, and services in for example finance, banking, energy, and transport, including military goods and equipment. Iceland has aligned itself with all the political statements of the EU regarding sanctions against Russia and thus applied all of the resulting rules in the country.[409]

While Icelandic politicians have, much like the general population, demonstrated resistance against the increased numbers of refugees and asylum seekers in the country at this time, they continue to be stalwart supporters of Ukraine's efforts to defend itself. This is demonstrated in continued financial and material support to NATO and Ukraine directly, and in the rhetoric of MPs and cabinet ministers. Welcoming the increased number of refugees in Iceland is claimed to be straining the welfare system, but the money that is put into military, economic, and humanitarian assistance abroad is not seen as being taken out of the welfare budget. This is an interesting mismatch in the discourse dominating the Icelandic political debate about the country's ability to accommodate more refugees, asylum seekers, and potentially even immigrants. The divisions here are rather clear, with the populist right mostly speaking against the refugees, often arguing that costs are prohibitive and reduce the state's ability to meet the needs of 'our own people'. The centre and right-wing parties tend to promote putting money into traditional defence-related activities, sometimes arguing that the increased number of refugees is weighing down public services. The centre left and left wing, however, tend to emphasise the responsibility to welcome refugees.

Discussion and conclusion

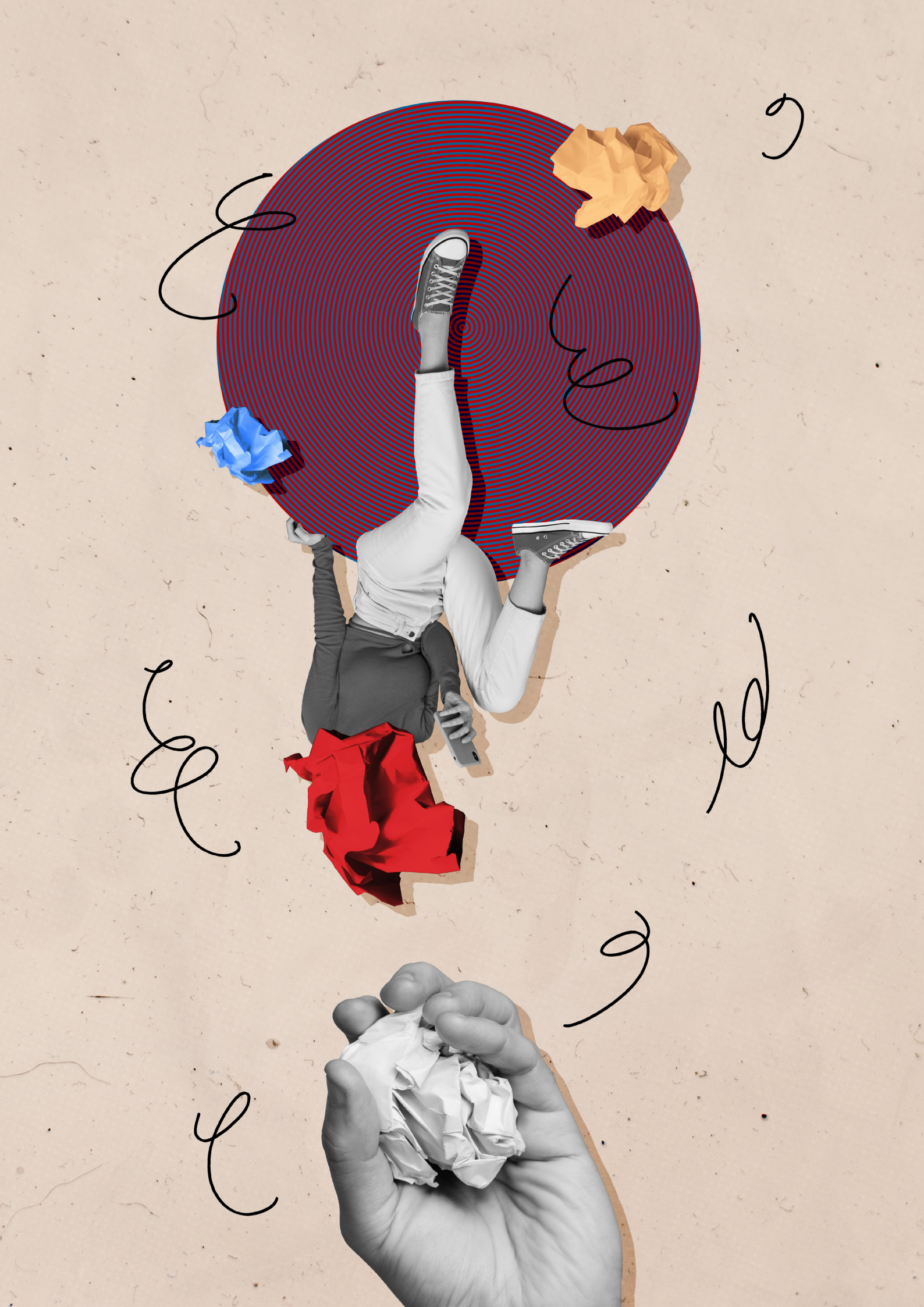
As demonstrated by the two case studies, disinformation has not been a prominent issue of concern in Icelandic society to date. When Russia invaded Ukraine in February 2022, the Icelandic authorities and the general population immediately responded with strong support, as indicated in public mobilisation, open borders, and humanitarian, economic, and military assistance, whether through people-to-people action, at the bilateral state level, or through NATO or other international cooperation. This reaction was universally supported by the Icelandic media, which is, as we have demonstrated, small and reactive.

The debate has, however, started to indicate elements of polarisation. The number of Ukrainian refugees coming to Iceland was probably higher than expected, and, along with refugees and asylum seekers from other countries arriving in greater numbers, the welfare system has been proven not to be strong enough to accommodate all new arrivals. Elements of disinformation have also started to appear in this discussion about the number of refugees and the costs of welcoming them. This has caused distrust among the population, but for now the actors involved appear exclusively domestic.

Research demonstrates that societies in which people do not trust institutions and predominantly use social media to access news and information may be more likely to fall prey to disinformation. And in a society that relies so heavily on few, and often underfunded, media outlets, accompanied by extensive reliance on social media, it would not be surprising to see successful disinformation campaigns in the future. In the case of Iceland, it could even be argued that there is little to lose and a lot to be gained for Russia to attempt to conduct such campaigns. At the end of March 2024, the first obvious attempts by Russia to influence Icelandic opinion were noticed, as the spokesperson of Russia's MFA claimed that Icelandic mercenaries were fighting for Ukraine, meaning that Iceland was sponsoring Ukrainian Nazis.[410] Nonetheless, Russia's cause has extremely low support in Iceland, and even minimal success would be an improvement on its current credibility in Icelandic society.

As outlined, Icelanders are heavy users of social media and online news outlets. Studies in Iceland have shown that much of the false and misleading information in circulation comes from online sources, and this warrants further monitoring and investigation in the near future. According to a study for the Icelandic Media Commission, around half of respondents said that they had seen false information or fake news during the parliamentary election campaign of 2021. Of those respondents, over 70 per cent saw this type of information on Facebook, while less than 30 per cent saw it on television.[411] Similarly, findings from the Icelandic National Election Study illustrate that most respondents saw false or misleading information on social media, with Facebook being the dominant mis- and disinformation platform.[412] It is thus unsurprising that people experience information disorder as a significant concern. This is supported, for example, in surveys on foreign policy and national security. In 2020, 50 per cent of respondents identified fake news and information disorder as a significant threat to Iceland's security, and in 2023, 59 per cent did so.[413]

The above-mentioned reasons (small and reactive media, heavy dependence on online/social media, etc.) result in a weak information ecosystem that may easily be captured by bad actors. Iceland is frequently left out of Nordic studies but would benefit greatly from further research in this field that would bring together the national security perspective and an understanding of media and its weaknesses. As we have indicated, there are no confirmed international disinformation campaigns in Iceland, perhaps in some part due to the protective effects of the less widely used Icelandic language. Domestically we have nonetheless seen some fledgling attempts, which recent legislative changes should have eliminated. The risk remains, however, that Iceland is quick to grab hold of a single truth, which often emerges (too) quickly as information sources are not diverse, and this is something to be taken seriously by the media and political authorities alike.



Latvia

Juris Jurāns

The context of Russia's information influence

Since Vladimir Putin gained power in Russia, he has been known to recognise the importance of mass media and other forms of information channels as a tool of shaping and upholding public opinion according to his political needs. Since the 2000s, the media in Russia has been steadily losing its independence to the point where terms such as 'free press' are practically non-existing. Since 2003 Reporters Without Borders has almost consistently ranked Russia in 140th place or lower in its 'Press Freedom Index' (with the exception of 2005, when it ranked in 138th place), and the rating reached an all-time low in 2023 – from a total of 180 countries, Russia ranked in 164th place.[414] Almost all independent media in Russia has either been declared a 'foreign agent' or 'undesirable organisation' or just plain banned. At the same time, the Kremlin has been actively trying to limit Russian citizens' access to information channels that publish material critical of the Kremlin or contradict the official narrative.

This also includes media and other information outlets that are based outside Russia. In 2022 such a 'warning' from Russia's Federal Service for the Supervision of Communications, Information Technology, and Mass Media (hereafter Roskomnadzor) was received by the Russian language edition of one of the largest Latvian online media outlets, TVNET.[415] In this warning TVNET was 'advised' to remove all its malicious content about Russia. Since Russia began its illegal full-scale invasion of Ukraine in February 2022, Roskomnadzor has been not only actively limiting local media outlets but also restricting access to the foreign press by blocking its channels in Russia. However, this strategy is not new. It can be seen as a wider strategy by the Kremlin to shape the information space in Russia according to its political purposes. One must note that this strategy is not only limited to picking and choosing information outlets that are to be accessible in Russia. It also includes interfering in other countries' domestic politics, using different influence tactics. These include but are not limited to spreading disinformation, employing agents of influence, and amplifying Kremlin-serving narratives.

The main Kremlin narratives towards Latvia

It is reasonable to say that the Baltic countries, not only Latvia, have been on the forefront of Russian information influence campaigns since regaining their independence from the USSR in 1991. Consistent attempts to discredit Latvia on an international scale, manipulation of history, and attempts to achieve influence in business, the economy, the media, and politics had been ongoing for a decade before Putin took office in 2000.[416] Since his accession to power, Russia's efforts became more visible and resolute. Two persistent narratives – that Latvia is a failed state and that its policies are geared towards discrimination against and abuse of local ethnic Russians – have been amplified consistently by Russian officials and pro-Kremlin actors within Latvia. The information influence operations are on the one hand persistent, maintaining a constant 'drumbeat' on national and international levels, and on the other hand opportunistic, using moments of difficulty or turmoil to intensify activity.

The 'failed state' narrative was particularly prominent during Latvia's most recent parliamentary election in 2022, fuelled by the context

of Russia's invasion of Ukraine. The 'failed state' is described by two criteria: the government can no longer provide for and maintain control over the country and its population, and the government cannot defend the country's borders.[417] The root of the 'failed state' is often portrayed as inconsiderate and self-serving decisions by national politicians, following the Western political line to distance Latvia from Russia and thus hurting Latvia's economy by supporting sanctions.[418] The inevitable consequences on European economies due to Russia's invasion of Ukraine have been used by populists and other politicians in Latvia to undermine the government's pro-Western political course. The idea that Latvia cannot succeed without Russia has been consistently promoted by the Kremlin since 1991.

A similar assessment can be expressed regarding alleged discrimination against and abuse of local ethnic Russians. Even though this narrative has been present since 1991, it acquired new importance in the context of measures taken by the Latvian government against the background of Russia's ongoing war on Ukraine. Namely, the Latvian government's attempts to limit the spread of Kremlin-sponsored propaganda and disinformation, to increase the use of the Latvian language in the public sphere and state-sponsored education, and to tackle glorification of the oppressive Soviet regime have played into the 'Russian persecution' and also 'rebirth of Nazism' narratives which the Kremlin and its local proxies have kept alive for three decades. In the current circumstances, they also resonate with Russia's accusations of Nazism in Ukraine, providing a convenient artificial association that those supporting Ukraine's 'Nazi regime' are showing their own 'true colours' as Nazis.

The background to Russia's information influence operations in Latvia

Russia's information influence operations in Latvia are long-lasting and complex campaigns, involving a variety of actors locally and in Russia. Latvia's political and economic elites have been closely linked since independence was regained in 1991. Before Latvia's accession to NATO and the European Union (EU) in 2004, Russia had diverse opportunities to exert its influence in the economic and political spheres. With Latvia's Euro-Atlantic integration and gradual changes on the political scene – as well as in the context of international developments such as Russia's invasion of Georgia in 2008, annexation of Crimea in 2014, and current invasion of Ukraine – this influence has diminished. However, this does not mean that the Kremlin does not continue using its well-established methods to throw Latvia off its Euro-Atlantic course, fragment Latvia's society, and undermine its security.

To illustrate the Kremlin's multifaceted approach, the example of an information influence operation identified by Latvia's Constitution Protection Bureau (Satversmes aizsardzības birojs, SAB) in its 2010 report is telling. This operation, coordinated by Russia, involved local political actors, newly established and existing civil society organisations in Latvia and Russia, a coordinated media campaign, and the involvement of the Foreign Intelligence Service of the Russian Federation.[419] The operation concerned an attempt to rename an avenue in the capital, Riga, named after the first president of the independent Chechen Republic, Dzhokhar Dudayev.[420] The underlying narrative was promoting the idea that the Latvian state was offending and creating humiliating conditions for local ethnic Russian inhabitants who, following the Kremlin's line, viewed Dudayev as a terrorist. Thus, it also enforced the narrative of the Latvian state as an allegedly failed project ruled by ultranationalists who glorify other nationalists turned terrorists. These activities aligned with the approaching Latvian parliamentary election and visit to Riga by the mayor of Moscow Yuriy Luzhkov. SAB had identified Dmitriy Yermolayev, an officer at the Foreign Intelligence Service of the Russian Federation, as the curator of these activities,[421] which were amplified by Russia's

Regnum news agency and some local media outlets also. Yermolayev was using as cover the position of editor of the local edition of *Russian News* (*Российские вести*) called Riga.rosvesty.ru.[422]

A more complex example is the question of the Latvian language as the official state language. This has been on the political agenda since 1991, with lawmakers taking gradual steps to introduce education in state-sponsored institutions exclusively in the Latvian language and thus tackle the bilingual heritage of the Soviet Union, which had left part of the population living in an information space dominated by Kremlin-controlled media.

The first attempts to introduce partial teaching in the Latvian language in state-sponsored secondary schools by 2005 resulted in mass protests involving schoolchildren and symbols of the Russian Federation. Those were organised by a newly established civil society organisation, Headquarters for the Protection of Russian Schools, and its spin-offs. The organisation's founders and active supporters included several known local pro-Kremlin politicians, such as Tatjana Ždanoka, Jakovs Pliners, Miroslavs Mitrofanovs, Andrejs Mamikins, and others. Such activities continued each time the Saeima (the parliament of Latvia) proceeded with the reform, up until 2017.[423] They were not only of a local nature but included campaigns within international organisations aimed at discrediting Latvia as a country that did not protect the rights of minorities.

This can also be looked upon as part of a wider strategy implemented by the Kremlin, namely the 'compatriot policy', whereby the Russian Federation uses the deliberately ill-defined 'compatriots abroad' and protection of their rights[424] as a moral justification for its interference in the internal affairs of or even military aggression against its neighbouring states. Russian officials have continuously extended support to local pro-Russian activists and condemned Latvian officials for any attempt to limit the use of the Russian language in state education, including threatening rhetoric. For example, in 2010, when Luzhkov visited Latvia, he 'expressed confidence that the Russian language will definitely become the second state language' in the country.[425] At that time Latvian politicians probably did not realise the full significance of Luzhkov's words and what was yet to come.

In late spring 2011 the political landscape in Latvia was in turmoil. As the Saeima rejected the Corruption Prevention Bureau's request to search the properties of then MP Ainārs Šlesers (discussed later in this chapter), President Valdis Zatlers dissolved the Saeima and initiated a new parliamentary election. Possibly motivated by the political fragmentation and attention diverted to internal disagreements and power struggles, Kremlin-affiliated local actors initiated a petition to amend the constitution and introduce the Russian language as the second state language in Latvia. On 9 September the Central Election Commission received a corresponding bill initiative signed by 12,533 voters. That was sufficient to initiate the official process of the nationwide collection of citizens' signatures, which resulted in the bill being brought to the Saeima for consideration. Following rejection of the bill by the Saeima on 22 December, Latvia was on the verge of a referendum. It was held on 18 February 2012, and the bill was rejected by 74.8 per cent of the voters.

The collection of signatures was organised by a civil society organisation, Vernacular Language, led by Vladimirs Lindermans, who has been continuously on the radar of the State Security Service (Valsts Drošības Dienests, VDD) as a Kremlin agent of influence in Latvia and has faced several detentions, including in 2014, for spreading information to Latvian citizens on how to join fighter groups of the self-proclaimed Lugansk and Donetsk People's Republics,[426] and in 2015, for helping two Russian citizens illegally enter the Ādaži military base during the multinational military exercise Saber Strike 2015.[427]

Apart from testing the resilience of Latvia's voters and of the Saeima, the referendum also illuminated what role the language question played in the Kremlin's overall narrative on alleged discrimination against ethnic Russians in Latvia. For example, the mayor of Riga, Nils Ušakovs, who represented the Russia-oriented Harmony party, an official cooperation partner of Russia's ruling United Russia party, stated that 'the attitude towards the Russian minority needs to change' and that the referendum was a suitable tool to raise the issue.[428] During Ušakovs's tenure as mayor, the city council actively supported the unofficial 9 May 'Victory Day' celebrations in Riga, although for the Latvian nation it marked the beginning of the 50-year Soviet occupation (discussed later in the chapter). Since Putin's presidency Victory Day had acquired new importance not only in Russia but, importantly, also abroad, as a tool to promote Russia's interpretation of World War II history and to spread disinformation. Ušakovs has also been an active promoter of economic cooperation with Russia and critical of Western sanctions introduced in 2014.[429]

It can be argued that the lack of a strategic approach to limit and prevent Russia's influence in Latvia contributed to the rather comfortable operation of pro-Kremlin actors during the first two decades of Latvia's regained independence. Although policymakers took decisions to lessen the country's economic and political dependence on Russia, and to strengthen the national information space, the reforms were slow and faced internal resistance. In terms of information influence operations, except for the transfer to the Latvian language in education, there was a lack of strategic decisions, and ad hoc solutions to immediate threats prevailed. This problem has also been deepened by Russia's relentless usage of 'soft power', including but not limited to the 'compatriot policy' and other forms of public diplomacy.[430]

Another example which illustrates the complexity of Russia's information influence operations in Latvia, specifically to promote the narratives that Latvia 'glorifies Nazism' and 'oppresses local Russians', concerns activities of local politician Tatjana Ždanoka. She has been one of the most visible figures in Latvian politics promoting the Kremlin's agenda locally and also internationally in her capacity as a Member of the European Parliament (MEP). She was one of the few members of the Supreme Soviet of the Latvian Soviet Socialist Republic who in 1990 abstained from voting on the law that re-established Latvia's independence. Ždanoka is being investigated for cooperation with Russia's special services.[431]

Apart from her activities as a politician, Ždanoka has also used civil society organisations as part of her political campaign that centres on safeguarding the rights of the Russian minority in Latvia. For example, one such organisation established by her is the 'Latvian Committee of Human Rights'; it has been recognised to receive funding directly from the Kremlin.[432] Ždanoka has also been a guest on Russian state-sponsored TV channels accusing Latvia of the 'rebirth of fascism'.[433]

Ždanoka has actively used her international platform as an MEP to discredit Latvia, support Kremlin propaganda, and provide an international platform for pro-Kremlin activists and media. For example, in 2012 she organised a conference at the European Parliament to discuss why the Russian language should be the official state language in Latvia, and also invited Lindermans to this event.[434]

In 2014 Ždanoka attempted to use the European Parliament's resources to finance her trip to Crimea to serve as an 'independent observer' of the illegal referendum to join Russian Federation. The European Parliament refused to pay for this trip.[435] The tactic to frame Latvia as allegedly abusing human rights has helped Ždanoka to gain attention internationally. She has used her position as MEP to talk extensively about these topics, and has been particularly vocal against the increased usage of the Latvian language in state-sponsored education. Furthermore, after Russia invaded Ukraine on 24 February 2022, she as a Latvian MEP opposed the decisions of the European Parliament to declare Russia a state that sponsors terrorism and to condemn Russia's aggression against Ukraine.[436]

Even before Russia launched its full-scale invasion, Ždanoka used her position as an MEP to talk about 'children being killed in Donbas for 8 years'[437] – a popular Russian disinformation narrative. In late December 2022 she became the centre of another scandal for using the premises of the European Parliament to take part in a Belarussian state-sponsored TV debate where she promoted pro-Kremlin narratives.[438] In 2022 the head of SAB named Ždanoka as one of the most prominent of the Kremlin's influence agents in Latvia.[439]

Russia's illegal annexation of Crimea in 2014 proved to be a turning point in Latvia's threat perception and policymaking. From then onwards, Russia's information influence operations, accompanied with active disinformation campaigns, became an increasing problem not only for Latvia but also for other countries Russia was trying to keep in what it considers its 'sphere of influence'.[440] The establishment of the NATO Strategic Communications Centre of Excellence in Riga[441] in 2014 and its rapid growth demonstrates increased recognition among Allied countries that Russia's information influence operations have become advanced enough to pose a threat to national and collective security. Strengthening individual and collective understanding of different techniques used by Russia and countering those were placed at the top of the political agenda within the EU and NATO.[442]

Latvia's relationship with Russia after the annexation of Crimea

Up until 2014 the political relations between Latvia and Russia could be summarised as 'careful'. Latvian politicians to some extent had reservations concerning any decisions that might negatively affect the bilateral relationship, while some local politicians (e.g. the mayors of a few larger Latvian cities) were actively trying to safeguard the cooperation between different Latvian and Russian cities. For example, even after the 2014 annexation of Crimea the then mayor of Riga, Ušakovs, was still actively engaging with different Russian politicians by participating in numerous foreign visits in different Russian cities (the intensity of such visits decreased after the 2014 annexation of Crimea; nonetheless the political vector was still clear).[443] However, it is important to note that Latvian foreign policy was mainly aimed at strengthening integration within the EU and transatlantic partnerships.

Nonetheless, the careful approach was still very much on the political agenda, meaning that even though Latvia recognised the increased security threats after Russia's invasion of Crimea, the country's stance towards Russia was dual. There are several reasons for this. In a broader sense this also stems from the EU's collective approach that was to 'engage and try to compromise' with Russia rather than to exclude it.[444] Nowadays such a strategy has been heavily criticised, but at the time prominent figures in European politics, such as long-term German chancellor Angela Merkel, advocated for it. Engagement and mutual business relations were historically being viewed as a deterrence strategy.

The second reason for the dual approach towards Russia was more pragmatic. Since independence Latvia has been heavily dependent on Russian energy resources. Government policy has been characterised as controversial: only formally fulfilling European directives and commitments, instead of creating well-thought-out long-term conditions for a competitive environment in the energy sector.[445] To this day the whole Baltic region is still part of the Belarus, Russia, Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania (BRELL) electric grid, which means that in theory Russia can disconnect the electricity to the whole region. As has been seen in the case of Ukraine and elsewhere, Russia does not hesitate to use energy resources as a political blackmail lever. At the time of Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine there were already plans in place to withdraw the Baltic States from the BRELL power grid and integrate them within the Central European power grid, but the earliest estimate then was that the desynchronisation process could be completed in 2025.[446] According to the latest announcement by Baltic electricity transmission system administrators, decoupling from BRELL is planned on 8 February, 2025.[447]

Furthermore, the dependence on energy resources provided by Russia was also deepened by the fact that the majority of natural gas used in Latvia was imported from Russia. By providing cheap energy resources Russia was able to create a dependency for countries it considered to be of critical importance to its foreign policy goals.[448] Energy resources and related dependencies have also been used by the Kremlin as a subject of manipulation in the information space of other countries. When in 2013 Latvian lawmakers started discussing liberalisation of the natural gas market to end Russian Gazprom's monopoly by 2017, it was stated by several lawmakers and in the media that the Kremlin's influence could be felt in the Saeima, which resulted in unnecessary delays and complications of the lawmaking process.[449] The public rhetoric used by the Gazprom-controlled local gas supplier was focused on amplifying fears of significant price increases for consumers. [450] More recently, in 2022, following Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine, the Kremlin increasingly manipulated the topic of energy supplies as winter approached. The narrative about 'Europe freezing over' without Russia's gas was actively spread by Russian officials and the Kremlin's proxies. [451]

The debate on the liberalisation of Latvia's gas market was partially resolved after the illegal annexation of Crimea, which coincided with regular parliamentary elections in Latvia. In October 2014 the twelfth parliament of Latvia was elected. The parties of the ruling coalition were vocal in their rhetoric about the necessity to strengthen Latvia's security capabilities and emphasised the threats posed by Russia, including its information influence operations and disinformation campaigns. It is notable that the Harmony political party, which had consolidated the majority of the votes of local Russian speakers, did not terminate its cooperation agreement with United Russia until 2017, and in its 2014 election programme did not mention anything regarding the need to strengthen Latvia's security or further integration within the EU and NATO.[452] Harmony also opposed the 2014 international sanctions on Russia and maintained that Ukraine was at least co-responsible for the ongoing war in Donbas.[453]

From here on, Latvian governments have moved steadily towards decreasing dependency on Russia in the economy and thus also in politics, which has partially been a natural result of the limitations that the sanctions and counter-sanctions imposed on economic cooperation with Russia, one of Latvia's main trade partners in 2014. This has pushed Latvia to look for alternative energy sources and diversify its transit sector, lessening the potential of corrupt activities and the impact of politicians and businessmen with reported links to the Kremlin.[454] Crimea's example also brought the realisation that Russia's abilities to conduct information influence operations and evolve them into hybrid warfare could have far-reaching consequences for the country's national security. This was also emphasised by SAB, which pointed out that in 2014 information warfare was one of the main instruments used by Russia to reach its goals in Ukraine.[455] Since 2014 the Latvian government has taken proactive steps at national and EU levels to limit and counter Russia's information influence operations. The security of the national information space has become one of the top items on the political agenda.

Russia's disinformation campaigns in Latvia since 2014

Russia's tactics since 2014 demonstrate a sharp increase in disinformation campaigns, felt across Europe. In Latvia the aftermath of 2014 can be characterised by further distancing of the Latvian and Russian language media spaces. Researchers have pointed out that Russian speakers in Latvia fall into three large groups: European-minded and loyal to the Latvian state, 'neutral' without a sufficient level of integration but at the same time not explicitly pro-Kremlin, and those who consider themselves Russian 'compatriots' or part of the 'Russian World' and

therefore pro-Kremlin.[456] The Kremlin's propaganda and disinformation efforts have largely been aimed at converting the 'neutral' group. The Kremlin has used its local proxies in the media and politics as well as the growing possibilities offered by social media to target Latvia's inhabitants. In addition, some of the local media have been identified as having an affiliation with political or ideological actors within Latvia and Russia.[457] This opens possibilities for political influence, also exacerbated by the economic difficulties of the small media market.

One must consider that the spread of disinformation does not always come in the form of flat-out lies, but rather sometimes can be characterised as the systematic usage of a narrative that aims to discredit the political or economic system of a particular country. Russian disinformation in Latvia often takes the shape of diverse narratives which portray Latvia as a failed state with only one possible 'salvation' – severing ties with the West and strengthening relations with Russia.[458] The other major direction, as indicated earlier, continues to be narratives about Latvia's hostile policy towards its Russian-speaking minority. Disinformation has even gone as far as to state that Latvia functions as an apartheid state.[459] Alongside traditional propaganda media channels, the Kremlin and its proxies have been using social media trolls and bots to amplify the spread of their messages and counter criticism of the Kremlin and its policies.[460]

Down the years Russia's ultimate goal has been to introduce a government in Latvia that would be favourable to the Kremlin's policies and effectively run Latvia from Moscow as a satellite state. Hence it is important to consider Latvia's political landscape and voter choices in the context of Russia's information influence operations.

The 2018 election demonstrated that Russian-speaking voters were influenced in their electoral choice by such messages as 'The Latvian state has mistreated or offended me', 'The majority of government politicians are corrupt', and 'Latvia's future is under threat'.[461] Russian-speaking voters also demonstrated low trust in the public broadcaster and showed high consumption of the First Baltic channel (PBK), which rebroadcast TV content from the Kremlin-controlled Pervyy Kanal.[462]

Russian speakers in Latvia are more consolidated in their political choices than are Latvian speakers. The Harmony party managed to attract a large number of votes for five consecutive parliamentary elections since 2006 (2006: 17/100; 2010: 29; 2011: 31; 2014: 24; 2018: 24). As in 2014, in 2018 Harmony won the election but traditionally was left out of the ruling coalition due to its pro-Russian stance being unacceptable to most coalition members.

But this election demonstrated a worrying new trend: the 'failed state' narrative was picked up by populistic political forces mainly oriented towards ethnic Latvian voters or claiming to serve the interests of all ethnicities. For example, a brand-new party, KPV LV,[463] came second in the election.[464] Although the party did not use pro-Russian rhetoric, investigative journalists pointed to the support that KPV LV had received from the aforementioned politician Ainārs Šlesers, who has advocated for friendly relations and cooperation with Russia and allegedly had hoped with the support of KPV LV to bring Harmony into the ruling coalition.[465] .

Although post-election KPV LV proved to be an unsuccessful project per se, its spirit lived on in similar political ventures. For example, its candidate for parliament Aldis Gobzems – who had had suspicious financial dealings with a couple employed by the Russian Otkritiye bank[466] and Latvia-based Parex bank, a former European base of Russian offshore businesses[467] – established a new populist party in 2019. Significantly, in the same year SAB had refused to issue Gobzems with state secret clearance.[468] The new project, called Katram un katrai (For Each and Every One), engaged in propagating the 'failed state' narrative and became a major player in the anti-vax movement in Latvia during the Covid-19 pandemic.

Russian-inspired disinformation in Latvia during the Covid-19 pandemic

Covid-19 pandemic can be described not only as worldwide medical emergency, but also as a turning point in the international fight against disinformation. On 5 December 2018, a year prior to the outbreak of Covid-19, the European Commission introduced a joint action plan against disinformation. It concluded that disinformation by the Russian Federation posed the greatest threat to the EU.[469] The pandemic impacted information consumption habits of European populations, driving parts away from established media sources, and in certain groups there was a surge in the conspiracy mindset and increased distrust towards governments, resulting in lower vaccination rates. It opened a window of opportunity for the Kremlin to enforce the familiar 'Russia versus the West', 'failed state', and 'oppression or mistreatment of ethnic Russians' narratives.

The narrative about the alleged oppression of Russians in Latvia was historically linked to Latvia's policy of strengthening the position of the Latvian language. During the pandemic this narrative acquired a new twist: Latvia 'blindly' follows the West and is so consumed by the hate towards Russia and Russians that it refuses to accept help from Russia in the form of the 'Sputnik V' vaccine.[470] Another narrative was: due to discriminatory state policies, the Russian minority in Latvia is economically disadvantaged, forced to live in overcrowded 'ghetto' areas, and therefore more prone to be infected by the virus.[471] It should be noted that previously the Kremlin had used a contradictory disinformation narrative, claiming that Russians in Latvia were the most economically advantaged, since Latvians themselves were unskilled and lazy.[472]

The 'Russia versus the West' and 'failed state' narratives also acquired 'new colours'. For example, the EU was portrayed as being on the brink of dissolution as the member states were not resilient enough to deal with the consequences of the pandemic.[473] Russia's active campaign to undermine Western vaccines and promote its own Sputnik V vaccine included opportunistic tactics amplifying the benefits of Sputnik V and complications of the Pfizer and AstraZeneca vaccines. According to polls, about 20 per cent of Latvia's inhabitants noted that they would prefer to be vaccinated with Sputnik V.[474] Russia's diplomatic representation in Latvia also stated that Russian citizens residing in Latvia were welcome to cross the border into Russia and get vaccinated with Sputnik V.[475]

Latvia's National Electronic Mass Media Council (NEPLP) fined PBK for rebroadcasting a Russian TV programme containing disinformation about the virus and how it spreads.[476] This action was condemned by the Russian Foreign Ministry's spokesperson as a 'fascist' act to limit crucial information regarding the virus among Latvia's Russians.[477]

A curious case which may have played a role in the Kremlin's wider information influence operation in Latvia is that of Jānis Pļaviņš. He actively spread disinformation that Covid-19 was no different than the flu and that vaccines were not safe because they were developed too quickly.[478] He also amplified other conspiracy theories, including the 'Bill Gates microchip' conspiracy.[479] His company Memory Water had provided illegal advertising support to the KPV LV party during the pre-election campaign,[480] and later he supported Gobzems's anti-vax protests where several Kremlin-sponsored media representatives and pro-Russian activists were also involved.[481] Gobzems himself had publicly stated that he would not get the vaccine because they were not necessary for those not in high-risk groups,[482] and promoted the idea that a healthy lifestyle was sufficient to avoid infection. His key messages were not so much focused on undermining the science behind the vaccines but rather on attacking the Latvian state for resorting to mandatory vaccination for public service employees (medical personnel, schoolteachers) and other measures to limit the spread of the pandemic. In March 2022 the conspiracy website mainampasauli.news, owned and managed by Pļaviņš, was blocked by the NEPLP together with 71 other websites (mostly with Russian domains) due to the threat to the national security.[483]

This short illustration demonstrates how the Kremlin applies opportunism to exploit a crisis to increase instability, cause friction in societies, promote its political goals, and strengthen its influence by flexibly modifying preset narratives to the current situation. In some cases the Kremlin's direct influence has been proven, as in the case of a campaign run by Russia's secret services to undermine Western vaccines. In other cases one is left wondering to what extent certain actors are genuine victims of the Kremlin's disinformation, act consciously in its interests, or opportunistically promote narratives echoing Kremlin rhetoric to advance their own political or business interests. The pandemic also demonstrated that the Russian language media space could have an impact on Russian-speaking audiences in Latvia, although it must be pointed out that no proper investigation has been carried out to understand the underlying motivations of those refusing the vaccine or preferring the Sputnik V vaccine to the Western brands.

Similarities between Russian disinformation narratives and the rhetoric of newly elected political parties in the Saeima

In October 2022 the fourteenth parliamentary election was held in Latvia. During the pre-election period, one of the main concerns was voter turnout, which had been in decline since the eleventh parliamentary election. Against the background of Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine, it was also important to form a stable ruling coalition which would maintain a clear pro-Western course and avoid political gridlock.

The election turnout was better than expected – almost 60 per cent of voters took part, electing 7 out of 18 parties to the Saeima. And it brought a surprise: Harmony, the leading party among local Russian speakers, did not amass enough votes to enter the Saeima. Research shows that the reasons were more parties competing for the Russian speaker vote and poor pre-election advertising by Harmony (particularly on social media). Since Harmony lost the local municipality elections and the seat of the Riga mayor in 2020, it had gradually moderated its pro-Russian stance, possibly in an attempt to attract Latvian-speaking voters in time for the parliamentary election. However, it did not gain the Latvian votes and lost Russian votes instead. The stance on the 'Ukraine question' in particular was of a significantly higher importance to Russian-speaking voters than it was to Latvian speakers in this election.[484] Experts believe that Harmony's choice to openly condemn Russia's invasion of Ukraine contributed to its poor election performance.[485]

The 2022 election brought another surprise, which apparently cost Harmony part of its vote. A brand new pro-Russian political project, Stabilitātei! (For Stability!), established in early 2021, gained 11 seats in the Saeima. This party has been described as both pro-Russian and populist[486], but the party itself claims that its policy is centrist. The main criteria why voters claimed to have chosen this party was that it offers an alternative policy to the current political discourse.[487] Interestingly, the founders of For Stability! Aleksejs Rosļikovs and Valērijs Petrovs, were both previously expelled from Harmony for disciplinary misconduct.

The For Stability! political programme can be described as the most radical and most correlating with the Kremlin's interests. It includes statements about the possibility of leaving 'the strangling union' (meaning the EU), ensuring the availability of education in one's native language (without specifying what this entails), providing voting rights for non-citizens,[488] and multiple populist promises concerning major increases in social benefits and welfare.[489] For Stability! was also the only party that had not included any points about strengthening cooperation with NATO or the West in general, or mentioned anything about the necessity to strengthen Latvia's

security against the backdrop of Russia's ongoing aggression in Ukraine.

During the pre-election campaign, For Stability! focused primarily on the Russian-speaking minority in Latvia. Most of its communication with voters took place in the Russian language and framed various issues along the lines of Kremlin propaganda. Apart from the already mentioned issues of the state language and non-citizen rights, the party actively advocated against the Latvian government's decision to remove monuments glorifying the Soviet regime. Party leader Rosļikovs promised to 'demand responsibility from all involved'. Latvia's assistance to Ukraine was another topic. The party has not openly stated its attitude towards Russia's invasion of Ukraine. However, from its activity on social media and elsewhere it is possible to conclude that it supported neither Western sanctions nor other initiatives helping Ukraine.[490] Although For Stability! avoided discussing the war, Rosļikovs expressed discontent with the help the Latvian government was providing to Ukraine 'without regard for the needs of the citizens of Latvia'.[491] As a serving MP, Rosļikovs has insisted on decreasing Latvia's defence budget and cancelling the country's participation in international military missions to focus on social welfare problems instead – a narrative promoted by the Kremlin for years.[492]

For Stability! has been described as a modern-day election phenomenon since its success is largely attributed to active political campaigning on social media. Its political candidates engaged in direct communication with voters on TikTok and Telegram, acquiring a great number of followers.[493] Party member Glorija Grevcova was spotted and engaged for her large follower base on TikTok, including inhabitants of Russia.[494] She and other party members have provided various commentary to Russian and Belorussian state propaganda outlets under EU sanctions for which they have received warnings from the VDD.[495] Before her election to the Saeima, Grevcova spoke out critically about the aid Latvia was providing to Ukraine, emphasising that by helping Ukraine the government was neglecting Latvia's citizens' needs and asking questions such as 'How will we survive the winter?' ('*Как мы выживем зимой?*').[496] This correlates with the narrative of 'Europe freezing over' spread by Russian propaganda channels. In early 2023 Grevcova received media attention after visiting the Museum of the Occupation of Latvia and publishing a video where she stated that 'the tour guide is explaining his own fictious story' and 'that this is the real propaganda'.[497] It was debated whether her statements could be interpreted as denial of the occupation, which under Latvian law is a criminal offence. Grevcova was quick to publish another video explaining that it had not been her intent to deny the occupation, but rather she was confused about the technical aspects of the museum's work.

Another newcomer to the fourteenth Saeima was Latvija Pirmajā Vietā (Latvia First), which won nine seats in the parliament. It ran a populist campaign during which it appeared to be trying to sympathise with the Russian-speaking electorate, condemning the 'artificially created societal division' between Latvian and Russian speakers – an act of the ruling regime.[498] As with For Stability! most of the Latvia First electorate named an alternative political course as the main reason for voting for this party.[499]

The party's leader is the well-known controversial politician Ainārs Šlesers, who had previously represented four different parties, for whom the 2022 election brought a long-awaited political comeback with a new political project. Latvia First included several members of the former KPV LV and also Harmony. Šlesers previously served as an MP, held the post of minister of transport, and also served as the vice-mayor of Riga under Ušakovs's leadership. Over the years he had created the image of a politician mainly concerned with Latvia's economy.

A lasting consequence of Latvia's vulnerability to Russia's influence has been a legislative initiative championed by Šlesers in 2009 whereby non-EU citizens could receive a permanent residence permit in Latvia in exchange for the purchase of real estate and an investment of EUR 300,000.[500] That, according to the VDD, had caused a surge in the acquisition of permanent residence permits by Russian and CIS citizens, creating a potential security threat.[501] Since Latvia's policy was not unique in this regard, in 2019 the EU issued an assessment of

the threat posed by 'golden visas' and called for stricter measures.[502]

Prior to the 2022 election Šlesers was building his popularity as a severe government critic, promoting the idea that Latvia had turned into a 'failed state' where 'thousands of people leave Latvia' and 'Latvia takes last place in almost any statistics'.[503] His campaign included several obscure and populistic promises, such as 'Latvia will become the "Northern Dubai"' or in the IT sector 'Latvia will become the "European Silicon Valley"'.[504] The party's programme did not include any references to Russia's invasion of Ukraine and did not speak of the necessity to strengthen Latvia's security. However, it did once mention the EU and NATO by stating that 'Latvia being a member of the EU and NATO will ensure peace and stability in Europe'.[505] After entering Saeima, the party condemned Russia's war in Ukraine.[506] However, it should be noted that prior to the invasion Šlesers characterized the Latvian government's anti-Russian stance and actions as silly and irrational.[507]

The examples of For Stability! and Latvia First, as well as that of KPV LV, show that newly established political parties can win seats in Saeima by the skilled use of social media and rhetoric that promotes the 'failed state' narrative. It also demonstrates that part of the political landscape in Latvia is tightly connected, which allows political actors to migrate between parties and join up in the creation of seemingly new political projects to inject a 'breath of fresh air' which can attract voters disappointed in the performance of the already known political forces. Lastly, the political system over the years has proved to be vulnerable to Russia's influence: either directly (though this is often unproven) or by choice whereby populist narratives and Kremlin-sponsored disinformation align with a party's interests to attract and mobilise voters.

'Useful idiots', pseudo-experts, and agents of influence

The concept of 'useful idiots' is not new in Russia's information influence 'artillery'. It continues to be a tool for legitimising and spreading disinformation. People who wilfully and wholeheartedly believe the lies spread by the Kremlin as a result of indoctrination were important to the regime back in the Soviet period. In those days they were useful for spreading ideas about the 'great socialist way of life' and condemning the 'debauchery of capitalism'.

Modern-day Russia under Putin continues with this approach: using people who have turned into believers in the truthfulness and righteousness of the Kremlin's policies to enforce disinformation narratives helps legitimise fraudulent elections[508] or justify acts of war.[509] The Kremlin has been actively using such individuals not only to promote its viewpoint by showing the 'opinion of an ordinary person', but also to substantiate mostly false claims regarding such topics as politics and history. The VDD's annual reports have highlighted the Kremlin's strategy to target youth in particular to raise a new generation supportive of Russia's worldview. That includes the organisation of various youth activities in Latvia and Russia (with the participation of young people from Latvia) as well as the provision of scholarships and opportunities to study in Russia. Studies in social sciences in Russia are assessed by the VDD as particularly risky, since it is known that several universities work to prepare ideologically indoctrinated specialists in political science, journalism, and other socially important fields.[510] This way the Kremlin ensures the preparation and presence of a new type of 'useful idiot' or pseudo-expert favourable to its official narrative in its countries of interest.

The Kremlin is known to use activists in Latvia to promote disinformation narratives regarding history, alleged discrimination against ethnic Russians, or the glorification of Nazism in order to create a perception that these are genuine problems in the country, recognised by 'ordinary citizens' as well as 'experts' (who at times do not even have relevant credentials). A similar tactic is known to be used against other Western countries, by co-opting local journalists, civil society activists, or politicians to create an impression of national-level agreement with

the Kremlin's worldview and the disinformation it spreads. The opinion of a single 'expert' can be portrayed on Kremlin-affiliated media or in political rhetoric as if representing the opinion of the entire country or region.[511]

Since Kremlin-affiliated media has been one of the main sources to propagate disinformation, Latvian government has taken several steps to limit it. The NEPLP closed down the Russia RTR TV channel twice, the first time on 3 April 2014 for three months and the second time, on 7 April 2016, for six months. However, limiting TV broadcasting at the time was complicated due to the lack of a unified EU policy whereby Kremlin-affiliated channels registered elsewhere in the EU could freely broadcast to Latvia, despite being in violation of the latter's legislation against spreading disinformation, using hate speech, or promoting violence.

In 2019 the NEPLP managed to suspend the transmission of several Russian language programmes in Latvia that were part of one of the most influential Russian language TV channels.[512] The decision was taken since one of the beneficiaries of the said programmes was Yury Kovalchuk, who has been a subject of Western sanctions. The following year the largest Russian propaganda news outlet, RT, was also banned in Latvia.[513] Similarly this decision was also taken due to these channels being in the actual control of Dmitry Kiselyov, who is also under sanctions. Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine resulted in even direr consequences for the Kremlin propagandists when the EU collectively followed suit to block disinformation and war propaganda outlets.

Although this solution has not been entirely effective since parts of the population can still access Russian TV content via satellite, on YouTube, or elsewhere online via a VPN, it has nonetheless limited the Kremlin's possibilities to promote its worldview. In this situation 'useful idiots' and pseudo-experts based in the Kremlin's countries of interest have potentially gained importance as sources who can propagate the Kremlin's narratives to local societies. In 2020 it was discovered that there were secret divisions within the Kremlin tasked with carrying out disinformation and slander campaigns against other countries, including Latvia. Even more significantly, a list of potential candidates was uncovered that were deemed eligible for possible recruitment.[514] This shows the lengths to which the Kremlin has been willing to go in order to influence the information space in other countries, including Latvia.

Such persons who help spread the Kremlin's narratives and justify its actions, as well as undermining the national interests of their country of residence, mostly achieve their goals by giving interviews and commentaries on Russian propaganda channels (legacy TV or online television formats), by spreading their own messages via social media, and by participating in Kremlin-sponsored events which function as Russia's 'soft power' instruments (for example, the 'Leaders of Russia' forum).[515] One cannot say with certainty which of these persons genuinely believe their own statements and which knowingly take part in the Kremlin's information influence operations. Sometimes such people pose as journalists who work for propaganda channels such as Baltnews, Sputnik, and others. Some run Telegram channels targeting the country, such as Baltic Antifascists (Антифашисты Прибалтики).

Another example is the Latvian-born pseudo-expert Marats Kasems, whose name came to public attention after he was convicted in the summer of 2023. Kasems began trying to operate in Latvian politics in 2009 at the local municipality level but was not elected. He also ran unsuccessfully in the 2018 Saeima election for the For an Alternative party, giving his occupation as journalist for Rossiya Segodnya (Russia Today, the Kremlin's propaganda channel). He was accused of working against Latvia's independence, sovereignty, territorial integrity, rule of law, and national security for the period 2017 – 22 and he did not deny the accusations.[516] Kasems was convicted of his crimes, but more recently he publicly stated that he knowingly published deceitful and malicious content 'for the money',[517] and openly described the process of how Russian propaganda channels work, which by and large corresponds to existing knowledge of them. Kasems had worked with Kremlin-related channels since 2017, when he started working at Rossiya Segodnya. Afterwards he

became the leader of Sputnik Lithuania, another major Kremlin propaganda channel. In 2019 Lithuania announced Kasems as *persona non grata*. He then spent time in Russia, taking part in political TV talk shows, including after Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine. Using Latvian-born pseudo-experts on political TV shows provides the Kremlin with the opportunity to create the impression that the said person is speaking from real-life experience.[518] Kasems's detention and fine of EUR 15,500 also provoked a reaction from Russia's foreign affairs spokesperson, who condemned Latvia and pledged to work in his defence.[519]

The Kasems case is important for two reasons. First, by requesting the prosecution to indict him, the VDD set a precedent whereby the Kremlin's other agents of influence working in a similar way to undermine Latvia's national security might be also convicted. Second, it caused a public debate about whether formal charges for such crimes should be harsher than the aforementioned financial penalty, and changes in the law have also been suggested.[520]

Another pseudo-expert case concerns Alīna Gerliņa, also a Latvian citizen. Even though she has worked as a journalist in Russia, she has been more active in the field of academia, and therefore is more suitable for posing as an 'expert'. For example she acted as one of the 'independent observers' of the illegal referendums carried out by Russia on the occupied Ukrainian territories in the autumn of 2022.[521] The Latvian government distanced itself by stating that Gerliņa did not have any official capacity to represent Latvia at these illegal events, even though the Kremlin's propaganda specifically pointed out that she was from Latvia. In addition, in an interview Gerliņa claimed that she was afraid of returning to Latvia in case she was imprisoned.[522]

Gerliņa graduated from the Moscow State Institute of International Relations, where political indoctrination is a constant theme of the subjects studied.[523] She has been very vocal about such things as 'Russophobia', 'ethnic hate towards Russians', and other recurring themes in Russia's propaganda aimed at discrediting Latvia. She has also taken part in Russian propaganda events such as 'Leaders of Russia' and worked at Baltnews, one of the Kremlin's propaganda channels operating across the Baltic States.

Since Russia's invasion of Ukraine in February 2022, the public debate about people working in the interests of the Kremlin has become more prominent. Their activities have particularly grown on different social media platforms, spreading hateful rhetoric and disinformation about Latvia. If some appear to be 'useful idiots', then others work as part of the Kremlin's information influence operations and pose an actual threat to Latvia's national security.

In 2023 the case of the Baltic Antifascists Telegram channel received widespread attention when the VDD initiated criminal prosecution of six Latvian nationals taking part in the administration and activities of this group. In the course of the investigation, the VDD established criminal activities such as the illegal collection of undisclosed information about developments in Latvia with the intention of passing it on to Russian special services, the glorification and justification of Russia's war in Ukraine, and the collection of financial and other resources to support the Russian army's aggression in Ukraine.[524] Among the six names were those of Tatjana Andrijeca and Viktorija Matule. Andrijeca presents herself as a social activist, while Matule claims that she is being 'politically oppressed' in Latvia due to her views. Both have been highly visible on social media in Latvia, especially after Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine. They have been working in a similar manner, using TikTok and Telegram as the main channels to reach audiences.

The Baltic Antifascists Telegram channel has been on the radar of disinformation researchers and state security services since it began spreading disinformation and hate speech about the three Baltic countries, NATO, and the EU. Their messages mostly include such ever-present propaganda narratives as 'Latvia is a failed state', 'Nazism is on the rise in Latvia', and 'ethnic Russians are being oppressed in Latvia'. The fact that the content producers of this channel are Latvian nationals plays well into the Kremlin's tactic to 'speak from the horse's

mouth' to affirm its accusatory political rhetoric. Matule, for example, stated publicly that she was an administrator of Baltic Antifascists.[525] The channel is also known to the VDD for spreading fabricated information about employees of Latvian government structures, including the NATO Strategic Communications COE, by listing names and falsely accusing them of anti-Russian activities. For example, a case in September 2023 falsely alleged that certain persons had signed a non-existing online petition to deport Russians from Latvia. Given that Latvia is a small society, publishing lists of people's names can also threaten personal security and serve as a tool for intimidation.

The removal of Soviet-era monuments in Latvia

For the Kremlin, and for Vladimir Putin personally, history is a policy tool – a social and political organising force to shape group identities and determine world views.[526] This history is selective and manipulative, allowing the Kremlin to choose the ideas and symbols that are best suited for the political survival of the regime.[527] Manipulation of World War II history has been of particular importance not only for internal politics but also for how the Kremlin approaches international affairs and seeks to strengthen its influence. Concerning Latvia, most prominent have been the whitewashing of crimes committed by the Soviet totalitarian regime and the denial of the role of the Molotov-Ribbentrop pact and subsequent Soviet occupation. Soviet history diverging from the Kremlin's version of the 'liberation' of Latvia results in accusations of 'rewriting history', 'befouling the memory of the fallen soldiers', 'glorification of Nazism' and 'Russophobia', and also threatening rhetoric concerning 'provocations against Russia' to which there will be a response.

Once it had regained its independence from the USSR, Latvia committed to maintain the Soviet memorials on its territory as a result of bilateral agreements with Russia concerning the Russian army's withdrawal from Latvian territory and the demolition of certain military installations.[528] One of the Soviet memorials in particular, a 79-metre-tall obelisk built between 1982 and 1985 in central Riga, became the subject of debate following the restoration of independence.[529] There had been continuous calls to demolish the monument as it glorified the oppressive Soviet regime. Its name, 'The Monument to the Liberators of Soviet Latvia and Riga from the German Fascist Invaders', also represented an unacceptable narrative for many – in Latvia's case, it was not a 'liberation' but an occupation with devastating 50-year-long consequences for the nation.

Following Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine, the debate regarding removal of the monument gained new strength. Latvia unilaterally abrogated the bilateral agreement with Russia, using the latter's violations of international law as justification. On 16 June 2022 the Saeima passed the bill 'On the Prohibition of Exhibiting Items Glorifying the Soviet and Nazi Regimes and Their Dismantling in the Territory of the Republic of Latvia'. As a result, the nearly 30-year-old debate was resolved with the removal of the said monument on 25 August. Other remaining Soviet monuments across Latvia faced a similar fate.

The case of the monument to the 'liberators' is particularly interesting as it had been used as a tool for identity building by the Kremlin's proxies in Latvia. Since Putin's accession to power, the monument became central to Victory Day celebrations on 9 May. In 2010 Ušakovs of the Harmony party became the first mayor of Riga since the restoration of independence to take part in Victory Day celebrations at the monument. The procession to the monument in 2010 and 2011 was organised under the slogan 'For victory! Equal rights to Latvia's inhabitants, Russians and Latvians! To free and prosperous Latvia!' and included also slogans such as 'Citizenship for everyone!' and 'Official status for the Russian language!'[530] Around the same period, the St George's ribbon – an important symbol reintroduced by Putin's regime[531] – became a distinguishing sign used by 9 May celebration participants. The main organiser of these events was the civil society organisation

9.maijs.lv, which received the largest share of its financing from donations by the Russian embassy in Latvia.[532] It was founded in 2008 and its board included members of the Harmony political party: Vadims Braņņiks, Svetlana Savicka, Danuta Dembovska, and Ušakovs himself (chair of the board until 2012). Braņņiks previously worked for the Pervyy Baltiskiy Kanal TV channel and later became vice-mayor of Riga under Ušakovs.[533]

Over the years, these large-scale organised celebrations at the monument gained increasing sentimental value for the local Russian speakers and became a source of ideological consolidation, particularly as they were entangled with narratives supporting the idea of 'discrimination against Russian speakers' in Latvia, fuelling Soviet nostalgia, and promoting identification with the 'greatness of the Russian nation'. Importantly, they maintained the radically different, pro-Kremlin interpretation of World War II history in Latvia.

After the Saeima had taken the decision to dismantle Soviet monuments (there are no monuments to the Nazi regime in Latvia, although those were mentioned in the bill in principle), the Russian propaganda machine resorted to the well-known narrative about 'Nazi ideology being reborn in Latvia'.[534] The most vocal opposition to dismantling the monuments came from two cities in the Latgale region of eastern Latvia, which also has the highest concentration of Russian speakers. The discourse against the Saeima's bill in the city of Daugavpils was framed by the mayor, Andrejs Elksniņš, who had been in politics since 2011 with the Harmony party, until he left it in January 2023. Journalists have also pointed to links between Elksniņš and a local online media outlet, Gorod.lv, which has in the past republished articles from such Russian propaganda channels as RuBaltic.ru.[535] In the city of Rēzekne the mayor, Aleksandrs Bartaševičš, who also came to power through Harmony and, like Elksniņš, has not condemned Russia's invasion of Ukraine.[536] In the city of Jelgava, Andrejs Pagors, a local municipal politician representing the Latvian Russian Union political party, also condemned the removal of Soviet army monuments in Latvia.[537] He had also served as assistant to Ždanoka in her capacity as MEP. Several times Pagors posted on Facebook to commemorate the 'liberation of Riga from the Nazis' on 13 October 1944,[538] failing to mention that the 'liberation' turned into occupation. He has also promoted the narrative that Nazism is being glorified in Latvia[539] and, following Russia's invasion of Ukraine, posted congratulations on Facebook to Russia's paratroopers on 2 August 2022 (officially Airborne Paratroopers Day in Russia).[540]

The removal of monuments glorifying the Soviet army and by extension its heir – the current Russian army – has been a convenient opportunity to give a new impetus to the Kremlin's disinformation about the 'rebirth and glorification of Nazism' in Latvia.[541] If some of the above discussed actors are known for supporting and amplifying the Kremlin's narratives in general, then others such as Ždanoka and the Latvian Russian Union are known to particularly highlight this narrative as compromising Latvia's international image and, importantly, as appealing to the identity and diverging understanding of history of Russian speakers who settled in Latvia during the Soviet occupation. Considering that the main propaganda line used by the Kremlin to justify its invasion of Ukraine has been the allegation that 'Ukraine is a Nazi state' which requires 'denazification', this adds a new nuance and context to disinformation about 'Nazism' being promoted in Latvia.[542] One of the active promoters of such a storyline is Aleksejs Šaripovs, a representative of the civil society organisation the Anti-fascism Committee of Latvia and also the Latvian Russian Union. He has frequently talked about the idea of Nazism in Latvia, and his views have been published in such Russian disinformation channels as RuBaltic[543] and Sputnik.[544]

Overall, despite opposing rhetoric and initiatives by some politicians, the removal of the monuments glorifying the Soviet army proceeded without major incidents or notable public protests. Possibly, a variety of factors contributed to that within the Russian-speaking community: in part this could be attributed to a certain apathy and lack of interest in politics, and in part perhaps a re-evaluation of Russia's image following the invasion of Ukraine; possibly also the decisive actions taken by the government and

preventive steps taken by law enforcement discouraged substantial opposition.[545] This case, however, demonstrates the long-lasting and yet again complex nature of Russia's information influence operations involving a variety of actors at the political, media, and non-governmental levels.

Conclusion

If one considers the 2014 annexation of Crimea as a turning point in Latvian policymaking, since then the government has taken several significant steps to decrease the potential of Russia's influence. Diversifying the energy and transit sectors to diminish dependence on Russia in the economy has had a significant effect. Banning Russia's propaganda channels transmitted as TV broadcasts and online platforms has limited the Kremlin's information flow. However, without a unified information space through effective societal integration and Latvian-language policies, the ban on Russia's channels without replacing them with suitable alternative content for Russian speakers is thought not to bring about the desired results, particularly as some of the audience have migrated to social media looking for their customary content.[546]

A step in the right direction to address the failed social integration policy in Latvia and the consequences of the Covid-19 pandemic on societal resilience is the government's Plan for the Development of a Cohesive and Civically Active Society, 2022 – 2023, which addresses such important issues as national identity and a sense of belonging to Latvia, strengthening the use of the Latvian language, the formation of a unified historical consciousness, and the development of a democratic culture and civic cooperation.[547] However, it is too early to evaluate the impact of such a plan and the effectiveness of its implementation.

The stricter measures implemented by the Latvian government following Russia's invasion of Ukraine to limit the propagation of the Kremlin's narratives and spread of disinformation may also have a positive effect. In particular, the legal cases convicting actors who have been aiding the Kremlin in achieving its aims and undermining Latvia's national security set a precedent and a warning to other actors who may be willing to take part in similar schemes.

However, the context and cases described in this chapter also serve as a reminder that the Kremlin will use any opportunity to destabilise the country, target and mobilise local Russians, and discredit Latvia's image internationally. The Latvian government therefore will have to continue working not only on strengthening the country's information space and societal resilience but also on gaining the trust of those societal groups that may feel marginalised. The populist political actors who either knowingly or opportunistically play to the Kremlin's agenda are gaining traction in these turbulent times not only in Latvia but also elsewhere in Europe.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Lithuania

Balys Liubinavičius

Introduction

Lithuania's first encounter with Russian information influence operations was some time ago and precedes the initial mentions of this phenomenon in Russia's information security doctrines from the early years of independence. Russia's understanding of information as a means through which it can be imposed on its adversaries as part of an 'information confrontation' strategy and its efforts to disrupt and subordinate public perception to gain a geopolitical advantage are recognised as significant factors that have substantial implications for the national security of Lithuania. Also, information operations conducted by the Russian state are seen as constant 'information pressure' exerted on the country's population that show no signs of decline in the Kremlin's willingness to maintain its presence and strategic leverage in the Lithuanian information space. This still appears to be the case despite the limitations introduced as part of the EU's collective suspension of the major Russian state-funded propaganda outlets in 2022 in response to Russia's unprovoked aggression against Ukraine – a set of measures that significantly reduced the public's exposure to Moscow's information influence efforts, yet at the same time hasn't discouraged its intentions from continuing systemic information manipulation as a strategic approach in its relations towards other entities.

Therefore, in the hope that research on individual country experiences can contribute to gaining insights on the differences and/or adaptability of the phenomenon on a broader scale, this paper will focus on Lithuania's encounter with the information influence activities carried out by the Russian state and will assess the lessons learned from it. The analysis will be divided into three parts: the first part will provide an overview of the strategic and operational contexts in which Russia's information influence is executed in Lithuania; the second part will investigate local examples of Russia's footprint in the Lithuanian information space; and the third part will assess the successes and shortcomings of the Russian information influence operations carried out against the Lithuanian state.

Russia's information influence in Lithuania

Strategic background

Russia's influence objectives in the Lithuanian information space rely on several concepts that are often encountered in the Russian strategic documents that set the tone for Moscow's active role in the systemic information manipulation and/or interference against its perceived adversaries. In essence, this has much to do with an overarching perception of the necessity to control information resources as 'weapons' which are seen as an extension of means through which states seek to achieve their goals in international, regional, and domestic politics.[548] Similarly, viewed from the Russian military perspective, the so-called 'information superiority' – understood as a country's ability to dominate in the information realm of an adversary – is assigned the role of a decisive factor that needs to be utilised for achieving victory on the battlefield.[549] In this regard, the information influence in Russia's perception manifests as a combination of both functional and geopolitical contexts, which

are seen as interrelated processes that supplement each other and that need to be taken into account when motivations of specific information activities are analysed.

Ideology of the 'Russian world'

Russia's geopolitical motivations in the pursuit of information influence can be observed in the use of the term 'Russian world' (Rus. *Русский мир*) which draws its conceptual inspiration from the ideological debates that sought to resolve the issues of incorporating notions of ethnic and civic identity in the multinational Russian society after the dissolution of the Soviet Union. Despite being a relatively modern concept, the 'Russian world' was quickly recognised by the Russian ruling elite as a political doctrine and a 'soft power' tool, the purpose of which was to consolidate Russian diasporas abroad and increase its attractiveness globally by presenting itself as an alternative model to Western liberal development.[550] Bearing the features of a transnational ideological concept that has no strictly delimited boundaries, the 'Russian world' maintained its flexible application in treating those who sympathise with Russian culture, and Russia as a distinct civilisation, as belonging to its sphere of influence. However, the reality of the implementation of this concept has demonstrated the rather destabilising character of the 'Russian world', instead of the declared peaceful one. Assigning itself the role of a 'unique country-civilisation' that has a special position in the world,[551] Russia increasingly transformed the concept of the 'Russian world' into a dangerous geopolitical category that has been used as an excuse to intervene in the domestic and foreign agendas of the countries that Russia deems itself to have a 'responsibility' and 'right' to act upon. Russia's weaponisation of the cultural aspects of the 'Russian world' – the spread of the Russian language, Russian Orthodox traditions (and traditional values), and a common historical memory – has also served the imperialist ambitions of the Kremlin regime to expand its sphere of geopolitical influence with the use of 'hard power' to undermine the security and independence of its neighbours. Moreover, the defining features of the 'Russian world' that position it as a 'soft power' measure through its ability to use its attractiveness to reshape others' preferences are no longer seen as the primary drivers of the concept, and are instead supplemented with an exceptional focus on building an alternative vision, manifested as hostility towards the West and incentives to distance itself from it.[552]

The concept of the 'near abroad'

Another source of the extension of Russian geopolitical motivations in the information realm can be evidenced in mentions of the concept of the 'near abroad' (Rus. *ближнее зарубежье*) – a term invented by Russian officials in the early 1990s to denote the former Soviet successor republics other than the Russian state. Manifested in Moscow's struggle to reconcile itself to its new status after the dissolution of the USSR, the idea of the 'near abroad' emerged as Russia's need to redefine its foreign policy towards the newly independent states where Russia sought to maintain its influence as a former dominant republic.[553] In addition to being regarded as a contentious political belief, the concept of the 'near abroad' is seen by Russia as its inherent privilege to treat the post-Soviet territories in terms of a 'special area of interest' where it should maintain an exclusive right to exert its influence, while at the same time preventing 'far abroad' countries – independent actors during the Soviet era – from establishing their authority there. Russia's portrayal of the successor countries as 'sovereign, but not independent' entities signifies another important aspect of the 'near abroad', namely that of Moscow's assertiveness at bearing a 'special responsibility' over these territories where it should act as a 'policeman' entitled to supervise and intervene in domestic matters of the 'near abroad' whenever it deems it necessary.[554] In this regard, the application

of the concept of the 'near abroad' in Russia's foreign policy reflects a neorealist perspective on Moscow's attempt to reassert its position as of one of the power centres in the international system, by treating the post-Soviet space as its region of dominance and territory that needs to be controlled to some extent in order to compete with the other great power rivals.[555]

In view of the above-mentioned strategic concepts that define Russia's geopolitical motivations in its foreign relations, it can be argued that, on a general level, Moscow's instrumentalisation of information means is understood as an enduring long-term strategic asset that generates capacity towards creating and/or expanding Russia's spheres of influence via direct intrusion or upholding leverage over the domestic and foreign affairs of other sovereign countries. In this regard, Lithuania's status as a 'near abroad' country in Russia's geopolitical thinking entitles Moscow's strategists to treat the Lithuanian information space in terms of a 'special area of interest', where Russia's ability to maintain its presence is seen as providing it with possibilities of adapting and subverting specific parts of Lithuanian society to act in a way that would match Russia's interest in accumulating sufficient capabilities to constrain the political, economic, and civilisational choices of the Lithuanian state.[556] Similarly, analysed from this perspective, systemic amplification and promotion of specific ideological concepts such as the 'Russian world' should be viewed as a strategy of distancing and isolating parts of the Lithuanian population that are susceptible to Russian cultural influence, the purpose of which is to gradually undermine the social cohesion of Lithuania by making it vulnerable to the external interference and manipulations carried out by the Kremlin. Also, the proliferation of the ideas of the 'Russian world' can be assessed as having sufficient capacity to deter Lithuanian society from further integration into the transatlantic community, while at the same time seeking to subvert Lithuanian territory into a neutral area that would act as a buffer zone allowing Russia to distance itself from the perceived spheres of influence controlled by the collective West.[557]

Russia's information distribution channels in Lithuania

Russia's information influence in Lithuania is evidenced in the distribution of the Kremlin's disinformation and propaganda narratives which bears the features of an ecosystem that consists of multiple pillars, each having a different role it performs in the creation and amplification of Russia's information influence. Although developed as an operational framework, the ecosystem approach[558] speaks to the very essence of the interchange of sources and tactics that are employed to distribute the Kremlin's messaging, as well as demonstrating the potential of malign information influence to reach wider audiences. Also, it allows a more coherent differentiation between the degree of visibility of the connection a particular pillar has to the Russian state-coordinated information efforts, which contributes to a better attribution of roles and functions different sources might have.

Foreign-facing Russian media in Lithuania

Russia's primary assets in the Lithuanian information space are the foreign-facing media outlets that take part in Russia's global messaging efforts and receive direct funding from Russian government controlled entities. The main function of distributing Russian disinformation and propaganda materials in Lithuania is assigned to the media outlet Sputnik (Lith. *Sputnik Lietuva*) which was launched in Lithuanian and Russian versions in December 2016 as a project of the restructured international news agency Rossiya Segodnya (Russia Today) that was created by a Russian presidential executive order in 2013.[559] Even though it was initially regarded as a sign of Russia's strengthening role in the Lithuanian

information realm, Sputnik struggled to increase its popularity and compete with prominent local news outlets as its readership remained low, especially of the Lithuanian version of the website. Sputnik's position in Lithuania was shaken in 2019, following the removal of a coordinated inauthentic network of Facebook pages and accounts that were linked to Sputnik employees who were found to be operating in the Baltic countries, among others, and engaging in the systemic dissemination of misleading materials on NATO's military presence in the region and on the domestic affairs of the Baltic states.[560] Also, in the same year, the Lithuanian version of Sputnik was found responsible for unlawfully publishing content from the Lithuanian national broadcaster, as a result of which access to its website was temporarily blocked.[561] In 2022, as part of the EU's sanctions imposed on Russian state-coordinated disinformation and propaganda efforts following Russia's unprovoked aggression against Ukraine, Lithuania blocked online access to Sputnik, which eventually suspended publication in the Lithuanian language, leaving only the Russian version operating. Despite the fact that the Russian version of Sputnik still cannot be accessed in the territory of Lithuania, its editorial activity hasn't been halted, as its website still produces and publishes Russian-language materials on a daily basis.

Another Russian disinformation and propaganda mouthpiece in the Lithuanian information space is the Russian-language online outlet Baltnews, which was launched in October 2014 and is known to have connections to the Russian government owned news agency Rossiya Segodnya.[562] Although considered to be Sputnik's 'younger brother' that initially tried to obscure its connections to Russia and present itself as independent,[563] Baltnews has been operating as a regional project in the Baltic States and is regarded by Moscow as a significant outlet that contributes to the distribution of information materials reflecting Russia's interests in the region.[564] Like other related Russian state-funded outlets, Baltnews encountered difficulties in establishing its presence among Russian-speaking audiences in Lithuania, which was evident in the low number of daily visits to the website as compared with other prominent outlets in the country. Moreover, the activity of the outlet is assessed as only partially meeting Russia's raised goals in the distribution of information influence, as the outlet has had difficulties in finding professional journalists who could increase the production of Russian propaganda materials.[565] In 2019, following the decision by the Latvian authorities to block online access to the Latvian version of the outlet,[566] Baltnews changed its top level domain name containing the '*.com*' extension to keep its operations running in the Baltic States, despite the fact that similar steps to block access to the webpage were not followed by the Lithuanian and Estonian media regulators. After Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022, attempts were made to block the Lithuanian version of Baltnews under the auspices of the incitement of war propaganda and dissemination of disinformation undermining sovereignty and territorial integrity of Ukraine.[567] However, such initiatives did not bring significant results and have not prevented Baltnews from maintaining its online presence in Lithuania, as seen from the fact that Baltnews still produces and distributes Russian-language online information materials on a daily basis.

Domestic-facing Russian media in Lithuania

Russia's domestic-facing information influence efforts that are intended to shape Russian public opinion have a secondary and indirect effect on reaching audiences which are located outside its territory. This attribute is partly explained in regard to Moscow's views on the division of state efforts in the coordination of information influence operations domestically and abroad, where the Russian language is seen as a defining feature that separates boundaries of its information realm.[568] As a result, regardless of geographic location, Russian-language consumers get the same messaging as the audiences physically located in the territory of the Russian Federation – a situation that exposes countries where the Russian language is still commonly practised daily to additional sources of malign influence. Moreover, indirect incentives of the distribution of information materials are also enhanced by the technical capabilities of different mediums that can be accessed via open broadcast signals which are transmitted in the neighbouring territories surrounding Russia.

As far as the effects of Russia's domestic-facing communications in Lithuania are concerned, the public broadcasts of Russian state-subordinated television channels are regarded as a major indirect influence asset that has the highest impact on the Lithuanian public.[569] According to the results of a survey conducted in 2022, at least 24 per cent of respondents in Lithuania watched Russian television programmes on an average of up to 1 hour per day, despite the restrictions imposed on the public broadcasts of major Russian TV channels.[570] In addition to the popularity of Russian TV public broadcasts, indirect aspects of Moscow's information influence were also visible in the share of Russian audiovisual production (e.g., movies, TV series, concerts, cultural performances) in the Lithuanian television market, where it comprised up to 200 hours per week of all programmes transmitted to the Lithuanian audience in 2017.[571] Although the situation since that time has considerably improved,[572] the public's exposure to Russian television channels in Lithuania is generally regarded as a significant 'soft power' measure that negatively affects society's perceptions concerning issues of its internal sociopolitical situation, foreign relations, and historical memory, as well as contributing to fostering Soviet nostalgia.[573]

In view of the undesired outcomes of Russian information influence, starting from 2015, the Lithuanian national media regulator (LRTK) has been regularly introducing restrictions on public broadcasts of the Russian television channels which were found to have violated the provisions of the public information law in disseminating information materials that incited war propaganda and ethnic hatred and encouraged the public to question the sovereignty, territorial integrity, and political independence of Lithuania. In total, at least six Russian-language TV channels, namely Belarus 24, NTV Mir, RTR Planeta, Rossiya 24, PBK, and TVCI, are banned from broadcasting in the territory of Lithuania; most of them had their suspension extended or implemented as a result of violations committed in the coverage of Russia's invasion of Ukraine in 2022.[574] Also, restrictive measures were taken against 184 websites which illegally enabled the distribution of television programmes,[575] including among others such online Russian streaming platforms as *smotrim.ru, 1tv.ru, and ntv.ru,* which combine the assets of the largest Russian media holdings such as VGTRK, National Media Group, and Gazprom Media Holding, and function as an alternative source to reach the content produced by Russian television channels for foreign audiences located outside Russia. Nevertheless, the consumption of Russian-language audiovisual material remains a significant factor in Lithuanian society where the demand for Russian television programmes is assessed as moderate, yet decreasing, and it provides ground for Russia's information influence operations to maintain their capacity to extend their effects to Lithuania.

Local proliferators of Russian messaging

Proliferation of Russian information influence in the Lithuanian information space can be also observed in the activity of local outlets and organisations which assume the role of the so-called 'non-systemic opposition' that operates as an informal network, while amplifying some of the Kremlin's disinformation and propaganda narratives.[576] Although regarded as fragmented and comprising a diverse spectrum of actors, both witting and unwitting sympathisers of the ideas spread by the Russian state, the status of the 'non-systemic opposition' in Lithuania is often exploited by Kremlin-funded media outlets, which see it as an opportunity to inflate the opinion of a united popular movement that protests against Lithuania's pro-Western orientation and its foreign policy.[577] Having initially had a limited impact on shaping society's perceptions, the Lithuanian 'non-systemic opposition' gradually strengthened its positions in the Lithuanian information space, mostly as an adverse result of the 'infodemic' which acted as a catalyst to increase public visibility of radical political ideas.[578] In addition, among the most valuable assets of local-oriented actors is their establishment in social networks where it is assessed that outlets and organisations belonging to the 'non-systemic opposition' have accumulated sophisticated capabilities in reaching Lithuanian users with unverified and misleading information, parts of which reflect the Kremlin's distributed disinformation and propaganda narratives.[579]

In terms of Russia's strategic approach to information operations, some parts of the 'non-systemic opposition' in Lithuania can also be characterised as 'local influence agents' who are believed to receive direct guidelines from Russian propagandists on the distribution of Kremlin-aligned messaging. An example of this type of local influence could be the activity of individuals who take part in Russian government-funded non-governmental organisations such as the Lithuanian branch of World Without Nazism (Rus. *Мир без нацизма*), which is known as a Russian-sponsored front organisation that spreads Russian historical propaganda and accuses countries questioning Moscow's version of history as 'state-supported falsification of history' and 'glorification of Nazism', especially focusing on the Baltic States and Ukraine.[580] Also, indications of 'local influence agents' can be seen in actions perpetrated by covert organisations such as the International Forum of Good Neighbourhood (Lith. *Tarptautinis geros kaimynystės forumas*) – an association that in 2023 was liquidated by a Lithuanian court ruling for committing illegal activity and acting against the state of Lithuania, while participating in restricted-access public events in Moscow and Minsk where members of the organisation denied the fundamental principles of Lithuania's statehood.[581] These examples are not exhaustive, but rather illustrative of the phenomenon.

Resilience against Russian information influence

Lithuania's historical context and strategic position bordering the Russian Federation have made it aware of different coercive and subversive influence methods used by Moscow. Having shared practical lessons learned from Russia's foreign approach to its neighbours with other Baltic states, Lithuania has developed sufficient capabilities that increased the country's resilience to targeted Russian information influence activities and minimised the consequences for the Lithuanian public. Despite sometimes being portrayed as one of the 'principle defenders' of European efforts to counter Russia's disinformation campaigns,[582] Lithuania is not immune to foreign-led information operations which seek to challenge society's resilience in a rapidly evolving and adaptive digital realm. This is reflected in the results of two interrelated surveys showing that only up to 44 per cent of Lithuanians consider their ability to recognise online disinformation is 'good'[583] and that the overall resilience of Lithuanian society towards propaganda spread by authoritarian regimes is 'slightly above average', an outcome observed for two years in a row since 2022.[584] Although troubling, such assertions demonstrate the multilayered nature of societal resilience that has the features of an interplay between different factors affecting a country's disinformation mitigation efforts.[585] In this regard, it is essential to outline elements of Lithuania's resilience that have reinforcing and/or diminishing effects in the face of Russian information influence.

Resilience-facilitating factors

A high degree of cooperation displayed between distinct sectors, organisations, and individuals involved in countering malign activities distinguishes Lithuania from other countries in terms of having a positive impact in mitigating Russia's information influence operations. Understood as a decentralised and informal network that operates on the basis of mutual trust, the functions and roles assumed by the state authorities, independent media, and initiatives arising from civil society lie at the core of Lithuania's ability to respond to foreign-led influence efforts.[586] A whole-of-society approach in Lithuania's case has been gradually facilitated since the early acknowledgements of risks posed by Russia's 'information warfare', and has contributed to an integrated, multilevel system of countermeasures, ranging from strategic communications carried out by the state authorities, nationwide civic education programmes, to fact-checking initiatives in the major Lithuanian media outlets, as well as the emergence of groups of private citizens, popularly known as 'elves',[587] who tackle the Kremlin's online disinformation in social media on a daily basis. Although sometimes still regarded as requiring higher societal engagement and coordination, the density of mitigating measures employed by Lithuania is seen as a significant factor that

facilitates and enhances society's awareness of risks posed by Russia's 'information warfare', which in turn makes it difficult for Moscow to persist with and establish its long-term adverse effects in the Lithuanian information environment.[588]

Another important aspect of Lithuania's societal resilience against foreign-led information operations lies within the country's legal framework governing information policy, which is seen as a complementary element in extending society's spectrum of measures to counter malign influence. The designation of information threats as a separate issue that had to be adapted to existing regulation on information activities has provided the Lithuanian state authorities with guidelines and legal instruments to tackle situations of subversive and malign information influence attributed to a foreign state. In this regard, the Law on the Provision of Information to the Public is the principal legislation[589] that enables the state authorities such as the National Television and Radio Commission of Lithuania (LRTK) to deny the opportunities for hostile actors to conduct malign influence activities and reach target audiences in Lithuania, as well as increasing the costs of the systemic distribution of inappropriate information, thus facilitating Lithuania's deterrence capabilities to secure free, democratic, and open debate among the Lithuanian public.[590]

Resilience-impeding factors

As far as challenges to the resilience of Lithuanian society towards foreign-led malign information operations are concerned, it should be noted that an interplay between several aspects can be observed as having a potentially diminishing effect on the Lithuanian public's ability to withstand subversive influence. First of all, the information consumption habits of Lithuanians should be mentioned as one of the most prominent vulnerabilities that negatively contributes to the country's exposure to malign influence. Despite maintaining high positions in the ranks of press freedom and media pluralism, Lithuania ranks among the EU countries with the lowest score of citizens who verify the truthfulness of information when faced with doubtful content.[591] Compared to the EU average, in 2021 Lithuania considerably lagged behind the other countries with only 11 per cent of individuals double-checking online materials, thus indicating hesitant and passive involvement in the mitigation of information pieces having potentially adverse effects. Similarly, a survey conducted in 2021 by the Lithuanian Ministry of Culture revealed that up to 80 per cent of respondents had encountered inauthentic and/or doubtful information, with 36.7 per cent of interviewees admitting to having initially believed in the truthfulness of such content and 71.5 per cent usually ignoring the inconsistencies of factual reporting of the same story across different sources.[592] In this regard, the Lithuanian public's indifference to the spread of malign information influence can be regarded as a destabilising factor, which provides hostile actors with sufficient time opportunities to inflict initial damage on the target audiences before the exposure of inappropriate content is sustained. Also, though inexplicitly, insufficient willingness to counteract online disinformation might hint at a higher degree of society's susceptibility to malign information influence displayed by the passive acceptance of such content by some members of the Lithuanian public.

Secondly, Lithuania's resilience against Russia's information influence efforts is also negatively affected by the widening polarisation of society that has been observed as a secondary effect of the public strife during the coronavirus pandemic in 2020 – 21.[593] Mostly focused on sociopolitical and socio-economic differences rather than ethnic divisions, the social polarisation of Lithuanians contributes to the exclusion of already vulnerable groups and intensifies the public's discontent with the state, thus hindering and creating a wedge in the relationship between the state and its citizens.[594] Subsequently, this polarisation has combined with society's technological advancement and the creation of 'echo chambers' – a trend that is increasing among Lithuanian users of social networks, which are considered to be among the most important media to search for news in Lithuania.[595] Greater fragmentation can be seen as a disruptive process that enables malign actors to cultivate existing societal tensions to achieve their effects within a particular segment of society (or 'social bubble').

Russia's information influence operations in Lithuania

After reviewing strategic and operational contexts that provide grounds for understanding how Russia's information influence is accomplished in Lithuania, it is essential to take a closer look at individual instances of Russian campaigns that were carried out to target Lithuanian society in particular. Taking into account the adaptive nature of the Kremlin's systemic information manipulation and utilisation of a broad range of instruments to exert subversive influence over vulnerable groups of a specific country, this section will focus on analysis of foreign-led information campaigns which were identified in the Lithuanian information space during the period 2018 – 23. In particular, three case studies of Russia's information influence operations in Lithuania will be analysed to outline the differences and/or similarities in Moscow's approaches. In addition, each information campaign will be assessed in view of the factors that contributed to or reduced the adverse effects of Russia's information influence operations in Lithuania.

Case study: Trial of the tragic events in Vilnius on 13 January 1991

Background

In March 2019, following more than two decades of investigations and legal proceedings, Vilnius District Court convicted 67 individuals of war crimes or crimes against humanity committed against unarmed Lithuanian civilians who were killed or injured during the assault by Soviet security forces on a TV tower in the Lithuanian capital, Vilnius, on 13 January 1991.[596] The Lithuanian court sentenced former Soviet military and KGB officials – who were tried in absentia, as a result of the Russian and Belarusian law enforcement authorities' refusal to cooperate and extradite their citizens – to between 4 and 14 years in prison. The proceedings against the convicted assailants were regarded as the most significant legal case in the history of Lithuania and a long-awaited recognition of justice for the families of people who became victims of Soviet aggression in 1991. In a broader perspective, the trial recognised the illegality of Soviet actions which were seen as an extension of the USSR's attempts to re-establish its 1940 occupation of Lithuania, while treating the 1991 assault as the continuation of an act of aggression by the Soviet authorities to suppress Lithuania's independence and freedom.[597] In 2022 the Supreme Court of Lithuania rejected appeals lodged by the defendants and upheld the initial verdict of the 2019 ruling that found former Soviet military and KGB officials guilty of crimes committed in 1991 – a decision that is final and binding.[598]

In response to the Lithuanian court's decision, prior to the first hearing in 2019, the Russian Investigative Committee filed a criminal case against the Lithuanian judges, investigators, and prosecutors involved in the investigation of the 13 January case. Russia's law enforcement authority filed charges on the grounds of 'illegal persecution of Russian citizens' without providing explanations on the motivations of such a proceeding. Initially described as 'unacceptable influence' and politically motivated actions that violated the independence of judiciary,[599] Russia's retaliatory measures were viewed as an attempt to exert pressure over the investigation process of the 13 January case, while threatening the Lithuanian officers with international search warrants. In 2023 a court in Moscow convicted three Lithuanian judges in absentia of ruling a 'deliberately unjust verdict', which carries a prison sentence in the Russian Federation.[600] However, as of 2024 the Russian authorities have not taken measures against the sentenced Lithuanian citizens, though the legal proceedings are still regarded as an opportunity

for Moscow to put pressure on Lithuania and consolidate the legal interpretation of the tragic events of 13 January 1991 in Russia's favour.

Systemic pressure via information means

The 2019 court ruling drew Russia's full-fledged attention that was reflected in the application of a broad range of pressurising measures, including but not limited to the use of information influence instruments. Starting with the initial announcement of the criminal proceedings opened against the Lithuanian officers, Russia's retaliatory measures were accompanied by more propaganda materials that displayed the testimonies of those convicted in the 13 January case and of former members of the Lithuanian Communist Party to support the image of a 'politically motivated' and 'illegal prosecution' carried out against the ex-Soviet military and KGB officers by the Lithuanian side.[601] In addition to discrediting the 2019 Lithuanian court's ruling, Russian outlets also targeted the historical aspects of the tragic events of 13 January 1991 by systemically distorting factual evidence of the brutality of crimes committed by the Soviet soldiers, while stating that the shootings were carried out by the Lithuanians themselves and that the tragic events were staged as a provocation to falsely incriminate the Soviet Union for committing an act of aggression. Moreover, the Russian information influence campaign sought to target the foundations of Lithuanian statehood by claiming that Lithuania's re-establishment of independence in 1990 was illegitimate as it was still part of the Soviet Union, as a result of which the actions perpetrated by the Soviet soldiers on 13 January 1991 were in line with Soviet laws to protect the constitutional order of Soviet Lithuania.

Besides employing a wide spectrum of narratives to conceal and deny the responsibility of the Soviet crimes committed against Lithuanian citizens in 1991, the trial of the 13 January events also saw the active involvement of a network of different actors, both local and foreign, in fostering and distributing Russian-affiliated malign messaging. The application of this influence measure was evident in a series of events that were organised in line with the upcoming Lithuanian court hearing to present the legal proceedings against the accused as a politically motivated persecution disguised by fabricated evidence. Among the most notable examples of this form of activity was the organisation of a presentation in February 2019 of a RuBaltic.ru research paper, 'The Baltics' Political Repressions and Political Prisoners', in the premises of the European Parliament in Brussels. At the event activists from Kremlin-affiliated organisations operating in the Baltic countries accused the Lithuanian judiciary and security services of violating the principles of human rights and sentencing individuals for disagreeing with the official version of historical events.[602] Similarly, to increase the spread of Russia's historical interpretation of the tragic events of 1991 a special project in the form of video interviews was launched,[603] in which members of the local non-systemic Lithuanian opposition, Russian politicians, members of Kremlin-associated front organisations in the Baltic States, journalists, political observers, and ordinary Russian citizens were involved in the systemic promotion of malign messages, questioning both legal and historical aspects of the 13 January case.

Finally, on the day of the hearing in March 2019, Russian journalists and diplomats residing in Lithuania were sent to attend the Vilnius District Court's session for the purposes of producing propaganda materials.[604] Although their request to attend the hearing was denied, it didn't prevent them from distributing deceitful information on the Russian state-funded television channels which portrayed the Lithuanian court ruling as the 'theatre of the absurd' and a 'show trial', thus supporting the image of a politicised and illegitimate legal proceeding. On a related note, notions of 'illegality' were also reiterated by the Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs, which, commenting on the decision by the Lithuanian court, stated that the 13 January trial was 'deceitful'[605] and 'shameful', as well as demonstrating the continuation of a 'vicious line of Lithuanian leadership aimed at falsifying history'.[606] Hence, in addition to exerting pressure on the Lithuanian officers, Russia's information influence campaign made explicit attempts at historical revisionism to suppress and silence

testimonies of the Soviet assault on unarmed Lithuanian civilians in 1991 that Moscow considered incompatible with its version of Soviet history.

Estimation of information influence effects

Russia's pressurising measures employed in response to the Lithuanian court's 2019 ruling on the 13 January case did not achieve a significant impact on the Lithuanian public or at the wider international level. Even though the initial announcement by the Russian Investigative Committee and the Moscow court ruling were seen as adverse actions that sought to intervene in the process of the investigation of the Soviet crimes committed in Lithuania in 1991, as well as hinder the trial of these events, they didn't affect the impartiality of the legal process or the consideration of the defendants' appeals in the different instances of the Lithuanian courts adhering to the principles of the 'rule of law'. Russia's attempts to question the legal interpretation of the tragic events on 13 January as other than a 'Soviet act of aggression' so far have not been successful either and have not gathered international support for its alternative version of the legal process. Inefficiency of Russia's measures is also reflected in the adoption of a resolution by the European Parliament in 2019 which condemned Russia's intrusive actions and encouraged other international organisations to abstain from satisfying Moscow's requests to issue international search warrants against Lithuanian judges.[607] In this regard, the consolidation of national and international institutional efforts to ensure the protection of the Lithuanian judiciary contributed to the creation of a broad coalition of political supporters which reduced the chances for the Russian authorities to succeed in their attempts to intimidate Lithuanian officers, while attributing Russia's actions to politically motivated revenge initiated against the country.[608]

Analysed from the information influence perspective, it can be stated that the pressurising aspects of Russia's campaign might be regarded as measures of last resort that signal the failure of Moscow's historical revisionist attempts to establish sufficient authority in terms of legitimising an 'alternative version' of the tragic events of 13 January 1991. In essence the openly intrusive and adverse information measures can be seen as Russia's inability to maintain a soft power approach in extending its influence to Lithuania, so as to create a substantial group within Lithuanian society that would support Moscow's assertions of the illegality of Lithuania's secession from the Soviet Union in 1990. Partial explanations of the causes of Russia's information influence inefficiency might point to the early recognition of the destabilising nature of the Kremlin's revisionist behaviour, which was reflected in the adoption of a functional legislative basis that enabled the Lithuanian authorities to sustain the exposure of the Kremlin's influence efforts and to penalise attempts to establish contrary interpretations of the tragic events of 13 January as the 'deliberate spread of disinformation'.[609] Another factor impeding Russia's influence measures can be also explained in the reference to the historical significance of the occasion of the Soviet assault against unarmed civilians in Vilnius in 1991, which functioned as one of the pillars of the identity of modern Lithuanian statehood that unites the nation on the basis of a shared collective suffering.[610] In this sense, society's collective memory stood as the principal defender and facilitator of collective resilience that denied the possibilities for Russian historical revisionism strategies to achieve substantial results in Lithuania.

Case study: Belarus – European Union border crisis

Background

The migrant crisis on the EU's external border with Belarus began in the summer of 2021 when coordinated groups of immigrants from the Middle East attempted to illegally cross into the territories of Lithuania and later on to Latvia and Poland. Having begun as Belarus's response to the EU sanctions introduced because of the forced landing of a Ryanair plane in Minsk to detain Belarusian opposition activists in May 2021, the immigration influx instigated by the Lukashenko regime became regarded as an artificial measure designed specifically to put geopolitical pressure on and destabilise the countries neighbouring Belarus.[611] Despite their denial of responsibility for deliberately exploiting migrants to cause trouble for the European Union, the Belarusian authorities were verified as being involved in the systematic coordination and organisation of flights from the Middle East to bring immigrants to Minsk via a simplified visa regime and the help of local travel agencies to attract potential 'tourists'. Once they arrived in Belarus, the third-country nationals were taken by Belarusian officials to the border regions of the three EU countries and were given instructions on routes to illegally cross the border on foot.[612] The involvement of Belarus's state authorities was confirmed in the testimonies of detained immigrants, who stated that the Belarusian border guards provided trespassers with tools such as wire cutters and axes to breach fences, and assisted them in tearing down barriers protecting against entry into the neighbouring territories.[613] In other cases Belarusian officers were reported to have forcefully pushed immigrants into the territories of Lithuania, Latvia, and Poland and prevented them from returning to their countries of origin.

The Minsk regime's manufactured migrant crisis brought an unprecedented wave of migrants to Lithuania, which in 2021 was around fifty times higher than in 2020, comprising more than 4000 illegal border-crossings from Belarus, the majority of which occurred in July – August 2021.[614] Amid the deteriorating situation in the Belarusian border region and lacking sufficient capacity to accommodate the migrants,[615] on 2 July Lithuania declared a state of emergency over the border crossings[616] and bolstered its border security to manage the increased flow of migrants. In addition to the security measures, plans to build a physical barrier up to 700 km long alongside the Lithuania – Belarus border were announced by the Lithuanian authorities – a project that was eventually completed in late August 2022 in anticipation of a renewed flow of migrants.[617] Moreover, in response to Belarus's instrumentalisation of migration, in August 2021 Lithuania introduced a policy of 'pushback' that was believed to have prevented immigrants from illegally entering Lithuanian territory and allowed the Lithuanian border guards to divert trespassers to the official border crossing points with Belarus.[618] Although it was initially regarded as resolved by the end of December 2021, the migration crisis on the EU's external border with Belarus was still ongoing as of 2023, with the number of irregular migrants reported as 'increasing' in countries targeted with migratory pressure by the Minsk regime in the first place.[619] Hence, the 2021 crisis served the Lukashenko regime as an opportunity to open an illegal migration route, allowing third-country nationals to seek illegal entry to the EU via Belarus.

'Managed instabilities' of information influence

In addition to tensions escalated in the physical realm, the migratory pressure Belarus put on its EU neighbours had also seen a considerable instrumentalisation of information influence which was utilised to further stir and aggravate the crisis in the border regions of the affected countries. As part of this influence campaign, the Kremlin-coordinated disinformation and propaganda ecosystem played a vital role in lending intensity and scope to targeted campaigns, which was seen as an indication of Russia's indirect involvement in the pressure playbook used by Lukashenko's regime. In this regard, Russia's information influence capacities enabled the Belarusian authorities to push favourable messaging which sought to deny Minsk's involvement in the manufacturing

of the migrant crisis and flood the information spaces of the targeted countries with unverified and false materials intended to compromise the crisis mitigation efforts employed by the Lithuanian, Latvian, and Polish governments.

Footprints of the engagement of Russian state-owned media outlets in the escalation of the migrant crisis on the EU's external border with Belarus had been observed at the same time as the reports of the increased irregular migration flows to Lithuania came out in July 2021. Despite initially maintaining a neutral posture on the roots of the crisis in June, the tone of Russian-language coverage gradually changed, omitting mentions of the direction from which the migrants crossing the EU – Belarus border came. Concealment of the sources of irregular migration flows was used as a basis to shift responsibility to Lithuania (and later on to the EU) while building the image of Belarus as victim, as if the migrants from the Middle East were first pushed from the Lithuanian side before they appeared on Belarusian territory.[620] Subsequently, capitalising on the distorted messaging, the Kremlin-affiliated sources pushed made-up stories about alleged 'concentration camps' and 'beatings' of the detained migrants by Lithuanian officers to further convince the public of the sole responsibility of Lithuania in the deteriorating situation at the border with Belarus.[621] Also, as a part of the communication campaign, statements of the official authorities of Belarus and Russia were amplified to claim that the reasons for the illegal migration were to be attributed to the European countries which were behind the 'destruction' of the statehoods of such countries as Libya, Iraq, Afghanistan, or Syria, thus causing the unprecedented flows of refugees worldwide.[622]

On a related note, the application of information influence measures was also evident in the systemic exploitation of social networks, which were used to distribute disturbing visual materials prepared and staged by the Belarusian border guards to show the supposed violent treatment of migrants by the Lithuanian and Polish officers. Besides prompting negative reactions from social media users, first-hand shocking testimonies were used as a bold measure to foster a positive and 'humane' image of the Belarusian officers, while simultaneously demonising the actions of the EU neighbours' border guards. Belarus's involvement in the systemic manipulation of information was exposed by Meta's adversarial threat report released in November 2021, which identified a network of inauthentic accounts that were coordinated by the Belarusian KGB to target English, Polish, and Kurdish speakers, and further aggravate tensions among the local audiences of the pressured countries.[623] Separately, references to social media content were also amplified by Russian outlets which used disturbing and unverified reports posted in social media groups as 'hard' evidence to discredit Lithuania's management of the migrant crisis and support the Belarusian interpretation of the events.[624]

Lastly the unfolding EU – Belarus border crisis saw regular attempts by Kremlin-related media outlets to advance well-established and misleading Russian narratives intended for EU countries, while treating the aggravated situation as a pretext and an opportunity to carry out subversive information operations. Among the most notable instances of Russia's strategic messaging were stories exploiting socio-economic factors to portray Lithuania as a failed state incapable of providing decent living conditions for both detained immigrants and Lithuanian residents.[625] Similarly, consistent efforts were observed, especially in the early stages of the crisis, to diminish the solidarity of EU countries by pushing antagonising stories showing Lithuania as the 'abandoned periphery' of Europe that is paid no serious attention by anyone in the West, which intentionally disregards its security interests.[626] Also, the incitement of hostility and negative sentiments towards the countries under pressure was evident in the employment of abusive phrasing, such as the use of the labels 'fascists' and/or 'Nazi', to discredit the political regime of Lithuania and depict the Lithuanian government as 'illegitimate', thus rendering the crisis mitigation measures as 'morally corrupt' and 'wrong'.[627] Therefore, besides fostering and escalating the destabilising communication surrounding the development of the manufactured migrant crisis, Russia's disinformation and propaganda ecosystem used time-sensitive and unstable situations to exert its information influence over foreign and domestic populations.

Estimation of information influence effects

The migration crisis instigated by Belarus at the external border of the EU has exposed Lithuania to coercive effects that sought to test the country's ability to control its borders and create external pressure over the international legal commitments undertaken by Lithuania to protect the rights of people seeking admission to the country.[628] Although regarded as necessary, Lithuania's initial measures, such as the introduction of the state of emergency, creation of a physical barricade, and the adoption of a 'pushback' policy had been largely regarded as addressing only one angle of the problem,[629] namely that of the practical control of the country's borders to reduce the influx of migrants, while at the same time neglecting the disruptive aspects of the illegal migration arising from the use of migratory pressure as a 'wedge strategy'[630] to fuel political divisions at the domestic and international level. In this regard, excessive reliance on hard security measures to mitigate the unconventional threat put Lithuania into a disadvantageous position that provided Belarus (and Russia) with opportunities to exploit the discrepancies in the protection of human rights of migrants in Lithuania for strategic and political gains. Specifically, following the immediate reaction to the gravity and hostile nature of Belarus's artificially created crisis, Lithuanian public discourse had almost simultaneously begun to see dehumanising notions of migrants which were used to justify the extraordinary measures taken by the Lithuanian authorities. As a consequence, the crisis prompted Lithuania to lower its standards in terms of respect for human rights and hindered its reputation in addressing human rights violation issues in other countries.

Other than that, Belarus's instrumentalisation of migration has also revealed the importance of integrating the different layers of communicators in the affected country's strategic communication efforts. Despite initially relying on a basis of a mutual trust, Lithuania's strategic communication capacities, employed to expose Minsk's involvement in the systemic coordination of illegal migration flows, suffered a substantial blow as a result of the Lithuanian government's decision to deny the entry of local and foreign journalists to the Belarus border region.[631] Though motivated by the necessity to ensure the safety of journalists, the media restrictions interfered with Lithuania's horizontal approach to countering hostile influence, thus rendering the state authorities the sole communicators on developments, while denying alternative communication actors the opportunity to provide impartial and verified information with regard to the artificially constructed migrant crisis. In this sense the establishment of an 'information vacuum' in the Lithuanian information realm has also contributed to the provision of additional means for deceitful Belarusian and Russian information materials to reach local audiences and further destabilise the internal situation in Lithuania.

Case study: Lithuania's aid to Ukraine

Background

Lithuania has been a steady supporter of Ukraine in terms of military, humanitarian, and financial aid provided to Kyiv both before and after Russia's full-scale invasion of the country in 2022. In relative terms, Lithuania is one of the leading providers of aid to Ukraine at an estimated 1.4 per cent of the country's GDP, reaching around EUR 1 billion as of October 2023, excluding private donations and support provided by international and/or non-governmental organisations.[632] Even though the Lithuanian government's support comprises slightly less than 0.5 per cent of the global military, humanitarian, and financial aid provided to Ukraine, it is still regarded as a significant contribution from the economy of a small country, with a population of only 2.8 million residents. In regard to the type of assistance supplied to Ukraine's defence efforts, as of 2023 the biggest share of Lithuania's aid has consisted of military support, with an estimate of over EUR 465 million provided since the Russian

aggression. Among the most notable examples of Lithuania's military support activities was the decision by the Lithuanian government to provide Stinger air defence systems at the onset of the full-scale invasion of Ukraine. Lithuania's military support package has also included lethal weapons, munitions, military equipment (such as self-propelled mortars, howitzers, NASAMS air defence systems[633]s), investments in heavy armament procurement funds, and regular training provided to Ukrainian soldiers under different programmes.[634]

Lithuania's determination to stand together with Ukraine is also evident in the active role taken by Lithuanian society, which is represented by the fact that up to 70 per cent of Lithuanians have donated or otherwise provided help to the Ukrainian people since the country's encounter with Russian aggression.[635] The importance of the societal aspect of the solidarity with the Ukrainian nation is also reflected in the number of grassroots initiatives and non-governmental support activities that have been conducted since February 2022, and that have been estimated to raise more than EUR 60 million as of 2023.[636] Notably, Lithuanian crowdfunding campaigns – such as the so-called people's Bayraktar initiative, which raised over EUR 5 million in three days to buy a Bayraktar drone for Ukraine in May 2022,[637] or the national 'Radarom!' fundraising campaign, which collected EUR 14 million to purchase air defence radars for Ukraine at the beginning of 2023[638] – are regarded as vivid instances of Lithuanian society's active engagement and contribution in backing Ukraine's battle for freedom. Furthermore, significant capacity in the provision of military and humanitarian support from Lithuania is assumed by non-governmental organisations such as the Blue/Yellow fund and 1K fund, which raised over EUR 50 million for the purchase and delivery of military aid to Ukraine by the end of 2023.[639] Hence, in this regard, both the Lithuanian government's support and society's engagement are seen as important factors shaping Lithuania's determination to maintain an active role in facilitating Ukraine's defensive capabilities and solidarity with the Ukrainian people.

Information influence as amplification of local falsehoods

Russia's information influence operations targeting the provision of foreign humanitarian and military aid to Ukraine have sought to undermine and diminish international solidarity with Ukraine. In addition to resorting to dismaying approaches to foster the development of an environment of fear and discourage international support via the issuing of warnings against responsive steps, Russia's influence efforts were also visible in individual instances of targeting specific countries that sought to take advantage of local contexts in undermining the assistance provided to Kyiv. In this regard Russia's subversive capabilities rested on the interplay between the distribution of the Kremlin's pre-established narratives via its state-controlled media assets and the systemic inclusion of local proliferators in amplifying deceitful content pieces targeting the provision of government assistance to Ukraine and grassroot initiatives that acted as a society mobilising element.

Russian information operations focused on Western governments' military assistance to Ukraine initially relied on the general targeting of Ukrainian allies with pre-established narratives that were adapted to discourage an international response to Moscow's unprovoked aggression against Ukraine. Since the start of Russia's full-scale invasion of the country, Kremlin foreign-facing media outlets have employed strong rhetoric to claim that the military aid Ukraine received from its allies contributed to a further escalation of the conflict and might lead to a direct armed confrontation between NATO countries and Russia.[640] As part of the systemic intimidation efforts intended to diminish Western solidarity with Ukraine, Russia's information influence activities were also backed by the dissemination of stories that portrayed the individual military support provided by Ukraine's allies as a 'miscalculation' and a 'waste of resources' that had no substantial impact on Kyiv's capabilities to defend itself from Russian military might.[641] Likewise the circulation of visual materials supposedly showing military equipment abandoned by Ukrainian defenders[642] and the destruction of Ukrainian defence installations, and articles claiming that

military support provided to Ukraine by its allies ended up on the black market or in the hands of criminal gangs,[643] was used to further dissuade the public from supporting Kyiv in its efforts to repel Russian aggression.

In regard to information influence measures targeting individual countries, the involvement of Russian state-controlled media outlets was noticeable in several attempts to contrast the Lithuanian government's assistance measures dedicated to helping Ukraine with the well-being of Lithuanian society, while portraying the provision of humanitarian and military aid as a 'burden' that supposedly deprived the already poor Lithuanian economy of financial benefits that could have been provided to its citizens instead.[644] Also, the provision of military and humanitarian support to Ukraine was equated to 'Russophobia' and 'anti-Russian' behaviour, to transfer the responsibility of the aggravated security situation in Ukraine and attribute the killing of the civilian population of Donbas to the countries that supplied the Ukrainian armed forces with lethal weapons.[645] Despite Russia's influence efforts being regarded as directed primarily at shaping the perceptions of domestic Russian audiences, the manipulated narratives on Lithuania's support for Ukraine maintained their capacity to divide Russian-speaking groups of Lithuanian society in their engagement with the country's solidarity with Ukraine.

In terms of volume, substantial impetus to the spread of deceitful information targeting Lithuania's support for Ukraine was provided by Russian media attempts to undermine widely recognised Lithuanian grassroots initiatives. These attempts saw the active involvement of the Lithuanian non-systemic information sources as the primary conductors in sharing compromising information materials. Although it initially started as the proliferation of rumours and a source of online 'trolling' in late spring 2022, distribution of content harmful to Ukraine-supporting initiatives accelerated in Lithuanian social media and was quickly utilised by Russian-aligned outlets to damage the reputation of the Lithuanian initiators of humanitarian and military help for Ukraine. Among the stories most often used to discredit Lithuania's solidarity with the Ukrainian people was the amplification of smear campaigns launched against Lithuanian civic initiatives that were portrayed as 'corrupt' and 'non-transparent', while at the same time portraying the organisers of the different crowdfunding projects as 'scammers' who allegedly embezzled the money collected from Lithuanian citizens.[646] Stories promoting allegations of the use of deceptive schemes that supposedly sought to manipulate and trick Lithuanian residents into donating their savings to the private bank accounts of suspicious individuals were elevated to make the public more hesitant to participate in similar crowdfunding initiatives.[647] Additionally, the involvement of some Kremlin-aligned actors was noted in the distribution of fabricated materials to increase Lithuanian society's distrust, while baselessly accusing leaders of the crowdfunding campaigns of allegedly getting rich and using the donated money to buy luxury goods such as expensive cars or private villas in Lithuanian resorts.[648]

Finally, besides republishing the compromising content, Russian-language outlets have also been observed to lend their media platforms to several Lithuanian non-systemic opposition activists to increase the visibility of and legitimise the manipulated stories on Lithuania's support for Ukraine. Application of this technique was particularly evident in the attempts to discredit the people's Bayraktar initiative in July 2022 with the use of prominent Russian media programmes which provided the grounds for unsubstantiated and distorted claims that Lithuanians allegedly got tired of supporting the Ukrainian people and that the Bayraktar initiative was in fact a 'scam'.[649] Similar attempts to internationalise Lithuanian falsehoods were seen in the editorials of foreign-facing Russian media branches in other countries which provided publicity for Lithuanian proliferators of Russian influence, while presenting them as credible and reliable critics of the 'corruption' issues that were allegedly faced by Ukraine-supporting grassroots initiatives in Lithuania.[650] Hence, public smear campaigns against initiators of crowdfunding projects, as well as the promotion of antagonising messaging intended to increase suspicion and distrust among domestic Lithuanian and foreign audiences, have been utilised by Russian foreign-facing media outlets as means of obstructing and downgrading Lithuania's humanitarian, military, and financial aid to Ukraine.

Estimation of information influence effects

Russia's pursuit of a diverse set of information influence measures to discourage the Lithuanian population from supporting Ukraine has demonstrated no significant impact on either the government's or society's determination to keep providing humanitarian, military, and financial assistance to the Ukrainian people. Despite being noted as running low on its reserves, Lithuania's assistance to Kyiv is reflected in the steady pace of the provision of different forms of help that shows no signs of exhaustion and represents the country's willingness to give support for 'as long as it takes'. In essence, Lithuania's persistent help to Ukraine indicates a broader decline in Moscow's ability to exert its influence in Lithuania as a result of society's consolidation in the face of Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine, which the majority of Lithuanian citizens condemned as an unjustified act of aggression, while at the same time recognising Russia's assertive behaviour as a threat to the country's security.[651] In turn this has also backfired on the Kremlin's information influence capacity, which saw its already limited attractiveness to the Lithuanian public diminished because of its attempts to justify the destructive and brutal reality of the unjust war launched against its neighbour.

Analysed from the perspective of information influence approaches, Russia's reliance on local falsehood amplification strategies has seen only a limited effect in mobilising the already influenced parts of Lithuanian society which engaged in consistent attempts to discredit Lithuanian grassroots and non-governmental initiatives collecting support to Ukraine. Although vocal, the activity of the members of the non-systemic opposition in Lithuania has still remained on the margins of the general Lithuanian public, and thus has failed to increase society's scepticism and hesitancy towards assisting Ukraine. Besides lacking substantial backing from Lithuanian society, the inefficiency of local proliferators of Russia's influence can also be explained in reference to the previous exposure and attribution of their activities as favouring the Kremlin's interests as ascertained by the Lithuanian state authorities and independent investigations. Combined with Lithuanian society's generally supportive attitude towards Ukraine's battle for freedom, actions perpetrated by Kremlin-affiliated local activists may have been instantly recognised as openly hostile behaviour that was seen as unacceptable in the face of Russia's aggression against Ukraine.

Evaluation of successes and failures of Russia's information influence in Lithuania

Lithuania's encounter with Russia's information influence throughout 2018 to 2023 has demonstrated the different forms that the Kremlin's instrumentalisation of information measures take to advance its strategic and operational interests in the information environments of targeted countries. Analysed individually, Russia's information operations have been characterised as having maintained a varying capacity in the degree of visibility of the state's involvement in the conduct of specific actions, which ranged from the direct engagement of Russia's state-subordinated entities – including but not limited to actions perpetrated by official governmental authorities and state-controlled media outlets – to the use of more hidden measures that relied on the amplification and facilitation of actions performed by separate agents of influence and/or Russia's affiliated proxies. The analysis of the three case studies unveiled the variation in the degree of integration of information influence operations into a broader range of asymmetric measures used by the Kremlin to subject the targeted country to adverse influence. Seen from this angle, Russia's information influence operations in Lithuania were employed as instruments of political pressure to discourage the country's

behaviour through the use of intrusive means that sought to raise the costs to the Lithuanian authorities and deter them from continuing with specific practices (as reflected in Russia's pressure on the legal proceedings of the trial relating to the events of 13 January). The application of information influence measures has also been observed as an interplay with 'hard' instruments of coercion that were employed to increase the force-multiplier effect of hostile actions that threatened the physical security of the country. In this regard the migration crisis instigated by Belarus in 2021 is among the most emblematic cases and demonstrates the considerable capacity of information influence measures to destabilise, provoke, and further aggravate an already tense security situation in the border regions with Lithuania, thus exposing the country to additional sources of adverse influence.

Measured in terms of success in achieving its strategic, political, and operational interests in Lithuania, Russia's exertion of information influence is bounded by several factors that impede its capabilities in increasing the impact on the Lithuanian public. Analysed from the perspective of its capacity to attract extensive societal support for its policies, the Kremlin's efforts to expand its influence beyond the already affected elements of Lithuanian society have not been particularly successful and have not shown signs of substantial growth in the number of people who would lean towards favouring Russia's interests. Although established and still present, Russia's diminishing influence in Lithuania can be explained by its lack of substantial attractiveness to and positive attachment within Lithuanian society, which finds its 'soft' aspects contradictory to the identity of modern Lithuanian statehood based on its disentanglement from the Russian civilisational understanding. As a distancing process Lithuania's self-consciousness has also been strongly reinforced by Russia's unprovoked aggression against Ukraine, which prompted a deep realisation of the destructive and brutal nature of the implementation of the 'Russian world' ideology envisaged by the current Russian political regime.

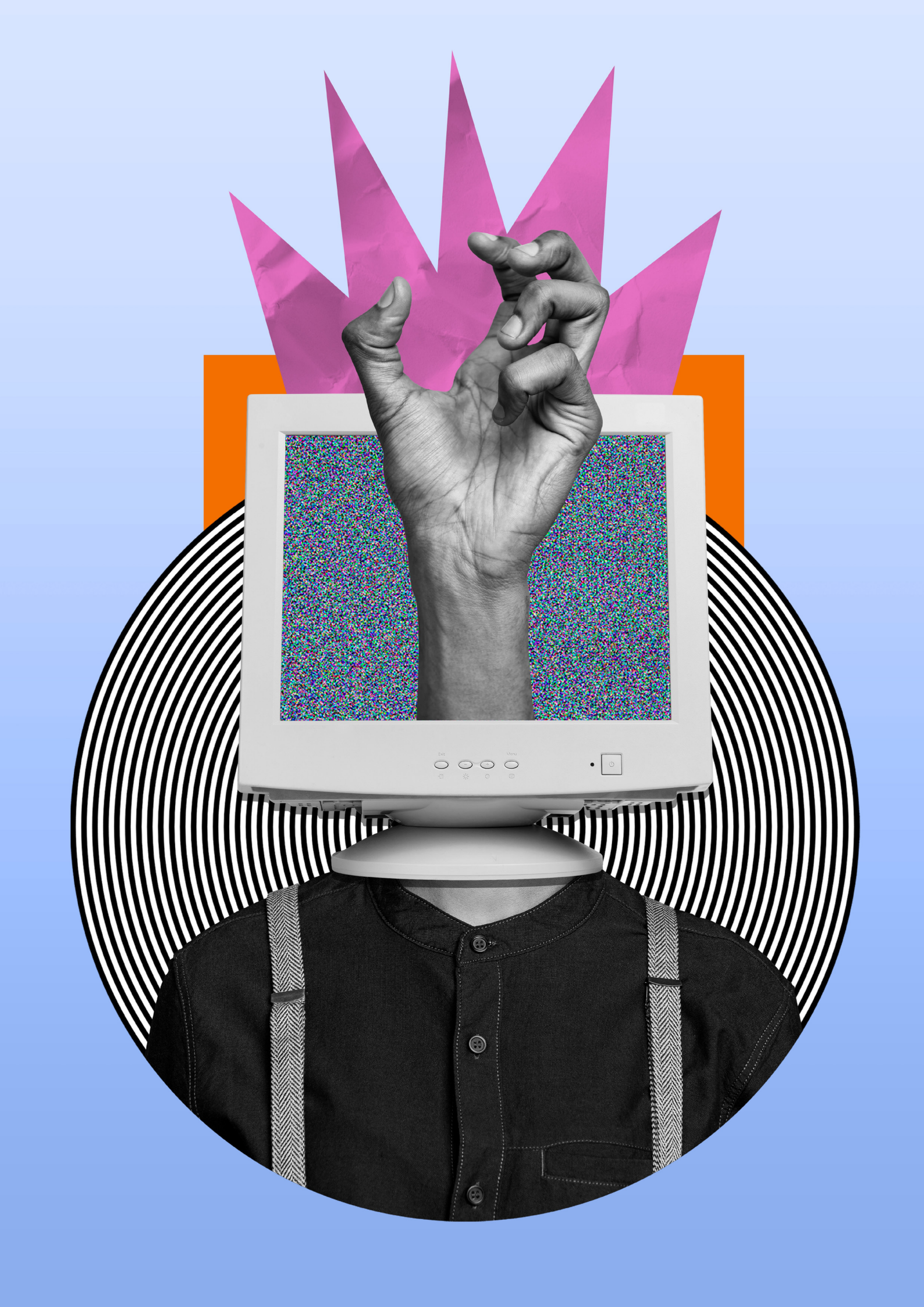
As for analysis of the volume of harm caused by Russia's information influence to the country's well-being, it should be noted that the Kremlin's disinformation and propaganda ecosystem maintains sufficient capabilities to disrupt and/or hinder certain political processes in Lithuania, despite the application of a broad spectrum of countermeasures against Moscow's malign influence in the country. As the examples of Russia's information operations in Lithuania show, adverse influence is likely to have more success when it is conducted in the 'grey zone', that is, with no explicit attribution to state-coordinated influence campaigns, which in turn weakens society's ability to recognise the malignant aspects of foreign-led information operations. In this regard, the increasing reliance on hidden forms of information influencing, such as the coordination of inauthentic networks on social media platforms or the use of local affiliated proxies and/or agents of influence, can be seen as Russia's evasive manoeuvres being implemented as a substitute for the already restricted channels of influence to sustain its leverage in the Lithuanian information realm. Also, it might be indicative of Russia's strategic willingness and allocation of substantial resources to instrumentalise information means for the extension of its political, strategic, and operational interests in Lithuania, even if the exploitation of such measures might not always result in the achievement of specific outcomes (as Russia's unsuccessful attempts to diminish Lithuania's military, humanitarian, and financial assistance to Ukraine have demonstrated). Hence, viewed from this perspective, it could be claimed that the rationale of Moscow's conduct of information influence operations in Lithuania has a rather disruptive purpose, focusing on the realisation of interests in the logic of a 'zero-sum game', whereas the approach of positively engaging the public with the use of 'soft power' concepts may no longer be seen as a viable instrument to affect the societal cohesion of the Lithuanian public.

Conclusions

This paper has sought to analyse and present in detail Russia's information influence operations carried out in the Lithuanian information space in the period 2018 – 23. It has been observed that Moscow's engagement in the conduct of information operations in Lithuania rests upon several geopolitical concepts, namely the ideology of the 'Russian world' and the doctrine of the 'near abroad'. Those concepts are utilised by the Kremlin to establish strategic leverage in the Lithuanian information realm and exploit it in terms of a 'special area of interests' to constrain political, economic, and strategic choices of the targeted country by gradually subverting parts of its society with the use of information means. As part of this strategy, it has been noted that Russia has developed substantial capabilities to distribute its information influence in Lithuania, the structure of which resembles the rationale of an ecosystem, where a distinct spectrum of influence agents is integrated to multiply the effects of state-led information campaigns. In this sense Russia's information influence capabilities in Lithuania have been observed to mostly rely on the foreign-facing outlets such as Sputnik and Baltnews, which act as the major distributors of Lithuania-oriented propaganda materials, while Russian domestic-facing sources and local Lithuanian proliferators of the Kremlin's messaging assist in extending Russia's influence in the country.

Against the background of Russia's information influence, Lithuania has responded with a significant number of countermeasures to mitigate the effects of Moscow's adverse information activities. The most notable assets include the high degree of horizontal integration and cooperation of the public and private sectors of the country, including the state authorities, independent media, non-governmental organisations, and private citizens, which function as an informal network simultaneously addressing and sustaining distinct outcomes of foreign-state-led malign influence. Also, implementation of the legislative framework for the designation of harmful information has successfully contributed to the denial of Russia's opportunities to carry out its information operations in Lithuania. As a result of the use of this measure, as of 2023 Lithuania has restricted the online access of the Kremlin's major foreign-facing outlets Sputnik and RT, and has also suspended the broadcasts of the largest Russian television channels, including websites which illegally provided distribution services of such television programmes. However, the implementation of restrictive measures in Lithuania has not entirely discouraged the Kremlin's determination in reaching out to the Lithuanian public. This has been observed in the continuation of the daily operations of the suspended Lithuania-facing Kremlin channels and their search for regulatory loopholes.

In terms of individual instances of Russia's information influence operations intended for the Lithuanian state, it was observed that the Kremlin in its operations has maintained a disruptive rather than 'soft power' approach that sought to hinder and interfere in Lithuania's internal political, legal, and societal processes, while exploiting society's vulnerabilities to certain aspects of malign influence. Analysed from this perspective, it was found that Russia's increasing reliance on hidden forms of information influencing has been among the most efficient methods to which Lithuanian society was found to be susceptible, in particular due to decreased capability to recognise hidden forms of foreign-state-led malign influence within a significant part of society. Also, as part of its subversive influence arsenal, Russian state-coordinated information operations were found to be employed as both an instrument of pressure to discourage the Lithuanian authorities and society from carrying on with certain policies, and a supplement to the 'hard' instruments of coercion to increase the output of hostile actions conducted simultaneously in the physical space. Nevertheless, Russia's systemic efforts to expand its influence beyond the already affected parts of Lithuanian society have not been particularly successful, which is seen as increasingly distanced from the concepts envisaged by the Russian civilisational understanding. As a result, Russia's 'soft power' influence in Lithuania is assessed to have been gradually diminishing. This has since been reinforced by Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022, which weakened Russia's capacity to create a positive attachment to its policies on the part of the Lithuanian public.



Norway

Gunhild Hoogensen Gjørv with Arsalan Bilal

Introduction

Norway's foreign policy has traditionally been aimed at balancing its relations with Russia between deterrence and reassurance, with cooperation with Russia on issues of mutual interest playing an important role in maintaining stability between the two countries.[652] Despite being a founding member of NATO, Norway pursued a policy focused on cooperation and trust-building since the end of the Cold War. Since 2014, however, it has become increasingly difficult for Oslo to achieve these objectives because of rising hostilities with Russia.[653] Many of these tensions stem from Russia's efforts to engage in 'information confrontation' within Norway, with the purpose to influence policy-making as well as potentially to widen political wedges between its people.[654]

Russia's interest in influencing Norway's policy decision-making has been progressively increasing for at least a decade, since the Russian annexation of Crimea in 2014. Nevertheless, until the Russian escalation of war in Ukraine in February 2022, relations between Russia and Norway remained relatively stable, and amid hostile Russian reactions to Norway's participation in the initial EU sanctions against the state, there were some significant 'high points' of cooperation between the two countries until 2022. The escalation of war in Ukraine, combined with increases in information influence activities targeting Norway, not only challenges efforts at cooperation, but necessitates increased awareness and preparedness to mitigate the attempts to escalate insecurity in Norway.

The Norwegian authorities believe Russia does not pose a conventional military threat to Norway, but Moscow's strategy involves undermining the opponent's will to fight and its capabilities. The head of Norwegian Intelligence noted early in 2024 that 'the fact that Russia sees itself in a lasting conflict with the West indicates that they will attempt to affect our will and ability to protect our interests… The targets can be affected by various measures under the level of military conflict.'[655] He highlighted that Russia could employ political influence in conjunction with information warfare and cyber operations against Norway.[656] How far has Norway been, and continued to be, affected by Russian influence operations?

Norway provides an interesting and important case illustrating the ways in which Russian information influence operations can function over time, and in particular when most identified activities appear limited and unthreatening. An analysis of information influence operations includes at least three stages: identifying information influence activities, mapping them, and identifying patterns that can be potentially mobilised into more direct and harmful phases when desired. In other words, in addition to contributions that (1) map information influence activities and (2) demonstrate the psychological effects of these activities, we wish to focus on identifying strategic patterns to effect political change.

In this chapter, we investigate Russian-instigated influence activities that target Norway, looking at their nature, scale, effectiveness, and implications. We therefore first provide an explanation of how we further nuance the concept 'information influence operations' with a focus on 'priming phase' influence activities and their impact on perceptions of security. This is followed by an overview of both the Norwegian context and various general influence activities that have been registered in Norway. Drawing upon openly available sources including media, research reports, and so on, we examine the overall national case, followed by two regional cases for our empirical analysis, focusing on Svalbard and Sør-Varanger/Kirkenes, which have been particularly subjected to Russian influence operations. We conclude with suggestions regarding the possibilities for mitigation efforts through the Norwegian policy of 'total defence'.

Information influence operations and the comprehensive security landscape – towards a proof of concept

In this section we combine information influence operations with insights from a broader concept of hybrid threats, and connect them more directly to perceptions of, and potential threats to, security. These operations obtain their meaning based on their impact on the sense of security they target nationally or locally. Using a security lens enables us to gauge the degree, nature, and impact of Russian-generated information influence operations in Norway. The information influence operations taking place in Norway occur largely in a 'priming' space, where each individual activity does not necessarily pose a direct threat and could be interpreted as a benign event. The question is how they affect sub-state levels of security and contribute to potential destabilisation by exacerbating such insecurities.

When employing a broad or comprehensive approach, security issue domains (military, economic, societal, human/individual, environmental, political, etc.) cut across both actors (those actively attempting to establish/maintain security) and referents (those that need security). A solely military- and state-based security analysis does not account for many of the other domains targeted within today's threat spectrum, where 'substantial control by an actor over the target can be achieved without necessarily engaging in military activity'.[657] Similarly, information influence operations target various actors, referents, and levels of (in)security to achieve a cumulative influence effect. To understand this effect, it is important to see how different actors and levels of security function in relation to one another, and how each may be vulnerable to influence.

Thus, a 'comprehensive' security approach can be used to increase awareness of non-military and military security issue areas across levels, actors, and referents.[658] Their alignment provides information about security gaps and possible mitigating measures and resilience measures, especially in relation to below-threshold (usually sub-state or non-military) threats. Assessing what makes information influence operations a threat to security requires analytical tools that identify the diversity and range of (in)security or vulnerabilities – which information influence operations target – across actors, referents, and levels.

In combination with assessing what fears/insecurities are targeted during the priming, destabilisation, or coercion phases (more below), analysts can assess the severity of the threat activity and determine appropriate response or resistance measures. If feelings of insecurity (fear, doubt, and distrust) at sub-state levels increase among a critical mass of the population, then national security is negatively affected. A comprehensive security analysis

increases the analyst's ability to better understand the implications of any impacts or effects of information confrontation (to use the Russian terminology)[659] or information influence operations on the stability and security of individuals, communities, society, and, in the end, the state.

Information influence operations can be driven by ideological or idiosyncratic convictions, political objectives, or commercial interests. Influence can involve persuading, nudging, signalling, manipulating, and even compelling another actor by all possible means.[660] Although these means can include violence, there is an advantage to using non-violent or non-military means as it is difficult to respond in kind. Such means include targeting the influential and open spaces – for example political debate, media sources, academic teaching and research – that dominate the civilian domain.

The nature of information confrontation, or information influence operations, thus demands an analytical concept for security that goes beyond traditionally narrow, military-centric understandings of security, and instead recognises the more complex constellation of security perspectives operating simultaneously in a given context. This is clear with regard to hybrid threat activities in general, where under-threshold attacks use non-military means to target predominantly civilian-led domains (social, legal, information/media, cultural, political, economy, diplomatic, etc.) in an attempt to exacerbate fear and doubt and to increase distrust in democratic authorities.[661] Information influence operations target existing or potential insecurities that often fall below the threshold of military aggression against state security, where traditionally military measures (use of force) are inappropriate as a response. That does not mean that information influence operations do not threaten security, but they target different levels, categories, and actors. Though individual information influence operation activities may not raise the alarm by themselves or as isolated events, they can gradually contribute to a combined effort (or hybrid threat) to increase doubt in and distrust and fear of state authorities over time, within parts of a population.

The phases of hybrid threat activities – priming, destabilisation, and coercion[662] – are useful in assessing the stage at which information influence operations are taking place. Priming is the early stage of information influence operations in which activities are used to identify existing vulnerabilities or insecurities that can be subject to influence. Information influence operations more often than not depend on existing fears, doubts, and distrust that, during the priming phase, can be further maneouvered towards ideas, values, and behaviours that favour the aggressor or actor that intends harm.[663] This phase can take place over a long period of time, slowly identifying existing insecurities at sub-state (individual, group/societal) levels that can be influenced and manipulated, as well as eventually scoped to identify opportunities where multiple insecurities can be combined to increase fear and distrust among individuals or groups/communities.

The destabilisation and coercion phases depend on the results of priming, thereafter establishing more designated goals with specific aims.[664] Activities in the next two phases may be more visible, even risky. The use of plausible deniability becomes effective in these stages, building on increases in societal doubt and distrust during the priming phase. Increased and 'energetic narrative promotions, clear disinformation and propaganda, as well as the activation of bots, algorithms and cyber-attacks'[665] are used to polarise and destabilise a state by largely targeting insecurities within the population. When doubt is already on the rise, plausible deniability by potential adversaries contributes to the expansion of distrust.

This point about exploiting *existing* insecurities or vulnerabilities is important. Although an aggressor or actor intending harm might introduce new themes to test their resonance within the target society, influence can be more effective when targeting home-grown or long-standing tensions or political cleavages that already create insecurities for some members of the target society. Simultaneously an aggressor may also identify members within the target society that are in *positions of trust* – for example political actors, media personalities (including bloggers, influencers),

and/or respected academics or experts – that express and represent the views and values that the aggressor intends to exacerbate and increase to foster greater discord. The priming phase, therefore, targets fundamental tools of democracy – freedom of expression, debate, contestation and protest against vulnerabilities in market economies (budget cuts, reduced investment in critical infrastructure, etc.) – which in turn identify existing political cleavages and/or insecurities. These can then be further encouraged by both transparent/open and hidden measures, if necessary, to exacerbate political unrest or polarisation in a society.

This raises a difficulty with some current definitions of hybrid threats and information influence operations that emphasise the problems of detection, attribution, and plausible deniability. Not all information influence operations, or hybrid threat activities in general, have undetectable or hidden and unattributable sources. Many such activities are increasingly taking place in the open, within the parameters of local and national laws, and by known actors. Information influence operation actors can make use of open, legitimate, democratic tools that openly allow influence as a part of democratic debate. Examples of such activities can include openly negotiated foreign investments by aggressor-associated companies (or states themselves). These may address economic needs within the target society or country, but can be also used to create financial dependence and self-censorship in favour of the interests of the investor, as well as promote narratives that place the investor/investor-state in a positive or powerful light.[666] Such tactics are commonly associated with Chinese state linked firms (e.g. Huawei), but are not unheard of for Russian investors.[667] This also includes identifying and, if possible or necessary, encouraging existing open debates and narratives favourable to the aggressor state.

These targeted debates or narratives can include existing local/regional grievances with authorities in the target state or society, disagreements on crucial foreign and security policy measures (for example, for or against NATO or the USA), or perceptions of political marginalisation either as individuals, minorities, or regions. Encouraging a political cleavage through the democratic norms of academic freedom, freedom of speech and association, and debate is not illegal, and it can play a significant role in strengthening an aggressor's influence.

This makes existing cleavages and insecurities central to the efficacy of information influence operations. The survival of democracy demands that all viewpoints get a hearing – but it demands that populations engage in debate, use reliable information sources and fact-checking, and acknowledge that not all arguments are equally relevant, reliable, or correct.

The Norwegian context

Mainland Norway consists of five regions: Nord Norge (North Norway), Trøndelag, Vestlandet, Østlandet, and Sørlandet. The archipelago of Svalbard is the northernmost part of the Kingdom of Norway, but it is not designated as a county, municipality, or electoral district.[668] Norway is often characterised as small by virtue of its modest population of 5.56 million,[669] but its territory is larger than Poland or the United Kingdom and it has the third largest GDP per capita in Europe (2023 figures).[670] Norway's GDP per capita is more than five times greater than Russia's.[671] Norway borders Sweden to its east, and extending along the Arctic coast towards Russia, it borders Finland to its south. In the easternmost northern corner of Norway, it neighbours Russia with a 195.7 km border. Norway has the longest coastline in Europe, and it is the second longest in the world, only behind Canada. Eighty per cent of Norway's maritime area is located within its northernmost region.[672] North Norway – the region closest to Russia – includes just over one third of the total landmass of Norway (34.9 per cent), but is home to only 8.8 per cent of the Norwegian population.[673] North Norway has had, and continues to experience, a consistent outmigration, which can negatively impact the robustness and

resilience of local communities against both material (physical/kinetic) and information influence threat activities.[674]

Norway is a member of NATO, Moscow's current principal nemesis, as well as a neighbour of Russia.[675] North Norway is an integral part of Norwegian security and foreign policy politics.[676] Prior to the Russian invasion of Ukraine on 24 February 2022, and until the accession of Finland and Sweden to NATO, Norway was 'NATO in the north'. With Finland and Sweden joining the Alliance, the geopolitical balance tips in favour of a stronger defence posture for Norway. A military attack on Norway targeting its High North as part of Russia's bastion defence strategy to secure control of the northern seaways and protect the perimeter of its military assets on the Kola Peninsula would now include an attack on not just one NATO member but three, affecting the northern regions of Norway, Finland, and Sweden.[677] Norway continues to play a crucial role in NATO defence, with its maritime access and control in the Norwegian and Barents seas, as well as crucial 'railroad reach' into northern Sweden and Finland in the event of a blockade of the Baltic Sea.[678]

Besides NATO membership, the Norwegian government considers the United States its 'most important ally'.[679] In March 2022 Russia declared Norway an 'unfriendly' country, notwithstanding Norway's assertion that the two states need 'functioning diplomatic relations … not least in demanding times'.[680] Norway and Russia have shared long-standing non-aggressive relations since the time of Tsar Nicholas II and during times of severe geopolitical tension (the Cold War). Nevertheless the current Russian government considers Norway part of what President Putin calls the 'collective West' that allegedly undermines Russian security.[681]

The Norwegian authorities have become more wary of Russia, particularly since the escalation of the war in Ukraine. In their 2024 threat assessment, the Norwegian Police Security Services (PST) stated that Russia poses the greatest intelligence threat to Norway for 2024.[682] The 2024 assessment by the Norwegian Intelligence Service – *Fokus 2024* – highlights influence operations as a part of Russian information warfare.[683] Both assessments identify a number of vulnerable targets for intelligence attention: traditional targets like weapon suppliers, the oil and gas industry, dual use industries (which have civilian and military benefit), and the Norwegian armed forces and facilities, as well as public debates on defence and security policy, Arctic and Svalbard policy, energy and environmental policy, and the role of Norway and the West in the war in Ukraine.[684] Svalbard and East Finnmark (in particular the municipality of Sør-Varanger) are particularly vulnerable to increased attention from Russia, with regard to both intelligence/information gathering and influence campaigns.

Situational awareness is, and will continue to be, crucial to Russia's information influence operations. The expulsion of 15 intelligence officers from the Russian embassy in Oslo in May 2023 reduced the Russian capacity for information and intelligence gathering.[685] Formal roles at the embassy level are not the only sources of intelligence gathering, as the PST report also indicates that 35 European (not Russian) citizens have been detained for conducting information and intelligence gathering since the escalation of the war in Ukraine in February 2022.[686] Russia has a variety of means available to collect and use information. Already deployed resources, such as sleeper agents or illegals, digital contacts, and even business and research activities (fishing trawlers, research vessels), can gather information and identify and manipulate targets for influence operations.

The PST emphasises the relevance of and goals behind information influence operations, particularly in targeting individuals, groups, or certain sections of society and in influencing such targets to change their opinions on an issue that has political and societal relevance.[687] Beyond changing an opinion or a viewpoint, information influence operations are even more effective when targeting existing opinions with the intention of exacerbating these to a polarised extreme, heightening the threat perception of individuals or groups against others in society or their own government. Other potential information influence operation activities (combined with other hybrid threat activities) can include creating or exacerbating accidents or other

high-profile issues that can affect Norway's reputation in the Nordic region, in Europe, or further afield, potentially fostering mistrust and lack of credibility for Norway.

Specific groups are targeted in social media to test the degree to which they are susceptible to pro-Russian messages. This includes the spread of combinations of theories, lies, and half-truths about provocative or emotionally charged issues that confuse the truth and weaken people's trust in the authorities and national media. Other methods include various hacking techniques, where as an example pro-Russian 'hacktivists' have carried out denial-of-service attacks against Norwegian targets.[688] The intention is to increase doubt regarding the ability of Norwegian public institutions to deliver services. The activity has so far had limited effect beyond creating attention.[689] An important question is whether such activities remain on the level of 'creating attention' and nothing more, or if, as they accumulate, they can pose a greater threat to local, regional, or national security.

In the sections that follow, we first provide an overview of the general challenges faced in Norway as a whole. We then turn to two more specific case studies in the north, given its role in Norwegian security and defence. First, we look at Svalbard, the archipelago in the High North that is part of Norwegian sovereign territory and subject to the terms of an international treaty. Second, we discuss Russian influence in the Sør-Varanger municipality in Finnmark, which borders Russia, particularly in Kirkenes, a town just a few kilometres from that border.

Norway as a target of Russian information influence operations

In a common realist view, small states, never mind sub-state actors within small states, matter little to the geopolitical exercise of power: 'small states are largely considered subject to the power and will of great powers in an international system characterized by anarchy and competition'.[690] That analytical perspective leaves little room for information influence operations targeting small states and sub-state actors. A more comprehensive approach to security demonstrates the role of small states and sub-state actors (groups and individuals), where vulnerabilities and insecurities at sub-state levels present meaningful targets for an aggressor to weaken its adversaries below the threshold. Russia's practices can be understood to reflect a desire to weaken key neighbouring actors in NATO, especially in the Arctic.

Norway is a NATO member and maintains close security ties with the US. Resulting defence agreements have included crisis reinforcement measures where equipment, infrastructure, and training and exercises take place or are established for allied forces, as well as establishing permanent NATO headquarters on Norwegian soil.[691] High military security does not mean that Norway is not vulnerable to external security threats. Increased security provided by Western actors makes Norway more secure, but it also turns the country into a prime target of Russian under-threshold operations that do not invoke NATO's Article 5, which states that an attack on one Alliance member will be deemed an attack on all and a collective response shall be put into action.[692]

Norway is a target for Russia not least because of the strategic importance of North Norway and the Norwegian Arctic region, which remains central for the entire country's security.[693] Like other global and regional powers, Russia considers the Arctic crucial because of natural resources – it is believed to have around 13 per cent of the world's undiscovered oil reserves and approximately 30 per cent of its undiscovered gas reserves.[694] Global climate change makes these potentially more accessible, but melting ice in the Arctic is also gradually bringing down what was once a solid natural barrier against any military offence. This is used as a pretext by Russia to fortify its Arctic military

presence.[695] The Norwegian Arctic is even more susceptible to Russian operations because of the Svalbard archipelago – the northernmost Norwegian territory.[696] Russia strategically challenges the archipelago's legal status as part of its information influence operations.

Though experts have warned of possible Russian aggression involving military power against Norway, especially in the Arctic (bastion defence),[697] it is not an imminent threat. However, Norway is a target of threat activities below the war threshold emanating from Russia, in the form of information influence operations and other hybrid threat activities.[698] Norwegian prime minister Jonas Gahr Støre recently declared:

> *our democracies are being tested on fake news, conspiracy theories, cyber-attacks, and you know, a very different kind of enemy. And should it come a conflict that really borders on – you know, I think that Putin's taste for a war with NATO is limited and that is so because NATO is strong – but it will not necessarily start in the military field; it will start by diluting our democracies, diluting the truth. We have to have preparedness for all of that.*[699]

A fundamental issue that we want to touch upon before digging into how Russia executes information influence operations against Norway relates to Moscow's principal purpose. We have already argued how remaining below the threshold of war is a strategic priority for Russia because of NATO's security cover that Norway enjoys. But it goes beyond that. Moscow's strategy in recent years has involved employing below-the-threshold strategies preceding, as well as in tandem with, kinetic operations when they become feasible.

We cannot rule out that Russian influence operations against Norway may lead to the launch of kinetic operations against Norwegian security in future. Russia's increasingly aggressive behaviour since the mid 2000s, in particular its annexation of Crimea in 2014, shows that, despite past cooperation, it is difficult to trust the Russian state or hope that it will offer cooperation in the future.[700] Information influence operations against Norway may play a primary role in future Russian aspirations that eventually could make Russian military action possible. Kinetic action targeting Norway in the future is being simulated by experts, as illustrated by a recent NATO Defense College publication contemplating a future scenario involving Russia invading Svalbard in 2028. The hypothetical scenario was based on Russia manipulating claims about legal ambiguities in the Svalbard Treaty,[701] which eventually evolves into a complex information influence operation to create a discourse and justify aggression towards Norway.[702]

We do not know the extent to which Russian has been able to influence public opinion in Norway. In 2018, according to a survey conducted by Norway's *Klassekampen* newspaper, around 76 per cent of people living in the Norwegian north purportedly wanted Oslo to do more to improve relations with Russia.[703] It is difficult to get a nuanced understanding of how this might have changed after the Ukraine war, but a survey conducted in 2023 suggests that somewhat favourable views of Russia do exist within the population. The latter survey revealed that while seven out of ten Norwegians think that the Ukraine war has damaged ties with Russia for generations to come, a large majority still believe that it is important for Norway to have good neighbourly relations with Moscow.[704] This is less a sign of information influence operations than a reflection of local interests and/or perceptions of insecurity. It also reflects political traditions that have counted on good relations with Russia. However, these same insecurities, opinions, and political values can be and are mapped during the priming phase, to be potentially exploited in the interest of reducing resistance to Russian hybrid activities in the near future or at a later date.

As we will argue, therefore, maintaining sophisticated information influence campaign activities that remain under the threshold, and within the priming and initial destabilisation phases, allows Russia to monitor and apply, when deemed necessary, a steady pressure upon existing vulnerabilities and insecurities that could be escalated at a later date. The primary tools Russia has been employing or could employ in information influence operation

activities against Norway include disinformation and distortion, memory politics, exploitation of local grievances and insecurities, political traditions,[705] academic research and science diplomacy, and legal manipulation. Many of the activities we report on here can be classified under priming (see section 2).

Disinformation and distortion

Russia is known to be one of the top purveyors of disinformation. Such disinformation is spread not only through official channels but also state media, as well as proxy and unattributable sources and platforms.[706]

An information influence operation can include disinformation, understood as information purposefully distorted, twisted, or flatly false for the purposes of causing harm, including politically polarising a community. There is little evidence that disinformation in and of itself has had much impact or that there have been any large-scale attempts to expose Norwegians to disinformation or information influence operations.[707] Nevertheless, it is still possible to identify patterns and issue areas that are targeted during the priming phase, seeking out insecurity or vulnerabilities among specific individuals, groups, or minorities that, as a result, appear to be attracted to alternative narratives that together express a distrust of the mainstream media and state authorities.

Faktisk.no, an independent organisation representing and composed of diverse Norwegian media houses, has published reports on disinformation in Norway, noting that some alternative websites stand out for sharing Russian propaganda, including both mis- and disinformation.[708] It looked at a number of non-mainstream news websites, including resett.no (now called inyheter.no), dokument.no, rights.no, and steigan.no. These websites were identified using tools at storyboard.news, a Norwegian-based service that tracks trends in social media.[709] The four websites were among the most viral websites operating in Norway in 2021.[710] In comparison with the other websites, it was found that steigan.no had a much higher frequency of posting links from 'proxy actors' or those website links that pose as independent but have a direct or indirect connection to Russian authorities. The website editor, Pål Steigan, responded to inquiries by faktisk.no regarding the posting of links having a connection to Russian authorities, and accused faktisk.no of being a tool of Norwegian and American military intelligence.[711] He defended his editorial right and obligation as an independent and alternative source of information that had no financial links to any political interest, and claimed that this was a shameful period in Western history, replicating a form of McCarthyism.[712]

At the same time, the steigan.no website does not claim to be politically neutral. It is owned by Mot Dag AS, which has adopted the name of an earlier Norwegian journal and communist revolutionary organisation.[713] Steigan.no (under the mandate of Mot Dag AS) engages in

> *serious critical and investigative journalism, including overarching political and economic revelations of imperialism and war, exploitation, oppression, and environmental threats – to inspire and contribute to critique, organisation, and struggle against such conditions, as well as to stimulate debate and exploration of the capitalist economic and political system and alternatives to capitalism.*[714]

The rationale provides space for dissenting views that are already distrustful of current and dominant political and economic systems.

Steigan.no is an example of an arena for Norwegians who feel they are marginalised, silenced, or not represented by mainstream ideas and values. It addresses issues such as 'green colonialism' (including climate change measures that make use of indigenous territory for windmills),[715] anti-EU and anti-NATO positions, the Russian war in Ukraine, vaccine scepticism, and the inappropriate and alleged illegal use of police forces, among other issues that raise questions about political decision-making.[716] The editor of

steigan.no argues he uses Russian-based information and information from other non-Western sources, because Western information sources are driven by Western (particularly American) intelligence services, and owned by monopolies that also drive the weapon and Big Pharma industries, among others.[717] The website reflects what can be called 'home-grown' politics, and is rooted in long-standing political views. These sites nevertheless need to be wary of potential manipulation and exploitation as these views coincide with intentional Russian propaganda.

Alternative information arenas reflect fears and insecurities expressed by a minority or by a broader audience that just feels uncertain or often unrepresented by either mainstream information sources or the governing authorities. A comprehensive security analysis makes these insecurities more visible for understanding their relevance to national security. Therefore, in a democratic society that ensures that various viewpoints get space for expression, making marginalised insecurities visible can be a measure to strengthen the society's security. It is all the more crucial, however, that the insecurities are as fact-based as far as it is possible to have full knowledge about an issue.[718] Though a critical value of democracy is that there is an arena to share and contest different values, they need to be weighed against facts, where the source of the facts is as reliable and neutral as possible. Mainstream media sources need to be as vigilant as alternative media platforms. Drawing from a variety of sources (often a very good principle) may not necessarily mean that information is rooted in fact. Political movements (such as that represented by steigan.no), which are important to democracy, are also open targets for misleading information sources that attempt to cater to dissenting views, with the intention of exacerbating senses of alienation and distance from the mainstream.

At the moment, disinformation in Norway is not a severe problem. This can be attributed to the general and overall level of trust within Norwegian society. Norway continues to have one of the highest levels of trust in the world.[719] High levels of societal trust, particularly in institutions, often correlates with populations trusting in the data or fact sources coming from institutions.[720] This high level of trust should not be taken for granted, however. There has been a general high level of trust within Norway for mainstream media sources,[721] but the numbers are not static, and among 18- to 29-year-olds, trust in the media is on the decline.[722] Trust and satisfaction with living in Norway is also on the decline, which has been attributed to economic insecurity.[723] A decline in trust in institutions including the mainstream media can increase the opportunities for disinformation to filter into the Norwegian political environment, and exacerbate differences, ideally to polarise and destabilise society and lead to reduced national security.

Exploitation of academic freedom

In the priming stage, it is not always necessary for information sources to be hidden or unattributable. Priming can include the open use of (in most cases) Russian media to present alternative explanations and facts, often catering to existing distrust in mainstream information and made use of by known or legitimate actors in *positions of trust* in the media, politics, and academia.

Attention has been directed towards the ways in which academic cooperation can be abused either as part of information influence campaigns or for retrieving information/intelligence. In 2020 the PST provided a public warning about the ways in which academic cooperation could be subject to manipulation or lead to the inadvertent sharing of sensitive (particularly technological) information.[724] Potential vulnerabilities may derive from international/foreign researchers and/or organisations that Norwegian academia cooperates with, as well as from Norwegian nationals themselves.

The Norwegian academic environment relies upon open, international cooperation, but this can simultaneously weaken the same environment if knowledge and research are

extracted illegally, and in some cases legally (through open sources), and used with the intention to harm and weaken Norwegian security interests. The PST highlighted various situations in which academia is vulnerable, in particular by hiring nationals from countries that have exhibited and engaged in hostile intentions and activities either regionally or globally. Some foreign researchers can be used (either willingly or under duress) in espionage and the illegal transfer of information. Numerous Iranian scholars have been investigated regarding their potential to share information/intelligence with the Iranian government.

The PST also highlighted the recruitment of Norwegian researchers. Such recruitment takes place through bribery, blackmail, or both, to assist in gathering inside information or conduct information influence operations.[725] However, information influence operations could include the promotion of security narratives by (in this case) Russian political interests, which can be useful both within the recruiting countries, showing that 'Western scholars' agree to or support the justification of Russian national activities, or to influence Norwegian audiences of the same.

Norwegian freedom of expression and academic freedom have been challenged when researchers using these freedoms – as they are within their rights to do – can also be exploited and manipulated by propaganda efforts and/or demonstrate compliance with authoritarian state narratives.[726] Both ethical and security concerns merge when working with scholars in restrictive authoritarian countries. Such cooperation can and often does impact the ability to research independently, as scholarly critique is frequently censored, which restricts how scholars can conduct and communicate their work. This applies to both Norwegian and Russian colleagues with whom they cooperate, but further can place the safety of colleagues in Russia in jeopardy if they are deemed to be cooperating with 'foreign agents'.[727]

Tensions between academic freedom and willing participation in aggressor state narratives complicate the academic landscape. As with bloggers or media influencers, the freedom to express a variety of views is paramount in a democracy. At the same time, not all views are equal, and should be subject to fact-checking and debate. The relevance and influence of people in positions of trust, such as university professors, is not neutral. Claims made by academics are often cited as legitimate and scholarly sources; they give credibility to certain assertions. Thus concerns were raised in 2023 when a Norwegian professor, funded by Russian sources, actively participated in conference activities in Russia, including being interviewed on Russian media, seeming to contribute to Russian propaganda.[728] Less than a year later, in April 2024, the same professor claimed on the social media platform X that 'NATO will likely begin deep strikes within Russia & also destroy the Crimean bridge. – NATO will claim these are Ukrainian attacks, but NATO will provide the weapons, select targets & even pull the trigger. – This places great pressure on Russia to restore deterrence by any means!'[729]

It has been clear for some time that Norwegian universities and academics are monitored, through hacking, keeping track of open publications or conference contributions, and espionage.[730] In June 2024 a retired intelligence commander in the Norwegian Intelligence Service commented on the decision of two university professors to attend a festival and conference in north-west Russia. The retired officer declared this decision was a 'scoop' for the Russians, claiming that two Western professors attending such a conference would be likely used as propaganda in the Russian media, stating further: 'Russia is closed from the West in all areas, and when suddenly two professors arrive connected to a university in Norway … and hold a presentation here, it is clear that the Russians will use this as a signal that indicates "see, not everyone is against us, or critical of what we are doing".'[731]

Norwegian universities have ceased cooperative relations with their Russian counterparts since the Russian escalation of war in Ukraine in 2022, and the university to which these professors belonged claimed that this decision of the professors was in breach of the institution's regulations.[732] One of the professors stated in an interview that he had explicitly

requested that his participation was solely as a private person and that his professor title was not to be used at the event. The Russian event coordinators did not heed his request. A Norwegian news media editorial concluded that this was likely for propaganda purposes.[733] Universities have been put in a difficult position between protecting academic freedom and international cooperation and guarding against security risks.

Case studies

Svalbard

The Norwegian Svalbard archipelago, previously known as Spitsbergen, lies between 74° and 81° north latitude, surrounded by the Norwegian and Greenland seas to the west, the Barents Sea to the east, and the Arctic Ocean to the north. The islands have geopolitical significance for Norway, as the closest country to the North Pole from the European Arctic,[734] extending Norwegian territory and jurisdiction far to the north. The Svalbard Treaty, which came into force on 14 August 1925, established Norwegian sovereignty over the islands, 'making Svalbard the northernmost region of the Kingdom of Norway'.[735] Although the treaty 'conferred full and absolute sovereignty on Norway', it allows its signatories 'equal enjoyment and liberty of access provisions'.[736] This allowance has led to contestation around how Norway exercises its jurisdiction and the degree to which it can restrict the activities of signatories. In its most recent report to the Storting (Norwegian parliament) on Svalbard, the Norwegian government reinforced its national control over the archipelago.[737] Norwegian sovereignty is not challenged per se,[738] but some signatories, including Russia, interpret the treaty in ways that dispute Norway's jurisdiction, and Norway has not adequately acknowledged the current problems it faces that require a firmer articulation of national control.[739]

Svalbard is a group of mostly uninhabited islands located in the Arctic,[740] with a population of approximately 2600 people.[741] The islands have had increasing geopolitical and geostrategic importance. The Norwegian authorities acknowledge the fact that Svalbard is of 'exceptional strategic significance for Russia'.[742] It has become a bone of contention between Norway and Russia.[743] Besides the geostrategic factor, Svalbard's continental shelf boasts of vast untapped zinc, copper, gold, rare metal, oil, and gas reserves. Russia is profoundly interested in these.[744]

Svalbard's unique legal status emanates from the Svalbard Treaty, which allows activities by parties to the treaty to take place in the archipelago, including fishing, hunting, mining, and other activities by Russia, in particular at Barentsburg and Pyramiden. Interactions between Russian authorities (businesses, consuls, etc.) and Russians citizens in the main city, Longyearbyen, can also increase the potential to influence and manipulate local politics in the region, which can have national implications. At the same time, unjustified fearmongering around the presence of Russian nationals breaches the democratic values Norway stands for.

In combination with other threat activities such as damaging communication cables between the archipelago and mainland Norway, intelligence gathering on the seabed,[745] and signalling through religious symbolism at Russia settlements, it can be seen that Svalbard is a primary target for a variety of influence operations that need to be seen in light of a comprehensive Norwegian security perspective.

Increased Russian presence in Svalbard

The Norwegian authorities believe the High North in general and Svalbard in particular are very important to Russia.[746] Recent developments involving Russia and/or Russian nationals confirm that Moscow is increasingly interested

in maintaining and augmenting its presence, both physical and symbolic, in Svalbard. In 2020 Russia's Foreign Ministry stated, 'We do not intend to curtail our presence there [in Svalbard]. On the contrary, we have long-term plans for strengthening, diversifying and modernizing it.'[747]

Having a physical presence in the archipelago is essential for maintaining and expanding potential influence there. Such influence is developed through ensuring the Russian population stays in Svalbard. A number of steps have been taken by Russia to facilitate this. These include attempts to push the narrative about the Pomor settlers in the archipelago, eulogising Soviet-era mining, and conferences on Barentsburg in mainland Russia. Moreover, Russia recently made an ambitious plan to establish a Svalbard science centre in Pyramiden. The centre will have departments in Grumant, Coles Bay, and Barentsbay. Russia also aims to create a consortium of research and educational institutes and organisations from friendly states. BRICS+ countries can team up with Russia on the project.[748] In September 2024 a Russian parliamentarian proposed establishing a penitentiary on the Norwegian archipelago for terrorists convicted by the Russian state.[749]

Lawfare, signalling, and the Svalbard Treaty

The politics and contestation over the Svalbard Treaty are an important dimension within Russia's attempts to have increased influence in the region. The treaty was signed in 1920 and came into effect in 1925, fundamentally recognising Norway's sovereignty over the archipelago while giving nationals of the signing states equal access to its 'waters, fjords, and ports'. It further stipulated that the establishment of naval bases would not be allowed in the archipelago, and it shall 'never be used for warlike purposes'. Military installations were prohibited.[750]

Until the late 1950s the Soviet Union was the only country besides Norway to have a significant physical presence in the archipelago. Over the years, however, the Russian population has been declining. Russian settlements in the archipelago have gone down from 68 per cent of the population of Svalbard (2407 people) in 1990 to only 16 per cent (or 391 people) in 2022.[751] The Svalbard Treaty, as well as the presence of Russians on the islands, has been used by Russia to assert its rights over the archipelago. Such calls intensified following the invasion of Crimea in 2014, as Moscow stressed that the Svalbard issue should be discussed 'bilaterally' between Norway and Russia. Norway maintains that it will not negotiate over its territory.[752]

The Russia – Norway tensions over Svalbard escalated in the wake of a series of developments after the 2014 invasion of Crimea. In 2015 Russian deputy prime minister Dmitriy Rogozin paid a symbolic trip to Svalbard. The visit happened even though he could not travel to any EU or Schengen country because of sanctions imposed on him for his alleged role in the illegal annexation of Crimea.[753] Despite being on the EU/Schengen sanctions list, he was able to make the visit based on a provision of the Svalbard Treaty which allows 'free access to the archipelago for signatories to the treaty'. Rogozin's presence in Svalbard was not only symbolic but also provocative, as he vehemently underlined Russian claims over Svalbard. 'The Arctic is Russian Mecca,' he said. Moreover, he tweeted that 'Norwegians bring their tourists here in snowmobiles to explore the "Soviet heritage".'[754] Rogozin was attempting to reinforce Svalbard's historical connection with Russia.

Rogozin did not stop at calling Svalbard 'Soviet heritage'. When Norway protested against his visit and asked Moscow to explain why it was made,[755] he said, 'You don't wave your fists after a fight.' It was clear from the visit as well as his controversial comments that Rogozin had a purpose in going to Svalbard. The visit was an attempt to bolster the Russian presence in the Arctic, or at least to make it more conspicuous.[756]

The Russian government claimed the visit followed international law and that the Svalbard Treaty allowed it.[757] Norway responded by revising the law regarding entry into Svalbard and the expulsion and deportation of people from it. The regulations originally came into effect in 1995

but had been revised in 2016 and 2021 before the latest revision in 2022. That revision allows the governor of Svalbard to deport any person subject to international restrictive measures that include travel restrictions to which Norway has agreed.[758]

In 2020, coinciding with marking the Svalbard Treaty's centenary, Russian foreign minister Sergey Lavrov formally protested against Oslo's alleged violations of the treaty. He said that Russian economic activity was discriminated against and demanded that contentious issues over Svalbard be negotiated bilaterally. Oslo dismissed the demand, saying that Norway did not 'negotiate with anyone over what is Norwegian'.[759] Russia has also been protesting against radar and satellite stations in Svalbard. The Kremlin holds that such installations are aimed at destabilising Russia as well as conducting intelligence operations to undermine Moscow's long-range aviation and submarine-launched ballistic missile capabilities.[760]

Russia has expressed multiple concerns over Svalbard, claiming that Norway has been violating the Svalbard Treaty. These concerns relate to restrictions on the use of helicopters, expansion of environmental protection areas, alleged illegal establishment of the fishery protection zone, and Norway's 'deportation procedures' for Russians.[761] The legal narrative around the Svalbard Treaty is manipulated by Russia to drive a wedge between Norway and its European allies or the EU,[762] which have had differences with Oslo over the archipelago.[763] This has had little effect largely due to a greater convergence of interests between Western countries in relation to issues that involve Moscow, since the Russian escalation of war in Ukraine. At the same time, creating controversies over Norway's approach to the Svalbard Treaty still serves Russia's desire to influence public opinion.[764]

Influencing a narrative of Russian historically based rights to Svalbard

Russian bids to influence perceptions pertaining to Norway's jurisdiction on Svalbard have been progressively visible, including influence efforts that have focused on promoting its purported historical presence in the archipelago. Through lectures, documentaries, exhibitions, and historical street signs, Russia is intensifying attempts to underscore its historical connections with Svalbard,[765] which Moscow refers to by its previous name, Spitsbergen.[766] Russia wants to claim, thus far through symbols, that it was the Russians who discovered Svalbard.

In 2023 Bishop Iyakov, known for supporting Russia's geopolitical ambitions in the Arctic, erected a giant cross on Svalbard.[767] Though the governor of Svalbard later ordered it to be removed, the cross, according to the director of Trust Arktikugol', Russia's state-owned coal-mining company, was a tribute to all Christians and Russians who had discovered Svalbard.[768] The Russian Orthodox Church is known to have close ties to the Kremlin and 'serves as an instrument of the Russian authoritarian regime'.[769] Spiritual education combined with specific representations of historical memory is part of the church repertoire.[770] This is one of many examples of official representatives or persons in positions of trust employing historical memory for political purposes.

On 9 May 2023, in celebration of Russia's victory in World War II, around 50 motor vehicles, including trucks, vans, tractors, and snowmobiles, were out on the streets of Barentsburg. Hovering above them in the air was a Mi-8 helicopter, which joined the celebrations. The scenes were reminiscent of Russia, but they were witnessed on Norwegian soil, thousands of kilometres away from the Russian mainland,[771] and in a country Russia considers 'unfriendly'.[772]

The Russian Victory Day celebrations in Svalbard were symbolic but a continuation of Russian attempts to build influence by being increasingly assertive in the archipelago. A year prior, in July 2022, the heroism of the Russian navy was celebrated in a similar fashion in Barentsburg, a town mainly inhabited by people originally hailing from Russia and Ukraine.[773] In a symbolic event, a number of smaller vessels carrying military flags passed through Norwegian waters at Barentsburg.[774]

The naval parade was officially projected by Russian actors in Svalbard in a bid to enhance its symbolic effect. The Russian consulate general in Barentsburg posted photos of the event, saying it was a 'symbolic passage'. Photos were also further circulated on Facebook by Inga Valerevna, the content manager of the Grumant Arctic travel company, a subsidiary of Trust Arktikugol'. The company takes care of virtually all Russian operations in Svalbard.[775]

The seafaring parade was led by Andrey Chemerilo, who was appointed as Russia's consul general in Svalbard in 2022 after the start of the war on Ukraine.[776] The Norwegian broadcaster NRK reported that Chemerilo was affiliated with the GRU, Russia's military intelligence. The NRK claimed that he once lived at an address which was known to be a place for GRU officers in training.[777] If true, this demonstrates the intersection of Russian espionage and information influence operations in North Norway.

The 2022 and 2023 Russian celebrations in Svalbard were aimed at influencing the political discourse on Svalbard, which has unique geographical and legal features. Svalbard remains geostrategically attractive for Russia as it is the conduit between the Barents Sea and the Atlantic Ocean. Svalbard is close to the Kola Peninsula where Russia's Northern Fleet is based. The archipelago is also important for Russia's 'bastion defence'. Due to these factors, the Russian Ministry of Defence itself deems Svalbard a potential 'geopolitical flashpoint' as well as the 'epicentre of tensions'.[778] The archipelago is sometimes called NATO's Achilles heel, and is vulnerable to a possible attempt by Russia to annex it.[779]

Sør-Varanger and Kirkenes

The second case that we examine with reference to Russian influence in Norway is the municipality of Sør-Varanger, which is located in the easternmost part of the Finnmark county of Norway, bordering Russia and Finland.[780] The port city of Kirkenes, the administrative centre of the municipality, is strategically important for Norway given its proximity to Russia and the Barents Sea, and as accessibility to the Northern Sea Route increases due to melting of the Arctic ice.[781]

Sør-Varanger in general and Kirkenes in particular have traditionally been an epitome of 'High North, low tension' for three reasons. First, the area borders the Russian Arctic,[782] and Norwegian policymakers have tried to keep tensions low due to close proximity with Russia. Second, around 5 per cent of the local population originally hails from Russia.[783] Third, the municipality has been a symbol of cross-border harmony between Norway and Russia, although the war on Ukraine has upended this friendship, with the EU and Norway drifting away from Moscow.[784]

The strategic importance of the region and its close ties with Russia date to World War II. Prior to addressing how the symbolic closeness between Sør-Varanger and Russia is under stress, if not dissipating, and how Moscow might still be exploiting its historical ties with North Norway, it is useful to understand how Russia's relationship with this northern Norwegian region evolved. It is the same historical affinity, and the consequent 'friendship' agreements in the High North, which makes Sør-Varanger/Kirkenes susceptible to Russian influence.

Strong historical ties with Russia

Kirkenes was a battleground during World War II when the German forces invaded the city. Around 100,000 German troops were

stationed there, as north-eastern Norway became a launching pad for the onslaught against the Soviet Union.[785] The nearby port city of Murmansk, just 200 km from the border, was the main target of the German military aggression.[786] Amid the German invasion, Kirkenes was one of the towns that was subjected to heavy bombings by the Allied forces.[787] It was one of the most bombed towns in Europe, second only to Valletta in Malta. Estimates suggest that it was bombed over 300 times by the Soviets. The worst attack happened in July 1944, when around 140 residential buildings were set ablaze by extensive Soviet air raids.[788] Kirkenes was a natural target, because not only were German forces stationed there but the town also had a strategically important harbour and airport.[789]

In autumn 1944 the German army was compelled to withdraw from the Murmansk front following the Petsamo – Kirkenes offensive against the German forces. Kirkenes was the first Norwegian town to be liberated by the Red Army.[790] The local population gave a hero's welcome to the Soviet forces.[791]

After the end of the war, North Norway in general and Kirkenes in particular continued celebrating how the Soviet forces liberated the region from the Germans. The brutality of the German occupation forces when they were withdrawing was also remembered: they resorted to a 'scorched earth' strategy, destroying everything in the areas they abandoned to make them uninhabitable.[792] Because of Soviet efforts to liberate the area during the war, the Red Army continued to be seen as a liberation force in North Norway. Symbols and events to commemorate this event carried on until the abruptly changed security outlook with the escalation of the Russian war on Ukraine in 2022. For instance, in a 2019 event in Kirkenes, Norwegian King Harald paid homage to the Soviet heroes, saying, 'I will repeat what is written on the memorial to fallen Soviet soldiers [in] the Western Cemetery in Oslo: "Norway thanks you". This is carved in stone.' 'Norway will never forget the Soviet army's war effort,' he maintained. 'We know the losses and sacrifices it required.'[793]

It is against this historical backdrop that the Sør-Varanger municipality has experienced over 30 years of open cooperation with northwest Russia (Murmansk, Arkhangelsk, and Nikel in particular) since the dissolution of the Soviet Union. Russian and Norwegian citizens were used to crossing the border into each other's countries, and there are close connections between people across this border. Political tensions between residents of the city of Kirkenes had been present, but have significantly escalated since the war on Ukraine in 2022.[794] Feelings of insecurity have been increasing for both Norwegian and Russian residents, resulting in pockets of 'silence' where segments of both populations fear engaging in discussion and debate, fostering higher levels of distrust instead.[795] Attempts to influence the local population through positively infused memory politics, family connections, narratives about the history of World War II, and fomenting anti-NATO sentiments are best not seen as isolated incidents or the particular ideas of a few. These can also have relevance in light of broader attempts to use existing vulnerabilities in the region (inequalities between different ethnic groups, marginalisation of the region by the central authorities, racism/ethnic exclusion), along with activities such as intelligence/information gathering (drones, mapping of the local seabed, etc.) and electronic operations (jamming) to impact Norwegian security.

Memory politics

It is increasingly evident that despite historical convergences between Russia and North Norway, Moscow wants to instrumentalise this to achieve strategic objectives, including in Ukraine, and influence the Norwegian audience.[796] This process of instrumentalisation is achieved in part through memory politics which entails mobilising remembrance to achieve political objectives. Through memory politics the past can be deployed strategically and, perhaps more importantly, can be manipulated to legitimise present and future political actions.[797]

In August 2024 a debate arose regarding the possible removal of Russian monuments that were becoming sites for information influence operations. The mayor of Vardø, Norway's north-easternmost city and home to the Globus

III radar at the border with Russia,[798] wants the monuments removed. He claims that the Russian consulate general in Kirkenes had been sending Russian authorities to various monuments and laying wreaths, in an attempt to direct attention to the gratitude Norwegians should have with regard to Russian efforts during World War II. According to the mayor, these public events were attracting locals sympathetic to Russia.[799] The monuments in question are not those that were erected in the years after the war, but rather more recent monuments that were unveiled thanks to the efforts of a Russian – Norwegian expert group largely made up of representatives of the FSB (the Russian Federal Security Service that eventually succeeded the Soviet KGB).[800] The monuments were erected after 2010 and used to promote the Russian fight against Nazism, not only then, but now, as argued by Joakim Aalmen Markussen:

> *[The monuments] would enable the Kremlin to claim that Norway supported Russia's narrative about WWII. In turn, this would entail that Norway also supported the distorted worldview that the Kremlin has built on top of the WWII narrative, namely that Russia is under attack by the West, that it must fight the alleged spread of neo-nazism and other paranoid conspiracies.*[801]

Removal of the monuments does not have unanimous support, as some local activists wish to see more focus on the contribution of the partisans who cooperated with the Soviets during the liberation of the region at the end of the war. The Vardø museum association supports the monuments and rejects the idea that they have anything to do with initiatives by the FSB, but instead reflect cooperation between the museum association and a veterans association in Murmansk.[802] Removal of the monuments has therefore become a contentious issue anchored in the local community.

Russia has also made use of memory politics through 'friendship' agreements, most of which have been with communities in North Norway. Since the escalation of the Russian war in Ukraine, friendship agreements between Russian and Norwegian northern cities have been largely frozen, with critics suggesting these friendship agreements can be abused by Russian actors.[803] Previously many of the friendship agreements were used for patriotic and militarised nation-building among school-age children from the Norwegian and Russian friendship cities, emphasising Russian military symbolism while celebrating the liberation of East Finnmark by the Soviet Red Army.[804] So-called 'Russian-Norwegian patriotic memory tours' from 2011 to 2019 were praised in the Russian media for maintaining a positive relationship with Norway, especially after the 2014 annexation of Crimea.[805] These tours have exploited the sense of common history with the Soviet Union that North Norwegians have shared since the end of World War II, but with a more focused intent to tweak the historical narrative in Russia's favour to garner support for Russian perspectives.[806]

The Russian Orthodox Church has also been actively used in promoting Russian-state-driven Pomor history to legitimise Russian geopolitical interests, including setting up Pomor crosses in different locations in East Finnmark and in Pyramiden on Svalbard.[807] These practices are consistent with a long-standing effort by Russia to counter Central and East European state efforts to distance themselves as independent states from the former Soviet Union and Russian Empire. Russian Orthodox priests even requested visits to water supply systems in Norwegian municipalities in 2019.[808] In consultation with the local police, the request was denied by the municipal authorities.

Confuse and divide

The use of memory politics to play on existing sympathetic attitudes towards Russia might not be just aimed at creating a crucial support base in a strategically important region. It additionally plays an instrumental role in, and coincides with, efforts to strategically confuse and divide the local population. This is crucial if and when Russia feels a need to engage the West, or NATO, in an escalation of conflict or war. It is believed that if Russia were to mount an attack against the West, its forces might cross the Barents Sea, passing Kirkenes and the North

Norwegian coast to reach the Atlantic Ocean. Russia has been strengthening naval activity and exercises in the region,[809] but it also began simulating attacks against Norwegian military facilities in the High North.[810]

Memory politics makes use of existing feelings, values, insecurities, vulnerabilities, and anxieties around the time-honoured friendship between the Norwegian and Russian people. Amid Russia's mounting aggression, engaging in influence activities can be Russia's attempt to generate strategic deception at the local level. On the one hand, Russia's posturing in the region is increasingly aggressive. On the other hand, it has been using influence in North Norway to further encourage sympathies for Russia as an age-old friend. This can be part of a strategy to persuade a critical mass of locals to call for placating Russia, while overlooking Moscow's aggressive posturing in the region. Moreover, if people are made to believe that Russia is a friend and does not pose a threat to Norway, there might be reduced civil preparedness if there is any Russian aggression in the High North, including in Finnmark and Sør-Varanger.

Influence in the North Norway region can also be tailored towards achieving operational goals, especially in relation to the collection of valuable information. An *Economist* report in 2023 highlighted how vulnerable Kirkenes is to espionage.[811] It is believed that Russia maintains human intelligence in Kirkenes. In a special report the *Barents Observer* revealed that the Russian Geographical Society, in cooperation with Norwegian partners, engaged in projects that focused on history seminars and partisan memorial trips, but had additional agendas to recruit spies from the local Russian diaspora.[812] The activities were extensive, including creating linkages with a wide variety of Norwegian organisations, such as the Fram Museum in Oslo and even the Norwegian Armed Forces Museums.[813] This was a yet another significant revelation on the heels of the arrest of spies in Norway and Europe in 2022 and the expulsion of 15 Russian diplomats from Norway for spying in 2023.[814] Information and intelligence gathering which can be used against the state at a later stage is not always conducted by sensational spy activity, but also on a smaller, more banal scale, mapping any and all weaknesses. Frode Berg, a man from Kirkenes arrested by the Russians for espionage, revealed that the Russians were cognisant of the alcohol issues that one of his associates back home had. In another case a Norwegian in the custody of Russian intelligence was shown a picture of his three-storey flat's living room. The picture, he believed, was taken from a drone.[815]

Conclusion

In this chapter we have used openly available information to identify trends and demonstrate the ways in which Russia employs a wide variety of under-threshold information influence operations that test and map Norwegian insecurities, vulnerabilities, and sympathies. In combination with other hybrid threat activities, Norway is subjected to a steady stream of activity that can act to reduce trust in the country over time and move conditions from priming to destabilisation (see section 2 of this chapter).[816] There is little evidence that these attempts have been very successful so far. Many of them are still within the priming phase of a hybrid threat activity level, and Norway still enjoys a high level of trust across society towards citizens and government authorities. This does not mean Norway is protected over the long term, if such activities continue to whittle away at insecurities and increase fear and mistrust.

What lines of defence does Norway have against this slow but persistent pressure to exacerbate divisions within the state? Over time, and with increased effort on the part of an aggressor, a state and society can be moved from the priming stage of threat activities into a more targeted destabilisation stage, with the intent of weakening a state from the inside. An important response is the total defence concept that Norway reintroduced in 2018, which outlined a modern, civil-military approach to defence that

was to meet today's challenges.[817] It has the potential to help the Norwegian state meet the challenges of information influence operations, though there are still important gaps in the strategy. Although the approach reinvigorated the importance of a national defence strategy that recognised the role of civilian efforts in the defence of the state, the role of the 'average citizen' was neglected.[818] In particular, the impact of information influence operations that target existing insecurities and vulnerabilities within society and among certain populations has not been given adequate thought. In the meantime, it is becoming increasingly clear that a lack of trust in information sources, particularly those that are 'mainstream' and/or used by authorities to inform the public, are making Norwegian citizens more vulnerable to alternative sources that promote anti-Western, anti-democratic, pro-Russian, and/or misinformation and disinformation. Critique and scepticism are healthy attitudes in a democracy to help improve the polity over time. However, such critical awareness including media and source literacy should be applied in equal measure to alternative sources of information.

At the time of writing in autumn 2024, a focus on the individual, civilian role in a defence situation – whether during a crisis or a war – has been an increasing part of the Norwegian authorities' mandate. In spring 2024 the Norwegian Directorate for Community Security and Preparedness (DSB) released an update of their 2018 preparedness information: 'Advice on self-preparedness for emergencies.'[819] It describes what Norwegians must have in stock at home, to last at least seven days. The emphasis on the role of the individual is clear in the updated 2024 information.

What the current advice does not emphasise is the continued necessity for community. Society or community depends upon trust between people and authorities, reliable information that people can trust, which in turn is dependent upon reliable, fact-based information. Information becomes even more central during a crisis event.

Today's threat picture reflects a multi-actor, multi-level security network, which with a comprehensive security analysis approach ensures that existing vulnerabilities and insecurities that impact a comprehensive security picture are made more visible. The linkages of sub-state actor insecurities to national security become clearer, and measures to acknowledge if not address these insecurities become more meaningful, as these are the target of an aggressor. These insecurities are an attractive target for information influence operations. People's opinions and behaviour influence the effect that threats have on society and thus how a conflict develops. Combined with military measures, this could become part of a hybrid war.

It is important to prevent influence operations from gaining a foothold, which is why recognising the activities taking place during the priming phase is crucial. It is equally important that there are plans to deal with the effects of influence operations.

On the basis of the patterns or trends that are emerging regarding information influence operations, total defence can be strengthened through a population's ability to critically evaluate information and other influence tactics through education in the school system and other organisations. Incorporating into the curricula the ability to criticise sources, a now common recommendation, is still not enough. What happens during a crisis when digital communications are down, and power is out? Segments of the population will likely still not be prepared. Accessing the internet will be impossible for large parts of the population. Alternative approaches to spreading reliable information will be needed. Such measures need to be in place well before a crisis, shared with the population, and ideally, practised.

The classic Norwegian *dugnad*, or community volunteerism, is worth reviving as a part of information preparedness. Not only should individuals prepare with enough supplies to protect individual households for a minimum of seven days, as advised by the DSB authorities, but an analogue communications system will be critical if power and communication systems go down. Non-digital methods of reliable information-sharing need to be available. This could include a volunteer network within each

municipality where a few assigned volunteers at local elementary schools (usually these are most abundant and located within easy reach for everyone in a neighbourhood) would be the main and agreed upon conduit of information between the neighbourhood and the city authorities (city hall). Schools could have additional provisions stocked to help those who have not been able to store up enough (insufficient space or time). Volunteers could include local veterans who have crisis training. By setting up information volunteers and local emergency stocks, people can obtain reliable information and resupply the most necessary items. The local contact points can be established at selected schools, or otherwise sports clubs, religious organisations, and the like. Such strengthening of human and societal security through increased participation will strengthen resilience.

In the meantime, a greater focus on the role of priming activities targeting sub-state insecurities and distrust will assist in preparing for crisis events. Such preparations can go a long way to mitigate the effects of priming activities including information influence operations that seek out weakness, insecurity, division, and polarisation. Society's resilience rests largely on its ability to share a common understanding of when a crisis is imminent or under way, and how to meet a shared and commonly understood threat.

Sweden

Martin Kragh

Summary

This article summarises the history of Russian influence operations towards Sweden, beginning in the Cold War and continuing to the present day. It describes the wider context and provides three in-depth case studies. Strategic issues, such as Swedish – NATO co-operation and military support for Ukraine, have arguably been key targets for Russian influence activities. Russian campaigns have also inserted themselves into other contentious areas, such as issues related to migration and crime. The article concludes that Swedish membership of NATO represents a Russian strategic failure, although Sweden – for different reasons – may be a target of Russian influence operations also in the future.

Introduction

Russia, under its authoritarian leader Vladimir Putin, has reverted to its historical Cold War patterns of engaging in covert influence activities – behaviour historically referred to as 'active measures' in the Soviet KGB lexicon on political warfare. In this chapter I provide empirical evidence on how Russia moved towards a preference for active measures towards Sweden, a small country in a geopolitically important European region. I discuss the nature of such influence activities and document phenomena such as forgeries, disinformation, propaganda, and military threats. These phenomena help us understand Russian foreign policy strategy towards Sweden and the Baltic Sea region.[820]

The significance of covert influence activities as instruments of statecraft in global affairs, and the increased presence of Russia within this domain, has been discussed in the last decade by academics, journalists, and analysts in the wider expert community. Covert warfare and deception as such have ancient roots, and their specific iteration in the form of Soviet international propaganda was analysed in the early post-war period and the Cold War. In recent years governments, academia, and NGOs have initiated work to identify and respond to 'Russia's ongoing disinformation campaign', as evidenced by the European Council's establishment of the East StratCom Task Force in March 2015.[821] A number of events – the Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MFA) campaign against the chancellor of Germany, Angela Merkel, over the so-called 'Lisa case' in January 2016; the abduction of an Estonian security officer by Russian special forces on 5 September 2014; and Moscow's financial support for Marine Le Pen's Front National – challenged observers to rethink their understanding of Russia's foreign policy strategy even before the country's full-scale invasion of Ukraine in February 2022.

Although it is difficult to ascertain accurately the political effectiveness of Russian active measures, the phenomenon merits study: regardless of whether influence activities prove effective, marginal, or counterproductive, they consume considerable resources and are indicative of intent at the highest political level.[822] Russia takes a differentiated approach towards individual European states, including in the Baltic Sea region. Furthermore, a country-specific case study may still provide evidence on issues of wider geostrategic significance: for example, Swedish – NATO cooperation; military security in the Baltic Sea region; Baltic Sea energy infrastructure; the EU's Eastern Partnership;

EU policies toward Ukraine; and the sanctions regime against Russia – issues and policies which in different ways have had a divisive impact on EU/Sweden – Russia relations.

A few distinctions are in order. There are information influence operations which can be, within reasonable bounds, attributed to Russian state actors (i.e. state media outlets and/or government and intelligence agencies). Other operations, however, remain ambiguous, and cannot always be easily attributed to any particular actor. Throughout this article, whenever necessary, I have made certain to highlight such nuances. Information influence operations, by design, thrive on uncertainty. Often, key pieces of the puzzle will remain obscure for the analyst. Furthermore, not all of them will share the exact same attributes, or be pursued with identical intensity by their senders. Indeed, there will always be cases where attribution is impossible, or only tentative conclusions can be drawn.

This article summarises some case studies on proven or alleged Russian influence operations towards Sweden. Its first part briefly describes certain features and legacies of historical Swedish – Soviet relations. It is shown how historical patterns in Soviet influence activities are also present today. The second part highlights certain key themes in Russian propaganda towards Sweden and the Baltic Sea region, providing an overview of Sputnik International narratives. The third part discusses the relevant case studies, highlighting how Russia has attempted to influence, for example, Swedish – NATO cooperation and support for Ukraine. I also discuss the challenges with attribution of influence operations. The last part discusses how Russian influence activities may also be continued in the future.

Historical background

Behavioural patterns in Russia's foreign policy towards Sweden have precedents in the Cold War period, when the military balance in the Baltic region was different from the present era. After World War II, Moscow dominated politically and militarily the territories from Vyborg in the east to Rostock in the south: the Baltic States were occupied and incorporated as Soviet republics; Polish borders were shifted westwards; and East Germany was founded as a Soviet satellite state. Finland and Sweden reaffirmed their military non-alignment, while Norway and Denmark became co-founding members of NATO in 1949. The geostrategic position of Finland and Sweden was not lost on Moscow, and by the 1980s Soviet and Warsaw Pact states are believed to have operated about 160 intelligence officers on Swedish territory, engaged primarily in the systematic illegal collection of information and recruitment of local and foreign agents. Although Moscow always rejected this allegation, testimonies from Soviet defectors confirmed Sweden as one of the highest priorities in Soviet and Warsaw Pact espionage activities.[823]

Historical evidence affirms the efficiency of the Soviet security services. In the Nordic states, in the 1970s the KGB Soviet security agency recruited Norwegian political secretary Arne Treholt, whose responsibility included high-level negotiations with Moscow on the demarcation of the Norwegian – Soviet border in the Barents Sea. In Sweden, the KGB recruited Stig Bergling, an officer in the Security Police, and Stig Wennerström, a military attaché stationed at different times at the Swedish embassies in both Moscow and Washington. Leaking information to Moscow on defectors from the KGB, Bergling paralysed Swedish counter-intelligence for many years. Wennerström provided his Soviet counterparts with details on Swedish military planning and the defence industry, information which in 1952 allegedly enabled Soviet fighter jets to shoot down Swedish aircraft carrying out radio and radar signals intelligence-gathering over international waters in the Baltic Sea (the 'Catalina affair').[824]

As elsewhere in Europe, it has been discussed to what extent Moscow was also able to infiltrate parts of the wider political, economic, and media climate in Sweden.[825] One early case of Soviet disinformation relates to the Soviet kidnapping of Swedish diplomat Raoul Wallenberg in Budapest in 1945. The Soviets initially provided the Swedish government with misleading information on Wallenberg's real whereabouts. One historian has argued that the KGB furthermore planted disinformation in the US journal *Reader's Digest* that upon his arrest Wallenberg had been in possession of jewellery and gold hidden in the gasoline tank of his car, although no firm evidence exists to corroborate this claim. The campaign to discredit Wallenberg, however, fell flat in the post-war period.[826]

When the Soviet submarine *S-363* ran aground in 1981 on the south coast of Sweden, a forged telegram soon appeared in the media purportedly written by the Swedish ambassador to Washington, Wilhelm Wachtmeister. The telegram expressed the ambassador's profound disappointment over a secret agreement between Stockholm and Washington to provide US submarines access to Swedish military bases in wartime. The telegram was immediately revealed as a Soviet forgery, but its content also raised interesting questions from the point of view of intelligence analysis.[827] Notably, the forgery contained an important – but for the Swedish public unknown – kernel of truth: Sweden maintained, in the Cold War, a secret security agreement with the US. The agreement was known to the KGB, thanks to the espionage by Wennerström. Disinformation and forged telegrams with similar narratives began to appear again in 2014 in the wake of Russia's war on Ukraine, a renewed Swedish NATO debate, and (contested) observations that foreign submarines might have intruded into the Stockholm archipelago. As illustrated by the Cold War patterns of Soviet – Swedish interactions, Russian influence operations share several features from the original KGB handbook on political warfare. The main difference is, notably, the presence of the cyber domain in today's information landscape.

Russian information influence operations towards Sweden

To the extent that Russian state media reflects the interests of its government is it also possible to draw inferences about Russia's strategic goals through an analysis of its main narratives. Figure 17 shows mentions of seven Baltic Sea states in the English-language version of Sputnik, from 2016 to April 2024. Sweden, in this time period, is mentioned 3464 times, or 29.7 per cent of all mentions. In second place is Poland, with 18.5 per cent of all mentions, followed in descending order by Norway (16.7 per cent), Finland (13.0 per cent), and Denmark (12.5 per cent). Sweden, in other words, has attracted a relatively large interest in comparison to its neighbours. The word cloud shows the most common words for all articles in the chosen time period, i.e. articles discussing Russia's president Vladimir Putin, security, NATO. A more fine-grained analysis of the data could show more specific themes and their changes over time, for example ahead of an election or any other similar event. For the purposes of this article, it suffices to note how the focus on Sweden – in combination with themes related to NATO and security – has been congruent with the themes prevalent in Russia's use of other tools of influence, such as forgeries and disinformation.

In 2015 Russia made a short-lived attempt to reach the Nordic countries with the launch of Sputnik websites in several local languages, including Swedish.[828] Sputnik International, which replaced Voice of Russia on 10 November 2014, launched its Swedish-language version on 15 April 2015. Before its termination in spring 2016, the website published 3963 news items.[829] Its most common themes were 'crisis in the West' (705 articles), 'positive image of Russia' (643), and 'Western aggressiveness' (499). These pervasive categories were followed, in descending

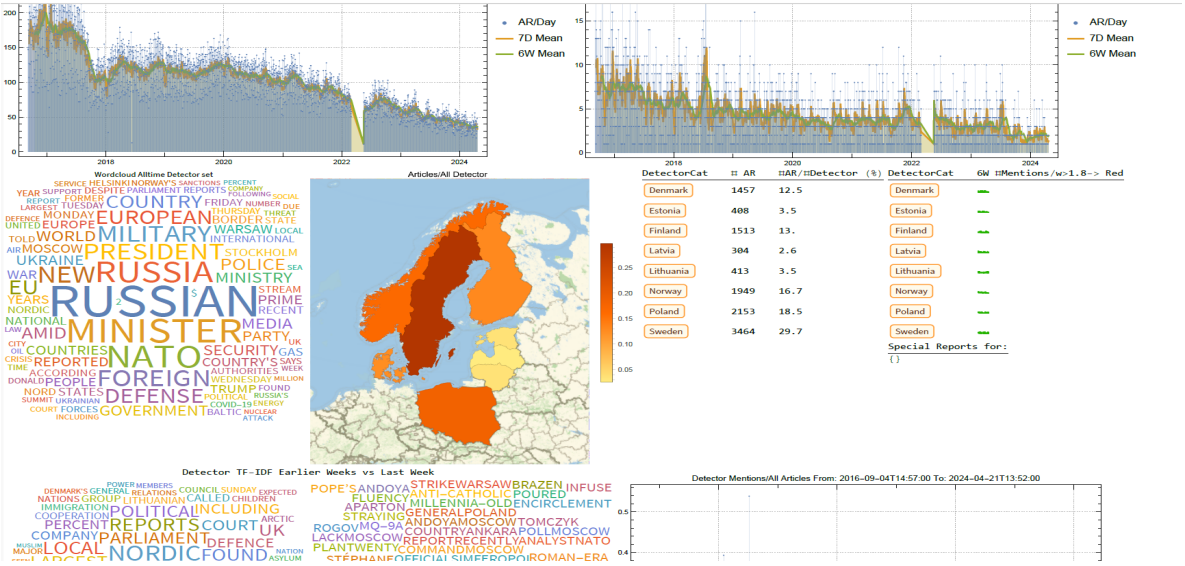


FIGURE 17. Mentions of seven countries in Sputnik International, 2016 – 24. Source: Ongoing research project, data collection not yet completed and fully analysed. For more information, please contact the author. Note: The data represented here does not cover the total amount of influence Russia is conducting against the region. For example, Russian-language sources targeting Baltic states, if included here, would alter the picture of Russian priorities.

order, by the themes 'negative image of countries perceived to be in the West's sphere of influence' (424), 'the West is malicious' (309), 'international sympathy and cooperation with Russia' (304), 'Western policy failures' (112), and 'divisions within the Western alliance' (72). Thematically, the continuity with Soviet mass communication themes was quite strong, with a general emphasis on anti-Western narratives.

Unsurprisingly, the most frequently appearing targets in Swedish Sputnik reporting were the EU (698 articles), NATO (321), and the United States (1018). The EU was depicted as an organisation in terminal decline, beset by major difficulties such as the Greek economic crisis and the influx of migrants to Europe from the Middle East and Africa. European bureaucrats and decision-makers were described as incompetent and puppets of the US government.[830] NATO was described as both a US instrument of war and the chief architect of Western policy towards Russia. The encirclement hypothesis, which argues that the US and its allies are threatening Russian security with the instalment of military bases near Russian borders, dominated as the analytical framework.[831] The narrative of a Russia under siege, needless to say, was not a novel one, as it recalled the Soviet critique of capitalist states encircling the 'Socialist Fatherland'.[832]

The attempt to establish different Sputnik websites for the Nordic countries coincided with other documented cases of active measures towards Sweden: for example, disinformation campaigns, the circulation of various forgeries, and fake news items surfacing in the country's information landscape. In conjunction with these efforts, Russian politicians and diplomats openly began to intervene in Swedish domestic political affairs on NATO and Baltic Sea security. Not least, several public statements around 2015 – 16 targeted the agenda of the Swedish government to push forward with the so-called NATO Host Agreement, deepening Sweden's cooperation with the military alliance. 'Sweden's accession to #NATO', tweeted the Russian MFA on 10

September 2015, 'would have military & political implications requiring #Russia to take retaliatory steps.' On Russian state TV, Swedish politicians were castigated as agents of Washington, and falsified interviews with Swedish citizens were produced. Furthermore, Swedish journalists and diplomats working in Russia became targets of harassment and espionage activities, including smear campaigns on Russian state television.[833] In spring 2024, following Sweden's accession to NATO, an anonymous group of people threw manure over a fence to the Swedish embassy in Moscow. Predictably, Russian politicians and pundits had also thundered against Sweden's decision in 2022 to apply for NATO membership.[834] Further, there have been cases of *hack-and-leak* operations. In 2017 and 2018, Sweden's Sports Confederation was the victim of a cyberattack later attributed to 'Fancy Bear', a group within Russia's military intelligence, the GRU. Through repeated and comprehensive breaches, the GRU had been able to access personal details of Swedish athletes, such as medical records, which were subsequently published.[835] On at least one occasion, in 2014, the Russian TV channel RT lobbied a group of local youths in a Stockholm suburb to perform acts of vandalism in front of the camera – to generate and amplify content on Sweden's problems of migration-related crime. In 2015 Russian military vessels interfered with and tried to obstruct the laying of an electric cable between Sweden and Lithuania in the Baltic Sea. In other words, increasing tensions between Russia and the outside world – following Russia's war against Ukraine in 2014 – was being reflected in several different domains.

Although Sweden has been far from a high-priority target for Russian foreign policy, it has been possible to document several information influence operations of varying size and intensity towards the country. In spring 2017, following an ISIS terrorist attack in central Stockholm, an alleged screenshot from the conversation between the terrorist and his handler appeared on the Russian propaganda website www.politonline.ru only one day after the event. Referencing a Twitter account created to vaguely resemble cooperation between the Russian independent TV station Dozhd' and Kavkaz Center, but with an alleged sympathy for Islamist jihad (https://twitter.com/tvjihad), the article provided original information on the terrorist and his organisational ties to a terrorist cell in Dagestan.[836] Although the screenshot's origin has never been established, it was later confirmed through technical analysis of the terrorist's mobile phone that the conversation was indeed authentic. Some operations have also targeted Sweden indirectly. In 2018, documents belonging to the Institute of Statecraft, a think tank based in the United Kingdom, were hacked and subsequently leaked by Russian cyber intruders. Following this, dozens of Russian media channels, in several different languages, initiated a large-scale information campaign arguing that the think tank was a covert MI6 network intended to undermine Russian security and regime stability. Although no evidence for this claim was ever presented, the information gained traction in a handful of Swedish media outlets. The country's largest newspaper, *Aftonbladet*, used the information to accuse the author of this text of being a British agent. As their only apparent source was Russian disinformation, *Aftonbladet* was subsequently criticised by the Swedish Media Ombudsman, an independent disciplinary body that handles complaints on the editorial content of newspapers and other media outlets. For some reason, however, *Aftonbladet* has defended the criticised publications.[837]

The Russian MFA has regularly accused Sweden of 'blatant Russophobia', as it has many other Western countries deemed 'unfriendly'. In later September 2023 its spokesperson, Maria Zakharova, argued that on 27 September this Russophobia had led to 'an act of vandalism' against a monument to Soviet prisoners of war outside Luleå, in north-west Sweden.[838] Notably, no mentions of the vandalism had appeared in the Swedish media before her statement was made. Similar accusations have been raised against Sweden concerning the status of the Russian Orthodox Church, deemed the victim of bias and negative treatment by Swedish society. Russian media reporting describing Swedish society as Russophobic intensified following the country's formal application for NATO membership in the spring of 2022. One example of this was in the run-up to the Russian full-scale invasion of Ukraine when the Russian ambassador to Sweden made a statement about the

increasing Russophobia in Sweden.[839] Such coverage appeared in 2023, following a sequence of Quran burnings in Sweden by an Iraqi asylum seeker and a Swedish-Danish far right activist. 'Did they not have enough from Peter the Great?' quipped Putin, using the burnings to deflect attention from an anti-Jewish pogrom in Dagestan.[840] Similar Quran burnings in Russia have also been blamed on people receiving 'inspiration' from Sweden, including in the UN, where Sweden, Denmark, and the Netherlands were accused by Russia of fomenting a 'war' against religion.[841] Lastly, in 2023, the Quran burnings were tied to Sweden's application for membership of NATO. An activist allegedly burning the NATO statutes – a non-event, unnoticed in the Swedish media – was used as a pretext to claim that 'they' (Swedes) did not want to join NATO.[842] Furthermore, several Russian-language media outlets, such as INO-TV, Regnum, Krasnaya Vesna, and Ruletka, have had regular – and typically critical – coverage of Swedish domestic and foreign affairs. The news site Lenta, for a while, provided in-depth coverage of Swedish parliamentary activities, including events not covered in Swedish media.

Lastly, it is worth noting a change in Russian narratives targeting Sweden in relation to the full-scale invasion of Ukraine in February 2022. Prior to the invasion, the main narratives depicted Sweden as a country witnessing a societal collapse due to non-European immigration[843] and moral decay.[844] After the invasion, during 2022, most of the narratives were related to Sweden's potential membership of NATO and support for Ukraine. The narratives stated, for example, that Sweden was a vassal state that was being used by the US and NATO,[845] that membership of the Alliance would mean a depletion of the Swedish economy, and that it would lead to a worsened security situation for Sweden and the whole Baltic Sea region – Russian propaganda tropes familiar since 2014.[846] After the formalisation of Sweden's NATO application later in 2022, Russian actors started to focus more on depicting Sweden as a non-reliable NATO ally, a state that was weak and a hub for terrorism.[847] After the finalisation of Sweden's NATO membership in March 2024, it was possible to observe the considerable decline in reporting related to that membership (although it still continues); meanwhile the narratives that were prevalent prior to Russia's invasion of Ukraine have increased again.

Case studies

In the following sections the author presents and discusses in more depth three particular cases of Russian information influence operations towards Sweden. They are different in scope and target, and also preceded Sweden's application for full NATO membership in spring 2022, but provide a general vision of how issues such as disinformation, forgeries, and other tools of influence can be analysed and potentially attributed to Russia.

Case study 1: Forgeries against NATO and Ukraine

Forgeries have been a recurring element in Russian information influence operations. In most instances they originated in a similar fashion, usually through an obscure Russian- and/or Swedish-language website or blog. Some forgeries have utilised fake letterheads and purported to be written by Swedish decision-makers, presumably to gain credibility and an aura of authenticity. Between 2014 and 2016 at least ten forgeries relating exclusively to Swedish affairs appeared on various media platforms. However, if one includes also forgeries planted in the Swedish information space on other topics, no fewer than 26 forgeries in total appeared between December 2014 and July 2016. Their sharp increase in a short time period should not be surprising. In contrast to the Cold War, when the planting of forgeries was laboriously

time-consuming, the use of internet resources reduces the cost of disseminating information. Once inserted into different digital media outlets, forgeries and disinformation exist in a target environment over very long time periods, and their origins are easily concealed.

Attribution of forgeries is not necessarily straightforward. Linkages to Russian-sponsored originators have existed, however, in almost all documented cases. These linkages may be direct or indirect, but typically follow a similar pattern. Forgeries and accompanying explanatory 'news articles' have usually appeared for the first time on websites such as cont.ws and politrussia.com (Russian-language websites), then in (poor) Swedish translation at *Pressbladet* (a website not dissimilar in superficial appearance from Sweden's most popular news site, *Aftonbladet*), and later on websites in different languages (such as indymedia.org.uk, cyberguerilla.org, and CNN's Ireport, where forgeries in many languages are uploaded regularly). Most of these websites have in common the feature that they allow users to self-publish material. The most active social media account used for disseminating Swedish-language forgeries in this time period was 'George Kobzaru' (a fake name), who was also present on pro-Kremlin Facebook groups and was later revealed to have been created as part of a much broader Russian influence operation targeting several European countries.[848]

Certain forgeries appearing in the Swedish information space have had nothing to do with Sweden per se, that is, 'evidence' of NATO opposing the UN; Western states lobbying for Ukrainian politician Nadia Savchenko to be secretary general of the UN; Polish politician Jarosław Kaczyński being mentally ill; Ukraine's minister of finance Natalie Jaresko covertly undermining the Dutch referendum on Ukraine's EU association agreement; and German politicians conspiring against Turkey using Kurdish proxies.[849] Forgeries on Swedish politicians and decision-makers focus on similar narratives, that is, conspiracies involving Ukraine, terrorist organisations, and NATO. Their level of detail, and the instrumental exploitation of the names of specific Swedish politicians, diplomats, and civil servants, suggests that the originators of the documents have access to at least a modicum of intelligence on Swedish society. However, the language, including grammatical errors and other revealing features, indicates that the same originators often have an imperfect grasp of the Swedish (or any other foreign) language.

An analysis of Russian-sponsored forgeries reveals certain patterns regarding narratives and modes of distribution. On 21 February 2015 a letter seemingly signed by then Swedish minister of defence Peter Hultqvist appeared on social media through a (fake) Twitter identity of a well-known Swedish military affairs journalist.[850] In the letter, sent to a named CEO of BAE Systems Bofors AB (Sweden's largest weapons manufacturer), the author writes among other things how he is 'grateful to [Bofors] for setting up the presentation for our Ukrainian partners. They admired the Archer System capabilities. Even the initial order may amount up to 12 units.' However, the letter has a number of obvious marks of a forgery, including factual mistakes: the alleged recipient was the then previous CEO of BAE Systems Bofors AB, not the current one. Furthermore, Hultqvist's signature had been retrieved from a source in the public domain, and for logically inexplicable reasons the letter was written in English. Nevertheless, the claim that Sweden was planning to export the advanced Archer artillery system to Ukraine surfaced on a German news website, and later reappeared on pro-Kremlin websites and social media.[851]

A second forgery appeared as a letter signed by the then head of the International Public Prosecution Office in Stockholm. It was uploaded to CNN's Istory website by the social media account 'doubtingsteven' on 2 September 2015, and later broadcast on Russian state television and pro-Kremlin media.[852] The letter, addressed to Oleksiy Pokotylo at the 'Head Department for National Security and Defence Affairs' in Ukraine, apparently confirmed an investigation regarding war crimes committed by a Swedish citizen in Ukraine, and rejected a 'request' from Ukrainian authorities that the case should be dismissed.[853] This letter also had the marks of a forgery, including factual mistakes. The letter purported to be sent from the International Public Prosecution Office, but carried the official letterhead of the Swedish government; Pokotylo

was not the head of the 'Head Department for National Security and Defence Affairs', but deputy head of the Department of National Security with the Presidential Administration. Furthermore, Swedish prosecutors do not usually receive, nor would they reply to, requests from a foreign government. The document also contained certain expressions which would never be used by a trained legal expert.

A third and fantastic forgery example appeared on 23 March 2016, when the social media account 'Olle' uploaded an article to the website *Pressbladet*.[854] In the article, 'Olle' alleged the uncovering of a conspiracy between Sweden and NATO to secretly relay weapons via Turkey to the Islamic State (IS). The article referred to a letter sent to the Swedish MFA, written by 'Nada al-Qahtani', an alleged commander of a 'Daesh female assault team'. In the letter the IS commander petitioned the Swedish government for military support. Considering Sweden's militarily non-aligned status, the letter writer argued, the Swedish government was aptly positioned to support the IS without the risk of 'NATO sanctions'. Why this letter was also a forgery is not difficult to discern. The IS does not self-identify as Daesh, a derogatory name used by the organisation's enemies; IS is not widely known to promote women soldiers, especially not in the capacity of commanders; nor do they typically petition Western governments for support. Furthermore, it is not obvious why Sweden in its capacity as a militarily non-aligned country would be in a position to support IS without the threat of 'NATO sanctions'.

Other forgeries appearing in the Swedish information landscape have included stories of Sweden appropriating fertile soil from Ukrainian farmers, Poland lambasting the Swedish government for the country's neutral position during World War II, and the civilian nuclear energy company Westinghouse fomenting nuclear accidents in Ukraine with its sub-quality fuel (produced in Västerås, Sweden).[855] The most frequently appearing target in the forgeries uncovered in 2015 to 2016 was Sweden's former minister of foreign affairs Carl Bildt (2006 – 14), a politician known for his criticism of Russian foreign policy and support of Ukrainian EU integration. In May 2016 an article appeared on Russian- and English-language websites claiming that Bildt had proposed the creation of an organisation to counter EU scepticism and develop closer EU – Ukraine ties. Appended to this article was a forged Swedish-language article, edited graphically to appear as an authentic news item from the website of *Dagens Nyheter*, Sweden's largest daily newspaper.[856]

On 2 March 2016 cyberguerilla.org published forged email correspondence from the 'hacked' account of a Ukrainian official and acquaintance of former president of Georgia Mikheil Saakashvili. The 'correspondence' reveals an intricate conspiracy between a Swedish diplomat and a mission director at the US Agency for International Development (USAID). Accordingly, these two (named) individuals were in cahoots to install Bildt as prime minister of Ukraine. Furthermore, the correspondence included cryptic discussions on 'particularities about Sudan' and 'dirty' business between Saakashvili and Bildt which might derail the whole process, in case this information would become publicly known (*sic*).[857] The claim that Bildt would be prime minister of Ukraine later appeared on RIA Novosti, RT, and Sputniks in different languages as an authentic news story; two Swedish newspapers did not doubt its relevance and published the information as well.[858] Another false story connected a Swedish PR firm, where Bildt was previously head of the board of directors, to a Western push to keep Ukrainian president Petro Poroshenko in power.[859]

The systematic dissemination of forgeries through various media channels suggests a coordinated campaign, even if it remains to be established precisely where and how the forgeries have been generated. Efforts have also continued. For example, in 2021 a fake motion appeared through the website *Flashback*, allegedly authored by a Swedish parliamentarian. The motion argued for a joint Swedish – Ukrainian NATO membership application, and for upholding political pressure against Russia.[860] Interestingly, again, the creators of the forgery were partially able to predict the future, as Sweden one year later did submit its application for NATO membership. In order to be successful, forgeries need to contain a kernel of truth or at least refer to a loosely related

story which happens to be true. For example, it is an undeniable truth that Swedish prosecutors have initiated investigations regarding war crimes committed by a Swede in Ukraine, and the Swedish government has supported Ukrainian EU integration. Radicalised Swedish citizens have joined IS, and NATO member Turkey has also been accused of supporting IS by its allies.[861] By relating truth to lies, forgeries are successful if they rely on the speed of social media, exploit the short attention span and bias of users, and manage to reappear in new media contexts hiding their actual source of origin.

It is reasonable to treat this sequence of forgeries and fake news items as an element of one consistent information influence operation. Indeed, analysis conducted by a team of researchers in 2020 located the operation against Sweden as part of a larger effort – which they, with reference to the KGB HIV/AIDS campaign in the 1980s, labelled 'Secondary Infektion' – by a Russian state actor to cause political divisions in Europe and within NATO.[862] This result was possible thanks to the technical attribution provided by Facebook, in cooperation with a team of experts on Russian influence activities. It was concluded that there was little evidence of this particular operation being effective, and that the main themes in the campaigns targeting Sweden were NATO cooperation and support for Ukraine. Furthermore, the forgeries were supported by broader narratives concerning Sweden's support for Ukraine – themes such as 'the support for Ukraine is pointless', 'weapons support for Ukraine ends up in Sweden', and so on.[863]

Case study 2: 2018 election interference

In 2018 the Russian propaganda outlets RT and Sputnik International made a concerted effort to emphasise and amplify the problems – alleged and real – related to crime and migration in Sweden. It was, to a large extent, in conjunction with these operations that Sweden became an outsize priority in Russian international propaganda outlets. Simultaneously there appeared a number of peculiar forgeries, reflecting perhaps a botched campaign to smear the Swedish parliamentary election conducted in the same year. The forgeries were designed to smear the Sweden Democrats, the country's most well-known anti-immigration party (with a background in the far right), as insufficiently patriotic. One explanation can be that Russian state media at the time had decided to promote another political party – much smaller and without any parliamentary representation, but considered more sympathetic towards Russian interests. It remains unclear who was behind this disinformation campaign. As in the case with Russian forgeries described above, however, a number of markers point to a Russian-sponsored actor. Interestingly, a secondary wider goal with the campaign seems to have been, again, the smearing of Ukraine and NATO.

On 20 August 2018 two fake documents appeared on the Swedish website *Pressbladet*, which by 2014 had already been used prominently for spreading forgeries.[864] The first document was a fake letter from US secretary of state Mike Pompeo to his Polish colleague Jacek Czaputowicz.[865] The letter claimed that the US had learned about the deep ties between the Sweden Democrats and Russian security services. Russia's goal, it was alleged in the letter, was namely to control the Sweden Democrats in order to further its interests in Sweden and the EU. This document was also posted on a few English-language websites.[866]

The second document was a fake letter from Marine Le Pen, president of Rassemblement National (formerly Front National), to Jimmie Åkesson, the leader of the Sweden Democrats. The letter promised the provision of 127 election observers and organisational support for the Sweden Democrats in the Swedish election (Figure 18).

Rassemblement National

Président du Rassemblement National

Monsieur Jimmie ÅKESSON
Président
Démocrates de Suède
Boîte 20085
104 60 Stockholm
Suède

Nanterre, le 8 août 2018

Monsieur,

L'association Rassemlement National a accueillie bien votre proposition du recommencement de la collaboration. Prochainement nous sommes prêts de trouver la possibilité pour la rencontre des partis parce que la sécurisation de nos pays et en particulier, la décision des problèmes de la migration incontrôlée, exige la consolidation des efforts du côté des patriotes de la Suède, France, Italie, Autriche, Pologne, Belgique, Pays-bas.

Nous sommes préoccupés des événements politiques en Suède et nous espérons que les Démocrates de Suède réussiront de forcer leurs positions à Riksdag et en 2019 nous espérons d'augmenter notre mission au Parlement européen où la fraction L'Europe des nations et des libertés veut voir vos représentants dans ses rangs.

Nous avons le plaisir de vous annoncer que selon votre demande l'association Rassemlement National a préparé 127 d'observateurs qui suivront les élections à Riksdag et a consacré une somme des actifs du parti pour la participation dans la campagne de propagande des Démocrates de Suède. S'autorisant du propre exemple on comprend bien que pour les patriotes il est difficile de faire concurrence aux adeptes de la politique de la globalisation rigide. Le Rassemblement National a décidé d'accorder le soutien financier à votre parti pour réaliser la campagne électorale effective.

En considération de la pression immense sur les partis droits et du mépris des autres points de vue par l'UE nous croyons qu'il est nécessaire de contribuer au succès des Démocrates de Suède aux élections à Riksdag. Nous attendons de vous les nouvelles propositions de la collaboration.

Je vous prie d'agréer, Monsieur, l'expression de mes sentiments distinguées

Marine Le Pen

Rassemblement National – 76/78,rue des Suisses 92000 Nanterre
Tél: 01.41.20.20.00 – Courriel:marinelepen@rassemblementnational.fr

FIGURE 18. Fake letter from Marine Le Pen to Jimmie Åkesson

On the surface of it, it looks like the creators of these fake documents attempted to spin the issue of Russian election interference in various Western countries, using the Sweden Democrats as a potentially helpful tool. It should be noted, however, that there is no evidence that the leadership of the Sweden Democrats has favoured any unique political ties to the Kremlin, although a few party members in the past have expressed an understanding of or sympathy towards Putin (although they were, however, usually reprimanded for this).

The story also has a broader international dimension. On the peculiar website StudentRoom, a forum for student exchange, a third fake document also appeared, a letter purportedly written by Ukraine's prime minister Volodymyr Groysman to his minister of information policy Yuriy Stets. The letter supposedly revealed a far-reaching Ukrainian conspiracy to meddle with the Swedish elections in order to advance the agenda of the Social Democrats and the Green Party, and to damage the Sweden Democrats.[867] Interestingly, the post attracted a few comments from readers who apparently thought the documents might have been authentic. It is worth citing the unredacted document at length to give a feel for the forgery's logical (in) coherence and convoluted language. Notably, the NATO Strategic Communications Centre of Excellence (NATO StratCom COE) was also involved in the alleged conspiracy:

> *Taking into account that Ukraine is interested in continuing the cooperation with the Swedish prime Minister Stefan Löfven and expresses the confidence to the ruling coalition within the Social Democratic Workers' Party and the Green Party, the Ministry of Information Policy of Ukraine is suggested discrediting the activities of the Sweden Democrats in social networks and the media, this party having a great chance to increase its representation in the Riksdag and lining up with Russia on many political and social issues. While preparing the information materials, it is recommended to use the logic of the charges and the theses reflected in the prior Ministry's publications on the StratCom disclosures of the activities Russian hackers had provided in the interest of the Sweden Democrats.*

What does the reference to StratCom here mean? Well, the article links to a fake pornographic Twitter account 'Axel Solberg', who on the Medium website posted an alleged hacked letter from the StratCom COE alleging Russian cyberattacks against the Social Democrats.[868] The same article also provided several links to Swedish web forums where various rumours about the election were spread, including a fake Facebook post allegedly by a well-known member of parliament for the Sweden Democrats.[869]

In conclusion, and in contrast to the case discussed in the previous section, it is notable that no Russian state media outlets ever referenced any of these above forgeries. However, a contextual analysis suggests certain Russian fingerprints. First, the main narratives contained in the forgeries – that the Swedish parliamentary system cannot be trusted – all followed the overall Russian media reporting on the Swedish 2018 parliamentary elections. Second, the style, language, and tone of the fake documents resembled established Russian fakes – as did the mode of dissemination of the fake documents and the various stories that went along with them. Third, the different conspiracies added up to a smear of Western states, Ukraine, and NATO, three favourite targets of Russian influence operations. Notably, the analysis later conducted in the Secondary Infektion report provided a technical attribution, confirming the origin of the campaigns in Russia.[870]

Case study 3: 'Sweden has given up the fight against the coronavirus'

The global pandemic caused by COVID-19 severely affected the global economy and confined millions of people across the world to their homes. Whereas most EU countries opted for a lockdown strategy, closing schools, workplaces, and borders in March 2020, the Swedish authorities implemented comparatively mild restrictions. The Swedish strategy at the time received scorn and apprehension in the international media, but also cautiously optimistic assessments that a liberal approach to restrictions might be the more sustainable policy choice in a protracted pandemic. In retrospect, demographic evidence suggests that the Swedish strategy was rather successful in comparison with many other states, while Sweden also avoided many of the negative side-effects of hard lockdowns.

From the outbreak of the pandemic, Chinese and Russian state media outlets initiated a campaign to peddle conspiracy theories and disinformation about the COVID-19 virus.[871] A few of the Chinese campaigns targeted Sweden directly. A Swedish journalist and China expert, for example, documented how the official newspaper of the Chinese Communist Party, Global Times, accused Sweden of being 'the first European country to openly surrender to the new Corona pneumonia epidemic'. Chinese diplomats and party loyalists turned to Twitter with accusations that the Swedish government was neglecting human rights – a concept otherwise rarely championed by Chinese state officials.[872]

Major Russian-language news outlets, such as *Rossiya 24*, RIA Novosti, *Izvestiya,*[873]and *Rossiyskaya Gazeta,*[874] provided sceptical and/or critical opinions about the Swedish approach to the COVID-19 pandemic. There existed, however, a difference in comparison with Chinese state media: apart from more obscure news websites with limited readership, mainstream reporting in Russian-language news outlets tended (as a general rule) not to target Sweden with overtly misleading or false claims regarding the pandemic.[875]

There was, for sure, (at least) one notable exception to this rule. On 17 March 2020 a Russian-language Azeri news website, www.haqqin.az, published an article that within four weeks was read more than 1.7 million times, and achieved more than 277,000 interactions on Facebook (Figure 19).[876] If this very high level of interaction is true, it means that the article is one of the most widely read articles ever published about Sweden in the Russian-language media. Furthermore, it reappeared in full on other Russian and Ukrainian language websites, such as www.vazhno.ru, and was thus further amplified. Vazhno.ru targets Russians in the Baltic States, and had about 7.5 million readers in February 2020.

The suspicious article in question was titled 'Sweden has given up the fight against the coronavirus: "This virus poses no harm to people!"'[877] Its main argument was that the Swedish authorities denied the risks associated with COVID-19, and that this explained why the Swedish government had refrained from 'implementing any extraordinary measures whatsoever'. Furthermore, the article argued: 'Swedish scientists claim, in contrast to their colleagues in other countries, that the Coronavirus is ... safe!' In the last paragraph the article concluded that 'at stake are the life and health of millions of people'. No evidence, however, was provided by the text's anonymous author to support these alarmist statements.[878]

The article had more peculiar content. Notably, it referenced claims allegedly published on social media by a Polish-Swedish triathlon athlete that all sport events in Sweden were open without restrictions, and that athletes from elsewhere in the world should therefore visit Sweden. A fact-checking site in Kazakhstan, which has drawn attention to the article, argued that the athlete in fact had never written or claimed anything of the kind – as if, by the way, this would have made any difference.[879] Furthermore, the article was illustrated with a seemingly unrelated picture of a group outside

the Swedish royal castle protesting against the treatment of Falun Gong in China.

One more striking feature of the story should be highlighted. Haqqin.az was at the time operated by an Azeri journalist who in 2011 was named a prisoner of conscience by Amnesty International. In 2013, however, Amnesty publicly ceased its cooperation with the journalist, arguing that he had 'misled the organization about the source of funding for a project he had requested Amnesty International involvement in'.[880] Amnesty also criticised statements on haqqin.az, alleging that the website was used by the Azeri authorities to discredit European criticism of human rights violations in Azerbaijan.[881]

The narrative that Sweden was denying the dangers of the COVID-19 pandemic was, in the spring and autumn of 2020, seemingly strong. There were, needless to say, clear similarities between the fake narratives pushed in the Chinese and Russian stories about Sweden's handling of the pandemic. One important difference was that Russian-language disinformation pieces about Sweden typically targeted mainly the Russian-language audience, whereas the Chinese disinformation was part of a broader international campaign to apparently deflect attention from China's culpability for the ongoing pandemic. The article published by haqqin.az was notable for four reasons: its seemingly large impact in the Russian-language media sphere; its obviously false content; its simultaneous publication by Russian and Ukrainian websites; and the fact that haqqin.az has been previously tied to Azeri state-sponsored campaigns against the EU. The origin of this specific campaign, it should be stated, is difficult to establish with certainty.

One remaining problem is how to properly assess the article's reported levels of interaction. If (part of) the interaction was non-organic, that is, manipulated, it is reasonable to assume that someone invested time and resources in order to amplify the article's impact (for commercial, political, or other reasons). This question is, however, outside the scope of this chapter.

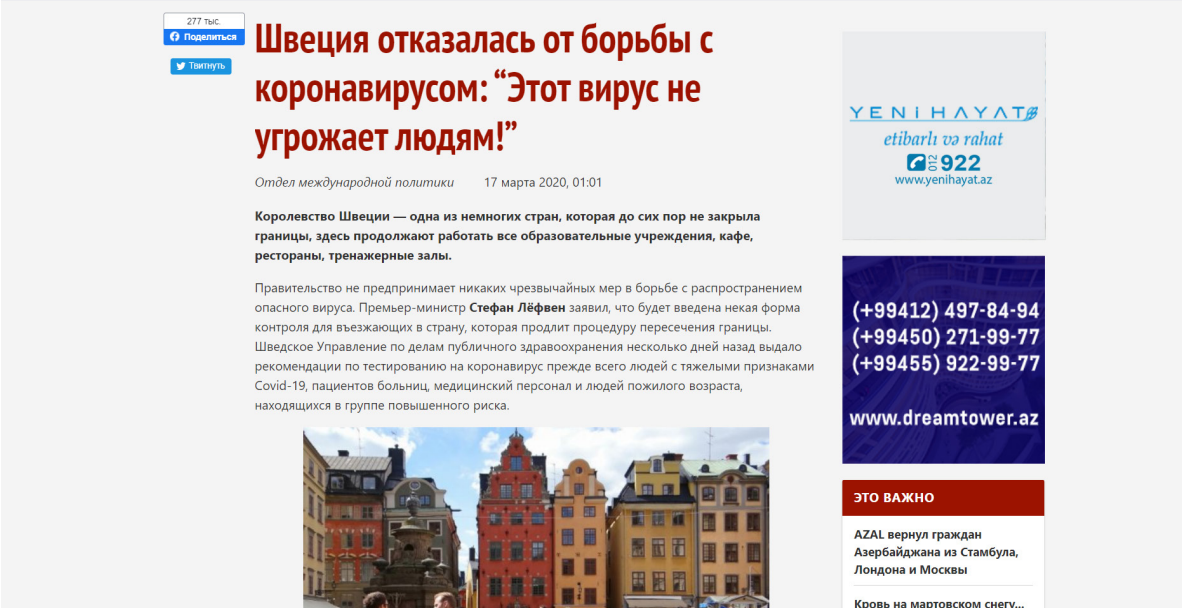


FIGURE 19. Screenshot of article alleging how Sweden had given up the fight against COVID-19.

Concluding discussion

There exists a strong continuity in the foreign policy goals of Russia towards Sweden. Since the early days of Cold War, maintaining Sweden's military non-alignment ('neutrality' as it was called in Moscow) was a key strategic interest. The largest information influence operation conducted by Russia towards Sweden in recent years was also connected to the question of Swedish – NATO cooperation (through the NATO Host Agreement) and further NATO integration. The application by the Swedish government to join NATO in spring 2022, followed by formal membership on 7 March 2024, can be regarded as a clear Russian strategic failure. In this regard, Russian information influence operations have proven ineffectual and potentially counterproductive – as they contributed to raising public awareness in Sweden regarding Russian foreign policy conduct. Whatever the potential merit of Russian information influence operations, Russian actions in other areas and domains have muted their effectiveness. Different societal strengths in Sweden, such as media literacy and strong situational awareness, are typically mentioned as the main factors contributing to the country's resilience (one could also add the fact that Sweden is a relatively small country, and the Swedish language belongs to a relatively small language group).

Russian setbacks in the military or diplomatic arena are no reason for complacency. The continuation of the Russian war on Ukraine, and the subsequent increase in tensions in the Baltic Sea region, suggests that Sweden could be the target of Russian influence activities also in the future. Their relatively low cost, in combination with plausible denial, makes the use of influence activities an attractive option. The historical cleavage in Swedish domestic politics regarding NATO could be one potential vector of attack, although a strong parliamentary majority in favour of membership emerged following Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine in February 2022. Other societal cleavages, such as the issue of problems connected to crime and/or migration in Sweden, have already been favourite targets of Russian state media and could be so also in the future. Notably, domestic and foreign policy dimensions can overlap, as in the case of the Quran burnings, Swedish-Turkish negotiations on NATO, and anti-Swedish protests in the Middle East. Another area which Russia may have an incentive to target is foreign policy, such as military support for Ukraine or sanctions towards Russia. As always, Russian state media and their various offshoots in troll factories, useful idiots, and agents of influence can easily amplify campaigns initiated by other actors also, for various reasons. Often, the exact origin of a campaign will be difficult to determine with certainty.

In assessing the potential influence of Russian information influence operations, it is important to remember how they can also be potentially amplified for three different target groups: a Russian domestic audience, a Swedish domestic audience, and/or an international audience. In several of the case studies described above, all of these groups were targeted in various ways. A response to Russian influence activities must therefore be flexible enough to reach not only a Swedish audience, but also audiences in other geographical areas, depending on the character of the particular campaign. The attacks against Swedish diplomatic missions in the Middle East, following the news about Quran burnings in Sweden, are a case in point. Campaigns can erupt quickly, and with little forewarning. In such instances, it is crucial that different societal actors – from the government level to media, academia, and civil society – have the tools necessary to manage and/or comprehend a potential threat.

Conclusion

Kristofers Kārlis Krūmiņš

Russia's strategic objectives towards the region

Russia's strategic interest and influence have been recognised as present in all Nordic and Baltic countries to various extents. This report has established the objectives, methods, and effects of Russia's information influence operations across the Nordic-Baltic region, noting the degree to which the Kremlin has or has not been effective and why. The publication demonstrates that certain factors that work in favour or against Russia's influence might be common across all countries in the region, while others are country specific – as described below. While the Nordic countries seem to observe lower levels of Russian information influence operations than the Baltic states do, they, nevertheless, are experiencing activities that are preparing the information environment for potentially more targeted and intense campaigns in the future, if an opportunity presents itself.

Overall, Russia's objectives have been rather similar across the different case studies, with the intensity of each objective dependent on the respective audience's susceptibility towards various narratives and discursive tropes. Russia's objectives mainly include sowing distrust in local politics and institutions while also discrediting the broader values of democracy and human rights held by the so-called collective West.

After the beginning of the full-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022, a new objective has been to induce defeatism and reduce a country's will to support Ukraine's fight against Russia. This is achieved by portraying NATO and its allies as weak and incapable of resisting Russia, as well as discrediting NATO as allegedly being controlled by the US as a colonising power which imposes itself on European countries.

While some of the current narratives used by Russia might even be contradictory to what has been advocated previously, they nevertheless serve the overarching and historically consistent primary purpose of discrediting the image of the West and portraying it as opposed to Russia. In addition Russia seeks to sow distrust among Western allies, thus dispelling the perception that all NATO member states act as a unified whole, especially when it comes to the US's relations with its European allies.

Some of Russia's information influence operations have the objective of creating a deterrent effect by voicing continuous threats against its perceived adversaries, such as NATO member states. As noted in several country chapters, Russia uses nuclear threats with the aim of deterring the Nordic-Baltic countries from assisting Ukraine or hindering the build-up of domestic defence capabilities against potential Russian aggression. In some cases Russia hopes to implement reflexive control whereby the Nordic-Baltic countries would take decisions disadvantageous to their own national, regional, or collective security.

Last but not least, regional security, particularly in the Nordic countries, is affected by Russia's ambitions in the Arctic. Influence operations in Svalbard or sowing discord between Copenhagen and Greenland is part of Russia's strategy vis-à-vis the Arctic, where it aims to strengthen its presence and weaken the influence of other Arctic nations.

Russia's information influence operations, either attributable to the state directly or done by other actors that support Russia's aims, are targeting not only the populations of

the countries covered by this report, but often focus on creating a certain opinion about those countries for the domestic audience in Russia. This can be understood as an attempt by the Kremlin to solidify public opinion at home in order to create legitimacy for itself and the campaigns waged abroad. Thus, even as some impacts of the information influence operations abroad might be limited, the actors involved might still deem them a success given the resonance of their activities in Russia. Studying such a strategy goes beyond the scope of this publication, although recognising these motivations can yield valuable insights into when and why Russia resorts to certain messaging which at first glance may seem ineffective on foreign audiences.

Russia's information influence approaches: similarities and differences

For decades, Russia has deployed a broad spectrum of hybrid influence tools against the Nordic-Baltic countries. This report highlights that a certain degree of similarity can be observed across states, despite the differences in characteristics of domestic audiences, economies, and politics. The aims appear similar – to confuse and intimidate. Confusion pertains to trust in domestic and Western politics, and intimidation concerns hindrance of regional and Western cooperation and resistance to Russia's power ambitions. However, the array of tools, and the extent to which they are deployed, varies.

More visibly aggressive are the information influence operations against the Baltic states – Latvia, Lithuania, Estonia – and Finland, due to their geographic proximity and comparatively larger Russophone populations. Apart from attempts to influence local information environments through exploiting domestic media and social media, using proxy and accidental actors who proliferate the Kremlin's narratives on political and civil society levels, Russia has also resorted to cyberattacks, the weaponisation of migration, espionage, and sabotage. Finland and the Baltic states have been targets of Russian (and by extension-Belarusian) directed migrant flows on their borders that are later used in information campaigns attempting to discredit Western institutions and portray their respect for human rights as hypocritical. Nordic countries have also noted such tactics to a varying degree and express caution against the intensification of Russian influence operations in the future.

The reports from the Nordic-Baltic countries in this study have outlined numerous cases where similarities in Russian tactics are presented, the most prominent of which are recounted below.

Information channels used by Russia in the post-pandemic world continue to exploit the disinformation networks established during the Covid-19 pandemic. Russia has tried to extend the anti-government scepticism common with Covid-19 deniers to sow distrust about their governments' actions regarding Russia. These sentiments are subsequently easier to amplify using bots and social media sites because of pre-existing attitudes in support of discourses rooted in a conspiratorial mindset and general distrust of democratic institutions and the media.

The aforementioned opportunistic approach perhaps stands in contrast to some of the more strategic methods employed by Russia. It typically includes **state-funded foreign-facing media channels that not only publish articles and offer commentary in Russian or in English, but also attempt to extend their influence in the local languages.** However, that has proven to be difficult since all the Nordic-Baltic languages are unique and are not widely spoken; the machine-generated translations employed in pro-Kremlin campaigns contain mistakes and linguistic deficiencies, making them easily discernible from organic texts. Therefore the

Kremlin and its sympathisers have been more effective in targeting the Russophone parts of the region's populations, largely based in Latvia and Estonia, where the Russian language can be used and there is a well-established habit in some segments of the populations of consuming Russian language information sources. In this setting, **historical ties and geographic proximity** also play a role, providing relatable context for the Kremlin's narratives.

Across the countries in this study, **direct channels of media influence have been banned,** such as the international networks Sputnik and Russia Today, as well as many Russian national television channels previously available to audiences (mostly targeting Russophone populations in the Baltic states). It is unclear, however, how many people, despite the illegality of such acts, continue to access these channels through other means. For example, in the Baltics, more information and data are needed about the situation post 2022 to properly assess the continuous Russian influence despite the legal remedies employed. Although Russia's capabilities in this regard have declined, the **Kremlin's channels remain accessible via rebroadcasts through social media channels (Telegram, YouTube) or by consumers using virtual private networks to access such content directly**. It is challenging to monitor social media accounts which continue to spread pro-Kremlin content, as well as assess their level of affiliation with Moscow and actual impact on audiences.

Several countries in the study have reported **forged letters and false virtual meetings** that seek to sow distrust in local governments. Forged documents have been a continuous tactic in countries like Denmark and Sweden, exploiting the lack of control over some media channels that allows these forgeries to reach broader audiences, despite being quickly exposed as fake. In a similar fashion, Latvia, Denmark, and others have reported fake virtual meetings and interviews involving high-ranking government officials that have been pranked, a tool that aims to parade the lack of competence of Western institutions more broadly.

Russia continues to employ so-called **'useful idiots' and individuals with alleged expertise** that are portrayed as the voice of reason in countries that are targeted. On the one hand, these can be unsuspecting individuals who happen to mirror pro-Kremlin narratives and are conveniently exploited by Kremlin-friendly media and organisations. On the other hand, as case studies from the three Baltic states show, they can be **agents of foreign influence who have a direct rapport with the Russian security services**. In both cases, these individuals have a dual use to the Kremlin: reaffirming its narratives to various audiences (international and Russian domestic) and demonstrating discord within – or 'alternative facts' stemming from – the Western nations. Estonia and Latvia have also reported cases of different **civil society organisations that hide behind civic activism while popularising Russian-backed narratives** about the supposedly resurgent fascism in the West. Norway has noted activity serving the Kremlin's interests also in **the academic and science field**.

In a bid to divide societies, the parties and entities on the extremes of the political spectrum have received tacit support. Examples in this report have included Latvia, Estonia, Finland, and Iceland, which have each noticed channels attributable to Russia fuelling narratives that **support the far-right and far-left anti-establishment rhetoric**. Although these activities fall short of direct electoral interference, Russia continues to target domestic politics in a bid to polarise societies in the West.

When it comes to the narratives that Russia uses, there are slight differences between the countries. **Those that host Russophone populations and have been targets of contentious memory politics are more intensively targeted with narratives about the alleged revival of Nazism, Russophobia, and discrimination against minorities**. The examples typically include Latvia, Estonia, and Lithuania, although some of the regions in the Norwegian High North are also subject to this. Moreover, there has been an important **shift regarding Sweden and Finland, the most recent countries to join NATO**. Previously Russia's information campaigns supported narratives about friendship and positive sentiments between the two sides. However, given the failure to deter these countries from joining the Alliance, the narratives

took a much more negative and aggressive turn. In the Finnish case, threats were a common tactic shortly before accession, and afterwards the campaigns concentrated on discrediting the Finnish government and pointed to alleged Russophobia.

A common thread among all the countries in the study has been the civilisational and imperialistic narrative that is **discrediting the Nordic-Baltic countries in an attempt to show the United States as 'the puppet master'** that has allegedly been successful at 'colonising' these states. Such narratives are concurrent with the attempts to portray local governments as corrupt and untrustworthy, thus fuelling a general anti-establishment sentiment which proves attractive to politically extreme groups and pre-existing conspiracy networks as outlined previously.

Countries' strengths and vulnerabilities vis-à-vis hostile influence

The case studies by countries in this study not only assess retrospectively the recent tendencies of Russian information influence but also point to potential future trends and vulnerabilities that decision-makers should heed. Insofar as the Russian information influence operations have not deterred Finland and Sweden from joining NATO, nor have they significantly hindered any efforts of the Nordic or Baltic countries to help Ukraine, one can conclude that Russia has failed in its most important immediate strategic objectives. Nevertheless, to avoid complacency, several vulnerabilities have been recounted in the country reports in the context of current and future trends.

The success of Russian information influence depends on similar determining factors. **Overall, hostile influence is more potent in countries with lower levels of trust in democratic institutions and that have populations that consume information in the Russian language.** Thus, it is observable that due to the higher levels of trust and participation in the democratic institutions in countries such as Denmark, Finland, Iceland, Sweden, and Norway, Russian influence activities are of lesser consequence. **Socio-economic stability and societal cohesion** are essential factors for resilience against hostile influence. All the Nordic countries project a stable economic outlook that is not as prone to exploitation in the face of short-term fluctuations, compared with the Baltic states that are less affluent and, thus, more susceptible to Russian narratives about economic downturn and social injustice. Furthermore, societal cohesion proves to be a facilitating factor for Russia's influence activities across all the countries analysed. For example, Russia continues its attempts to sow discord between the titular nations and ethnic Russians in Estonia and Latvia, while paying special attention to the centre – periphery divide in Norway's regions bordering Russia.

Another crucial element in **understanding the potential scope of Russian information influence operations is domestic media environments**. On the one hand, open, pluralistic, and editorially independent media environments with a stable income contribute to societal resilience against foreign information influence operations. On the other hand, Sweden and Denmark have noted that their open and diverse media landscape can sometimes make it easier for Kremlin-sponsored channels or messages to infiltrate it. Conversely, in Iceland, the media landscape is small and media coverage is reactive and often based on posts from social media, which means that false narratives spread more easily. Also, it remains difficult to assess the effects of banning direct access to Kremlin-affiliated media since some segments of the populations, particularly in Latvia and Estonia, choose to go out of their way to access pro-Kremlin media as a habitual and alternative source of information.

The Nordic-Baltic countries are clearly concerned with the questions of **media literacy and societal resilience** as important elements

to diminish the effects of Russian information influence attempts. The chapter on Lithuania shows an example of how a **whole-of-society approach and an increasing level of cooperation between the government and civil society** can foster resilience against threats in the information environment. Similarly, educational efforts to bolster societal defences against disinformation have proven strong, as pointed out in the chapters on Estonia and Finland. Such activities provide varying degrees of awareness of the threats Russia poses to national information environments and make the population less susceptible to confusion during crises and more resilient to disinformation campaigns. Perhaps those states that have experienced Russian aggression, as in the case of the Baltics and Finland, while hosting remnants of the Soviet legacy, are better positioned to estimate threats stemming from their neighbour. While all the country report authors note that **most members of society are conscious of the threats Russia presents and support the main political values espoused by the West**, there is still room for political extremes and other domestic actors to mirror pro-Kremlin rhetoric and manipulate societal sentiments.

The ever-evolving landscape of global politics provides Russia with **opportunities to act situationally** to exert influence. One such example, common across the Nordic-Baltic, is the question of **migration**. On the one hand, the Kremlin has been portraying the Nordic countries as struggling with immigration, framing national governments as inept in their alleged disregard for the well-being and security of their own populations, or morally corrupt in allegedly promoting double standards concerning the individual freedom of migrants. Cases of failed migrant integration have been used to allege the general failure of 'Western values', as a means of inciting societal polarisation. On the other hand, the Kremlin is known to have orchestrated migration across the Nordic and Baltic borders with Russia and Belarus to test preparedness, to intimidate, and to portray the target countries as the weak links of regional or Alliance's security.

Overall, this publication demonstrates that all Nordic-Baltic countries have experienced Russia's information influence operations to a varying degree; these operations have adapted over time, as the security situation evolved in the region with new Nordic members joining NATO. In spite of Russia's aggressive rhetoric and other influence activities, the Nordic-Baltic region has demonstrated **unity in continuing its support for Ukraine and boosting both individual and collective defence capabilities in the region**. The countries analysed have also taken numerous steps to defend their societies against hostile information influence and, hopefully, will continue working together to build up their shared capability to mitigate the effects of such influence.

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