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# RUSSIAN MEDIA LANDSCAPE

STRUCTURES, MECHANISMS, AND TECHNOLOGIES OF  
INFORMATION OPERATIONS

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” The present study contains a brief analysis of the political, financial, and legislative influence brought to bear on the Russian media environment.

## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Various reports that have been published by the NATO Strategic Communications Centre of Excellence contain detailed analyses of Russian information influence activities, focusing mainly on technology and software. The present study contains a brief analysis of the political, financial, and legislative influence brought to bear on the Russian media environment, making it possible for the Kremlin to influence opinion domestically and to conduct special media operations against Western countries and their allies.

This report is devoted to deep aspects of Russian information influence activities that have rarely been the subject of detailed studies. It is an analysis of the structure created by the Russian state to control the flow of information in the paradigm of a ‘hybrid war’ against democratic countries. The paper is presented in three parts:

In the section **MECHANISMS of STATE CONTROL over the MEDIA in RUSSIA**, we show how control over the Russian media space has been consolidated into the hands of a few powerful individuals through transfer of ownership and mandated changes, and

provide data on mergers and acquisitions involving Russia’s largest media assets and their subordination to the state. We examine the mechanisms of political influence on information producers by means of non-profit structures and a system of personnel appointments. We provide data on state financing of Russia’s information policy at the federal and regional levels. We discuss examples of the involvement of Russian special services in state information policy, drawing on the experience of the author and on academic research. And finally, we describe how recent changes in legislation and policy can be used to limit freedom of

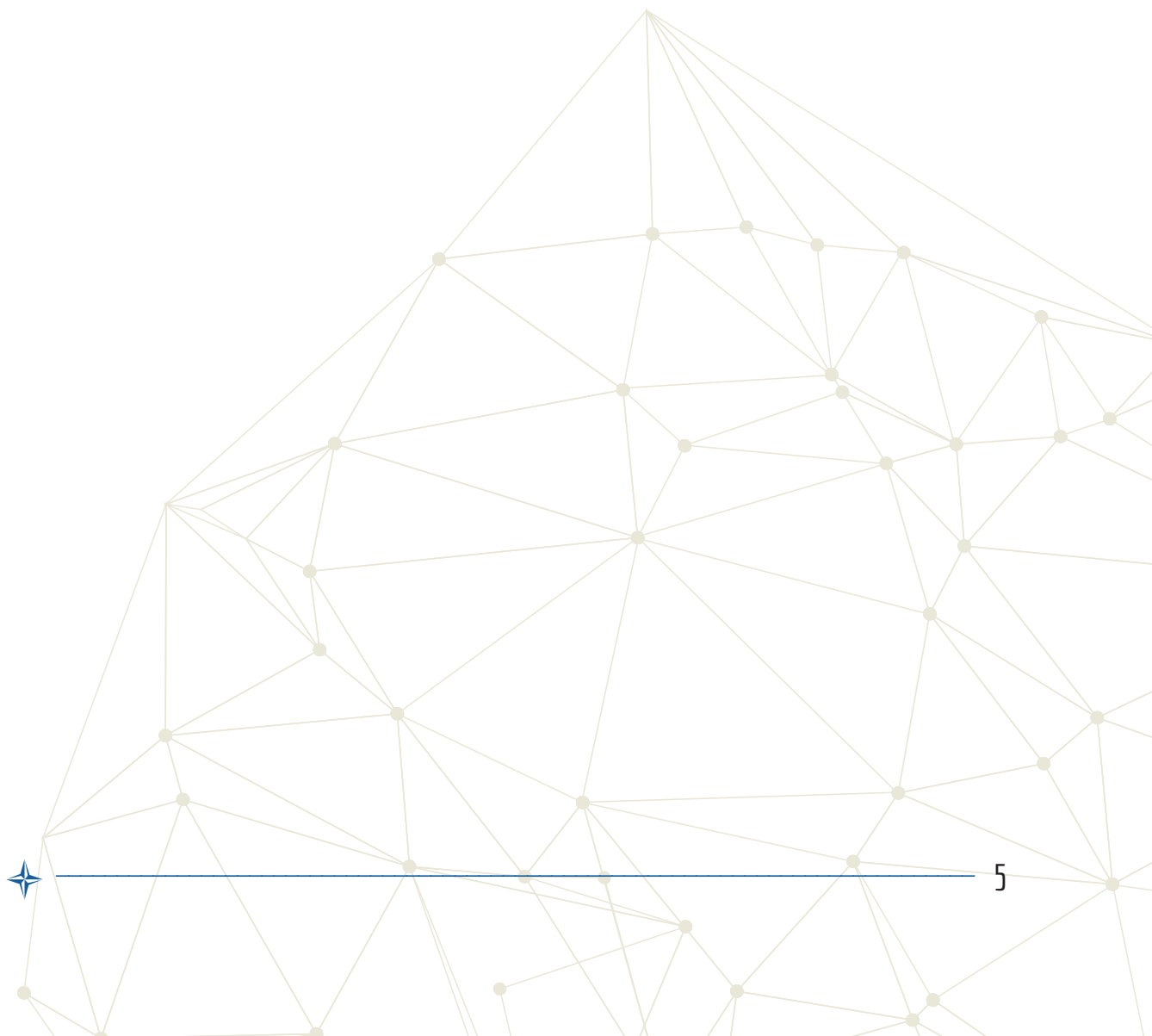


speech, to undermine citizens' rights to publicly express their own opinions, and to oust foreign owners from the national information sphere.

In the section **TRENDS in RUSSIAN INFORMATION STRATEGY**, we investigate tendencies for strengthening the state monopoly in the media space. Here we discuss the Russian conception of the current tools and techniques of hybrid war—the 'mirror principle', the 'cloud adversary', the 'compatriot strategy', and other weak state strategies and tactics designed to gain

advantage without triggering kinetic military conflict—and provide examples of special information operations against European states.

In the section **INFORMATION INFLUENCE ATTACKS AGAINST NATO, WESTERN COUNTRIES, and their ALLIES**, we describe the information influence products Russian information operatives create for foreign and domestic consumptions and we analyse the content of the RT news agency and a number of other Kremlin-backed media structures.



# GLOSSARY: A NOTE ON TERMS

As there is no agreed upon standardised terminology for elements involving information operations and warfare, in this report we will use the following definitions:

**Information Warfare**—any action to deny, exploit, corrupt, or destroy the enemy's information and its functions in pursuit of a competitive advantage.<sup>1</sup>

**Information Operations**—the collection of several tools of influence, from diplomacy to information. May include gathering of tactical, strategic, or operational information about an adversary and also the dissemination of propaganda in pursuit of a competitive advantage over an opponent. Coordinated activity undertaken in support of political and military objectives, in order to affect the opponent's decision-makers by influencing their will, attacking their decision-making processes, and shaping their understanding.<sup>2</sup>

**Special Information Operations**—Information Operations carried out by special services.

**Information Influence Activities**—Information used in an illegitimate way against an adversary. Can be deployed covertly and deceptively by foreign powers to undermine critical democratic processes, control public dialogue, and influence decision making. Information influence activities should be considered hostile as they undermine public confidence in important social institutions, isolate vulnerable communities, and contribute to social and political polarisation. Disinformation is an example of information influence activity.<sup>3</sup>

**Information Influence Campaigns**—Targeted campaigns, made up of many influence operations, to persuade and influence local and foreign populations on certain subjects, used by the government to achieve geopolitical goals via the media. Also referred to as propaganda. Coordinated, direct or indirect application of national diplomatic, informational, military, economic, business, corruption, educational, and other capabilities to affect attitudes, behaviors, decisions, or outcomes.<sup>4</sup>

**Media Operations**—line of activity developed to ensure timely, accurate and effective provision [through the media] of Public Information and implementation of Public Relations policy within the operational environment.<sup>5</sup>

**Special Media Operations**—Media Operations carried out by special services.





” Russia’s information influence campaigns are produced by specialised agencies led by the Administration of the President of the Russian Federation—for example, the Internet Research Agency and the Federal News Agency.

## INTRODUCTION

The political-military situation in the world today is complex and full of risks. Some worrisome trends include the instability of world markets, large-scale military conflicts in North Africa and the Middle East, the migration crisis in Europe, the collapse of international treaties on the limitation of conventional and nuclear weapons while Iran and North Korea continue to have active nuclear programmes, and now the coronavirus pandemic. The situation is complicated by increasing tensions between major powers such as the United States, China, and Russia and regional stakeholders, such as the EU. The processes of emerging from a centrally planned economy, as the Soviet Union, to forming a single market for raw materials, goods, and services, was hampered by new centres of regional influence and their desire for dominance. All players in the new system of international relations want to change the rules of the game and the laws of competition in their favour. These are continuing challenges to global peace and security.

Russian President Vladimir Putin’s regime has the potential to integrate into the international community in accordance with the values of democracy and the free market, but has shown little motivation to do so, as compliance with international rules would reduce Russia’s freedom to manoeuvre according to its politically-driven business model; it would be forced to act more transparently than it currently does. The desire for regional and global influence has led Russia’s top leadership to act in violation of international law on multiple occasions. During the Second Chechen War in 1999,

the Georgian War in 2008, and again during the conflict with Ukraine over the regions of Donetsk and Luhansk beginning in 2014, the Kremlin turned to the exercise of raw military power involving armed aggression and territorial expansion. At the same time, it toughened its domestic and foreign policy by suppressing the opposition, restricting citizens’ rights at home, and commencing a programme of large-scale modernisation of the armed forces. It unleashed information aggression against Western countries and began intervening in the internal affairs of states around the world. This



newly confrontational policy also led Russia to implement a model of economic expansion in the countries belonging to the Commonwealth of Independent States and the Balkans.<sup>6</sup> At the same time, the EU countries' dependence on Russian hydrocarbons has increased, making the EU less antagonistic towards Russia than it has been in the past. Since 2015, Russia has been actively involved in the Syrian Civil War on the side of government forces. In addition, illegal Russian armed groups are taking part in proxy wars in Ukraine, Libya, and other countries in Africa<sup>7</sup> and Latin America.<sup>8</sup>

According to Russian political strategists, the combination of military and information aggression can keep Putin in power for the long term, consolidating his image as the 'most successful leader', the 'father of the nation' and, at the same time, a 'sacred victim of the West'. The main direction of Russia's foreign policy has become Putin's struggle with the West to save Russia and to save himself.<sup>9</sup> Information operations involving the media have become the weapons of Russian special services in a 'hybrid war' with the United States, Europe, and their allies around the world. 'Hybrid war' is still an ill-defined notion in conflict studies. The NATO definition is a 'type of threat that combines conventional, irregular and asymmetric activities in time and space'.<sup>10</sup> 'Hybrid war' refers to the use of unconventional methods as part of a multi-domain war-fighting approach. These methods aim to disrupt and disable an opponent's actions without engaging

in open hostilities, including information influence campaigns. For the purposes of this study, 'information influence campaigns' are considered to be a set of measures conducted by Russia's state structures intended to destabilise the socio-political situation in Western democracies by psychologically manipulating public opinion; they are a means of direct, but non-military, influence on the West.

Putin's actions demonstrate his concern with mass popular protests and his possible removal from office.<sup>11</sup> That is why Russia has created powerful mechanisms to counter the influence of the West, which the Russian president considers to be the primary threat to the stability of his regime and the source of all of Russia's internal and external problems.<sup>12</sup>

President Putin, who was also the former director of Russia's intelligence agency—the Federal Security Service, determines the specifics of the policies created by his regime. His thinking is implemented as a set of special information operations designed to produce and promote Russia's information influence.

In the period from 2014–20, a powerful information monitoring and producing structure was set in place in Russia, including an extensive network of media resources financed from Russia's federal and regional budgets.<sup>13</sup> The Arab Spring and the uprising in Ukraine brought the Russian leadership to a turning point. It began to





see the free media and, particularly, a free internet, as the main enemies of Russia's state-controlled media. Prior to the war in Ukraine, Russia already had well-developed media structures with large resources and consistently updated plans regarding how to achieve and maintain control of the narratives and messaging.<sup>14</sup>

Russia's information influence campaigns are produced by specialised agencies led by the Administration of the President of the Russian Federation—for example, the Internet Research Agency and the Federal News Agency.<sup>15</sup> The strategic planning of information influence campaigns is carried out by numerous analytical centres, also controlled by the Presidential Administration, as will be elucidated further on in the text.

Russian information influence campaigns produce content according to uniform standards developed under the auspices of the Presidential Administration. Monitoring of Russian state media - RT and Sputnik in particular - has shown that the administration's agenda is universal for all mass media. If a theme appears in one publication, it tends to appear simultaneously in all Russian media. However, information intended for Russian audiences differs from narratives designed for foreign audiences.

Information for domestic consumption is characterised by themes of national revival and patriotism and the criticism of all aspects of life in the US and Europe.

*Information for external consumption is customised depending on the audience and the strategic objective. For example, RT in Spanish may lean more to the left and focus on Latin America, while Sputnik in Eastern Partnership countries<sup>16</sup> will focus on topics that strengthen national ties to Russia, praise the strength of Russian economy, and the like.*

The content of Russian information operations intended for foreign audiences is largely determined by both opportunistic objectives and long-term strategic goals. The public statements of Russian politicians show that the rehabilitation of the USSR as a symbol of geopolitical power and as a respected welfare state is a major goal. In this light, it is not only Belarus and Ukraine that are the targets of Russian expansion, but also potentially countries in Central Asia, the Caucasus, and the Baltics. Russia promotes a special narrative to its 'compatriots'—ethnic Russians and Russian-speakers who experienced the Soviet period and their descendants.<sup>17</sup> By claiming 'we will defend our compatriots no matter where they live', Russia is fostering ties with citizens of former Soviet states in an attempt to bring them into the fold, at least psychologically.

Concurrently, Russia's information influence operations, both internal and external, have one overriding task—to prevent the possibility of a Russian colour revolution, regarded as a main threat to the personal power of Putin and his associates. 'We see

what tragic consequences the wave of so-called colour revolutions has led to. For us this is a lesson and a warning. We should do everything necessary so that nothing similar ever happens in Russia', Putin told participants of a Russian Security Council meeting on combating extremism in 2014.

Journalists and propagandists Dmitry Kiselev, Vladimir Solovyov, and Margarita Simonyan, and First Deputy Chiefs of Staff of the Presidential Administration Alexey Gromov and Sergey Kiriyyenko, have been identified as the main figures involved in state information policy aimed at solving Russia's strategic problems. Primarily, their task is to weaken the image of Western countries, which, as the Kremlin surmises, have inspired the colour revolutions; to this end they employ hybrid warfare tools, including discrediting democratic institutions and political leaders and

inspiring and supporting mass protests. For example, in their article 'The Dominant Military-Political Development Scenario in the World and Russia's Choice',<sup>18</sup> Vladimir Nazarov, Aleksei Podberëzkin, and Olga Podberëzkina of the **Centre for Military-Political Studies** of the **Moscow State Institute of International Relations (MGIMO)**<sup>19</sup> of the **Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs** write that 'the meaning of the "information war" is the struggle against various states in order to damage their information systems, processes, resources, and critical structures; to undermine political and social systems; and to conduct massive psychological campaigns against the population, government elites, and society. The goal is to force a state that Russia attacks through non-military means to make decisions in favour of Russia.'

**ALEXEI GROMOV is a Russian politician. He is First Deputy Chief of Staff of the Presidential Administration of Russia**

In 2019, the publication **Proekt**, which unites independent journalists, conducted an investigation into the professional activities of Alexei Gromov.<sup>151</sup> The published report contains the following information:

At weekly meetings in the Presidential Administration, leaders of all major television channels often gather. Heads of both state and formally private TV come to Alexei Gromov: Channel One, VGTRK, NTV, TVC, REN TV and Channel Five. At these meetings, Gromov manages not only the channels, but also the press services of the departments. Press officers of the President, Government and Parliament come to his office. Important



participants are officials of the Kremlin's internal political bloc, which is responsible for the elections, and Foreign Ministry spokeswoman **Maria Zakharova**. Gromov discusses the schedule of the President with the audience and can give a direct order on how to cover an event and what exactly needs to be shown or told in the reports. He can veto a news item. Once a quarter, Gromov gathers press secretaries of law enforcement agencies. In addition to television channels and news agencies, Gromov oversees the largest newspapers. This is explained by his rather close relations with the owner of the **Kommersant** newspaper, **Alisher Usmanov**, and the director and Editor-in-Chief of the newspaper, **Vladimir Zhelonkin**. The proponents of Alexei Gromov in the media are **Vladimir Sungorkin**, director and Editor-in-Chief of the **Komsomolskaya Pravda** newspaper, and **Alexei Abakumov**, director of development of the **RBC** television channel (ROSBUSINESSCONSULTING).

Alexey Gromov created the RT channel together with **Mikhail Lesin** (ex-minister of mass media, media manager) in 2005. It was Gromov who insisted on the appointment of **Margarita Simonyan**, the young correspondent of the Kremlin pool, as the Chief Editor of the channel, and then also the head of RT, known as **Russia Today** at the time.

Alexey Gromov and Margarita Simonyan are good friends and partners today. The Simonyan family - herself, her younger sister Alice and husband **Tigran Keosayan** are building a business, including on advertising public projects that may be related to Gromov. Tigran Keosayan owns another company - the **Coliseum**. The company explores the market and studies public opinion. Last year, her profit reached 10.5 million RUB (0.123 million EUR).<sup>152</sup>

The system of informal relations allows the main information influence actors of Russia to receive various bonuses, sometimes in the form of budgetary funds for financing various information influence projects, including film production. For example, the film *Crimean Bridge. Made with love!* presents the Russian annexation of Crimea as a fairy tale story of the 'salvation of the peninsula from Ukrainian captivity'. The film was directed by Tigran Keosayan and the script was written by Margarita Simonyan. The total budget for the film amounted to 300 million RUB (3.5 million. EUR) Almost the entire amount was allocated from the state budget without competition. The film was a box office failure, receiving the lowest ratings from viewers and critics and earning only 70 million RUB (0.8 million EUR). Tigran Keosayan blamed the failure of the Russian liberal opposition and its American patrons who organised 'bullying' of the film in the media.

” The *goal* of this study was to monitor and analyse qualitative and quantitative changes in the production system of Russian information operations.

More than RUB 90 billion (EUR 1 billion) of the 2020 Russian federal budget were allocated to support mass communications—30% more than the previous year.<sup>20</sup> It appears that the media will receive EUR 1.275 billion from the federal budget in 2021.<sup>21</sup> The Russian government intends to significantly increase its funding to expand its audience to 900 million viewers per year. The authorities plan to spend at least 211 billion roubles on state television and the **Россия сегодня** [Rossiya Segodnya] agency. Funding may decline in the future once Russia has created a sufficiently powerful base for conducting its media operations against Western countries.

to counter the negative impact of the toxic Russian information environment.

Our *objectives* are to 1) elucidate the structure of media holding companies and news agencies in Russia, 2) provide an overview of the mechanisms financing Russian information influence activities and 3) the laws and policies governing information flows in Russia, 4) identify new trends in Russian information influence activities, 5) analyse the relevant informational content of RT (formerly Russia Today) and 6) suggest a direction for a response.

### *Research Goal and Objectives*

The *goal* of this study was to monitor and analyse qualitative and quantitative changes in the production system of Russian information operations. The resulting information can be used by experts worldwide to improve their mechanisms of protection against Russian information influence and to take adequate measures



# MECHANISMS OF STATE CONTROL OVER THE MEDIA IN RUSSIA

This section will explore the structure of Russian media, political influence in media operations, the financial mechanisms funding information influence operations, the role of the Russian special services in the management of information flows, and finally the policies and laws regulating information flow in Russia.

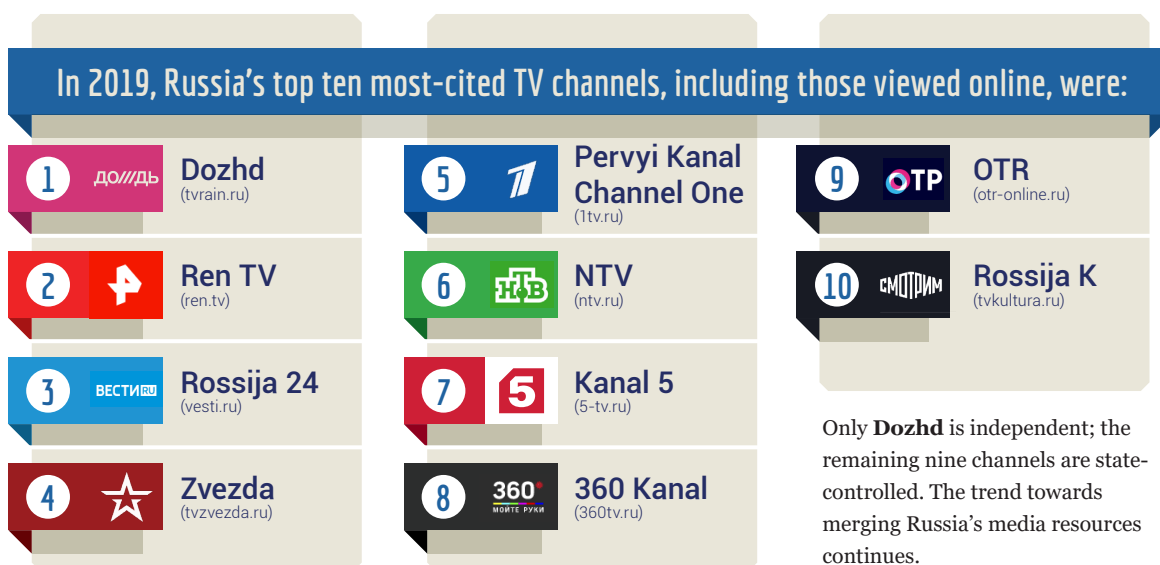
The system of Russian information influence operations is modelled on the principles of a Soviet planned economy—a system in which the government controls and regulates development, production, and distribution of a product—in this case, information influence activities. As this system is organised from the top down, lower-level personnel have little say in the process. Instead, decisions are made by a centralised authority. The successful functioning of the Russian information system requires tight state control stemming from the Administration of the President of Russia, which operates as a single ‘control centre’ where all important decisions are made. According to the paradigm of a planned economy, large production structures ensure efficient economies of scale, making it possible to concentrate resources and to reduce the number of managerial units required for the rapid transmission of command signals. In the early 2000s, a large number of media structures were competing in the national information market. By the beginning of 2020, the Russian information influence system had been consolidated and only

three companies were producing almost 90% of Russia’s information content.

According to the monitoring company **Medialogia**,<sup>22</sup> in 2019, the top three most-cited and thus most influential news agencies in Russia were **RIA Novosti** (ria.ru) [part of the state-owned Россия сегодня international news agency; CEO Dmitry Kiselev, Editor-in-Chief Margarita Simonyan]; **TASS** (tass.ru) [state-owned, CEO Sergei Mikhailov]; and the independent news agency **Interfax** (interfax.ru) [joint-stock company, CEO Mikhail Komissar, who owns a 50% stake]. Together they accounted for 87% of top-cited content.

Television is the primary source of information for the Russian population—the average person watches about 3.5 hours of TV per day.<sup>23</sup> In the Russian Federation, there are two so-called multiplex TV channel groups (programme packages). The first multiplex consists of ten channels: *Pervyi kanal*, *Rossiya 1*, *Math TV*, *NTV*, *Piaty kanal*, *Rossiya K*, *Rossiya 24*, *Karusel*, *Public Television of Russia*, and *TV Centr*.





This multiplex also includes three radio stations: *Vesti FM*, *Mayak*, and *Radio Rossii*. According to a Presidential decree, this multiplex is free of charge and is broadcast in every region of the Federation as a public service. The second multiplex is made up of *Domashny*, *Zvezda*, *Mir*, *Muz TV*, *Pyatnitsa*, *Ren TV*, *Spas*, *CTC*, *TV-3* and *TNT* channels. The digital programme package includes all of Russia's public must-carry TV & Radio communication channels mandated by Presidential decree № 715 of 24 June 2009.

It is interesting to note that, in the era of the internet, television still dominates as an institution of public life in Russia, and for this reason the state maintains large holdings in television media. As a survey conducted by the Levada Center in January 2020 showed, television serves as the primary news source for 73% of Russians,

while the internet is the primary source for 39%. At the same time, 52% of Russians say they trust television news; 24% of Russians trust internet publications, and 21% trust social networks.<sup>24</sup> As of 2018, approximately 20% of Russians did not use the internet.<sup>25</sup>

## The Administrative Structure of the Russian Media Landscape

Until 2018, there were four media holding companies in Russia, but as a result of the purchase of the **STS** channel by **CJSC National Media Group**, three now remain. These are: **CJSC National Media Group**,<sup>26</sup> **Gazprom-Media Holding**,<sup>27</sup> and **VGTRK**.<sup>28</sup> Consolidation of the media landscape continued throughout 2018–19.

The main information influence product of the **National Media Group** is the Channel





One programme *Time Will Tell*, hosted by Anatoly Kuzichev and Artyom Sheinin. In 2005, the Digital Telefamily World Wide Network was created to broadcast Channel One. In 2015, a new multi-channel broadcasting centre began operations, making it possible to broadcast all types of media in HD format. On 20 March 2020, as

part of the Digital Telefamily package, the **Pobeda channel** began broadcasting a show on the history of World War II in time for the 75<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the end of the war in the European theatre—an important anniversary for Russia.<sup>29</sup> This channel is also available through the French satellite broadcaster Eutelsat HotBird. Digital Telefamily channels

## Russia's TV Holdings and Owner-Controlled TV channels

### NMG



The closed joint-stock company **National Media Group (NMG)** is Russia's largest private media holding, created in 2008 by combining the media assets of **AB Russia**, **SEVERSTAL**, **SURGUTNEFTEGAS**, and the **SOGAZ Insurance Group**.<sup>153</sup> The group's General Director is **Svetlana Balanova**, a former top manager of IBS and Gazprom-Media. Balanova's father participated in the creation of the National Media Group. Since 2014, the post of Chairman of the Board of Directors has been held by **Alina Kabaeva**, whose name is also associated with Vladimir Putin in the Russian media. The ownership structure of the company is strictly classified. However, **Rossiya Bank** held 35% of NMG assets at the time of founding. Rossiya Bank is owned by **Yuri Kovalchuk**, a close friend of Putin. Rossiya Bank also owns 51% of the shares of SOGAZ, a subsidiary of GAZPROM.

**SEVERSTAL** is the largest steel company in Russia. It is owned by Russian billionaire **Alexei Mordashov**, one of Russia's richest oligarchs and one of Putin's closest associates. **SURGUTNEFTEGAS** is one of the largest Russian companies producing hydrocarbon raw materials. The general director and co-owner of SURGUTNEFTEGAZ, **Vladimir Bogdanov**, was included on the US sanctions list in 2018. A significant share of SURGUTNEFTEGAS export is carried out through **GUNVOR**, owned by **Gennady Timchenko**, another friend of Putin. Timchenko also owned a 7.5% stake in NMG, while being a co-owner of the Rossiya Bank. However, in 2016, he sold his share to GAZPROM Media Holding. Today, Yuri Kovalchuk is the main co-owner of the National Media Group and is expanding the



company's media assets. In February 2018, it was found that NMG became a co-owner of Sony Pictures TV channels in Russia. As a result of the transaction, NMG will receive 80% in the television business in Russia. In August 2018, the National Media Group acquired from **Roman Abramovich's** company a 4% stake in Channel One and got control over 29% of the channel's shares. However, in March 2020, Roman Abramovich sold all the shares of Channel One to **VNESHTORGBANK (VTB)**. VTB Capital acquired 20% of Channel One shares from the ORT-KB company, owned by Roman Abramovich, VTB acknowledged in a statement. The businessman no longer has any shares in the state channel. VTB Group, parent company to both VTB Capital and VTB Bank, did not disclose the terms of the deal.

**Channel One** is the largest producer of information content in Russia, one of the main structures of the information influence mechanism, forming narratives used both within Russia and abroad. 38.9% of Channel One shares are owned by the state, 9.1% – by the state news agency **ITAR-TASS**.

In December 2018, **NMG** established a consortium with **VTB** and closed the deal on the purchase of 75% in **STS Media**. The main shareholder of VTB is the Russian government, which, through the Federal Agency for State Property Management, owns 60.9% of the group's share capital. The remaining shares are distributed between the owners of the GDR and minority shareholders—individuals and legal entities. The president and chairman of the board is **Andrey Kostin**. Kostin is a defendant on the US sanctions list and the subject of numerous public scandals with regard to his relationship with a Russian television journalist.

In June 2018, NMG established a consortium with **ROSTELECOM** for the production and distribution of information content. ROSTELECOM is a joint-stock company; the state, represented by the federal agency ROSIMUSHCHESTVO, owns 45% of the shares. The chairman of the board of directors of ROSTELECOM is **Sergey Ivanov**, former deputy director of the FSB, former Minister of Defense of Russia and former head of the Presidential Administration. The president of ROSTELECOM is **Mikhail Oseevsky**, the former vice-governor of St. Petersburg, the former deputy chairman of VTB. Thus, formally, the private company National Media Group is closely connected with government agencies, owned by the state and managed by owners and government officials who have close ties with the Presidential Administration and, personally, Putin.



## GAZPROM Media

The joint stock company **GAZPROM Media** is a leading diversified media holding in Russia and Eastern Europe that was established in 1998. It combines assets in all segments of the media market: television, radio, print, film production and distribution, and internet platforms. 100% of GAZPROM Media's shares are owned by GAZPROMBANK, of which the state is the largest shareholder. The chairman of the board of directors is the head of GAZPROM, **Alexey Miller**.<sup>154</sup> The holding operates 9 broadcasting channels (NTV, TNT, TV-3, Friday!, TNT4, Match TV, Match! COUNTRY, 2x2, Super), film production and distribution (KIT Film Studio, Central Partnership, Comedy Club Production, Good Story Media), production and distribution of thematic television channels (Red Media). The Gazprom Media portfolio also includes 10 radio stations (Avtoradio, Energy, Humor FM, Radio Romantika, Comedy Radio, Like FM, Relax FM, Detskoe Radio, Echo of Moscow, 101.ru ), assets in the internet segment (Ruform, Premier), and printing (Seven Days and Media Press publishers).

Of note, in March 2020, the GAZPROM Media Board of Directors appointed the former head of ROSKOMNADZOR (the state control body for the media sphere) **Alexander Zharov** to the post of general director of the media holding. The state continues to strengthen its presence in the media.

GAZPROM Media is directly involved in financing the projects of the family of RT Editor-in-Chief **Simonyan**, and her husband, **Tigran Keosayan**. The head of the Russian Anti-Corruption Fund, **Alexei Navalny**, conducted a journalistic investigation and found out that Simonyan has a secret contract with **NTV** and receives royalties as the art director of the International Sawmill programme, the author and host of which is her husband. Navalny recalls that 'Margarita Simonyan, now is the television liar most favoured by the authorities. She heads the RT channel with an annual budget of 20 billion RUB, the **Россия сегодня** agency and the Sputnik agency. And besides—surprise! She's the artistic director of the International Sawmill programme, which no one knew before.'<sup>155</sup> The investigation provides data on the use of space and studio equipment by the RT agency in the interests of Simonyan's private business in the production of the NTV International Sawmill programme. Thus, the state monopolisation of Russian media assets leads to corruption and abuse of budget funds by functionaries.

## VGTRK



The state holding company **VGTRK (All-Russian State Television and Radio Broadcasting Company)** includes federal channels: Russia 1, Russia Culture; more than 80 regional television and radio companies broadcasting in all constituent entities of the Russian Federation; Russia's first round-the-clock information, channel Russia 24; an international television channel in Russian RTR-Planeta, also available abroad since 2002; the Russian version of the Euronews TV channel; four radio stations—Radio of Russia, Mayak, Culture, and Vesti FM; and the state internet channel—Rossiya—which brings together dozens of Internet resources.

The audience of Russia 1 television channel is 98.5% of the Russian population and more than 50 million viewers in the CIS and Baltic countries totalling over 250 million viewers around the world. The international version of Russia 1—the channel RTR-Planeta—is watched by residents of Europe, the Middle East, North Africa and the United States. RTR-Planeta is a 24-hour information and entertainment channel in Russian, specially created for Russian-speaking compatriots living abroad and consisting of the best television programmes Russia 1 and Russia Culture.

*Internet projects.* VGTRK is one of the largest players on the Russian internet. Online TV channels Rossiya on Russia.tv, Russia 24 on Vesti.ru, RTR-Planet on RTR-Planeta.com, and Radio of Russia (radiorus.ru), Radio Mayak (radiomayak.ru), Vesti FM (vesti.ru), Radio Culture (cultradio.ru).<sup>156</sup>

are now available to viewers in Russia, the CIS, Israel, North America, the Baltic countries, Europe, and Asia.

The main information influence products of GAZPROM-Media, a subsidiary of **GAZPROM Media Holdings**, are broadcast on the NTV channel. There are many information programmes implementing

the state's information strategy to promote a negative image of Western countries and Ukraine. Among these are *Meeting Place* with host Andrei Norkin, *International Sawmill* with author and host Tigran Keosayan, *The Results of the Week* with host Irada Zeynalova, *Central Television* with host Vadim Takmenev, and *Own Truth* with author and host Roman Babayan, deputy of the







Still from *International Sawmill* [Международная пилорама]



Still from *Own Truth* [Своя правда]



Moscow City Duma for the United Russia party.

The third largest media holding in Russia is the federal state unitary enterprise **VGTRK**. Its main information influence projects are the programmes *News of the Week* with Dmitry Kiselyov, *Evening with Vladimir Solovyov*, and *Moscow. Kremlin. Putin.* with author and host Vladimir Solovyov. Other projects include the daily talk show *60 Minutes* hosted by spouses Olga Skabeeva and Evgeny Petrov, and *Who is against?* with host Dmitry Kulikov.

Two major broadcasters remain independent of the three major holding companies: the **Zvezda channel**, founded by the Russian Ministry of Defense, and the **TV Center channel**/TBL, founded by the municipal government of Moscow. Zvezda broadcasts the information influence programmes *The Main Thing* with Olga Belova, *Touched!* hosted by Nikolai Petrov, and the talk show *Open Air*, with presenters Alexey Gudoshnikov and Nikolay Matveev. The programme *Postscriptum* hosted by Russian Senator Alexei Pushkov appears on the TV Center channel, as do *The Right to Know!* hosted by Dmitry Kulikov, and *In the Centre of Events with Anna Prokhorova*.

Almost all of these programmes use a talk show format with the host interviewing experts and politicians. These shows are used to popularise information influence narratives about the 'decaying West', 'the

collapse of the EU', 'the conspiracy of the world evil forces against Russia', 'NATO's weakness and the superiority of Russian weapons', and others. Before the pandemic, 90% of Vladimir Solovyov's programmes (*Evening with Vladimir Solovyov*, *Moscow. Kremlin. Putin.*, and *Sunday Evening with Vladimir Solovyov*) were devoted to criticising the political direction taken by the Ukrainian government. After the pandemic hit, the dominant theme of his shows became the coronavirus and the fight to control it. Dmitry Kiselyov and Aleksey Pushkov host proprietary programmes consisting of their own opinions and assessments of current political life in Russia and the world.

Over the past five years, Ukraine has been the subject of a systematic information influence campaign on Russian state television channels: 'Several top-rated talk shows were aired every day, where invited experts, together with the presenters, discussed events in the neighbouring country. TV presenter Vladimir Solovyov said that Russians were more interested in the topic of Ukraine than in their own pensions. Therefore, he stressed, more time is devoted to the Ukrainian topic on the air of his programme on Russia 1.'<sup>30</sup> The promotion of a negative image of Ukraine has become one of the primary concerns of Russia's state information policy. Financial and administrative resources have been consolidated to strengthen control over independent channels to block information from Ukrainian sources.







Still from *Meeting Place* [Место встречи]



Still from *Results of the Week* [Итоги недели]



A special place in the structure of Russia's information influence operations is occupied by the Russia Today news service,<sup>31</sup> created in 2005 as a subsidiary of the state-owned Russian news agency **Novosti/News**. In 2009, Russia Today was rebranded as **RT**. The channel is controlled by the autonomous non-profit organisation ТВ-Новости/**TV-News**. The activities of the channel are 100% funded from the state budget of Russia. Margarita Simonyan has been the chief editor of the media group **Россия сегодня** [also Russia Today]<sup>32</sup> since 2013 and has been in charge of the main editorial office of the news service RT since 2005;<sup>33</sup> she ran **Sputnik** in 2014–15 before turning it over to Anton Anisimov. Simonyan may also be the editor for the Arabic and Spanish versions of Sputnik. RT is the locomotive of Russian information influence campaigns. Hundreds of other media structures follow its lead in producing misleading and influence-based content in dozens of languages. The news service RT is often confused with the media group Россия сегодня, but this is the parent holding company that owns the news agencies RT, RIA Novosti, Sputnik, and several other information resources.

The Russian information influence media network is expanding its activities in all areas and is actively integrating its programming into the global media space on various platforms. For example, RT was the first news channel to reach 1 billion views on YouTube, and later it was also the first to reach 10 billion views.<sup>34</sup> In terms of total views, RT is ahead of news channels BBC,

CNN, Al Jazeera, Euronews, and Fox News. However, it is important to keep in mind that the most popular RT videos on YouTube are not original RT-produced content, but trending or viral videos filmed on phones or dash/surveillance cams. RT appears to be artificially boosting its views to stay at the top of the list.<sup>35</sup> RT also holds a special place in the structure of Russian information influence abroad, and it appears that Russia's special information operations in the global media space are being implemented successfully.<sup>36</sup>

### Political Influence over Russian Media Operations

In addition to the news agencies and television channels creating and distributing content, there are specialised administrative structures that have been created to support Russian influence operations. These structures and the people working in them are directly responsible for generating ideas and making administrative decisions that determine the direction and content of Russia's information policy, carried out as special information operations (see pg. 14).

The chief coordinator of Russia's information policy is **Aleksey Gromov** [b. 1960]. Gromov has been First Deputy Chief of Staff of the **Presidential Administration of Russia** since 2012 and administers Russian information operations from that seat. Gromov is an experienced politician who worked as press secretary for presidents Yeltsin and Putin and has been a member of the board of



directors for several state-owned television and radio companies. The Presidential Administration of Russia has a great deal of influence over the Russian media landscape as we describe in more detail below.

A number of iconic figures work within the system as programme and content creators. One such individual is **Evgeni Minchenko**. In 1993, Minchenko founded the **New Image PR Agency**, which specialises in political consulting. In 2009, he headed the communications holding company **Minchenko Consulting**. Minchenko oversaw the election campaigns of the heads of regions included in the 'Kremlin lists'.<sup>37</sup> He also advised Ukrainian politician Yulia Tymoshenko. He is included in the list of top 20 best political strategists in Russia. When the **Centre for Study of Political Elites** was established in 2019 by the Moscow State Institute of International Relations, Minchenko was appointed as head.

MGIMO's Centre for Study of Political Elites was created to research the interaction of various interest groups within Russia's political elite, how foreign policy decisions are made in the Russian Federation and in other leading world states, and the characteristics of communities of political elite in different regions of the world—their recruitment features, their principles of internal self-organisation, and the role of informal institutions such as culture, traditions, and other forms of influence. The Centre's main partner is Minchenko Consulting.<sup>38</sup>

The centre is also a tool for collecting and analysing information about Russian elites abroad. Theorists studying Russian influence operations assert that Russia's own elites and the elites of other nations comprise the main targets of these operations. Since 2014, some experts on Russia have argued that a war between Russia and the West will happen if the Western elites fail to agree on principles among themselves.<sup>39</sup> Contemporary Russian political discourse suggests that, if global elites are determined to start a war, little can hold them back, not even nuclear weapons.<sup>40</sup> Most likely, the MGIMO Centre for the Study of Political Elites will oversee the construction of an information product that is toxic to the national elites of European countries and their allies.<sup>41</sup>

Ideological support for Russian influence operations is also provided by the **Centre for Military-Political Studies**, established in 2012 as a joint project of MGIMO and the **Almaz-Antey Concern**, Russia's largest manufacturer of weapons for air defence and missile defence (including the BUK M1 missile responsible for bringing down flight MH-17). **Alexei Podberëzkin**, a conservative politician, leads the Centre for Military-Political Studies, which has formulated the basic tenets of the 'information war' in its research and publications.<sup>42</sup>

These tenets include the active use of information, communication, and cognitive-ideological means for coercive enforcement. The main political objectives

of Russian information operations are to damage the national identity, deform the basic values, and rearrange the priority of national interests of those countries targeted by Russia for potential military and territorial expansion, or at least to impact the information environment and decision-making within those countries. Russian information experts often employ the '**mirror principle**' in the production of information content. The mirror principle is a tool used in propaganda—your side makes claims that your adversary is guilty of whatever it is you have done/are about to do.<sup>43</sup> For example, Russian experts traditionally accuse the West of using communications technologies against Russia and Middle Eastern countries cooperating with Russia; if the West accuses Russia of aggression against Ukraine, then in Russia there may be a series of publications about Western aggression against the Middle East. In fact, it is the Russian special services [Спецслужбы] that actively use such information operations to interfere in the internal affairs of foreign states.<sup>44</sup> The goal of the Russian information strategy is to achieve political advantage without triggering an open military conflict with Western countries.<sup>45</sup>

Given the fact that the Centre for Military-Political Research is a joint project with the largest arms producer for the Russian army, it is likely that the centre's employees primarily serve the interests of the military industry, promoting the inevitability of a war with the West to Russia's top leadership. An analysis of publications by the centre's staff

supports this opinion; they affirm the idea that war between Russia and the West is inevitable and call for the Russian president and government to modernise the national armed forces.<sup>46</sup>

Non-governmental organisations producing specialised content, such as the **Russian Military Historical Society**, are also embedded in the Russian information system.<sup>47</sup> The Chairman of the society is **Vladimir Medinsky**, Assistant to the President of the Russian Federation and former Minister of Culture. The Chairman of the Board of Trustees is **Sergey Ivanov**, former Deputy Director of the FSB, former Minister of Defence, and former Head of the Presidential Administration. The Board of Trustees includes **Dmitry Rogozin**, Director General of ROSCOSMOS Corporation; **Arkady Rottenberg**, Chairman of the Board of Directors of SMP Bank; and **Sergey Chemezov**, General Director of the defence corporation ROSTEC. These people are members of Putin's inner circle who personally oversee a number of projects being carried out by the Russian Military Historical Society, including the glorification of Russia's victories over its enemies, the protection of the heroic history of Russia from attempts by Western historians to discredit it, and the promotion of patriotic values among the Russian-speaking populations of foreign countries.

Targeted work with the Russian-speaking populations in foreign countries is also carried out by **ROSSOTRUDNICHESTVO**



[The Federal Agency for the Commonwealth of Independent States, Compatriots Living Abroad, and International Humanitarian Cooperation]<sup>48</sup> led by **Eleanora Mitrofanova** and by the **World Coordinating Council of Russian Compatriots<sup>49</sup> Living Abroad**.

These structures serve as communication channels between Russian influence information centres and Russian foreign diaspora, coordinating the activities of pro-Russian organisations in the Baltic countries and Eastern Europe.

## Financial Mechanisms Supporting Russia's State Information Policy

The state monopoly over structures producing information content means they are financed from the state budget.<sup>50</sup> According to the draft budget for 2020–22, 91.9 billion RUB (1.08 billion EUR) was budgeted for the media in 2020, with about 71 billion RUB (0.84 billion EUR) expected for each of the next two years. This is a

significant increase compared to the current budget that allocated 69.5 billion RUB (0.82 billion EUR) to the media.

Media financing is carried out within the framework of budget section 23 of the state programme 'Information Society'. The budget for 2020 is as follows [1 EUR = 85 RUB]:

1

### ITAR-TASS News Agency

**2.9 billion RUB** (34.1 million EUR), plus an additional 70 million RUB (0.82 million EUR) to create a channel for the production of socio-political programmes for children aged 8–16 years.

2

### FSUE MIA Россия сегодня

**7.5 billion RUB** (88 million EUR).

3

### ANO TV-News/TB-Новости [legal entity of RT]

**3 billion RUB** (35.3 million EUR) for the creation, development, support, and distribution of a television channel in German, and for the promotion of the channel and its programmes at home and abroad.

**1.4 billion RUB** (16.5 million EUR) for the development of the network's material and technical base.

**23.0 billion RUB** (271 million EUR) for media creation.





4

**Channel One**

**6.5 billion RUB** (76.5 million EUR), plus an additional 268 million RUB (3.2 million EUR) to broadcast the Victory Parade under the programme 'Ensuring the country's defense'.

5

**VGTRK**

**24 billion RUB** (282 million EUR).

6

**OTR (Public Television of Russia)**

**4.5 billion RUB** (53 million EUR).

7

**Subsidy to Channel One, NTV, Channel 5, and TV Center**

**7.4 billion RUB** (87 million EUR) to pay for a television signal distribution system

8

**Russia's participation in international information exchange**

**38 billion RUB** (447 million EUR).

9

**A subsidy to the Zvezda television channel under the article 'Ensuring the country's defence capability'**

**2 billion RUB** (23.5 million EUR).

Other budget items finance activities that can be used in the context of information influence: 'Support for Russian cultural and humanitarian cooperation abroad'—845 million RUB (9.9 million EUR), 'Russian Humanitarian Mission'—55 million RUB (0.65 million RUB), and 'Subsidies of a non-profit organisation (without a name) for the implementation of foreign policy

activities in the framework of public diplomacy'—55 million RUB (0.65 million RUB).

An analysis of RT's budget allocation indicates that Germany and Austria have become new focus areas for Russian media operations. In addition to the German RT internet portal, a new television





channel has been launched to broadcast RT news in German.<sup>51</sup> The construction of the Nord Stream 2 gas pipeline, the upcoming elections for Germany's next Federal Chancellor, and the advancement of Russia's economic interests in Europe<sup>52</sup> are all reasons Russia may want to use information operations to influence German policy in favour of Putin's goals.

In addition to money allocated by the federal government, regional budgets also finance the production of information content to promote a positive image of the Kremlin and to promote narratives that are broadcast from the federal centre to all regions of the country. The predominant narrative advanced by the experts and politicians who appear in the Russian media, repeated daily on talk shows on all TV channels, is that *'all of Russia's problems are the result of subversive actions of the West'*.

Money from the Presidential Grants Fund is also used to support patriotic narratives. In 2020, projects to preserve historical memory came first in the grant competition. More than 1 billion RUB (11.8 million EUR)<sup>53</sup> have been allocated to 469 projects concerning the victory of the Soviet people in World War II.

### Russian Special Services' Involvement in Managing Information Flows

Russian special services are actively involved in the production and distribution of information influence at all stages.

**Department K**<sup>54</sup>—a classified division of the **Ministry of the Interior**—is responsible for controlling information flows. The department's main tasks include countering information crimes in the digital space, countering crimes committed using information and telecommunication networks (including the internet) and protecting the health of minors and public morality online. Department K also blocks the dissemination of information on the internet that qualifies as 'extremist' on the grounds of political disloyalty. The Russian authorities use Department K to fight terrorism, religious extremism, and political opposition in Russia. Some experts believe that it was Department K that initiated the new law regarding Russian software on devices; from 1 July 2020, it has not been possible to sell certain technically sophisticated products in Russia without pre-installed Russian software,<sup>55</sup> including smartphones, computers, smart TVs, and any other devices listed. Russian software allows Russian secret services to monitor device- and computer-users and to receive information from those devices.

The **Federal Security Service of the Russian Federation (FSB)**<sup>56</sup> is Russia's principal security agency. Its responsibilities include counter-intelligence, counter-terrorism, border security, surveillance, and other serious crimes. The FSB monitors the political loyalty of citizens and monitors the activities of scientific and cultural institutions and the mass media.<sup>57</sup> It manages a wide network of agents who collect information.

The service works to detect hostile attitudes towards Russia and to establish the facts surrounding any such instance.

The FSB also has an **Information Security Centre**,<sup>58</sup> which is part of its counterintelligence service. Formally, the centre deals with crimes in the field of electronic commerce and reveals the illegal use of personal data. In fact, the centre's area of responsibility is much wider—it monitors information flows and citizens' online activities, syphons information from communication networks, and disseminates misinformation.<sup>59</sup>

The **Russian Foreign Intelligence Service (SVR)**<sup>60</sup> is the largest player in the field of Russian information operations. It is the SVR that determines the strategic direction for aggressive information operations against EU countries to destabilise the political situation in target countries, bribe leaders of right-wing and populist parties in Europe, divide the European community regarding sanctions against Russian companies and persons, discredit Euro-Atlantic solidarity, counter NATO expansion, and create conditions for Russian dominance of the European energy market. The SVR establishes orders for the **RTR-Planet** channel broadcasting in Russian, and for RT and Sputnik, both of which broadcast for foreign audiences in more than 30 languages.<sup>61</sup> The main units in charge of working with information content are the **Analysis and Information Department** and the **Foreign Intelligence Directorate for Foreign Intelligence**.<sup>62</sup>

The **Main [Intelligence] Directorate (GRU)**<sup>63</sup> of the General Staff of the Armed Forces is the most powerful centre for Russia's informational aggression towards the West. Within the GRU structure, there is a strictly classified unit—the **12bis Office**—which deals with information warfare.<sup>64</sup> The Office receives operational information from other GRU units in charge of operations in the EU, NATO, Asia, Africa, and North and South America. This allows them to create content that is mainly distributed on social networks but then quoted by RT and other news agencies. This method follows one of the principles of Russian information influence operations—the use of multiple sources of information and cross-citation to increase consumer confidence in the planted information.<sup>65</sup> Closed studies indicate that the GRU creates fake accounts on social networks associated with immigrant communities in the EU countries. The GRU is also associated with **Evgeny Prigozhin's** 'troll factory'; an investigation into this subject was published in March 2020 by the American news company **CNN**.<sup>66</sup>

### The New Legal Framework for Regulating Russia's Information Policy

Conducting media operations in Russia requires appropriate legal support. The goals are to limit the possibilities for Russian residents to obtain information from sources other than government-sanctioned information channels and to create positive legal conditions for the production and dissemination of information influence



operations. Changes to laws are made under the pretext of combating terrorism and extremism.

A number of laws strengthening state control in the Russian media sphere have been adopted since 2002. However, these were single legislative acts. In 2018–20, a series of laws were adopted that actively restrict the freedom of Russian media.<sup>67</sup>

In January 2018, **The Federal Service for Supervision of Communications, Information Technology and Mass Media (ROSKOMNADZOR)**<sup>68</sup> issued an order stating that permissions to distribute foreign printed publications in Russia could be revoked if they were suspected of disseminating information that threatened domestic political stability.

On 1 July 2018, a package of anti-terrorism laws on additional measures to counter terrorism and ensure public safety came into force. From that day, telecom providers in Russia were required to record all telephone conversations, text messages, images, sounds, video recordings and customer emails. The law applies to instant messaging, forums, social networks, dating sites, and other online services.

In December 2018, Russia passed a law banning foreigners from owning more than 20% of the shares in the authorised capital of media companies operating in Russia.<sup>69</sup> The law applies to news aggregators that disseminate information in Russian or any

other national language of the peoples of Russia. The explanatory note to the bill states that restrictions for such services are needed to ‘prevent threats to public order in Russia’.

In March 2019, a federal law came into force that imposes penalties for knowingly publishing false information—‘fake news’—in the media and on the internet, and for insulting the Russian state or society. Any materials that offend or ridicule Russian society, its state symbols, or institutions and authorities shall be blocked. An accompanying law, an amendment to the Administrative Code, came into force at the same time imposing fines of up to 300 thousand RUB (3500 EUR) and the possibility of administrative arrest for insulting state symbols and institutions. When the Prosecutor General finds this kind of content, it must forward a request to ROSKOMNADZOR to remove it and to ensure restricted access to the sources disseminating the information. ROSKOMNADZOR, then determines the internet providers that host the content and sends a notification (in multiple languages), demanding it be removed within one day. Should the request go unheeded, ROSKOMNADZOR directs the provider to block access to the website in Russia. Should the content be removed, the owner must then inform ROSKOMNADZOR, which then makes a decision about restoring access.<sup>70</sup>

Since these laws came into force in mid-2020, ROSKOMNADZOR reported they ‘received a request from the Prosecutor



General's Office, which contained a number of links to posts on social media, including the VKontakte and Facebook networks, related to the spread of the novel coronavirus'. ROSKOMNADZOR restricted access to the websites and included the links in a register of illegal content.<sup>71</sup> All offending information has since been removed.<sup>72</sup>

The term RUNET—Russian internet—came into use in 1997 to refer to local Russian language websites and services. On 1 September 2019, a law came into force according to which all the key RUNET infrastructure must be located on national territory. ROSKOMNADZOR will be able to centrally manage the public communications network in the event of threats to the stable, safe, and integrated operation of the internet in Russia. This means that the government will have the ability to disconnect RUNET from the global internet at any time. Russia currently views the idea of 'space internet' as a threat to national security, as it cannot be controlled domestically.<sup>73</sup>

In November 2019, the Russian State Duma adopted a law that tightens the rules for foreign media working in Russia, requiring them to be recognised as 'foreign agents'. Individuals who disseminate suspect information or participate in its creation shall also be considered foreign agents under the new law.<sup>74</sup> Thus, all Russian journalists collaborating with Western media are under the observation of Russian

special services.<sup>75</sup> Currently, nine media outlets—primarily US-based—have been labelled foreign agents. The new rules also make it possible to block the internet resources of any foreign media operating within the Russian Federation.

In 2020, the Russian Ministry of Justice proposed a fine (which was adopted in February 2021) for distributing materials from unregistered media.<sup>76</sup> The law is also directed at the activities of bloggers with large audiences, equating them to media outlets. Opposition politicians considered this initiative a manifestation of censorship because the Ministry of Justice regularly rejects their attempts to register their own publications.<sup>77</sup> The law was signed by President Putin in February 2021, approving a fine of 2,500 RUB (28 EUR) for individuals and up to 500,000 RUB (5,632.09 EUR) for media entities.<sup>78</sup>

The new repressive regulations regarding the production and dissemination of information in Russia leads many to speculate that Putin's regime is preparing for a large scale 'information war' with the West: the state is strengthening its own information capabilities and is preparing for an offensive towards Europe and America.<sup>79</sup> However, it can be argued that the primary focus of these new regulations is the Russian domestic audience; the new restrictions on Russia's internal information market were designed to block the influence of external information sources on the Russian population and to



allow the government to promote narratives to sway its populace. Putin engages in such aggressive information operations to convince his domestic audiences that he is restoring Russia's image in the world and 'making Russia great once again'. In so doing, however, he has imposed a system of political repression in which he holds political, social, and economic power, allowing oligarchs and others of his inner circle to profit and enjoy a luxurious life.



# TRENDS IN RUSSIAN INFORMATION STRATEGY

In January 2020, established by amendments to the Russian Constitution, Russia finalised its new public administration system. The consolidation of Putin's status as 'eternal president' required some adjustments in all of Russia's political institutions. The media played an important role in this process.

The state has essentially monopolised all media assets to produce information products to order, using money from the state budget. Information policy is managed from a single centre—Russia's Presidential Administration. Information policy priorities are determined by the Russian special services—the **GRU**, the **FSB**, and the **SVR**.<sup>80</sup> The leaders of the SVR and the FSB are also members of the president's Security Council, and the GRU reports to the General Staff of the armed forces.<sup>81</sup> Numerous government think tanks are involved in developing the strategy and tactics for Russia's information policy, for example: the Analytical Center for the Government of Russia, the Valdai Center, the Institute of Contemporary Development, the Russian Institute for Strategic Studies, the Council on Foreign and Defense Policy, the Center for Strategic Research, the Civil Development Fund, and others. The Kremlin outsources information policy work to these organisations to maintain a veneer of plausible deniability regarding its influence. This structure is used to meet new challenges. First, it prepares answers

to both internal and external challenges and threats: the collapse in oil prices, the coronavirus, sanctions imposed by the West, and a decrease in the standard of living for Russian citizens. Second, it is responsible for escalating information pressure on the West, weakening intra-Western solidarity to improve Russia's geopolitical position, and to establish Russia's dominance in the European energy market.

## Upgrading the Tools of Information Warfare—the 'Cloud Enemy'

The concept of the 'cloud enemy' [облачный противник] has been in use by Russian military strategists since at least 2014 and is currently being discussed in Russian military-analytical centres as an aspect of hybrid warfare.<sup>82</sup> A 'cloud enemy' is a proxy agent in the theatre of hybrid war who acts to inflict damage and to subvert operations on the enemy's home front by, for example, carrying out cyber-attacks against critical structures, influencing foreign public opinion leaders,





or introducing agents of influence into the leadership of political parties, government structures, and defence management bodies. Any and all damage to the enemy is sanctioned as long as it falls short of triggering an actual military conflict. Among the most important and productive areas in which cloud enemies can operate to spread Russian influence 'legally' are Western public information spaces.

The idea has not yet been fully conceptualised and is used only within military strategic circles, and further study is required to understand how the term is being practically applied. It is possible that the new term is a borrowing from IT parlance, as in 'cloud computing'—services and software that can be accessed remotely. If so, the concept of the cloud enemy is similar to that of the fifth column,<sup>83</sup>—a group of people who can weaken a larger group from within. However, while Russian voices are using the term to describe Western activity, this could be an example of the mirror principle in action, where Western powers are accused of practices carried out by the Russians themselves. For example, Radio Sputnik aired an interview with Alexei Podberëzkin of the Centre for Military-Political Studies reacting to US assertions of state violence against Iranian citizens in January 2021. 'I think they are now using this mechanism of the "fifth column", or the so-called cloud adversary, to create a situation of instability through social networks and conspiratorial groups,' said Podberëzkin.<sup>84</sup>

Russian special services are actively creating 'information influence cells' in Western countries, comprised of journalists writing for local and national publications, bloggers, influencers, and social media users. Journalists living in target countries are frequently used as agents of manipulation; they are ordered to produce materials criticising the situation in their country. Russia's special services also use pro-Russian activists to prepare materials for local publications and for the Russian media outlets RT and Sputnik, which publish their stories in many languages.

Protest groups and movements, such as the 'yellow vests', displaced and disaffected migrants struggling to establish a livelihood, and Russian-speaking diaspora, are all potential cloud adversaries, ready to mobilise on behalf of a pro-Russian cause.

According to Russian intelligence agencies, Russians living in Europe are excellent representatives of Russia's policy in the West. Russian-speaking communities of 'compatriots' living in Western countries are the main consumers of Russian-language information influence media; they subsequently distribute promoted narratives in national languages on social networks. 'Cloud adversaries' or 'fifth column' Russian sympathisers are effective agents (witting or unwitting) of Russian influence and are a strategic resource the Kremlin can deploy to divide populations and to destabilise the political situation wherever there is a large Russian-speaking diaspora.

One of Putin's amendments to the Russian Constitution in 2020 mentions compatriots:<sup>85</sup>

Article 69, Paragraph 3. *The Russian Federation provides support to compatriots living abroad in the exercise of their rights, ensuring the protection of their interests and preserving the all-Russian cultural identity.* <sup>86</sup>

This creates a legal basis for Russia to intervene in the internal affairs of states where its compatriots reside; Russia has given itself the right to deploy various means—from humanitarian to military—to protect their interests. This was the justification given for Russia's incursions into Ukraine and Georgia.

In the article 'Choosing the Most Effective Russian Security Strategy', the authors propose the following scenario for Russian intervention in Ukrainian affairs:

[...] the current military-political situation should be characterised, in principle, as preparation for aggression by a Western political-military coalition, using Ukraine, the Baltic countries and Poland as its advanced detachment and "cannon fodder". Moreover, Ukrainian aggression can only be stopped by changing the regime and the ruling elite in Kiev with changes that should, in fact, reverse the processes that have been going on in Ukraine in the field of culture, language, and value system since the late 70s. Actually, military victory can only be a condition for civilizational change. Moreover, it is not a prerequisite. Political victory is achieved in a variety of ways. This can be achieved either by military force and the massive use of socio-cultural (informational, linguistic, etc.) means, or only by these means with massive political-diplomatic and cultural-informational pressure, which can lead to a change in the nationalist Russophobic regime. Thus, Russian culture is a powerful tool of external influence, and spirituality can become a decisive non-military means of confrontation, which, however, are still poorly used as political instruments of coercive force.<sup>87</sup>

This article goes on to list the main tools of information aggression: the production and promotion of narratives that form a hostile attitude towards the victim state; the informational support of destructive political forces; the use of the Russian-speaking diaspora as the 'fifth column'; the spread of the influence of Russian culture and the recruitment of agents of influence among national elites.



” Information influence products are distributed through various channels that promote and spread information using a combination of standard and influence techniques, such as click-bait headlines that increase the ‘viral potential’ of target content.

The **World Association of Russian Press (WARP)** was created in 1999 by the decision of the first **World Congress of Russian Press** with active participation of the Russian news agency **ITAR-TASS**. WARP oversees the development of a Russian-language information space at home and abroad and coordinates the work of journalists in 80 countries.<sup>88</sup> The organisation’s headquarters are located in New York and it positions itself as an independent non-governmental structure. However, the president of WARP is **Vitaliy Ignatenko**, former CEO of ITAR-TASS news agency, and Russian politicians and leaders of Russian information influence operations continually take part in annual Russian press congresses.

The **Russian World Foundation** [Фонд «Русский мир»] takes an active part in promoting the interests of Russia abroad. Putin created the foundation by decree in 2007. The Chairman of the foundation is **Vyacheslav Nikonov**, son of an NKVD operative and grandson of USSR Foreign Minister and Commissar **Vyacheslav**

**Molotov**. The goals of the foundation are to promote the dissemination of objective information about modern Russia and the formation on this basis of a public opinion favourable to Russia; the cooperation with Russian, foreign, and international organisations and like-minded individuals in the promotion of the Russian language and culture; supporting the activities of the Russian diaspora abroad; supporting the export of Russian educational services; supporting foreign- and Russian-language media and information resources focused on achieving the goals of the foundation.<sup>89</sup> The foundation has its own information portal in Russian,<sup>90</sup> which is used to coordinate the activities of Russian-speaking journalists around the world. The portal promotes narratives about the sinister role of the West, which allegedly desires to discredit the victory of the Soviet people in World War II, and provides information allegedly discrediting the Baltic countries in line with the aforementioned ‘mirror’ principle. Former Soviet republics are regularly accused of collaborating with

the Nazis during World War II—material supporting this thesis is provided about 96 veterans of the Latvian Legion.<sup>91</sup>

‘Cloud technologies’, or remote-access information influence activities and products, involve the introduction of subversive information structures into the existing media space to further Russia’s geopolitical goals. Information influence products are distributed through various channels that promote and spread information using a combination of standard and influence techniques, such as click-bait headlines that increase the ‘viral potential’ of target content. The newspaper ***Komsomolskaya Pravda in Northern Europe*** is a good example. The publication has existed in the market of Northern Europe for over 10 years and is the only Russian-language weekly that is distributed in the Baltics (Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania) and Scandinavia (Finland, Sweden, Denmark, Norway) in print and electronic form. The total audience of the publication is 100–130 thousand readers.<sup>92</sup> The print version is distributed through 800 retail outlets and has more than one thousand subscribers. **SKP Media Publishing House**, headquartered in Tallinn, owns a stake in this business. This small local paper serves as one of many channels for introducing Russian propaganda into local communities abroad.

Hundreds of Russian human rights, educational, cultural, and journalistic organisations operating in European

countries maintain close ties with Russia and are also used in information influence operations. In Estonia, for example, there is the international media club **Impressum** (co-founded by **Igor Teterin**, editor-in-chief of *Komsomolskaya Pravda in Northern Europe*),<sup>93</sup> the **Human Rights Information Centre**, the **Russian School of Estonia**,<sup>94</sup> and the **Russian Estonia** portal.<sup>95</sup> Similar structures exist in all EU countries.

If the Russian information influence system in the EU is described in IT terminology, these small organisations are block chains containing a hash of influence narratives. The narratives they promote form an informational ‘bubble’ that envelops the European social and political institutions with a corrosive film of disinformation. While few of these organisations have the power to do much damage on their own, in aggregate they are a vigorous source of anti-Western influence.

### ***Conducting Special Information Operations in the Digital Space***

Modern information influence operations employed by Russia against the West have their own logic and theoretical justification. Over time, the theory develops and the practice improves. In particular, one of the new textbooks published by MGIMO is devoted to this topic: **V. Zavorotny**, “Websites, web design, web animation: the practice of preparing informational and psychological impact materials”.<sup>96</sup>



A major objective of special information operations is to influence decision makers.<sup>97</sup> In the first stage, a dossier is collected on a particular person and their psychological portrait is drawn up. In the second stage, the target is exposed to an information influence campaign in the mass media; this can be in the form of cartoons, slanderous publications, or interviews with opponents and former friends. The target is now consumed by refuting defamatory information; they cannot logically process the larger context and implications of the information attack, and so are forced to use their time and other resources on protecting themselves. In the third stage, an agent of influence offers solutions to resolve the emotional and psychological turbulence the target is experiencing. The advice-giver is positioned within the target's immediate circle and now has leverage to influence the target's decisions.

A recurring target of information operations of the Russian special services is the President of Ukraine, Vladimir Zelensky, about whom rumours and gossip are spread suggesting he has an untraditional orientation and suffers from mental inferiority; he is accused of corruption and of sympathy towards Nazis.

Neuro-linguistic programming (NLP) methods are used often as a tool for conducting special information operations by Russian secret services.<sup>98</sup> NLP is a pseudo-scientific psychological theory that involves analysing strategies used by successful individuals and applying them

to reach personal goals. It relates thoughts, language, and patterns of behaviour learned through experience to specific outcomes.<sup>99</sup> Although modern experts consider NLP to be less than scientific, the special services in the USSR, and subsequently in Russia, created several 'scientific centres' where they studied how to impact the psyche with the help of semiotics.

One function of NLP-informed operations is to demoralise the target population, and then present Russia as the saviour. Currently, this technique is being used to create panic in the wake of the coronavirus epidemic in Europe. The target of one such information attack was Italy. Russian media used words like 'death', 'horror', 'catastrophe' in their texts to influence the psyche of the target population and create a feeling of hopelessness. Then Putin appeared, as if on a 'white horse' with 100 Russian medics and medical supplies. Accompanying this, a powerful PR campaign was organised in Russian media in Russia and abroad to help Russia assist Italy in the fight against coronavirus. Similar tactics are also used on Russian audiences. For example, calling a gas explosion a 'loud clap' in order to downplay the disastrous effects,<sup>100</sup> and referring to a drop in the GDP as a 'negative increase'; the use of such language games has escalated with regard to the sanctions and to the COVID-19 pandemic. Putin then becomes a *deus ex machina*.

Second, special information influence operations are used to strengthen the

” Russian intelligence agencies create numerous accounts on social networks that then spread disinformation, frequently via automated bots.

mood of protest in a target population and to encourage street riots. Information is disseminated on social networks and in all national media about unpopular government domestic policies and actions of the government, such as cutting social programmes, and about inadequate government actions against protesters, to persuade disaffected citizens to participate in demonstrations and even riots with impunity. Economic protest is transformed into political protest. For example, protesters might first demand higher wages, and when protests become large enough, political demands are made, such as the resignation of the government. The ‘yellow vests’ movement in France, outlined further in the section on information attacks below, illustrates a protest movement that received support from the Russian media in the form of information manipulation.

A third use for special information operations is to interfere with cooperation between allies. This strategy was used by Russian intelligence services to support Brexit and to create the image of Great Britain as a state that defied meddlesome bureaucrats

from Brussels. They promoted an image of the European Union as a weakening giant, bleeding in the fight against a freedom-seeking Great Britain, which, for its part, was unravelling the unity of the EU.

To implement these campaigns, Russian intelligence agencies create numerous accounts on social networks that then spread disinformation, frequently via automated bots. Facebook’s attempts to block these accounts led to the formation of a ‘grey market’ for selling accounts of real users.<sup>101</sup> Prices for such accounts reach 10 thousand EUR depending on the number of friends and contacts of the owner.<sup>102</sup> More information on the social media grey and black markets can be found in the NATO Strategic Communications Centre of Excellence’s report on the *Black Market of Social Media Manipulation*.<sup>103</sup>





# INFORMATION INFLUENCE ATTACKS AGAINST NATO, WESTERN COUNTRIES, ALLIES IN THE RUSSIAN MEDIA

Russia has developed a new information influence strategy in response to the challenges of the digital age. In January 2020, Putin and his supporters orchestrated changes to the Russian Constitution (which came into force on 25 December 1993, replacing the Soviet Constitution of 1936) to strengthen Putin's personal power by removing term limits on the office of the President. The current Russian state is striving to depict itself as the reincarnation of a victorious and unfairly maligned USSR personified in the figure of President Vladimir Putin.

As demonstrated above, since at least 2011, the Russian government has been consolidating its control over information flows to Russian domestic audiences and compatriots abroad by centralising power over all media, ensuring financing from state budgets, and instituting new legal policy that curtails freedom of expression, especially for critics of the Kremlin. The thrust of the narrative directed at the *Russkiy Mir* can be summarised as: 'Russia led by Putin is the only stable fortress in the world providing protection to its people, surrounded by chaos, Western hypocrisy and decay, which remains ready to attack Russia at any time.'<sup>104</sup>

In support of its strategy for the digital era, the Kremlin has generated a new wave of influence narratives that centre on historical events. According to Russian history textbooks, what they call the Great Patriotic War began on 22 June 1941, when Germany

launched Operation Barbarossa to invade the Soviet Union, and ended on 9 May 1945, when Russians celebrate the surrender of Nazi Germany. In the West, the Second World War officially began on 1 September 1939, when Germany first invaded Poland, and ended on 2 September 1945, when Japan finally surrendered.

The 75<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the end of the Second World War in Europe was an opportunity to reinvigorate the narrative theme of '*national self-identification and continuity*'. Russia took over the UN seat of the Soviet Union and is considered the successor of the USSR;<sup>105</sup> today's Russia is the successor state to the one that achieved victory over the Nazis, and its citizens are encouraged to take pride in this.

The Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact, the non-aggression pact between the Soviet Union and Nazi Germany signed on 23 August



1939, is seen as the '*pinnacle of success for Soviet diplomacy*'; it was this pact that led to the Soviet annexation of Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania, and parts of Finland, Poland, and Romania. In 2009, Putin said 'Without any doubt, we have good reason to condemn the Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact concluded in August 1939. [...] Today we understand that any form of collusion with the Nazi regime was morally unacceptable and without any chance of practical implementation.' Since then, there has been a dramatic re-evaluation, and the current position was expressed in 2015 by Vladimir Medinsky, then Russia's Minister of Culture, calling the pact 'a great achievement of Soviet diplomacy'.

Among the amendments to the Russian constitution is Article 67.3, which states:

The Russian Federation honours the memory of defenders of the Fatherland and protects historical truth. Diminishing the significance of the people's heroism in defending the Fatherland is not permitted.<sup>106</sup>

With this, Russia's information influence narrative acquires a new dimension—'*historical memory is sacred*'. The Foreign Ministry, and Putin personally, have been actively involved in the campaign to edit history in order to create an image of Russia as immaculate.<sup>107</sup> Russia is depicted as a martyr in its struggle with a corrupt, mercenary, cynical, and depraved West, which has been waging war against Russia and the Russian people for centuries.

Such statements have become a staple of Russia's information influence machinery—experts close to the Kremlin, journalists working for any of the state-run networks, and various information influence actors on social media all disseminate these ideas.<sup>108</sup> Russian historians who bring up evidence embarrassing to the official narrative are declared criminals, such as Yuri Dmitriev, who tried to establish the location of the burial sites of victims of the NKVD in Karelia. The publication, *Kasparov*, founded by chess-Grandmaster-turned-politician, Garry Kasparov succinctly stated: 'Russia is once again trying to invent a past for itself instead of realising the path travelled and drawing the necessary conclusions.'<sup>109</sup>

Although, the Russians (and, to an even greater degree, the Belarusians and Ukrainians) suffered enormous losses, endured almost unimaginable hardships, and acted with great bravery and determination to defeat the Nazis, actual reasons for pride don't seem to be enough.

Doctored history is replacing reality. A difficult and gloomy present gives way to artificially enhanced events of the past, where inspiring myths about the exploits and achievements of the Russian people can be created with impunity. Recurring motifs such as the alleged cooperation of Western countries with the Nazi regime and Poland's responsibility for causing WWII are popularised by articles such as 'How France gave Czechoslovakia to Poland and Hitler',<sup>110</sup> published by the online newspaper **Vzglyad**,



which is associated with the Presidential Administration.<sup>111</sup> Foreign commentators who are willing to tout the official narrative are sought out and popularised to create an impression of worldwide support for the Russian position.<sup>112</sup>

The density of information flow in the Russian media about the events of World War II is growing exponentially.<sup>113</sup> Other storylines belonging to this narrative include the heroic role of the USSR at the outbreak of the war, Europe's culpability in the Holocaust,<sup>114</sup> the rehabilitation of Soviet foreign policy on the eve of and after World War II, false information asserting the non-involvement of the NKVD in the execution of Polish officers in Katyn, the restoration of Stalin to the position of honour he held in the 1940s and early 1950s, and generally placing blame for all of Russia's problems on the West.

Russian law enforcement agencies are involved in policing the official truth. Legislation has been adopted to restrict the share of foreign owners of media operating in Russia. Platforms that remove information from Russian media may be blocked. Russian-language media receiving funding from abroad must declare their status as 'foreign agents'. Whenever possible, the spread of information published in the Western media that contradicts official narratives is curtailed. For example, when the **Radio Liberty** portal published an article titled 'Tehran Fairy Tale of the Lubyanka' Russian authorities demanded that material

regarding the Tehran Conference of 1943 be checked for compliance with the law on knowingly disseminating false information about the activities of the USSR during World War II.<sup>115</sup>

### Trends in Influence Narratives and Messaging Promoted by Russia

The Presidential Administration largely determines the content of Russian information influence campaigns. This can be seen in the content that appears simultaneously in all Russian media. For example, our monitoring has identified the following narrative themes—'the Ukrainian theme', 'the disaster of MH-17 over Donbass', 'the collapse of the EU', 'the struggle against the revision of WWII history', and 'the collapse of European solidarity in a pandemic'—and has tracked their recurrence through multiple media. However, narratives and information flows intended for Russian audiences differ from those aimed at foreign audiences.

Russian-language content includes illustrations and facts asserting the superiority of Russian weapons over those of NATO member countries. One of the main themes is the superiority of the Russian way of life, contrasting the 'high spirituality' of Russian society with the 'rotten, corrupt' West.<sup>116</sup> Another pervasive theme is World War II—or the Great Patriotic War as it is referred to in Russia. Russian domestic audiences are told that their country won a great victory against Hitler's forces, but



that this truth is strategically undermined by the West. This theme intersects with other narratives such as: 'Russian weapons are superior to their NATO counterparts because Russian designers build on extensive experience gained from the Great Patriotic War', 'Russia can survive any sanctions, just as our grandfathers survived even worse conditions during the Great Patriotic War', and 'the source of our patriotism lies in the heroic actions of the Red Army defending the USSR from the Nazis'.

Promoting narratives that demonstrate Russia's world supremacy is the overarching strategy for the information policy guiding Russian media and other information resources (that formally belong to Russian businessmen but are actually controlled by the state). However, in 2020 Russia faced new challenges, which influenced its information policy. On the one hand, the coronavirus pandemic led to a recession in the Russian economy, on the other hand, the pandemic created an opportunity for an information attack against Europe and the United States, also weakened by the global crisis. Accordingly, Russia has stepped up activities to produce information products about the superiority of Russian weapons. The story of Russia's military successes helped to divert the attention of the country's population from their economic problems. A dense information flow was also created about chaos ruling in pandemic-ridden Europe and the United States, contrasted with an image of Russia as a country capable of coping with any difficulties,

thanks to the wisdom of President Vladimir Putin. Against this background turbulence, Russia has intensified its informational pressure on Western democracy in order to stress test unity in the EU and in the Euro-Atlantic community. Some of the themes currently being emphasised are:

### **Military Superiority**

The volume of publications on the superiority of Russian weapons has increased. Emphasis is placed on examples of strengthening the combat power of Russian weapons in the Arctic. Sample headings include: 'The fastest/largest/most capable among the world's analogues';<sup>117</sup> 'Putin talked about the young people from the institute who created the Iskander';<sup>118</sup> 'In the Northern Fleet, tests of hypersonic weapons continue';<sup>119</sup> 'Ship's hypersonic capabilities: how the tests of the Zircon rocket are moving forward';<sup>120</sup> 'There are no analogues: in the US they declared the impossibility of matching the Russian rocket engine RD-180 until 2030';<sup>121</sup> 'A self-sufficient class of ships: what are the capabilities of multi-purpose Russian corvettes'.<sup>122</sup>

Similarly, pseudo-analytical articles on difficulties within NATO, the aggressive course of the Alliance, and problems with the development of the US armed forces, are being published. For example: 'Shortened flight: why there was a shortage of strategic bombers in the US';<sup>123</sup> 'Create a situation of tension: how NATO countries are increasing military activity in the Arctic region'.<sup>124</sup> The



mirror principle is at work again here—blame others for what you are suspected of.

In publications regarding relations among NATO member countries, Russian information influence operations often use misleading headlines and misappropriation as techniques of disinformation.<sup>125</sup> For example, an article titled ‘They are part of NATO and the European community: the US State Department announced that there is no threat to the Baltic states from Russia’<sup>126</sup> This gives readers the false impression that the US State Department denies that Russia is threat to the Baltic states when, in fact, the article confirms that NATO troops guarantee the Baltic States protection in the event of Russian aggression.

### **Laying groundwork for the trial regarding flight MH-17 at The Hague**

Even before the case of the crash of flight MH-17 went to trial in the Netherlands, RT launched a campaign in Russian to discredit both the investigation and the court. A special information operation was developed and carried out to disseminate a ‘firehose of falsehoods’ promoting many different competing and even farcical versions of events told by Russian military experts, politicians, journalists, and false witnesses. First, several media platforms published a message about a ‘letter from Netherlands intelligence’ stating that the Boeing airplane could not be shot down by a ‘Buk’ that linked to a dubious site in English—**Bonanza Media**—that has been

shown to have connections to Russian military intelligence.<sup>127</sup> Then, RT published an article citing ‘Dutch media publications’—without indicating the source—that claimed: ‘They testify to the correctness of the Russian side: the Kremlin assessed reports of the absence of ‘Buks’ in the area of the crash of MH-17’.<sup>128</sup>

### **Divisions in Europe**

Russian information influence operations designed to create divisions among the Allies have intensified. RT often cites French President Emmanuel Macron on this topic; his words are freely appropriated and ascribed convenient interpretations in RT headlines. For example, one headline read: “It costs us Europeans very much”: Macron pointed to the ineffectiveness of EU sanctions against Russia’.<sup>129</sup> RT’s activities in France serve as another example of Russian special services’ efforts to corrode the country’s political system through information influence activities. The main subject of this operation is the ‘yellow vests’ movement, which Russian media has been actively supporting for several years. During the period of 1 February to 20 March 2020, RT France published 67 articles promoting the activities of the ‘yellow vests’. During the same period, RT published no more than six pieces with the tag ‘yellow vests’ in other languages. These articles depict the ‘yellow vests’ as a powerful social protest movement against the liberal policies of President Macron.



In addition, some have suggested that RT news agency newsletters may include hidden instructions for 'protesters', often disguised as analytical materials, forecasts, or thoughts on developing events. Efficiency, accuracy, and availability of information allow Russian secret services to secretly manage protests by identifying existing rifts in society and furthering their expansion.<sup>130</sup> On 26 February 2020, **RT** Editor-in-Chief Margarita Simonyan announced that the former head of the economic intelligence service of France, **Alain Juliett**, would be hosting a geopolitical programme on **RT France**.<sup>131</sup> On 12 March 2020, a message appeared that **RT France** would be included in the package of news channels provided by French operator **Canal +**.<sup>132</sup> Thus, in France, the infrastructure for Russian information influence is created. The results can already be seen. **RT**'s exclusive live broadcasts and videos show *yellow vest* demonstrators chanting '*Merçi, RT!*' when they notice RT cameras. French Secretary of State for Digital Technologies Cedric O said: 'Today on YouTube, the most popular channel is not *BFM*, it is not *CNEWS*, it is *RT*.'<sup>133</sup>

## COVID-19

Beginning in February 2020, the '**coronavirus**' has become a major theme in Russian information campaigns. Two narratives have dominated the information flow: '*the virus is the invention of Western intelligence services*' and '*the coronavirus pandemic will destroy the West*'. Russian media use the theme of the pandemic to

assert the superiority of Russian medicine over that of Europe's, and to idealise Russia as the country that defeated both the Nazis and the virus. The general message is: "***The European Union is on the verge of collapse because of the coronavirus, but everything is calm in Russia.***" On 17 March 2020, **Mir Tesen portal**, [owned by Internet millionaire **Viktor Remsha**] published an article by Ivan Snezhny, 'Sunset of the West—coronavirus: panic in shops and on the streets', which claimed: 'The West has long been declining, the coronavirus COVID-19 pandemic did not cause the crisis—the virus was only a catalyst for deep problems and systemic miscalculations.' Another article on the same portal claimed: 'The West will wait in vain for Russia's collapse: Europe has been overtaken by the crisis'.<sup>134</sup>

The portal **RuBaltik.Ru** actively predicts the collapse of the West. **RuBaltik.Ru** positions itself as analytical and publishes influence materials in Russian, Belarusian, Polish, Lithuanian, and Latvian. One headline read: 'The death of the EU brain: Brussels saves Poland instead of Italy from coronavirus',<sup>135</sup> making use of a standard special services provocation technique to bring about discord in target societies. In another article, journalist Alexander Nosovich writes:

The coronavirus will become for NATO and the EU what Chernobyl has become for the Soviet Union. The coronavirus pandemic in Europe and the emergency measures taken in connection with the closure of EU member states have spawned talk about the collapse





of the European Union. The separation of the United States from the distressed Old World spurred the theme of the NATO crisis. The situation in the Western world of the era of the coronavirus resembles the accident at the Chernobyl nuclear power plant, which launched the mechanisms of the collapse of the USSR. In both cases, the trigger for disintegration was not the emergency itself, but a moral disaster: in the Soviet case—a lie, in the European and American—betrayal.<sup>136</sup>

This spin on the situation and the parallels it draws are designed to demoralise the West. Other examples include headlines such as:

**RuBaltik.Ru:** 'The Polish Institute: the lack of cohesion of European countries in the treatment of coronavirus has been a hit to the unity of the EU';<sup>137</sup> 'Coronavirus caused a catastrophe in the Baltic states';<sup>138</sup>

'10 liberal mantras trampled by COVID-19';<sup>139</sup> 'The United States is luring German doctors to force Europe to pay for the coronavirus vaccine'.<sup>140</sup>

**Vzglyad:** 'The pandemic will force Europe to abandon Russophobia'.<sup>141</sup>

**Russian News Agency:** 'Looting has already begun in "highly cultured" London';<sup>142</sup> 'The US has begun a full-blown financial crisis—announced Bank of America';<sup>143</sup> 'All is well, excellent investors—the collapse of the United States continues steadily';<sup>144</sup> contrasted with the news that everything is fine in Russia: 'There are no seriously ill patients in Russia, and the panic is inexplicable—the common view of an infectious disease specialist'.<sup>145</sup>



# CONCLUSIONS

## 1. *Russia continues to strengthen the state monopoly in the production and distribution of information products.*

The media assets market has been privatised and is now owned by individuals and commercial entities linked with the Russian state and with Putin's closest associates. The monopolisation of Russian media agencies began in the 2000s, when media oligarch Vladimir Gusinsky was forced to surrender NTV to new owners associated with President Putin's administration.<sup>146</sup> This process is now almost complete. In the print sector, the state has once again taken over not only most publishing businesses

but also paper production, while in the field of radio and television broadcasting the state has taken full control over signal transmission, and the largest television and radio companies in Russia are controlled by state representatives. Broadcasting structures are being enlarged to make state control more efficient. The latest phase is the active penetration of Russian government agencies on the internet tightening government regulation of social media and internet control.

## 2. *The funding for state and commercial information structures operating in the interests of the state is increasing at the expense of federal and regional budgets in Russia.*

Despite economic problems, state funding for media companies serving the interests of the state and Russian information activities increased in 2020 in Russia. There has been a sharp increase in funding for the main information resources—the *Россия*

сегодня news agency and **RT**. At the same time, the financing of information structures serving the interests of foreign information influence is several times higher than the amount of financing for structures involved in broadcasting to Russian audiences.

## 3. *In 2018–20, a number of laws were adopted that regulate the activities of mass media in Russia. The 'fight against information extremism' is used as an excuse to tighten legislation. In fact, there is a restriction on the fundamental rights of Russian citizens to freely receive and disseminate information.*

In contrast to European countries where, at the national level, there are practically no laws regulating media organisations

and content, such legislation has existed in Russia for a long time. 'Information policy' is the direction of the Russian



government's activities to ensure that citizens have access to information. Information policy is governed by media laws, the State Information Policy Concept and the Russian Information Security Doctrine. However, in recent years, the regulatory functions of the state have been tightened and strengthened. This is due to increased information pressure on Russia from Ukraine and the advent of numerous new alternative sources of information on the internet.

As part of the fight against internet freedom, Russia adopted seven laws and amendments to existing legislation in 2018–19, including toughening the punishment for disseminating fake news and for insulting government officials. A package of laws has also been adopted, creating opportunities for isolating the RUNET from the global internet network. Thus, the organisation of Russian information influence operations has been reconfigured to incorporate additional repressive functions.

**4.** *In 2020, Russian information influence activities began to actively disseminate new narratives, resulting in a change in the priorities of domestic and foreign policies. The economy is losing ground to ideology, and reality is giving way to history.*

Discussion of amendments to the Constitution proposed by Putin led to the emergence of new informational narratives, such as the legitimisation of the institution of the head of state as the '*father of the nation*'; the preparation for a long struggle with the West; the characterisation of Russia as a 'besieged fortress'; and the nonexistence of alternatives to the 'special way of Russia'. The deterioration of the socio-economic situation in Russia necessitated distracting the citizens from internal problems and elicited a narrative about 'Western responsibility for the economic difficulties in Russia.'<sup>147</sup>

Russian information influence aimed at Europe has intensified to strengthen

the position of the Russian state and Russian companies in the European energy market. To protect its economic interests, Russian information influence operations create narratives such as 'the ominous conspiracy of the United States against Europe.' The attack on the EU's core values and institutions has also intensified in order to create an illusion of the imminent collapse of the European Union. Russian information influence is actively replicating the narrative of 'the coming apocalypse of Europe.' At the same time, these narratives portray Russia as the state that will remain no matter what and will take on the mission of reviving a renewed world.<sup>148</sup>

**5.** *An analysis of the information content of **RT** and other Kremlin information structures from February to March 2020 confirmed the continuation of the previous strategic trends of Russian information influence activities aimed at fighting the West. Several new*



*trends have also been identified. The strategic purpose of information products includes discrediting NATO and US foreign policy; forming an image of Ukraine as a country of victorious Nazis; presenting a lurid account of crimes against the sexual integrity of children in the EU and the USA; and exaggerating the migration crisis in Europe and the crime rate among migrants. New trends include the coronavirus pandemic as the grave digger of the West, and the oil war as a trigger for global catastrophe. Special media operations are conducted to create and promote these narratives.*

Russian information influence operations respond flexibly to changes in the international situation and, along with traditional lines of discrediting the 'collective West' as Russia's main enemy, weave current stories into existing narratives. For example, the aggravation of the situation in Syria and around the Iranian nuclear deal led to a flow of **RT** messages in English, Arabic, and French about US and Turkish crimes against the civilian population of Syria and the failure of US policy toward Iran. The signed agreement between the United States and the Afghan Taliban on the cessation of hostilities has also become the subject of fierce obstruction and criticism in the English version of **RT**.

Russia's information influence expanded the applied techniques for producing and distributing the best-selling information product—half-truths in the analysed period. What experts used to call 'post-truth', but now often refer to as 'half-truths'. 'Post-truth' is defined as outright lies and fabrications that appeal to the emotions and ignore facts. The hallmark of the 'half-truth' is the combination of truth and silence; there is truth, but an incomplete truth. These are not facts, but fragments of them. An information

product using the 'half-truth' format is more effective, as it is accompanied by links to various sources, including completely reliable ones, and thus creates an illusion of the truth of the information. The use of this technique requires a high density of information movement between people and systems, in which 'fragments of facts' can be mixed freely with the intention to form a false mosaic of 'half-truths'.

This method is used widely in Russian information influence activities. For example, the story of the 'yellow vests' in France was co-opted to promote a strategic narrative favourable to Russia. The half-truth narrative repeats true aspects of the story—the yellow vest movement is a powerful social movement that opposes Macron's economic policies and enjoys widespread popular support; at one point, the protests did turn violent. What is further implied in the influence narrative is that the movement is opposed to the French government's inhumane policies and is subjected to brutal police repression. The history of the movement and the government's response are not explained. Thereby, the target audience's attention is diverted with sensationalism, and emphasis is shifted



to fit the story into the greater influence narrative of the West's decline.

Russian information influence operations continue to employ the 'mirror' principle whereby any hard-to-refute criticism of Russia is accompanied by an answer blaming the accuser of the same or worse. For example, stories about the coronavirus epidemic in the Russian media support 'the European Apocalypse' narrative with claims that the epicentre of the outbreak is in Europe and the West is incapable of managing the crisis. Thus, criticism about the backward

state of Russian medicine is neutralised.

Harking back to an old method used in Russian information influence operations, RT often recruits Western public opinion authorities to act as expert speakers or to author publications that support a desired narrative, as can be seen in the cases of former military officials, ex-heads of special services, or former Polish President Lech Wałęsa, giving credibility to these narratives. Fake Western experts are also used as guests on Russian TV shows, repeating disinformation narratives.<sup>149</sup>

**6.** *The machine of Russian information influence activities shows no sign of slowing down; improving and modernising practices allow it to expand the range of techniques used and to conduct special media operations aimed at unsettling socio-political processes and more effectively deforming the socio-economic space of Western countries and their allies around the world.*

It is therefore up to states and social media companies to implement their own regulations to minimise the impact of Russian state-controlled media manipulation in their own countries. While it is more difficult to manage online content, Ukraine and some Baltic states have taken action against the media outlets, including Россия сегодня, **Sputnik**, **VGTRK**, **NTV**, **REN TV**, **RT**, **TNT**, and **OTR**. If the aim of information influence activities is to erode trust in institutions, sow discord and chaos in society, and amplify existing divisions, then states must strengthen their own means of communication with society and increase media literacy and critical thinking. Social media companies must also work to

decrease the amplification of false narratives and information influence operations, and to increase transparency. However, protecting free speech and the human right of freedom of expression, while at the same time stifling those dissenting voices that use false information to undermine society can be a challenge. Eliminating all disinformation and information influence operations may not be an achievable goal; strengthening society against such operations may be a more valuable objective in this case, though there is no one single solution. While progress has been made, states must have a more robust organised and systemic response, and in most states, as of the publication date of this report, such a response is not in place.



# APPENDIX

Russia's Media Ratings for August 2020<sup>150</sup>

## Top 10 media





## NEWSPAPERS

august 2020

1



Известия

2



Коммерсантъ

3



Российская газета

4



Комсомольская правда

5



Московский комсомолец

6



Ведомости

7



Новая газета

8



Аргументы и факты

9



Парламентская газета

10



Труд

## MAGAZINES

august 2020

1



Forbes

2



GQ

3



Vogue

4



Esquire

5



HELLO!

6



Cosmopolitan

7



Профиль

8



7 Дней

9



Glamour

10



Эксперт



## TV CHANNELS

august 2020

1



Россия 1

2



Россия 24

3



REN TV

4



Первый канал

5



Телеканал 360

6



Телеканал Звезда

7



Пятый канал

8



НТВ

9



Телеканал Дождь

10



ОТР

## INTERNET MEDIA

august 2020

1



Rbc.ru

2



Russian.rt.com

3



Gazeta.ru

4



360tv.ru

5



Lenta.ru!

6



Kp.ru

7



Meduza.io

8



M24.ru

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Fontanka.ru

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МБХ Медиа




### TOP-5 MOST CITED JOURNALISTS

august 2020

- 1  Владимир Познер
- 2  Маргарита Симоньян
- 3  Дмитрий Губерниев
- 4  Владимир Соловьев
- 5  Ксения Собчак

### TOP 5 TELEGRAM CHANNELS

august 2020

- 1  @DavydovIn
- 2  @breakingmash
- 3  @pravdadirty
- 4  @nastyaivleevaagent
- 5  @stalin\_gulag

### News sources and media trust among Russians. Research of Levada Center, 02.27.2020

Main sources of information (% of respondents)

	August 2009	June 2013	March 2014	November 2015	July 2016	March 2018	August 2018	January 2020
<b>TV-channels</b>	94	88	90	85	86	85	73	<b>73</b>
<b>Internet</b>	9	21	24	21	33	27	37	<b>39</b>
<b>Social networks</b>	6	14	15	13	23	21	28	<b>39</b>
<b>Friends, family, neighbours</b>	26	24	25	24	27	27	18	<b>18</b>
<b>Newspapers</b>	37	20	19	13	19	13	13	<b>16</b>
<b>Radio</b>	41	16	18	13	22	15	15	<b>15</b>
<b>Magazines</b>	8	4	5	2	4	2	3	<b>5</b>
<b>Telegramm-channels</b>	–	–	–	–	–	–	–	<b>4</b>



Level of media trust (% of respondents)

	August 2009	June 2013	March 2014	November 2015	July 2016	March 2018	August 2018	January 2020
<b>TV-channels</b>	79	51	50	41	59	51	49	<b>52</b>
<b>Internet</b>	7	14	20	18	20	19	24	<b>24</b>
<b>Social networks</b>	4	11	9	9	12	15	15	<b>21</b>
<b>Newspapers</b>	16	12	14	12	9	8	7	<b>12</b>
<b>Radio</b>	23	12	13	11	9	9	10	<b>10</b>
<b>Friends, family, neighbours</b>	9	16	19	19	12	19	13	<b>8</b>
<b>Telegramm-channels</b>	–	–	–	–	–	–	–	<b>4</b>
<b>Magazines</b>	1	2	1	2	1	1	1	<b>2</b>
<b>Others</b>	<1	1	1	1	1	<1	1	<b>1</b>
<b>Nobody trust</b>	6	8	4	8	8	10	15	<b>13</b>
<b>Difficult to answer</b>	3	6	6	6	6	8	4	<b>3</b>

Source: Levada Centre, Sources of information and trust in the media (27.02.2020)



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