Two Years On

An Analysis of Russian State and Pro-Kremlin Information Warfare in the Context of the Invasion of Ukraine

About this Report

This report provides an overview of how Russian state and pro-Kremlin propaganda undermining international support for Ukraine has evolved over the two years since the beginning of the full-scale invasion on 24 February 2022. It outlines a range of semi-covert tactics through which Russian state and pro-Kremlin outlets continue to reach substantial audiences despite European Union sanctions. Finally, this report highlights four key areas of vulnerability of the Western alliance that Russian state and pro-Kremlin actors are likely to exploit over the coming year.

About ISD

The Institute for Strategic Dialogue (ISD) is an independent, non-profit organisation dedicated to safeguarding human rights and reversing the rising tide of polarisation, extremism and disinformation worldwide.

Since 2006, ISD has been at the forefront of analysing and responding to extremism in all its forms. Our global team of researchers, digital analysts, policy experts, frontline practitioners, technologists and activists have kept ISD's work systematically ahead of the curve on this fast-evolving set of threats. We have innovated and scaled sector-leading policy and operational programmes — on- and offline — to push back the forces threatening democracy and cohesion around the world today.

ISD
Powering solutions
to extremism, hate
and disinformation

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Executive Summary

This report provides an overview of how Russian state and pro-Kremlin[1] propaganda has evolved over the two years since the beginning of the full-scale invasion of Ukraine on 24 February 2022. It compiles and builds on efforts by the Institute for Strategic Dialogue (ISD) to monitor, track and analyse Russian state and pro-Kremlin dis- and misinformation, influence operations and propaganda related to the Russian invasion of Ukraine.[2]

Examining Russian state media and pro-Kremlin voices, the report shows how these became trusted sources among a broad range of fringe audiences in the years preceding the invasion. These audiences often distrust the political and media establishment and are therefore susceptible to the Kremlin's alternative version of events.

An overview of the evolution of tactics of Russian state and pro-Kremlin propaganda since the beginning of the full-scale invasion is also provided. We highlight important differences between geographies: while European Union sanctions against RT and Sputnik have reduced their ability to reach European audiences, official state propaganda outlets retain significant reach in the MENA region and in Latin America. Russian state media was therefore forced to innovate and draw on a range of covert, deceptive and agile tactics including the use of spinoff outlets, coordinated account networks, single purpose accounts centred around fake personas and the imitation of legitimate media outlets.

Key Findings

- **Outside of the European Union, there is a sustained and notable level of engagement with Russian state media.** Media outlets focussed on Latin America such as 'RT en Español,' 'Sputnik Mundo,' and 'Sputnik Brasil' boast substantial followings, reaching over 17 million people in the case of RT en Español, and garner significant engagement on their content. In the MENA region, the reach of Russian state media remains similarly significant, with the RT Arabic Website reaching 57 million visits in the first quarter of 2024 while visitors spend almost double the amount of time on RT Arabic than on Al-Jazeera's website.

- **In contrast, following the European Union sanctions on Russian state-affiliated media outlets RT and Sputnik, there has been a drastic decrease in visits to both outlets.** Global web traffic to the sanctioned sites decreased by 18%, visits via search engines by 100%, visits via social media by 70% and Web traffic from the EU by 74% between 2021 and 2022.

- **Despite the success of the EU sanctions, ISD research evidences a plethora of tactics pro-Kremlin voices have used to continue to reach EU audiences. To complement its official state outlets, pro-Kremlin actors use a range of semi-covert and nimble creative tactics to reach audiences online.** This includes the use of disguised spinoff outlets, coordinated account networks, single purpose accounts centred around fake personas and the imitation of legitimate media outlets.

  - **Russian state media outlets have devoted significant effort to develop approaches to circumvent content blockages related to the EU sanctions.** For example, ISD's digital monitoring also uncovered Bloß mit Biss, a network operating on TikTok and YouTube, as a sub-outlet for the German arm of the Russian state media network Sputnik.

  - **The cultivation of fake online personas to spread disinformation appears to be increasing as of the second half of 2023.** Often these accounts are used to plant fake content or unverified claims relating to corruption by high-ranking Ukrainian officials.

- **ISD identified domains mimicking domain names of popular news outlets in Germany, the United Kingdom, France, Ukraine and Italy associated with the wider Doppelgänger operation.** Our research further identified 29 Facebook ads promoting these websites. Doppelgänger is a coordinated network which promoted pro-Kremlin narratives by impersonating legitimate major news outlets to share fake news stories.

Drawing on our analysis of the approaches deployed by Russian state and pro-Kremlin actors since the start of the full-scale invasion of Ukraine, this report also looks ahead to identify areas that the Kremlin is likely to view as vulnerabilities based on its long-term strategic aims. In the final section, we identify four key issues and events that Russian state and pro-Kremlin actors are likely to target over the coming year, using their established communications toolkit to advance the strategic interests of the Russian state:

- Grievances around the cost of support for Ukraine in the context of rising migration and a stagnant economy in Germany;

- The potential rise of isolationism in US foreign policy;

- The expected gains of pro-Kremlin far-right parties in the upcoming European parliamentary elections;

- Accusations around perceived Western hypocrisy regarding international conflicts, especially in relation to the Israel-Hamas conflict.

Introduction

Information warfare is a central component of Russia's foreign policy and military strategy. The role of the internet, information and social media as vectors for the Kremlin's geopolitical ambitions is now well documented. While freedom of access, communication and information - principles that still underpin much of the internet in the context of liberal democracies - are shut down domestically, they are exploited abroad to influence public opinion and policies related to the economic and geostrategic interests of Russia.

When Russia launched a full-scale invasion of Ukraine on 24 February 2022, it was accompanied by an equally ambitious information offensive. Through its official state media outlets as well as more covert channels, Russia has sought to justify the invasion, discredit and undermine international support for Ukraine, and bolster its own standing in the international community. In one early and audacious example three weeks into the full-scale invasion, a deepfake of Ukrainian President Zelenskyy supposedly calling on Ukrainians to lay down their weapons was circulating on social media, though the Ukrainian government debunked the video swiftly.[3]

Building on its propaganda during the Euromaidan protests emerging in late 2013,[4] the 2014 Donbas invasion and annexation of Crimea[5] and the military build-up in late 2021,[6] Russia systematically tried to discredit Ukrainians as fascists or Nazis.[7] It spread false accusations of genocide against the Ukrainian government to justify military action[8] and spread disinformation related to Russian war crimes in Ukraine. In April 2022, an ISD study of Facebook posts across 20 countries[9] found that three weeks after the Bucha massacre, the most shared Facebook posts on the events were those that questioned or denied their very existence.[10]

Through its propaganda apparatus the Russian state pursues both longer term strategic aims (such as effecting larger attitudinal shifts in society) as well as tactical goals (e.g. influencing the perception of specific events and actions) of the Russian state.[11] The key propaganda goal related to the war is to undermine Western solidarity with and support for Ukraine, stymying its war effort and forcing it to surrender to negotiations on Russia's terms.[12] Eroding support for Ukraine from the United States, but also from European countries like Germany (Ukraine's biggest source of military and economic support) is therefore crucial to Russian interests. In the long term,

the Russian regime's strategy is to undermine the Western alliance and the multilateral institutions it is built around. To achieve this, its propaganda looks to discredit the West while at the same time seeking to improve Russia's global legitimacy.[13]

As documented in this report, the Russian state and its supporters have shown considerable political promiscuity in pursuing these goals. Rather than amplifying groups and individuals along consistent ideological lines, state media and pro-Kremlin outlets are pragmatically pushing actors that may hold contradictory ideological or political views, so long as they also advocate individual positions favourable to Russia's geostrategic interests.

Two years after the full-scale Russian invasion of Ukraine, we are at an inflection point. United action by Western governments is desperately needed to decisively tip the military balance in favour of Ukraine. However, it seems increasingly likely the US will adopt an isolationist foreign policy in the event of a Trump victory in the 2024 Presidential Elections. In parallel, increasing migration and economic stagnation, combined with the rise of pro-Kremlin far-right parties, mean that there are serious doubts whether European countries (with the biggest share of the burden falling on Germany), will be able to step up their assistance accordingly. Additionally, Russian state and pro-Kremlin propagandists will use perceived failures of the West to consistently uphold its principles of human rights and democracy to portray the international order as irreparably broken. Additionally, they are likely to contrast this to Western support for Ukraine, which they characterise to the non-Western world as a partisan project.

Pre-Invasion: Building Trust with Fringe Audiences

This section explores how the Kremlin built trust with online fringe audiences ahead of the full-scale invasion of Ukraine. In its targeting of political ecosystems, Russian disinformation and propaganda is characterised by ideological promiscuity. Rather than consistently amplifying groups and individuals along ideological lines, Russia has pragmatically considered the utility of each audience,[14] targeting both fringe and mainstream audiences.[15] In particular, Russia has tried to destabilise democratic societies by polarising and amplifying the political fringes, undermining trust in institutions and creating uncertainty and discord.[16]

Germany, which has been targeted by substantial pro-Kremlin communications efforts, is used as a case study in this section. In Germany, Russian state media successfully established itself as a trusted source among a broad range of audiences including among the far-right, far-left, communities focussed on conspiracy theories and COVID denialists. Through these audiences, Russian propaganda seeks to exacerbate societal polarisation around topics like migration, climate change, gender issues and public health.[17] Since the annexation of Crimea in 2014, such campaigns have spread false narratives around NATO expansion and the alleged "Nazi" regime in Kyiv, subsequently used to justify Russia's invasion of Ukraine since 2022.[18]

ISD research has shown how the Kremlin's invested in strategic communication targeted at the anti-vaccine Querdenken movement ("Lateral Thinking", the main organisers of anti-lockdown protests[19] and the far right.[20] RT DE came to be seen as a trustworthy source by influential far-right social media influencers like Jürgen Elsässer and leading Querdenken activists. Russian propaganda aims to influence election outcomes in favour of fringe parties[21] and undermine trust in democratic processes by spreading unverified claims about supposed election fraud.[22]

Far-Right Audiences

The Russian state has been increasing its engagement and cooperation with European far-right parties over the past decade to undermine NATO and the European Union. It aids groups that oppose liberal values, whose economic policies (such as opposing sanctions) are aligned with Russia's interests and who are willing to embrace and amplify Russian state propaganda or even lend legitimacy to its annexation of Crimea by serving as "election observers" to witness sham elections.[23] More covertly, it has been reported that a Russian intelligence agent worked as an aide for an MP of the far-right Alternative für Deutschland (AfD) in Germany[24], and paid the far-right activist Manuel Ochsenreiter money for pro-Russian articles.[25] Ochsenreiter later worked for the AfD MP Markus Frohnmeier, whose election campaign the Kremlin sought to boost during the 2019 elections, according to leaked documents.[26]

During the 2017 German parliamentary elections, inaccurate content disseminated by Russian state media and pro-Kremlin influencers as well as social media manipulation reinforced divisions around polarising issues, especially migration and refugees.[27] This was mutually reinforcing with similar messaging from anti-establishment alternative media outlets, in a similar dynamic also observed previously during the presidential elections in the US in 2016 as well as in France earlier in 2017.[28]

The most notable instance was the so-called Lisa hoax in 2016. This fabricated story about an alleged rape of a Russian-German girl by migrants spread from Russian state media via its foreign language channels to social media platforms.[29] It was picked up particularly by alternative German-language outlets with a strong anti-migration stance,[30] led to protests and was referred to in official statements by Russian foreign minister Sergei Lavrov.[31] The Lisa hoax showed how disinformation online can quickly have real-world impact and highlighted the risk of state actors leveraging societal polarisation around contentious issues like migration.

Far-Left Audiences

The relationship between the German far left and Russia is mixed. While some on the far left are critical of Putin, a significant segment of the contemporary far left prioritises calls for "peace with Russia", selective anti-imperialism and opposition to US hegemony. Anti-American and pro-Russian sentiments are particularly pronounced among Marxists and adherents of the former German Democratic Republic (GDR). Die Linke, the successor to the ruling party of the GDR (Socialist Unity Party), maintains a distinctive relationship with the Kremlin. ISD research in 2017 outlined overlaps between the far left in Germany and Russian state propaganda around anti-NATO, anti-establishment and anti-West sentiment,

which appeal to far-left readers of Kremlin-sponsored outlets like RT (formerly Russia Today) and Sputnik.[32]

Following the invasion of Ukraine, there were significant differences of opinion within Die Linke, centred around the long-standing pro-Russian views of the party's former vice-chair Sara Wagenknecht.[33] After Russia illegally annexed Crimea in 2014, Wagenknecht argued for the acceptance of the sham referendum on the Ukrainian peninsula and tried justifying the annexation in terms of Russia's security interests.[34] In 2023, Wagenknecht left Die Linke and founded a new party (Bündnis Sahra Wagenknecht), which calls for peace negotiations with Russia, blames NATO for the war and seeks an end to sanctions. A recent Washington Post analysis uncovered documents that proved the Kremlin's direct efforts to build a broad anti-war coalition in Germany via Wagenknecht's peace demonstrations.[35]

Building an Audience among Conspiracists

Russian state propaganda and disinformation successfully cultivated an audience among conspiracist ecosystems online, both in Germany and internationally. Multiple studies have underscored the significant reach[36] and engagement[37] of Russian disinformation during the COVID-19 pandemic.[38] Despite endorsing and implementing measures within Russia, the country's international state media focused on undermining confidence in vaccines and anti-pandemic measures in Europe, including Germany. This involved portraying the responses of these countries as disastrous and fuelling the Querdenken protests against COVID-restrictions, all the while amplifying concerns about mass surveillance and curtailments on civil liberties.[39] Some of the figures of this online conspiracist ecosystem have been closely engaging with pro-Kremlin content since the annexation of Crimea in 2014. For example, Ken Jebsen, Jürgen Elsässer and others who were active in the "Montagsmahnwachen für den Frieden" (Monday Vigils for Peace) later became active in the anti-lockdown movement.[40]

Once the full-scale invasion had started, conspiracist communities enthusiastically consumed content reflecting Russian claims about 'denazifying' Ukraine, opposition to Western military aid, and the alleged threat from the Ukrainian government to the Donbas population.[41] For example, German conspiracy theorists amplified Russian claims that Ukraine was allegedly planning large-scale false-flag attacks on civilians in the regions of Donezk

and Luhansk.[42] Some groups also spread antisemitic conspiracy theories which argued that Putin's decision to invade foiled secret and malign plans of "Jewish elites."[43] Another popular conspiracist narrative focussed on alleged US biolabs in Eastern Europe, drawing on stories which had been circulating among these channels for several years prior, especially in the context of conspiracy theories that portrayed the COVID-19 pandemic as a "bioweapon".[44] Restrictions imposed on Russian state media in various regions have unsurprisingly heightened their appeal within conspiracy ecosystems,[45] including on the messenger platform Telegram and other alt-tech channels.[46]

Post-Soviet Migrants

According to data from 2019, there were 3.5 million people in Germany from countries of the former Soviet Union. However, not all of them speak fluent Russian.[47] In 2020, it was estimated that around 2.2 million adults in Germany speak Russian fluently (many of them being former GDR citizens) or as a native language.[48]

Post-Soviet migrants in Germany are a heterogeneous group that includes ethnic German repatriates from the countries of the former Soviet Union (Russia, Kazakhstan, Ukraine), Jewish quota refugees and people from Russia who have immigrated to Germany for other reasons. 'Russian-Germans' (Russlanddeutsche) are the descendants of the Germans who had migrated to Russia from the 18th century onwards and who invoked a right to return to Germany as repatriates in the late 20th century.[49] Post-Soviet migrants and Russlanddeutsche in particular are frequently portrayed in major media outlets as a key target of Russian influence operations in Germany.[50] Some analyses assert there is a "significant influence" exerted by Russia, particularly over those within this community who are less socially and linguistically integrated into mainstream German society.[51] However, it's crucial to note that this community is diverse and that despite being a key target for Russian state media messaging, polling data indicates that only a quarter of this group places trust in Russian media (according to the same study, 38% of migrants from other communities trust the media from their countries of origin).[52]

Beyond broader narratives about Russia fighting "Ukrainian fascists" and an alleged Western conspiracy against Russia, some Russian state and pro-Kremlin propaganda seems to be specifically directed towards

post-Soviet migrants in Germany. For example, Russian state media has tried to describe conditions in Germany as chaotic, spreading scare stories about essential supplies being unavailable in Berlin and freezing people cutting down trees to provide heating due to energy shortages.[53] Another key narrative spread by pro-Kremlin actors such as the Vadar association which is targeted at post-Soviet migrants centres around alleged discrimination against Russian speakers or "Russophobia" in Germany.[54] ISD analysis of hateful and derogatory posts about Ukrainian refugees in pro-Kremlin channels frequently claim that Ukrainians in Germany specifically attack Russians and organise "Russophobic" performances and demonstrations.[55] Another investigation found claims in pro-Kremlin channels that Ukrainian refugees had burned a Russian flag.[56]

Vehicles of Influence: State Media and Evolution of Tactics

This section provides an overview of how tactics of Russian state and pro-Kremlin propaganda have evolved over the two years since the beginning of the full-scale invasion.

We highlight important differences between geographies: official state propaganda outlets retain significant reach in the MENA region and in Latina America, while sanctions against RT and Sputnik have significantly reduced its reach in European Union countries.

Pro-Kremlin actors reacted to the EU measures through a range of tactics including the use of disguised spinoff outlets, coordinated account networks, single purpose accounts centred around fake personas and the imitation of legitimate media outlets.
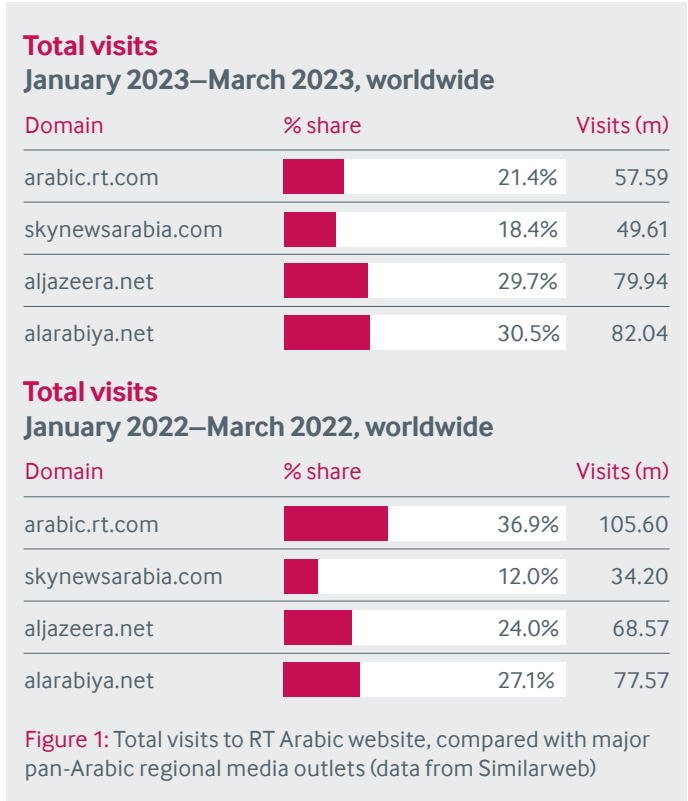
State Media Outlets

Following the full-scale invasion of Ukraine in February 2022, the European Union imposed sanctions on Russian state-affiliated media outlets RT and Sputnik. The objective was to counteract Russia's manipulation of information within the EU territory. Alongside addressing broadcast and print media, these sanctions encompassed social media platforms and search engines.

In October 2022, ISD research on the effectiveness of the sanctions in the European Union showed that site visits decreased substantially across traffic source types, including Google or other search engines, clicking through to the sites from social media platforms, or by typing the site address directly into a web browser.[57] Global web traffic to the sanctioned sites decreased by 18%, visits via search engines by 100%, visits via social media by 70% and Web traffic from the EU by 74% between 2021 and 2022. These numbers indicated that EU-wide sanctions were generally effective in curbing Russian state media reach of EU audiences.

This picture changes significantly outside of the European Union. For example, in Latin America, Russian state-affiliated actors maintain a notable reach online. Media outlets such as 'RT en Español,' 'Sputnik Mundo,' and 'Sputnik Brasil' boast substantial followings, reaching over 17 million people in the case of RT en Español, and garner significant engagement on their content.

In the MENA region, the reach of Russian state media is similarly significant, especially in the initial phase of the

Total visits
January 2023—March 2023, worldwide

Domain	% share		Visits (m)
arabic.rt.com		21.4%	57.59
skynewsarabia.com		18.4%	49.61
aljazeera.net		29.7%	79.94
alarabiya.net		30.5%	82.04

Total visits
January 2022—March 2022, worldwide

Domain	% share		Visits (m)
arabic.rt.com		36.9%	105.60
skynewsarabia.com		12.0%	34.20
aljazeera.net		24.0%	68.57
alarabiya.net		27.1%	77.57

Figure 1: Total visits to RT Arabic website, compared with major pan-Arabic regional media outlets (data from Similarweb)

war against Ukraine. During the lead-up to and the start of the invasion during the first quarter of 2022, the website of Russia Today Arabic (RT Arabic) had 105 million total visits (28 million more than al-Jazeera) and outpaced other pan-Arab regional media, based on data from Similarweb.[58]

By the first quarter of 2023, the RT Arabic website lost almost half of its traffic since the onset of the invasion (57 million) and by the first quarter of 2024 had lost further visits (52 million). However, the outlet's website has sustained its position amongst regional competitors in terms of unique visitors, visit duration and pages per visit. Visitors spent almost double the amount of time on RT Arabic as the website of the next closest pan-Arab media outlet — Al-Jazeera.

Likewise, by the first quarter of 2023 the Sputnik Arabic website had lost more than a million visitors a month compared to the first quarter of 2022. The Sputnik Arabic website has gained traction with new audiences however with substantial growth in Lebanon and Iran. Those two countries make up a quarter of the website's traffic. Data from Similarweb shows more than 55 percent of the audience to the Sputnik Arabic website are men between the ages of 18-34.

Key to RT Arabic website traffic are referrals from the application "The Pulse", also known as "Nabd." Nabd is a Dubai-based Arabic news aggregator whose two top outgoing link destinations are both RT Arabic websites. These websites represent 30.5 percent of all outgoing traffic from the aggregator. Both RT websites received more than double the traffic of the third most visited outlet (CNN Arabic) linked to via Nabd. Nabd has more than 25 million subscribers and claims to be the "largest Arabic news aggregator globally."

Disguised Spinoff Outlets Circumventing Sanctions

Russian state media outlets have devoted a significant amount of effort to develop approaches to circumvent content blockages related to the EU sanctions. Overall, sanctions against RT and its local language versions are being evaded in four main ways:

- Variations of state media domain names;[59]

- Mirror websites not directly attributed to state media;

- Websites copy pasting state media content;[60]

- Websites directing traffic to state media.[61]

Some of the techniques designed to evade sanctions were relatively overt or poorly disguised. After YouTube blocked Russian state media globally in March 2022, a new channel called Dig Deep Documentary was launched a month later which shared RT content with the logo removed, as well as RT documentaries about the war. Official RT social media even promoted the YouTube channel in May and June 2022.[62] Shortform video content and podcasts became a more covert way of disseminating RT clips. Though it is relatively easy to follow the linkages between these channels and state media, it has constituted a simple and successful way to avoid bans and could mean Russian state propaganda is being viewed by people unaware of it.[63] Large Russian YouTube channels have also directly posted state media content despite sanctions.[64]

ISD's digital monitoring also uncovered Bloß mit Biss, a network operating on TikTok and YouTube, among other platforms, as a sub-outlet for the German arm of the Russian state media network Sputnik. Bloß mit Biss channels primarily focus on German politics and have amassed millions of views since October 2022, featuring content produced by Sputnik's German arm, SNA,[65] underscoring

the ease with which Russian state-affiliated entities can circumvent bans on Kremlin content across various platforms. It also highlights the notable success that Russian propagandists can achieve with short-form video content, garnering tens of millions of views. Throughout the first half of 2023, this content was broadly focussed on undermining support for the German coalition government in general, and the Greens in particular, in response to their economic and material assistance to Ukraine.

Coordinated Networks

The Russian state has long used coordinated account networks on social media to purposefully distort the perception of popular opinion online.

In September 2022, ISD and other research organisations uncovered[66] and analysed[67] an extensive Russian influence operation ("Doppelgänger") that systematically targeted European audiences[68] with pro-Kremlin content across a wide range of social media platforms including Facebook, Instagram, Twitter, Telegram and YouTube.[69] Notably, the campaign had a specific focus on German audiences, including spreading false information about crimes purportedly committed by Ukrainian refugees in the country. Their tactics included creating cloned websites and videos featuring logos of reputable media outlets, establishing inauthentic profiles, amplifying content across social media platforms, and investing in advertising.

Finding conclusive evidence to establish who is responsible for coordinated network activity is often difficult. It is therefore not always possible to make definitive statements about Russian state involvement. For example, a December 2023 investigation by ISD unveiled a coordinated pro-Kremlin campaign of at least 64 accounts on X likely using content generated by ChatGPT to undermine support for Alexey Navalny (the jailed Russian opposition leader), as well as his associate Maria Pevchikh and their organisation, the Anti-Corruption Foundation (ACF).[70] Even though there was no conclusive evidence to attribute the campaign to the Russian state, ISD analysis found that the accounts were mostly active during week days and in line with business hours in Moscow and St Petersburg.

In some cases, non-state actors appear to coordinate their attempts to compensate for the lost reach of official state outlets following the sanctions. For example, a coordinated network of volunteers called Info Defense also began to translate existing Russian language propaganda and

disinformation about the Ukraine war into over a dozen languages, including German. This venture also includes a YouTube channel to disseminate their content with their main outlet being language specific Telegram channels.[71]

Single-Purpose Fake Persona Accounts
A tactic that seemed to be used more frequently over the second half of 2023 is to cultivate fake online personas, such as "whistleblowers", "doctors", "activists" or journalists" to spread disinformation. Often these accounts are used to plant fake content or unverified claims relating to corruption by high-ranking Ukrainian officials.

For example, a YouTube video in August 2023 originally posted by an account calling himself Mohammed Al-Alawi claimed he had proof that President Zelenskyy's mother-in-law bought a villa in El Gouna, Egypt for 5 million dollars of humanitarian aid money sent to Ukraine. The video was the only piece of content posted by Mohammed Al-Alawi. This claim has been picked up by numerous international disinformation sources including Natural News (which has 74K followers on Telegram), a US based commercial enterprise which acquired notoriety for promoting conspiracy theories and disinformation during the COVID-19 pandemic.[72] Natural News claimed that Zelenskyy himself bought the villa through his mother-in-law using Western aid money.

A similar case involved the alleged "journalist" Shahzad Nasir, who in November 2023 spread the idea that there was a corruption scandal involving the Ukrainian president Volodymyr Zelenskyy and two close associates, Boris and Serhiy Shefir, who purchased two luxury yachts with a combined value of 75 million dollars. Despite being quickly debunked by Community Notes on X, the claim about "Zelenskyy's yachts" was spread by pro-Kremlin outlets in various languages including the Strategic Culture Foundation (which has been banned on Facebook, Twitter and YouTube but has 12K followers on Telegram), reportedly linked to Russian intelligence service SVR, and several pro-Kremlin Telegram channels including the influencer Alina Lipp.[73] Nasir's YouTube channel was created in November 2022 and previously only published one video. "Nasir" appears only briefly in the video. His account on X was recently repurposed and only started its activity as Shahzad Nasir in November 2023. ISD could not find any evidence that a person with the same name is doing professional journalistic work.
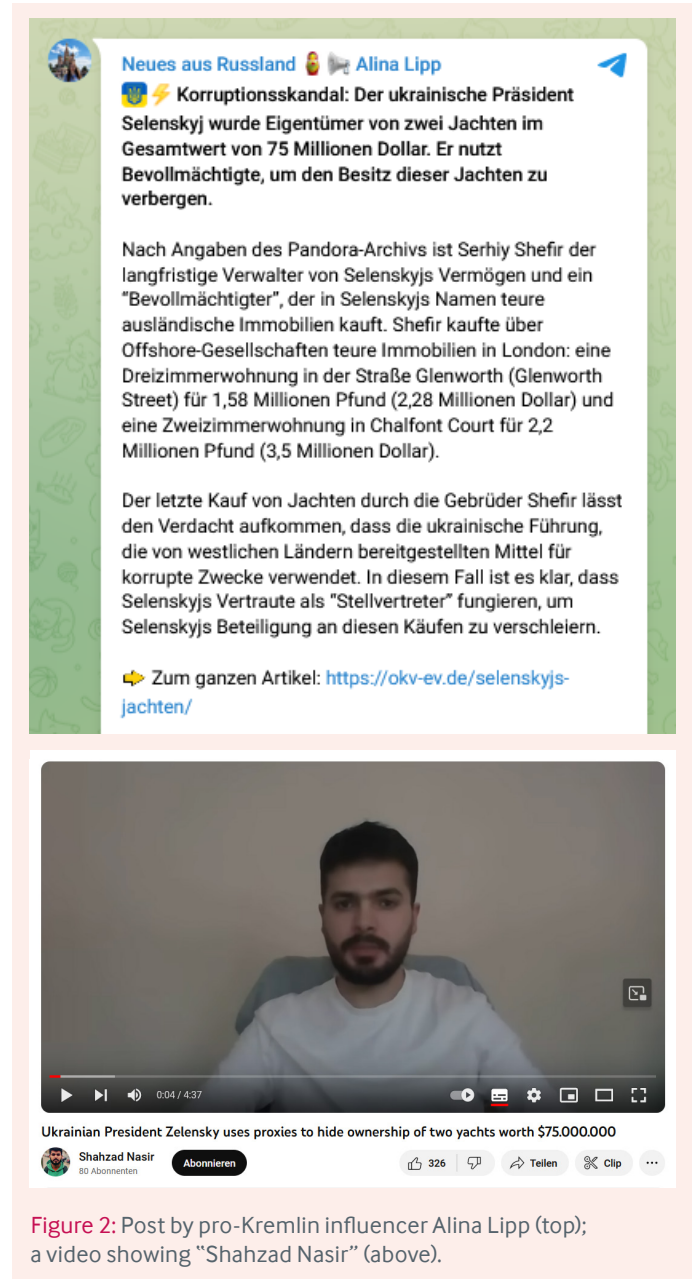

Figure 2: Post by pro-Kremlin influencer Alina Lipp (top); a video showing "Shahzad Nasir" (above).

In another case in November 2023, an alleged "French eco activist and journalist" claimed that Alexander Soros, son of George Soros, made a deal with the Ukrainian government to use 400 square km of Ukrainian land for free to deposit toxic waste. The X account which initially published this claim appears to only have been active since mid-November 2023. The claim was picked up by numerous Russian state and pro-Kremlin websites such as Sputnik, Tass or Pravda.ru and spread in German by Alina Lipp and the Swiss website Uncut News. Similarly, a "whistleblower doctor" from Africa who allegedly worked for the US medical company Global Surgical and Medical Support Group (GSMSG) claimed in November 2023 that wounded Ukrainian soldiers were being brought to Germany where their organs are harvested for NATO officers and high command who need organ transplantations. The video of the "whistleblower" was posted by a newly registered YouTube account. These claims were laundered through African news websites such as The Nation, NewsGhana and NetAfrique, including as sponsored posts, and later picked up by Russian state and pro-Kremlin media outlets and accounts.

Impersonating Legitimate Media Outlets

Another key tactic that has gained in prominence over the past year has been the impersonation of mainstream media outlets to share fake news stories drawing on the credibility of these organisations.[74]

In September 2022, when Meta took down[75] the Doppelgänger network mentioned above on the grounds of Coordinated Inauthentic Behaviour,[76] it emerged that the network had promoted pro-Kremlin narratives by impersonating legitimate major news outlets including a wide range of international outlets such as The Guardian, Ansa, RBC Ukraine, Le Monde, Le Parisien, 20 Minutes, Der Spiegel, BILD, WELT, t-online, Neues Deutschland, Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung, Süddeutsche Zeitung or Tagesspiegel (Berlin).[77] ISD's research identified 28 domains mimicking domain names of popular news outlets in Germany, the United Kingdom, France, Ukraine and Italy associated with the wider Doppelgänger operation. Our research further identified 29 Facebook ads promoting these websites.[78]

One example was the Telegram channel Deutsche Wahrheit (likely part of the larger Doppelgänger operation) which shared content designed to resemble mainstream outlets like BILD or Deutsche Welle. This included videos

Figure 3: Screenshot of a fake WDR article shared on Telegram.

and stories with false claims about Ukrainian refugees committing crimes or bringing over infectious diseases.[79] Similar tactics were also identified by the French government[80] and deployed in Poland specifically to fake local news stories about Ukrainian refugees.[81]

Other examples of media impersonation include a fabricated video spreading conspiracy theories about Ukraine selling donated weapons on the black market which was spread by fake German journalists and non-existent civil society organisations.[82] In one case, a pro-Kremlin Telegram channel also published a screenshot of a fake Westdeutscher Rundfunk (WDR) article claiming unknown individuals from Ukraine were trying to blackmail the mother of Shani Louk, the German-Israeli hostage kidnapped and killed by Hamas.[83] The fake article claimed that Ukrainians were trying to demand a 500,000 Euro ransom from the family. No such article has been published by WDR, and the text showed in the screenshot contains several mistakes.

Vulnerabilities

Two years after the Russian invasion of Ukraine, united action by Western governments is desperately needed to decisively tip the military balance and enable Ukraine to repel the Russian invasion and occupation. However, the united response by the West in the immediate aftermath has been fractured, presenting a range of vulnerabilities for Russian state and pro-Kremlin propaganda to exploit to further undermine international support for Ukraine.

In the following section, we identify four key issues and events where we see the most acute risk that Russian state and pro-Kremlin actors will target them over the coming year, using their established communications toolkit (see sections on the tactics outlined above) to advance their strategic interests:

- Grievances around the cost of support for Ukraine in the context of rising migration and a stagnant economy in Germany;

- The potential rise of foreign policy isolationism in the US;

- The expected gains of pro-Kremlin far-right parties in the upcoming European Parliamentary elections;

- Accusations around Western hypocrisy regarding international conflicts, especially in relation to the Israel-Hamas conflict.

Undermining German Support for Ukraine

As a major economic and political player within Europe, Germany has been and continues to be a key target for Russian disinformation and influence campaigns. Crucial contributing factors are Germany's longstanding historical dependence on Russian energy and the strategic role of the Nord Stream pipelines, the political post-WWII tradition of 'peace through dialogue', a favourable view of Russia and Putin in the 5 East German states which were part of GDR and a high number of Russian (native) speakers in Germany due to post-Soviet immigration. After 2022, Germany became Europe's biggest provider of military aid (in absolute terms) and pledged to significantly invest in its own defence. In November 2023, Germany announced it would double its annual military support to Ukraine.[84] Russia therefore has an additional strategic interest in disrupting Germany's support for Ukraine.

Facebook and X posts 2022

Post language	Sentiment		Posts
English	Positive		26
	Neutral		29
	Negative		5
German	Positive		4
	Neutral		34
	Negative		22
Spanish	Positive		5
	Neutral		40
	Negative		15

Facebook and X posts 2023

Post language	Sentiment		Posts
English	Positive		7
	Neutral		23
	Negative		30
German	Positive		1
	Neutral		29
	Negative		30
Spanish	Positive		3
	Neutral		34
	Negative		23

Figure 4: Comparison of sentiments expressed towards Ukraine in the most shared Facebook and X posts mentioning the country in 2022 and 2023

Despite the major and long-term propaganda efforts by the Russian state and its supporters outlined above, most Germans neither support Russia nor its invasion of Ukraine. According to a poll commissioned by ISD, 82% of Germans are somewhat or very unfavourable towards the Russian President Vladimir Putin and 78% report being somewhat or very unfavourable towards Russia.[85]

But there are concerns that online discourse about Ukraine has become even more negative and aggressive over the course of the war. In a December 2023 analysis, ISD measured attitudes towards Ukraine among the top shared English, Spanish and German language-content on Facebook and X, formerly Twitter, to understand potential changes over time as well as differences across geographies. The findings show that anti-Ukraine rhetoric is increasingly prominent among highly engaged with posts around the conflict on both Facebook and X. This trend is particularly significant in German language-content.[86]

Although results across platforms reflected the same trends, with a predominance of neutral attitudes followed by negative and positive attitudes, posts on X tended to be more polarised than posts on Facebook, which were more likely to be neutral. Specifically, out of 125 negative posts, 74 were posted on X. Similarly, 31 of 46 positive posts were posted on X. Qualitative analysis of these posts shows that the topic of the war in Ukraine has increasingly been used as a political tool to criticise governments and their support for Ukraine. Support for Ukraine is framed as damaging to the local population and economy. This framing has been exploited to foster resentment towards politicians supporting sanctions and aid for Ukraine. This trend was particularly evident in German and English posts, where most negative content primarily served to criticise domestic government policies.

Given the increasing prevalence of anti-Ukrainian narratives online, it should not come as a surprise that ISD's polling results found that Germans who trust information on social media more than information gathered from traditional media outlets are much less likely to hold pro-Ukrainian views.[87] They are also more likely to believe disinformation narratives about the war, while those who trust established media outlets are more supportive of Ukraine and express concerns about Russian war crimes and the Kremlin's influence on German democracy. Additionally, we identified major differences between social media platforms, with users of TikTok and X less likely to hold pro-Ukrainian views or be critical of Russia than those of other platforms.

Existing polling also shows that AfD voters are most likely to believe pro-Kremlin conspiracy theories about the war in Ukraine, followed by voters of Die Linke.[88] The overlap between the far right and far left is often described as a 'Querfront' ('cross-front'), which is most obvious around anti-NATO and anti-Western positions on foreign policy. Building on its efforts to build trust among fringe audiences before February 2022, the Russian state and its supporters continue to be able to influence the discourse among far-right, far-left and conspiracy theory communities online. Based on the results of public opinion polls and key narratives promoted by Russian state and pro-Kremlin actors to German audiences, three primary issue areas around which Russian propaganda may seek to leverage broader grievances are 1) the alleged futility of supporting Ukraine; 2) immigration; and 3) the economic situation in Germany.

Pessimism about the likely outcome of the war

ISD polling found that Germans wish Ukraine success in the war but lack optimism. While many Germans hope for a complete liberation of occupied Ukrainian territory (38%), only 4% of people think this is likely to happen while only 6% would find a Ukrainian surrender acceptable. At the same time, only 7% would accept an end to the war if Russia keeps control of all territory it occupied since the start of the full-scale invasion in February 2022. However, when asked about a likely outcome of the war, 26% answered they think that the war will be drawn out over many years and 19% think the war will end in a military stalemate without a peace agreement.

This pessimism provides an opening for one of Germany's new political parties, Bündnis Sahra Wagenknecht (BSW), founded by the former Die Linke MP Sahra Wagenknecht, which seeks to capitalise on both Germans' economic concerns and their lack of belief in Ukraine achieving a military victory against Russia. Wagenknecht is also known for her calls for a tighter migration policy, occasionally generating discussions on the far right about the potential for a 'Querfront' coalition. In its manifesto for the European parliamentary elections, BSW amplifies some of the talking points that pro-Kremlin actors have been promoting in their disinformation campaign since the outset of the war.[89] Wagenknecht's party insists the war be ended by negotiation of peace talks and calls on Germany to immediately

cease all weapons exports to Ukraine. At the same time, BSW promotes the inefficiency of economic sanctions against Russia and claims they hurt Germans more than their intended target. Favouring a "multipolar world" vis-á-vis a confrontation of opposing blocs (closely reflecting Russian foreign policy), BSW adds that Germany should recommence oil and gas imports from Russia and sign long-term energy deals.[90]

A negative perception of the anticipated outcome of the war in Ukraine presents an opening for Russian and pro-Kremlin propaganda. A recent Washington Post analysis uncovered documents that proved the Kremlin's direct efforts to build a broad antiwar coalition in Germany via Wagenknecht's peace demonstrations.[91] Throughout 2023, Russian state outlets such as RT DE consistently exaggerated Russian military successes and portrayed the Ukrainian war effort as failing and futile. This aimed to weaken support for Ukraine in the West. RT DE regularly cherry-picked statements from US and Ukrainian media about Ukraine's allegedly imminent "military collapse." In other instances, it amplified clips of Victor Orbán saying that Ukraine will lose the current war and that the US will turn away from Ukraine after the presidential elections next year.

Migration
Another key vulnerability is migration. In 2022, net immigration reached a historic high (largely due to Ukrainian refugees), according to the German Federal Office for Migration and Refugees (BAMF).[92] Similarly, the number of asylum applications in Germany increased to 352,000 in 2023 (compared to 244,000 in 2022), the fourth-highest annual number on record. According to recent polls, migration is the most important issue for Germans, ahead of climate change and the economy.

Since the beginning of the invasion, Ukrainians seeking refuge in Europe have become a primary target for pro-Kremlin propaganda and disinformation. This mirrors the pattern observed in anti-migration content deployed by these actors in the years leading up to 2022, with recurring elements such as fake or manipulated stories about welfare abuse and crimes allegedly committed by refugees.[93] Similar messaging tactics have been employed by Russian state media and pro-Kremlin influencers in various other European countries, including France[94] and Poland.[95]

Since February 2022, German-language content specifically directed at Ukrainian refugees has prominently featured claims about burdening the German welfare state and allegations of welfare tourism by purportedly affluent Ukrainians.[96] Another narrative employed to undermine the perception of Ukrainian refugees in the eyes of the German population portrayed them as criminal, violent, or harbouring Nazi views based on fabricated stories.[97] A distinctive aspect of this approach was the use of Russian-language messages claiming Ukrainians posed a particular threat to Russian Germans and Russians in Germany.[98]

Economy
A third notable vulnerability that might be exploited by Russian state and pro-Kremlin propagandists are concerns in Germany around the economic impact of support for Ukraine. Russian propaganda has increased its emphasis on discrediting or undermining the sanctions imposed on Russia in response to its invasion of Ukraine.[99] The energy crisis has indeed become a focal point for these actors, particularly around the cessation of gas deliveries to Germany through the Nord Stream pipelines. This is often portrayed by pro-Kremlin entities as a sinister plot by the US to establish Europe's dependence on its own gas deliveries.[100] For example, coordinated Russian account networks spread warnings of imminent blackouts and fabricated stories depicting accidents allegedly caused by energy shortages.[101] Examples of such false stories involve claims of explosions in local schools because of attempts to conserve gas.[102] Blackout messaging continues to hold prominence, particularly within far-right and conspiracist ecosystems.[103] Such trends are not limited to Germany, as similar narratives have been observed in France,[104] disseminated by Russian state media, pro-Kremlin influencers, and coordinated networks.[105]

During the recent farmers' protests, pro-Kremlin Telegram channels attempted to instrumentalise the farmers' grievances by arguing that weapons deliveries for Ukraine were to blame for the farmer subsidy cuts, which are the main point of contention of the protests.[106]

Russian state, pro-Kremlin and Kremlin-linked accounts have repeatedly tried to connect these economic grievances to a portrayal of Putin as a friend of Germany. In a recent speech, Putin spoke about the frozen relationship between the two countries, highlighting that both parties have been suffering from the current situation, but that Germany has been the one to suffer the most.

The celebration of these relationships has been widely welcomed by pro-Kremlin accounts, which interpreted the speech as a sign of Putin's willingness to reconnect with Germany. The same narrative was promoted in a video by the far-right COMPACT magazine, which has 285K subscribers on YouTube. The COMPACT reporters Jürgen and Stephanie Elsässer framed these remarks, and subsequent reporting about them in Germany, by arguing that Germany was responsible for the breakdown of relations, while omitting to mention Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine.[107]

America First Isolationism

Since the beginning of the Russian full-scale invasion of Ukraine, the US has been the most important source of military and economic support for Ukraine. Removing US support for Ukraine would be a game-changer for Russia that would enable it to shift the military balance in Ukraine in its favour.[108] At the same time, European aid would have to increase significantly to compensate.

There are serious doubts if Europe could fill the gaps left by a US retreat into isolationism, which has been on the rise on the US right since Donald Trump's 2016 US presidential campaign. Despite Trump's "America First policy" rhetoric, his administration had taken some effective steps in supporting NATO's eastern flank against the Russian threat.[109] However, current US debates[110] about continuing aid for Ukraine raise the prospect of domestic political concerns overriding US foreign policy more comprehensively in the future.[111] From this perspective, US commitments to NATO and support for Ukraine are often seen as a financial burden without serving core US interests. Therefore, America First advocates believe the US should end its support for Ukraine and reallocate resources to domestic issues. This reinforces long-standing US concerns about European NATO allies not doing their fair share regarding their own defence (for example, regarding the commitment to spend a minimum of 2% of their GDP on defence) as well as to support the war effort of their European neighbour.[112]

One of the most influential proponents of an isolationist US foreign policy is the former Fox News host Tucker Carlson, who regularly amplifies pro-Kremlin talking points around the Russian invasion of Ukraine. In early February 2024, Carlson visited Moscow for a sympathetic two-hour interview with President Putin.[113] During the interview, Putin outlined his views on the history of Russia and Ukraine and

Figure 5: Tucker Carlson's interview with Russian President Vladimir Putin

accused Ukraine and the West of being responsible for the war. Carlson accused media outlets in the US of "lying" to the population about the causes of the war and conducting propaganda on behalf of Ukraine. The Carlson interview is one of the most significant interventions by Russia to directly influence US support for Ukraine on the US right, and it appears likely that Russian state and pro-Kremlin outlets will aim to further amplify these stances in their English language propaganda.

For some of the most vocal supporters of Donald Trump, America First policies and opposition to further support for Ukraine have become markers of political identity rather than mere policy preferences. It has joined key wedge issues such as immigration, race, LGBTQ+ rights, free speech and climate change through which participants in political debates (especially online) clearly distinguish between members of their political tribe and its enemies. Support for Ukraine is portrayed as a political project pursued by detached elites that does not serve the interest of regular Americans. This plays into populist sentiments and distrust in mainstream political institutions.

The Rise of Pro-Kremlin Nationalists in the European Union

Election years are known flashpoints for information operations, and 2024 is one of the most significant election years in memory, with over 2 billion voters scheduled to participate in democratic elections. In the past Russian influence operations around elections aimed to distort or co-opt public opinion using disinformation to silence or discredit pro-democracy candidates while inorganically amplifying narratives favourable to far-right and far-left parties which support a foreign policy agenda favourable to the Kremlin.[114]

European Parliamentary Elections will be held in June 2024, and pollsters are predicting that pro-Kremlin far-right parties will make major gains (it should be noted that there is a major split among the European far-right, and some parties unequivocally oppose Russia).[115] This would significantly impact European policymaking on crucial issues, including support for Ukraine, as well as in regard to climate policy, migration, human rights and European integration.

Such anticipated gains for populist, authoritarian and pro-Kremlin parties would also provide momentum at a national level, ahead of critical state elections in East Germany[116] and national elections in Austria later in the year.[117] The Netherlands may also hold snap elections in 2024, given the political deadlock after the far-right People's Party for Freedom (which is opposed to further military support for Ukraine[118]) came in first during the 2023 general election.[119] While the party has struggled to form a coalition,[120] polls suggest it is nevertheless increasing its popularity.[121] In France, the far right would be further emboldened to put pressure on the current centrist government that lacks a parliamentary majority.[122] If they are able to form national governments, far-right parties would be in a position to use their veto power in the European Council to block support for Ukraine, following the example set by Hungarian Prime Minister Victor Orbán (who dropped his veto in early 2024, following a months-long standoff).[123]

In short, the Kremlin has a clear incentive to push for a victory of pro-Kremlin parties in the EP elections with a major goal to undermine support for Ukraine, particularly in Germany,[124] Austria[125] and France,[126] where these parties have a clear pro-Kremlin track record.

New World Disorder: Western Double Standards around the Israel-Hamas Conflict

Russian state-affiliated accounts have been instrumentalising the Israel-Hamas conflict to corroborate their anti-Western and anti-Ukrainian narratives. While Israeli officials[127] have claimed their military response to the 7 October 2023 terrorist attacks is solely targeting Hamas militants and the group's infrastructure, the bombardment has resulted in one of the highest rates of death[128] in armed conflict since the beginning of the 21st century, and disproportionately affects civilians.[129] At the time of writing, nearly 27,500
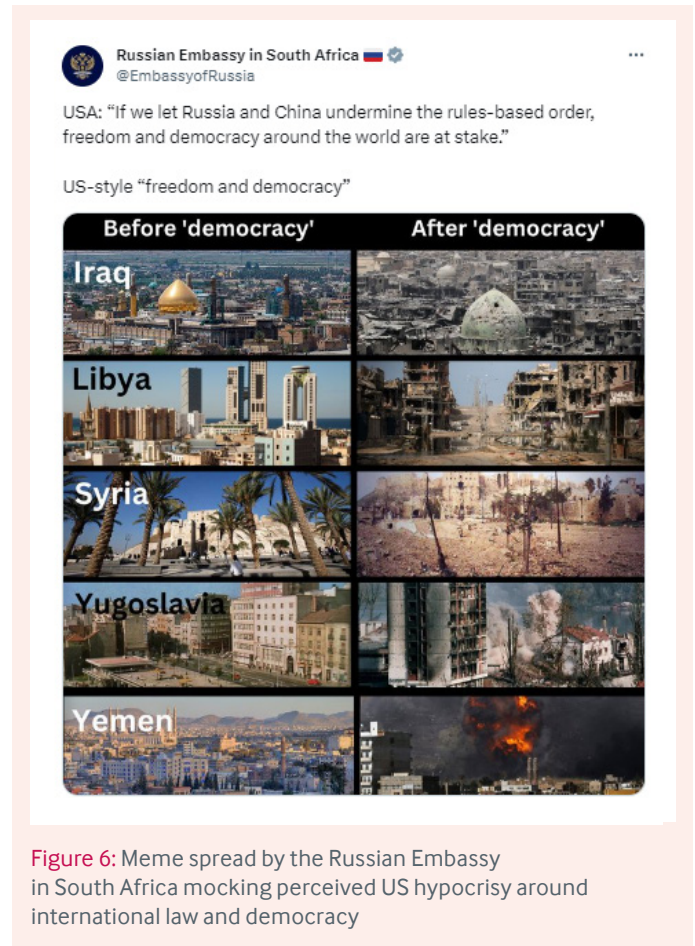

Figure 6: Meme spread by the Russian Embassy in South Africa mocking perceived US hypocrisy around international law and democracy

Palestinians have been killed since 7 October,[130] according to the Hamas-run Ministry of Health in Gaza.[131]

Despite the dramatic humanitarian impact on civilians, Western governments for a long time remained uncritically supportive of Israel's actions. As these governments are also among the key providers of military aid to Ukraine, accusations around Western double standards have been rife, and have become a key topic for Russian state and pro-Kremlin propaganda. ISD research has highlighted the impact of the Israel-Hamas conflict on Ukraine-related content produced by German language Russian state and pro-Kremlin accounts, showing that posts about the Israel-Hamas conflict soon surpassed the volume of discussions about Ukraine.[132]

Beyond accusing the West of "double standards" and blaming Western nations for the escalation, Russian state media also spread false and unverified information, including claims that Ukraine had supplied weapons to Hamas, and that the Gaza City hospital destroyed

on 17 October was hit by a bomb supplied to Israel by the US.[133]

The accusations of Western double standards are central to Russian state and pro-Kremlin propaganda internationally. In the MENA region in particular, the US and Western states are portrayed as a destabilising force that is actively stoking conflict through proxy states and non-state actors. Narratives such as these are meant to create a schism in Arabic-speaking countries and contrast the United States and NATO with Russia, which is portrayed as benevolent actor in the region. Recent surveys suggest that across the region, the response of Russia to the conflict is seen much more positively than that of Western countries: 41% of respondents described Russia's response as good or very good, compared to 3% who said the same about the response of the US or 9% who said Germany had reacted well.[134] Views of the US have become near-universally negative, and the country is seen by a majority of people in the region (51%) as the biggest threat to peace in stability, ahead of Israel with 26%, Iran with 7% and Russia with 4%.

Beyond playing on specific foreign policy grievances that are common across the MENA region, Russian state and pro-Kremlin outlets have used the reaction to the bombardment of Palestine as a clear example that the international order is allegedly broken and inherently corrupt. Additionally, they argue that the West has no moral authority and would actively undermine the international rule of law. Hence, the solution would be multipolarity, whether through BRICS (economically), or other means, which Russia views in its strategic interest.

Beyond the MENA region, Russian state and pro-Kremlin outlets have likewise attempted to instrumentalise the Israel-Hamas conflict to further instigate distrust of the West in Latin America, across many West and Southern African countries and Muslim-majority countries in East Asia such as Indonesia.[135] For example, several widely followed anti-Western and pro-Russian influencers in West Africa such as Nathalie Yamb and Kémi Séba spread polarising content about the Israel-Hamas conflict (including support for Hezbollah), the invasion of Ukraine and conflicts in the region (e.g. Mali, Burkina Faso, Niger).[136] In parallel, official diplomatic accounts focused on highlighting Russia-Africa cooperation, presenting Russia as an ally of African countries against the West.

In southern Africa, pro-Kremlin actors also leveraged Africa's history with colonialism to portray Russia as a partner in solidarity with Africans. This narrative frames Western nations as 'colonial masters' and emphasises Russia's willingness to trade without using the US Dollar. Russian ambassadors even authored op-eds[137] published on popular news platforms in Africa such as The Nation on decolonisation,[138] or claiming[139] that the UN's Black Sea Grain initiative was designed by the West for "cheap political and commercial gain". Pro-Kremlin campaigns connected these narratives to the West's support for Ukraine, seemingly to influence public opinion about the conflict in the region. Online tags such as 'neo-Nazism' were used by Russia state-owned accounts to weaponise the situation and spread the narrative that Ukraine allegedly promotes neo-Nazism.[140]

Outlook

Two years after the Russian invasion of Ukraine, we are at an inflection point. This report shows how Russian state and pro-Kremlin propaganda has evolved since the beginning of the full-scale invasion of Ukraine, and highlights vulnerabilities Russia is likely to exploit based on its long-standing strategic goals.

Our findings show that - while sanctions have limited their reach in the EU - official Russian state propaganda outlets are still able to reach major audiences in the MENA region and in Latin America. On a tactical level, in Germany and other European countries Russian and pro-Kremlin actors have increasingly relied on disguised spinoff outlets, coordinated account networks, single purpose accounts centred around fake personas and the imitation of legitimate media outlets.

The report looks ahead to four key areas of vulnerability in Germany, the US, the European Union and non-Western countries that could be exploited by Russian state and pro-Kremlin propaganda to undermine both international support for Ukraine and the political standing of the West. Russian state and pro-Kremlin propagandists will use perceived failures of the West to consistently uphold principles of human rights and democracy to portray the international order as irreparably broken. Additionally, they are likely to connect accusations of double standards over the Israel-Hamas conflict to Western support for Ukraine, which they characterise to the non-Western world as a partisan project, rather than a matter of justice and international law. At the same time, the possibility of a US retreat into an isolationist foreign policy looms while pro-Kremlin far-right parties are ascendant across many European Union countries. Consequently, the future of a liberal order able to ensure the survival of a democratic country defending itself against an aggressive military superpower is itself hanging in the balance.

At a time when united action by Western governments is desperately needed to decisively tip the military balance and enable Ukraine to repel the Russian forces from Eastern Ukraine, these vulnerabilities require urgent attention and vigilance.

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