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The Russian influence in Eastern Europe and beyond



**MOTIVES, PROPAGANDA, MECHANISMS, THE
INTENSITY OF INTERVENTION**

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Kingdom of the Netherlands

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Intro: regional clientelism and the disinformation

At the end of 2018 and in the first part of 2019 crucial elections took place – or are going to – in the Republic of Moldova (two rounds, parliamentary and local), Estonia, Slovakia, Ukraine, Georgia, Turkey or Macedonia, and then in May general elections for the European Parliament, to list only the most visible electoral events in our region. These campaigns were marked by the two symptoms of poor government deliberately promoted from the Kremlin, capitalizing on trends already inherent in each country's domestic policy:

- (a) **State-level clientelism** as a successful political model, coupled with a postulated "civilizational difference" between the East and the West, promoted increasingly boldly and openly as an alternative to the rule of law; and
- (b) **Systematic disinformation** ("fake news") with agendas perpetuated through new or traditional media.

The first element relies on the latter, and the latter is put in the service of clientelism, together consolidating the poor governance both in the realms of reality and rhetoric. We have two faces of the same coin, represented by the visible degradation of governance standards in just a few years.

This report summarizes the results of a project on manipulation and propaganda, focusing on two neighboring states, the Republic of Moldova and Romania. We made an effort to understand and build tools to counteract the strategic disinformation phenomenon and outline some responses and countermeasures. The ambition of the report is, however, to identify a **more general framework of analysis applicable to the region of Eastern Europe** in order to make comparisons between states and societies on relevant dimensions related to Kremlin's orchestrated disinformation.

Efforts have been made in the last few years towards understanding and, as far as possible, predicting the Russian interference in the political life of the countries in the region. In other words, the aim was to build an analytical model. Generally, as long as a complicated and largely elusive reality could be quantified, the idea was to assess the permeability of a state or society to various forms of propaganda of the Kremlin.

This is undoubtedly useful, but not enough. Here the list of relevant variables for such a model are summarized and supplemented with a few important new dimensions. They need to be tested further against a larger number of datasets and case studies in order to come up with a real comparative indicator applicable at regional level.

1. Online disinformation in early 2019

In February 2019, Facebook suspended fake pages and trolls profiles in several Eastern European countries as part of its new offensive against "**coordinated inauthentic behavior**"¹. The FB announcement concerned 364 accounts with more than 800,000 followers, many of which were ghost pages of news that reproduced content on the official Sputnik portal, run by employees or associates who declared themselves "independent"². Being subject to public pressure and serious reputational costs, the Facebook social network has recently been trying to remove from the virtual space online trolls with significant impact; in addition, it communicates much more openly than before on this subject.

Clear and predictable identification and separation of what is trolling or "fake news" online and what does not remain difficult tasks, technically and philosophically. Even more, they are difficult to operationalize in a form useful for artificial intelligence (AI) or for human operators who handle large volumes of information: markers of intelligent disinformation are hard to construct so as to function reliably in automated processes. In the future, we will see more scandals in both directions: because of false negative (i.e. sophisticated trolling which is not detected), as well as *false positives* (i.e., honest profiles erroneously marked as trolling). In fact, there are signs that false-positive errors are multiplying lately, as a result of more aggressive countermeasures, using mainly AI filters which have a hard time to understand the subtleties of natural language, professional jargons, or irony.

The difficulty lies in the fact that lying, exaggerating, telling half-truths, arguments *ad hominem*, making jokes and ironies (even bad ones) – are all part since the beginning of time not only of the campaigning tools of politicians, but even of everyday human daily behavior. Purging social networks of such types of language, sometimes associated with the fake news phenomenon, is impossible: such behavior is part of the natural language of all people.

In fact, studies show that in informal contexts, that is, those that make up the bulk of human communication, our speech is full of such systematic inaccuracies and distortions of meaning; the speech which is purely informative, analyzable with the criteria true / false criteria, represents an exception³. In this sense, the difference between the writing in traditional media (predominantly formal) and the social media (mostly informal) is often overlooked in the big hunt for fake news.

Moreover, "fake news" on social networks - which, from another angle, is a form of censorship - can also be strategically used by illiberal political regimes, as has always

¹ *Coordinated inauthentic behavior*, <https://newsroom.fb.com/news/2018/12/inside-feed-coordinated-inauthentic-behavior/>

² <https://newsroom.fb.com/news/2019/01/removing-cib-from-russia/>

³ Chambers, J. K. (2009). *Sociolinguistic Theory: Linguistic Variation and Its Social Significance*. Malden: Wiley Blackwell.

been the case in history; nothing new here. At the time of writing this report, a set of amendments to the tough anti-fake news legislation adopted in 2018 is being debated in the Russian Duma: fines of up to \$ 15,000 for the spread of false news or injurious language against "society, state, official symbols and institutions public ". Also, up to 15 days in jail are proposed for recidivism, plus the right of state institutions to suspend webpages that do not delete false or offensive information on request. Many other countries outside Europe have passed similar legislation.

It is probably not the best idea to tackle "fake news" through draconian legislation, especially in countries where the rule of law is weak or non-existent, because the mechanisms of a politically controlled justice can be immediately hijacked and diverted towards social repression. At least at this stage, the standard of "inauthenticity" appears to work reasonably well when it is applied in good faith by network administrators and not by public authorities in countries where there is no guarantee of respecting citizens' and the media's rights: if you pretend to be somebody else, you may be blocked on Facebook, Twitter, YouTube etc. even if what you post is not 100% false.

But the great danger is that the excessively tough legislation introduced by non-liberal states leads to "strategic reporting" behavior: mass complaints are orchestrated against the critics of the regime or other members of various minorities. If the reporting is persistent, the overworked content moderators may read the situation completely upside down and block precisely the victims of abuse; or the latter may even end up before courts. In an environment where expression is not free, citizens are timid and the propaganda prevails it is hard to create a critical mass in favor of reasonably balanced online solutions to moderate content.

Unfortunately, the current trend is towards adopting such legislation, under various names and forms, in democratic or less democratic states. Following the terrorist attack in Christchurch (New Zealand), Singapore and Taiwan have strengthened their filters against what they consider dangerous. Australia has passed a law "against the sharing of violent and repugnant material" in the parliament, which holds responsible the managers of companies with pages and networks for any delayed reactions. And the British government has announced in a policy paper that it is considering comprehensive regulation that reduces "damages created by the internet", putting the responsibility not only on social networks, but also on the administrators of forums, online communities, or downloadable applications⁴.

Mark Zuckerberg himself has recently pleaded in public statements and the press for stricter regulation of the social media that networks, through public mechanisms,

⁴ <https://www.economist.com/britain/2019/04/11/britain-unveils-a-plan-to-regulate-online-content>

since they find it hard to do this on their own⁵. The danger in all these developments is that the vivid pro-regulation activism, which can lead to a balanced and functional system in countries with rule of law, may on the other hand be used as a pretext and legitimization for limiting the freedom of expression in countries with non-liberal regimes: Australian or UK legislation can be hypocritically presented as a model by a government who actually wants to introduce censorship.

In one way or another, the action Facebook took in February, more or less replicated by other Western social media companies (but not the ones based in Russia), shed some light in a dark corner of the Internet. Thus, in the **Republic of Moldova** the online racking led to the blocking of 168 false Facebook profiles, 28 pages and 8 Instagram profiles. Many of these were very active in the election campaign for the 24 February elections, including with paid ads.

The public could see that many of these accounts belonged either to undercover Moldovan government employees or to activists or firms associated mainly with the PDM ruling party, headed by the oligarch Plahotniuc. All were hiding their real identity by pretending to be news channels or portals. Unlike what is happening in the West, the ideological orientation or cultural cleavages played no role in determining the line of conflict between trolls and their victims; and nor the issues discussed as such. The orchestrated campaign was purely pragmatic, "black electoral advertising".

A month later, Facebook repeated the operation in **Romania**: 31 pages and profiles were deleted or suspended because they acted in a coordinated manner and under fake identities, pretending to be news portals. As in the case of Moldova, it was discovered that most of the trolls were grouped institutionally around the main ruling party, PSD, member of the same ideological family as PDM from Chişinău. Shortly after they were blocked on the Western social networks, the influencers resurfaced with new accounts on the Russian network Vkontakte (vk.com) where they shifted the whole content⁶. This is truly remarkable, because very few Romanians use Facebook's Russian equivalent, if only because of the language barrier. As we will discuss below, the social networks located in Russia cannot ensure any kind of transparency or privacy safeguards, being under the legal obligation to make their databases and content accessible to the state agencies.

⁵ https://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/mark-zuckerberg-the-internet-needs-new-rules-lets-start-in-these-four-areas/2019/03/29/9e6f0504-521a-11e9-a3f7-78b7525a8d5f_story.html?utm_term=.20fb1f262473

⁶ https://pressone.ro/sestiuni/paginile-asociate-cu-psd-care-au-fost-sterse-de-facebook-au-migrat-pe-reteaua-rusiei-si-cocoon-se-intoarce/?fbclid=IwAR2g2fBUGffV6eUa-Vh7vqB_9tgz0INR4-tswBpEmlagbEBiugORg8G-wsk

2. Factors shaping the Russian influence

These situations in the Republic of Moldova and Romania may seem alike, but they are exactly: together they form a good compare-and-contrast case study on the fake news phenomenon in the region. It is so because, while they have some things in common, Romania and Moldova represent in other respects contrasting examples for the functioning of the fake news market, and especially the Russian influence in the Eastern European region.

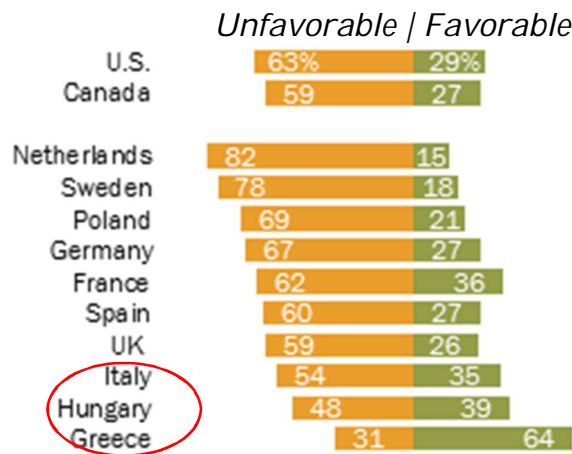
This region is heterogeneous, linguistically and religiously fragmented, with very different emotional connections to some major events in modern history such as the World War II, the collapse of the USSR, or the NATO enlargement. There are also varying degrees of nostalgia after the communist regime, depending on its nature in the 1970s and 1980s: the intensity of repression in each country or the perceived living standards were obviously not the same everywhere.

There are **features of the socio-political environment** in each society that filters the transmission of fake news or other kinds of influence from the Kremlin. Here we can mention:

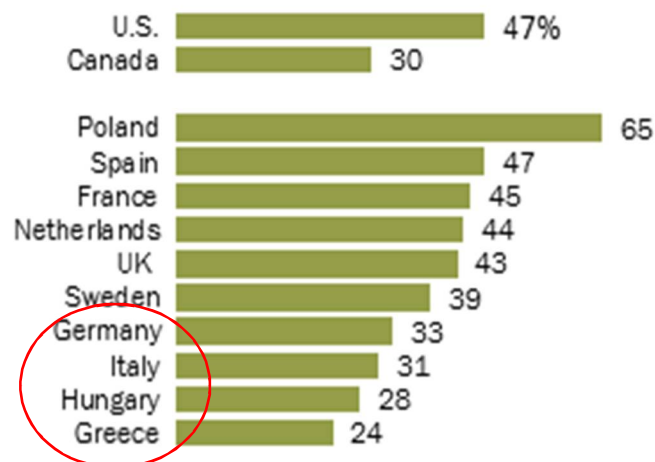
- a) Local culture, history, deep attitudes: there are countries with a rather Russophobic population, such as Poland or Romania; societies with more tempered attitudes, such as Bulgaria or Hungary; or even Russophile, like Italy or Greece among the old EU members. This type of bias does not change easily over time. A recent poll (see Figure 1 below) shows how divergent the opinions in Europe or the Balkans are about Russia and its current leaders. This state of affairs is stable over time and significant in the sphere of practical political action.⁷
- b) A significant percentage of the population is represented by the **Russian speaking community**, with all the political consequences deriving from here: political organization, ethnic parties, cultural ascendancy of Moscow etc. (Baltic States, Moldova). Things have a long history and there are many shades of gray: the notion of *Russkiy Mir* ("the Russian world") is imprecise in a deliberate and strategical way. It certainly includes more than the legal notion of state+citizens of the Russian Federation, and its purpose is to legitimize Russia's status as a major global power and possible interventions in the neighborhood beyond its borders. Similarly, the "**compatriots**" (*соотечественники*) who make up this Russian world are not only the official citizens and possibly the ethnic Russians from the overseas communities, but also whoever identifies themselves with Russia, politically or

⁷ Pew Research Center. *Global Attitudes & Trends. Spring 2017 Questionnaire*. Sadly the research does not cover Moldova and Romania but the data from other important countries of the region paint a suggestive picture.

Fig. 1. Opinions about Russia



Russia's power and influence Rusiei are a threat



Trust in Putin vs Trump

	Trump	Putin	Diff
	%	%	
Greece	19	50	+31
Germany	11	25	+14
Tunisia	18	32	+14
Turkey	11	20	+9
Hungary	29	34	+5
Brazil	14	19	+5
France	14	18	+4

Pew Research Center, 2017. Global Attitudes & Trends. (see footnote 7).

www.pewresearch.org

otherwise⁸. These "distant compatriots" become amplifiers of the Russian influence abroad and create leverage for direct or indirect action in their proximity, especially when they feel alienated from the policy of the countries in which they live. The "compatriots" are also useful internally, for rallying Russia's population around the leaders of the moment by using identity clues; or internationally, as a subject of diplomatic pressure and horse-trading⁹. There are state agencies and QUANGOS (for example the *Russkiy Mir Foundation*) with the mission to support and develop the cohesion of these communities of "compatriots".

- c) Large-scale knowledge of **Russian as a second language**, which makes possible the retransmission and direct consumption of the media programs from the Russian Federation without costly adaptations: domestic and international news, talk shows, and "entertainment" in which a certain vision of global and political issues is presented, more subtly or bluntly. Global conspiracy theories are a staple of such programs. Due to all these peculiarities of the domestic Russian media, one could say *Russkiy Mir* is indeed becoming a common space with a special identity, and thus a political reality.
- d) Territories outside the national border where **residents have two (or more) passports** and therefore the right to vote in multiple national elections when they want, or even to run as candidates: see the pairs Bulgaria-Macedonia, Romania-Moldova, Poland-Ukraine; or the case of the Baltic States. These historically rooted realities lead to the "contamination" to some extent of electoral politics and campaigns on both sides of the respective border, both in terms of logistics (organization of polling stations, joint campaigns of some parties) and in terms of campaign rhetoric or and issues put on the agenda.
- e) **Connections of the political and economic elite in the Eastern space**, in a very concrete sense: personal relations, often stemming from a common past; a good understanding of way of doing things in the former USSR, along with the specific cultural baggage of the 1980s and the transition period; the habit of doing business, legally or less so, in those parts; family or party links there. Things are more obvious in the case of the states that were part of the former USSR, but not only. For example, it is estimated that **Bulgaria** has a very dense network of business connections with Russia: up to 10% of the country's GDP is in one way or another generated within such

⁸ *Mobilizing Compatriots: Russia's Strategy, Tactics, and Influence in the Former Soviet Union*. Vera Zakem, Paul Saunders, and Daniel Antoun. November 2015. www.cna.org 3003 Washington Boulevard, Arlington, VA 22201.

⁹ *Ibid.*

networks¹⁰. In a sensitive sector such as mass media, the relative share of firms with a real Russian beneficiary is even **higher in Bulgaria than in Ukraine**, and corporate control is exercised both directly and indirectly through diversified business holdings. In addition, important Russian operators on the energy or telecommunications markets influence the agenda and tone of the comments in the rest of the Bulgarian media through the massive advertising budgets they control.

- f) **Links to the economic environment in Russia of business sectors** in Western countries, or of individual firms and industrial groups, which in turn develop more or less visible lobbying networks: "*the enablers*"¹¹. The authors of the well-known series *The Kremlin Playbook* mention here the energy and the financial and banking sectors and analyze the cases of **Austria** and **Italy**, notorious for the Russophilia of a good part of the economic elite, which opens the door for certain political decisions: for example opposition to the sanctions imposed on Russia by the European Union, or hostility towards Ukraine. One could also add **Germany** to this list, where a part of the energy sector, plus the predominantly exporting manufacturing industry, concerned with the high cost of the domestic energy inputs (globally, a competitive disadvantage), is strongly pushing the government towards good trade relations with Russia (true, the businesses could not stop it from initiating European sanctions against Moscow). Around these enablers we can find a whole network of think tanks and soft influence vectors, such as the *Dialogue of Civilizations Institute* (DOC) based in Berlin; local branches of *Russkiy Mir Foundation*; or the *Gorchakov Foundation*, which stimulates and finances cooperation initiatives with Russia and is lobbying for the abolishing of sanctions or the recognition of the annexation of Crimea, thus popularizing elements in the Kremlin's propaganda agenda in Western public space. Things are made easier in Germany due to two additional factors: the post-communist nostalgia and the social frustrations in the Eastern Lands, driven by the post-unification depression and the latest economic crisis; and the ethnic Germans "repatriated" from the former USSR after 1990, plus the Russian expats who immigrated to Germany later, who together form a linguistic bridge with Moscow. A similar and interesting case is the one of the nearly 40,000 former Soviet citizens, Pontic Greeks, who left the country after the collapse of the USSR and settled in **Cyprus**, **Athens** or **Thessaloniki**. As Russian speakers they represent a special target for Kremlin's international propaganda, but also

¹⁰ Heather Conley, James Mina, Ruslan Stefanov, and Martin Vladimirov, *The Kremlin Playbook 1: Understanding Russian Influence in Central and Eastern Europe*. CSIS 2016. Washington DC. <https://www.csis.org/analysis/kremlin-playbook>

¹¹ Heather Conley, Ruslan Stefanov & al, *The Kremlin Playbook 2: The Enablers*. CSIS 2019. Washington DC. <https://www.csis.org/features/kremlin-playbook-2>

an important bridgehead inside two EU member states with traditional pro-Russian attitudes.

- g) **The history of the USSR** as an identity and political filter for today, reinforcing nostalgia and vicarious emotional attachments even in younger generations. It is first and foremost about "*The Great Patriotic War 1941-1945*", as it was called in the canonic propaganda, a narrative perpetuated until today by the state propaganda and dating from the times of Leonid Brejnev, who discovered it as a convenient foundational myth to replace the October Revolution which was losing its shine as people were becoming increasingly disillusioned with ideology. GPW '41-45 is a piece of good quality fake news, false by omission, combining half-truths into a manipulative story with targeted message, carried further by the public education system and the anti-Western state doctrine, with the precise aim of strengthening deep political values and allegiances. In a divided society like **Moldova**, where identities are to some extent fluid, the effect of this alternative reading of history, based on deep emotions, is visible each year when May 9th (the Victory Day) comes close: the debating of current and the stance of the main political actors on the East-West dimension are cast into the reference framework of 1945¹². As Timothy Snyder would put it, this is the *politics of eternity*¹³.
- h) **The Orthodox Church (OC)** as a factor of influence is a subject often mentioned, but the analysis so far has been affected by imprecisions and clichés. For example, it is true that in countries with predominantly Orthodox populations, which are also among the most rural and aging in Europe, anti-Western or social-conservative propaganda themes could be deployed by the Kremlin agents. Official channels such as *Russia Today* or *Sputnik* do not miss any opportunity to manipulate in religious terms whatever social or cultural tensions may have arisen after countries like Romania and Bulgaria joined the EU. In Russia or the Republic of Moldova, there is a consistent history of OC's involvement in politics and electoral campaigns – and every time in the camp that opposes modernization and the liberalization of society (to some extent understandable: the Vatican is not exactly an avant-garde of progress too). What is unique is the argument for a "specific nature" of the peoples of the East which makes them different – and superior – to those from the West. What is more, the Russian Orthodox Church is one of the institutional links with the "fellow citizens" beyond borders, who form the expanded *Russkiy Mir* community (see point above). And in former USSR states, such as Ukraine or Moldova, it still has official jurisdiction over most believers, the Orthodox parishes being subordinated to the Patriarchate of Moscow. On the

¹² Details about "*The Great Patriotic War 1941-1945*" as strategic fake news, the manipulation mechanisms and the selective reading of history on which they rely, here: <https://expertforum.ro/video-mecanisme-de-zinformarii/>

¹³ Timothy Snyder, 2018. *The Road to Unfreedom*. Vintage books. London.

other hand, however, the landscape appears more complex if we look closer. First, the nuclei of radicalism in Orthodox environments are not so much present in the upper hierarchy (bishops) but rather in monasteries, especially those strong connected to the fundamentalist *Iavras* on Mount Athos. Sometimes there are tensions between the national Patriarchates and these radical monks who build up a massive followership through public preaching and a whole cottage industry of publishing, thus reaching massive audiences and creating a permanent flow of devotees around pilgrimage centers. The Russian influence and ideas originating in Kremlin's circles are spread mostly through these grassroots religious groups, not by co-opting the establishment of a national Orthodox church. Secondly, and very important, the national Orthodox Churches as such, i.e. the institutional setup with a Synod and a Patriarch at the top, have always been tightly controlled by the political power – under the communist regime, before it or after. There was no major dissent against the regime in Romania or Bulgaria (or before, in Greece), not even when emotionally sensitive decisions of great historical importance were made, such as the joining of EU and NATO. When the political regime in a country was pro-Western, the Orthodox Church went along without loud objections; when the political regime became aggressive, nationalist and anti-Western, like in Serbia in the 1980s and 1990s, the Orthodox Church followed it in a suicidal adventure. In other words, the Orthodox hierarchy in a country, though it may have its own inclinations, has toed the line imposed by the political power and did not become the clients of Moscow – unless the national political leaders became such clients themselves. Even the electoral trolling practiced sometimes by clerics in Moldova or Romania is done to please the parties in power who control the resources of the church, not on their own initiative. The warm relations between the Patriarchates of Belgrade and Moscow are in tune with the general attitude of the political establishment in Serbia as a whole. A certain autonomous influence of the Orthodox hierarchy on public opinion in a country cannot be denied, but their ability to actually mobilize the masses should not be exaggerated: a referendum on the "traditional family" (read: anti-gay marriage) initiated by Orthodox clergy in alliance with the neo-protestants failed spectacularly in Romania in October 2018¹⁴. Finally, the rivalry between the national Orthodox churches also greatly limits Kremlin's influence in the region. The Romanian Orthodox Church (BOR) follows the general view in state and society to avoid being associate too visibly with the Patriarchate of Moscow; there were differences of opinion and clashes at the Ecumenical Synod of Crete in 2016. What is more, BOR is part of in the political-administrative conflict taking place in the Republic of Moldova, between two alternative Metropolitans: some parishes (most of them) belong to the Moldovan Metropolitan Church, subordinated to

¹⁴ <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2018/oct/07/romania-anti-gay-marriage-vote-voided-over-low-turnout>

Moscow; the rest belong to the Metropolitan Church of Bessarabia, subordinated to Bucharest. There were moments when Romanian Patriarchate has sometimes become the target of the Russian negative propaganda. The same thing happened in 2018 in Ukraine, just on a much larger scale and in a more bitter context, when Constantinople recognized the Patriarchate of Kiev, independent of Moscow. The move was part of the project to consolidate the new Ukrainian national state and strongly pushed by former President Poroshenko. This only reinforces the idea that religious developments copy political developments in predominantly Orthodox countries. Kremlin's influence in the region would be quite limited if it relied on confessional affinities only.

3. Why is Russia different? “Not a machinery, but an ecosystem”

We discussed so far the Russian influence in Eastern Europe without analyzing much how does the source of this influence look like. Some observers oscillate between naivety and idealization when it comes to it, either by underestimating the Kremlin's ability to interfere in the political processes of other European states; or, on the contrary, portraying it as a well-coordinated, hierarchical and driven machine, with command and control procedures.

In reality the system by which the Kremlin projects its influence is not a machine but an **ecosystem**¹⁵. There is often no formal order, but a general and implicit direction of action that everyone understands and follows. This allows the center of power, Vladimir Putin and his entourage, to preserve the precious rhetorical asset called *deniability* – that is, a certain distance from the concrete operations which can always be blamed on someone else if something goes wrong.

Here by "ecosystem" I mean that the public institutions through which the Kremlin is putting into practice its propaganda and active measures are surrounded by a whole series of para-state actors, from QUANGOs to companies controlled by regime dignitaries or their close relatives. They work alone or in partnership with the Western "enablers" mentioned above who are willing to promote the Kremlin agenda. The Russian para-state actors have a free hand to occupy symbolic spaces across borders or exploit economic opportunities when they occur, as long as the general line is followed.

All these public and private elements of the ecosystem (and those situated in the gray area in between, since in Russia such separation is not always clear) may coordinate, but also compete or sometimes clash. It is notorious, for example, the rivalry among the intelligence services, including the military one; or between the General

¹⁵ <https://securingdemocracy.gmfus.org/russias-active-measures-architecture-task-and-purpose/>

Prosecutor's Office and the FSB. Elements of the ecosystem fight to achieve the general strategic goals of the regime, or even interfere and undermine each other in their actions, sometimes betting on different tactics or clients in a particular country (for example, in Moldova). The overall goal may be affected by such decentralized and inconsistent implementation.



KONSTANTIN MALOFEEV

Profile of private political entrepreneur, i.e. semi-detached Kremlin operator

A 45-year-old Russian billionaire, he made a fortune in finance and communications, most likely as “borsetka” for the Deputy Prime Minister Ivanov and other *siloviki*. He took part in subversive actions during the occupation of Crimea by organizing religious processions with relics brought from Russia. He is one of the intermediaries between Kremlin and the separatists in Donbass, Republika Srpska, and various Balkan anarchist-radical groups and Eurosceptic circles in Italy. He financed Marine Le Pen's party in 2014-5 and continues to fund separatist troops outside of Russia. The military and political leaders of Donbass had previously been employed in his companies. He is on the US and EU sanctions list, and has interdiction to entry Switzerland and Montenegro; Ukraine has issued an international mandate on his name. In his youth, as a corporate finance trader he came into contact with hardline conservative circles in the US, and then became an Orthodox fundamentalist, creationist and militant for the revival of the Tsarist Empire. His think tank *Katehon* (www.katehon.com) and his media group *Tsargrad*, where he employs **Aleksandr Dugin** as a journalist, promote Putin's foreign policy agenda as well as extreme conservative views, xenophobia and conspiracy theories. He set up the *League for a Secure Internet*, lobbying for restricted access and online censorship in Russia, and *Basil the Great Foundation*, the largest private Russian foundation financing religious education and events celebrating the traditional family in Russia and Europe. The archimandrite **Tihon Shevkunov** is among his collaborators: a personal confessor of Vladimir Putin and author of numerous religious books, some of which were translated and printed in Romania in massive editions¹⁶.

There is therefore a lot of individual initiative and operational creativity, sometimes poor horizontal communication in the system, the general rule being that success yields benefits to whoever scored it: a fief abroad which can be exploited to private advantage. Failures also remain isolated in the niche and *deniable* by the top echelons in Kremlin. Many economic openings in the Balkans, for example (Serbia, Montenegro, Republika Srpska) started as *freelance* operations run by the network of important actors like Konstantin Malofeev (see box), and then passed over to the Russian state.

¹⁶ <https://doxologia.ro/arhimandritul-tihon-sevkunov>

Following a long and cherished Russian tradition originating in Tsarist times and perpetuated under the Soviet regime, state authorities can recruit or delegate missions to **organized criminal circles**, which anyway overlap at the margins with the official system of state power. This is another element that helps political leaders to take distance from “private individuals who act freely and in their own name only” (again, *deniability*). According to analysts, Russia under Putin has managed to “nationalize” gradually the diversified and stratified criminal underworld of the ‘90s, including the old *capi di mafia* (“bandits in law”, *vory v zakone*) that even the NKVD/KGB could not fully control, to be put to work for political purposes¹⁷.

The Russian-based Organized Crime (RBOC, a term coined by Galeotti) has become useful abroad as a bridge with the extremist or criminal groups from the European states; or as supplier of highly specialized technical services to such illegal groups from the West (finance, IT, military hardware); or in the attempts to infiltrate and control the Russian communities of expats. Money laundering form an important part of the activity: estimates are that in Cyprus 25% of bank deposits and 37% of foreign investments originate in Russia¹⁸. All this continuum, ranging from official institutions to the criminal circles (RBOC) coopted informally for state missions, generates illicit resources for supporting the apparatus of propaganda and “active measures”, or for funding political clients and radical groups in countries where this practice is tolerated (Moldova, Serbia, Slovakia, Germany).

Fig. 2 shows the main elements (official ones) of the manipulation apparatus, as of 2018, with the diplomatic service, intelligence, the agency for the regulation of internet (strengthened in 2018-19 by the new laws of “fighting against fake news” and the one currently debated to limit the internet access), the main state media channels and the famous trolls (and hackers) factory in St Petersburg.

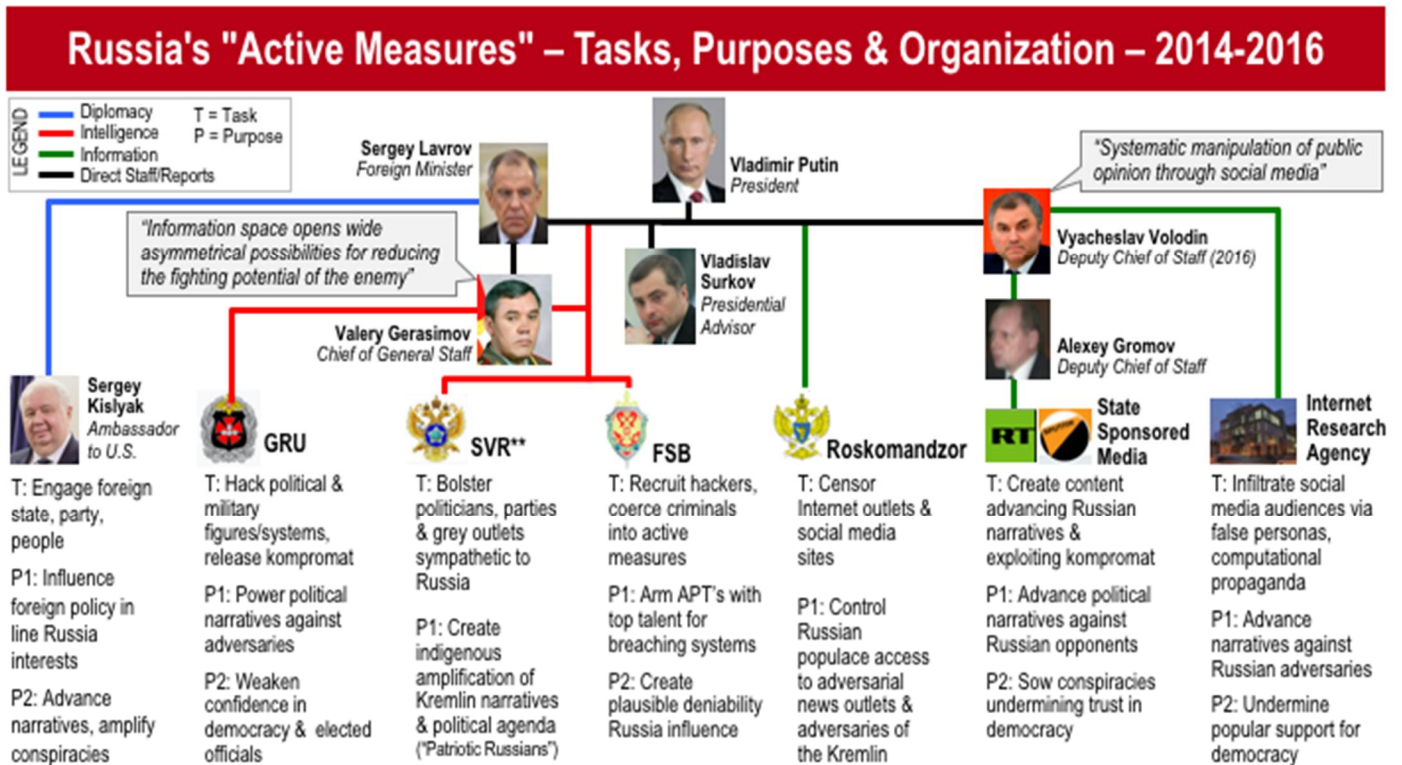
Around this network of institutions there is a whole plethora of private entrepreneurs, more or less connected to the center of power, sometimes syphoning off public resources, other times investing their own money in new operations, in the hope of hitting the jackpot. Their actions can take place in business, culture, academia, mass media, social networks, trolling in the electoral campaigns of other states, cyberattacks, etc. – all having operational independence under the broad strategy decided in Kremlin. An extreme example was the armed putsch organized in Montenegro in October 2016, through local clients with connections in Serbia, in the attempt to stop the country from joining NATO¹⁹.

¹⁷ Mark Galleoti, 2017. *Crimintern: How the Kremlin uses Russia's criminal networks in Europe*. European Council of Foreign Relations. www.ecfr.eu

¹⁸ Ibid.

¹⁹ <https://balkaninsight.com/2018/11/22/media-investigation-identifies-montenegro-coup-suspect-11-22-2018/>

Fig 2. The institutional disinformation system (the “active measures” machine) of Russia²⁰



Coming back to the soft measures, it is from this “ecosystem” perspective that the actions of such a semi-detached actor must be interpreted when they carefully put together networks of influence in Romania, coopting through various means politicians and opinion leaders. Normally they deny any connection with the regime in Moscow – and we refer here specifically to **Aleksandr Dughin**. “Dughin’s list” vehiculated in the media is real and it was discovered by investigative journalists from Ukraine, where there is more expertise on such matters than in Romania and they take things more seriously²¹. But this does not mean, as some people in Bucharest understood (or pretended to understand, to divert the discussion on a collateral path) that the list came directly from Kremlin with an official stamp of approval on it, or that Putin knew about it, or even that all the individuals appearing on it knew or had an immediate benefit from being singled out by Dughin as potential enablers for his actions in Romania.

²⁰ From: Clint Watts, 2018. *Russia's Active Measures Architecture: Task and Purpose*. <https://securingdemocracy.gmfus.org/russias-active-measures-architecture-task-and-purpose/>

²¹ https://adevarul.ro/news/politica/prietenii-rusiei-romania-deconspirati-presa-ucraineana-dan-puric-mircea-dogaru-lista-1_547ef05da0eb96501e529010/index.html

It is all about the efforts of such a Russian private cultural entrepreneur, one among others, loosely connected with the Putin regime but clearly sharing its ideology, to organize a network of influence in Romania and other Balkan countries, most probably with financial support from Malofeev's foundations. His bets are on opinion leaders who are attracted by the Christian-fascist and Eurasianist philosophical mélange from the books of Ivan Ilyn and Lev Gumilev, theories openly embraced by Putin after his great shift towards cultural conservatism from the winter of 2011-12²²; or individuals who are Euro-sceptic and anti-Western by training (such as former intelligence agents who joined the system during the nationalist phase of Ceaușescu, or Sovieto-nostalgics, or admirers of the interwar extreme right); or people who became anti-Western out of frustration (such as former prime-minister Adrian Năstase after he was released from jail, where he served time for corruption).

Pandering to inflated or hurt egos is a good way to co-opt marginalized former leaders or aspiring stars: their activity is presented in flattering light, they are invited to events when the rest of the society is avoiding them, fake profiles of them as intelligent and cultured people are created for upcoming young leaders etc²³.

Fig. 3. Long term investment: Dughin, Năstase and other opinion leaders



²² After 2005-06 such theories have become state philosophy in Russia, being frequently quoted by Putin. They are mandatory reading for dignitaries and civil servants, who receive the books freely and with dedication from the Kremlin. See more about the contemporary Russian Christian fascism as a state doctrine in Timothy Snyder, 2018. *The Road to Unfreedom*. Vintage books. London.

²³ For instance, Sputnik in Romanian language has a strategy to warm up to young Social-Democratic leaders, whom it helps build notoriety in society, as long as they are receptive to the illiberal agenda of Russia. Unlike in Moldova, these people don't need to be openly friendly with Russia; it would be counter-productive. Exalting the same values as Putin is enough.

The Romanian-speaking news portal **Sputnik** obviously follows such strategy of *captatio benevolentiae* with influencers who manifest anti-Western and anti-EU leanings, even when these are not sincere but pretensions. Sputnik is managed from Chişinău (Rep of Moldova) by an interesting combination of formerly pro-Romania unionists, who changed one radical camp for its opposite, and political-business operators with strong connections in Russia (RBOC, the white collars section). The former know well the political and cultural establishment in Romania, so they set the tone and recruit the propagandists; the latter provide the resources.

And this is no exception. In Europe we have been witnessing a systematic effort of the Russian state propaganda over the last years to bring together politicians from both ends of the political spectrum: extreme left or right is equally fine, as long as they are populist, anti-liberal and Eurosceptic. The range of options extends from open political cooperation (Greece, Germany, Italy, Austria) to funding through operations with varying degrees of transparency (France, Greece, Cyprus, Slovakia). The targets can be the parties or think tanks, social action groups, in general conservative, but also neomarxists clubs, anarchists, and so on. Aleksandr Dugin has regular and public contacts not only in Romania, but even more substantial in Hungary (Jobbik), Greece (the New Dawns) or Serbia (countless groups). Last year he held a series of public conferences in Macedonia as "the ambassador of the people," promoting panslavism and anti-Western values²⁴.

A new target has recently popped up as a priority for Russia, of interest for (i) the services in charge with disinformation and active measures, (ii) organized crime-based networks in Russia (RBOC) and (iii) various European extremist movements. Namely, "**the angry young men**": a social category which is frustrated, anti-globalization, organized along tribal lines, very much in the spotlight of sociologists who monitor the political trends in the West after the crisis²⁵. The Kremlin monitors with sympathy and interest the violent football galleries, martial arts clubs, skinhead or motorcyclist groups, and makes an effort to link across the borders of Europe such nuclei of white young men with no clear skills or occupations, but very interested in the great pop-narrative of the "clash of civilizations". In Serbia, Hungary or Slovakia, paramilitary volunteers go to boot camps manned by Russian instructors – private, of course, so deniable by Kremlin. Some of these volunteers become mercenaries and have travelled, or intend to do so, in Donbass and Crimea.

The most famous bikers band from Russia, the *Night Wolves*, has proven connections inside the Kremlin, meets Putin regularly and took part in the asymmetric warfare in Crimea in 2014, most probably under GRU coordination²⁶. Today they make tours in

²⁴ <https://balkaninsight.com/2018/03/05/kremlin-guru-rouses-anti-western-feeling-in-macedonia-03-05-2018/>

²⁵ Michel Carpenter. *Russia is Co-opting Angry Young Men*. The Atlantic, Aug 2018. <https://www.theatlantic.com/ideas/archive/2018/08/russia-is-co-opting-angry-young-men/568741>

²⁶ <http://readrussia.com/2015/07/14/the-rise-of-russias-night-wolves/>

the region – for example in Republika Srpska, on a grant from Kremlin – play the cards of romantic, rebellious anti-capitalism, anti-Islam and conservative social values. One of the Serb radicals involved in the failed *coup d'état* in Montenegro in 2016, Saša Sinđelić, is a member of the Serbian branch of the Night Wolves and had spent time with them in Donetsk²⁷.

As the article quoted notes, even if the number of such extremists in most European countries is low, they are very visible and active online, where they occupy whole niches and contribute to the polarization of debates and amplify the strategic trolling coming from Russia. The ultimate goal is that, through groups like this, to undermine the Western democracies by radicalization, destabilization and decredibilization of civic street actions, which must be associated in the eyes of citizens with chaotic and violent movements, creating a general feeling of insecurity²⁸. The attitudes of civic disengagement, cynicism, and moral relativism are encouraged: “the West is no less corrupt than the East, just more hypocritical because it tries to hide it and preach values to others; moreover, it has lost its moral compass”. Voting in elections is useless: why would one care about a European Union run by despicable liberal elites, who lead it towards historical ruin, as we learn from the Great Replacement Theory²⁹?

Semi-private cultural endeavors like that of Alexander Dughin may or may not be successful. This does not preclude other entrepreneurs to make similar efforts, in business, through party financing or cyberattacks – all being, naturally, deniable by the Kremlin. This decentralized, lively and resource-rich ecosystem is currently active in the whole Eastern European region for the European elections of May 2019. The general line to be followed is quite clear and no novelty: fueling the cynicism of electors in the new EU Member States and their mistrust in democratic institutions; political demobilization of the losers (real or imaginary) of the post-communist transition and EU integration; relativism and moral equivalence in international relations; permanent emphasis on the costs of joining the EU and especially NATO. The themes and means of action will always be adapted to the context of each country, depending on the conditions, as explained above.

²⁷ <https://www.rferl.org/a/montenegro-russia-serbia-coup-plot-witness-identifies-suspect-funding/28819658.html>

²⁸ The Australian perpetrator of the terrorist act in Christchurch (NZ) has such a profile, travelled in the Balkans and got in touch with these radical circles.

²⁹ The Great Replacement Theory (*grand remplacement*): conservative-racist conspiracy theory alleging that certain global actors, such as the EU, deliberately act to replace the European Christian population with immigrants of different races and faiths from other continents.

4. A framework to analyze the Russian influence in Europe

In addition to the structural **elements (a-h) listed** above, which make up the platform on which the Russian influence operates in the region, there are three other factors that determine the permeability to political manipulation in the region or add additional analytical dimensions. They can push sometimes in divergent directions.

4.1. Mass media in the national languages of the region is in deep crisis, after the massacre suffered under the combined forces of the Internet and the global economic crisis of 2008-2010. In fact, with the exception of Poland, where the commercial market is somewhat larger, it is hard to talk about functional media with real financial basis in most of the new EU member states in the Balkans or the Eastern neighborhood. The extreme fragmentation and lack of real economic base have made the private Eastern European TV stations easy prey for political or business groups; the written journals are virtually extinct; the online press, which at some point seemed to be a solution for the 21st century democracies, came with its own limitations and dysfunctions, as we can witness daily.

Public mass media (i.e. state TVs and radio stations) are a politicized failure, verging on irrelevance in most countries of the region. The media regulators (Audio-visual councils) are equally subordinated to executives or parliaments (i.e. political parties) and too weak to act as true arbiters of the profession³⁰. Or, without the old centrist platforms to make the editorial selection and ranking of the news and create relevant public debates, the societies become vulnerable to informational chaos, "Balkanization" by auto-isolation in homogeneous and hysterical bubbles, or to agenda capture by various oligarchs and, when conditions allow it, by the Kremlin's propaganda machine.

This is something difficult to explain to the Western partners, that the situation in the East is different from that in the big western states, with languages with international circulation, a solid economic base for the media and a pluralistic tradition of free speech. Even there the sector has suffered in the last ten years, but the magnitude of decline in the East is incomparably bigger. In practical terms, the new democracies at the forefront of the fight against Eurasian propaganda have to invent a model of democratic debate fast, without the help of proper mass media!

Against this background, the impact of systematic disinformation generously funded from Russia's public or private budgets (through the RBOC system generating informal resources, as described above) is visible, because it faces little market competition and can exploit the propensity of social networks to propagate fake news. Russia's approach is as flexible, as we have seen, and well adapted to the target country.

The case of **Turkey** is spectacular in this respect, with Sputnik in Turkish language (news portal plus radio station) making a vigorous comeback after the crisis in

³⁰ Raport EFOR: <https://expertforum.ro/media-circle/>

bilateral relations of 2016. Today it scores the channel's greatest success to any European domestic audience, with massive followership³¹. The formula is simple: on the one hand, it does not deviate from the anti-European, anti-American and anti-liberal line of President Erdogan, which dovetails well with that of the Kremlin; but on the other hand it offers uncensored news about internal politics and society, which the Turkish press, cowed by the authoritarian regime, has ceased to report. As *The Economist* observes, the fact that the Turkish Sputnik has become an oasis of freedom of expression only shows at what low level the rest of the Turkish press has descended.

4.2. Second, the political will to really counter Russian fake news and propaganda is a red line that divides the states in the region into contrasting categories, depending on the attitude of the governments in power.

On one hand, **(4.2.1)** the three Baltic States or, to a large extent, Ukraine, are examples of countries where the public authorities, led by the Cabinet of Ministers and the Parliament, are aware of the danger of online and offline manipulation, openly discuss the matter and take countermeasures, often in honest co-operation with the civil society and external partners. Things are not always clear in Ukraine, where political actors are present with double games, but because of the external aggression, the critical mass of public authorities supports the fight against the Kremlin's propaganda.

The intelligence services of these states publish risk assessments, and government agencies edit manuals and good practice guides to understand and combat online attacks, following Scandinavian good practices. The companies managing social networks are pressed to transparentize payments for ads during electoral campaigns, the public-private co-regulation in the sector is plausible. The latest Latvian and Estonian elections have been a successful example of public-private cooperative action in this respect.

On the other hand, **(4.2.2)** much more governments in the region actually rely on manipulations and fake news in order to stay in power, clientelism and fake news propaganda being actually two sides of the same coin: the bad governance model. Here we find the current political regimes in **Hungary, Romania, Poland, Moldova, Serbia, Turkey**, and so on. As much online transparency as it has been achieved in these societies, it was largely the result of the non-governmental actions *in spite of* the obstacles set by – and not with the help of – public authorities.

This dimension – ***the real determination of the authority to reduce the level of fake news and propaganda***, as much as it can be realistically done in a democracy – is an important but generally ignored factor in the comparative evaluations performed in our region. It does not irrelevant if, on a terrain predisposed to disinformation, such as in Ukraine, the parties in power try in good

³¹ <https://www.economist.com/europe/2019/02/28/a-russian-propaganda-outlet-prospers-in-turkey>

faith to oppose the external bombardment with fake news and manipulations – or, on the contrary, regard it as a strategic opportunity to create advantages for themselves in domestic politics.

The best case study for this category is the exposure and blocking of the trolling network active in the Republic of Moldova mentioned at the beginning of this report: an operation carried out solely by groups of civic activists in cooperation with Facebook. Moldova's government and state institutions proved to be obstacles, not honest partners in the fight against domestic or foreign propaganda; indeed, they were to a large extent accessories to crime! The **socio-political factors (a-h)** listed above create more or less favorable ground for Russian propaganda in each country, but what is common to all states in the group 4.2.2. is that **their own governments and / or political leaders are paramount sources of fake news in society**. The practical effects of this categorization becomes now obvious.

In countries where the populations are rather skeptical about Russia, like Poland or Romania, the manipulation themes originating in the East cannot be put directly on the market, as they are delivered to the citizens of Russia. They must be given a disguise, adapted and "nationalized"; that is, put in a dress more acceptable to the public and purged of any reference to Vladimir Putin or Moscow. In countries with more neutral sentiments towards Russia, such as Hungary or Bulgaria, this is not necessary because an eventual association with Kremlin does not stir hostility among the public.

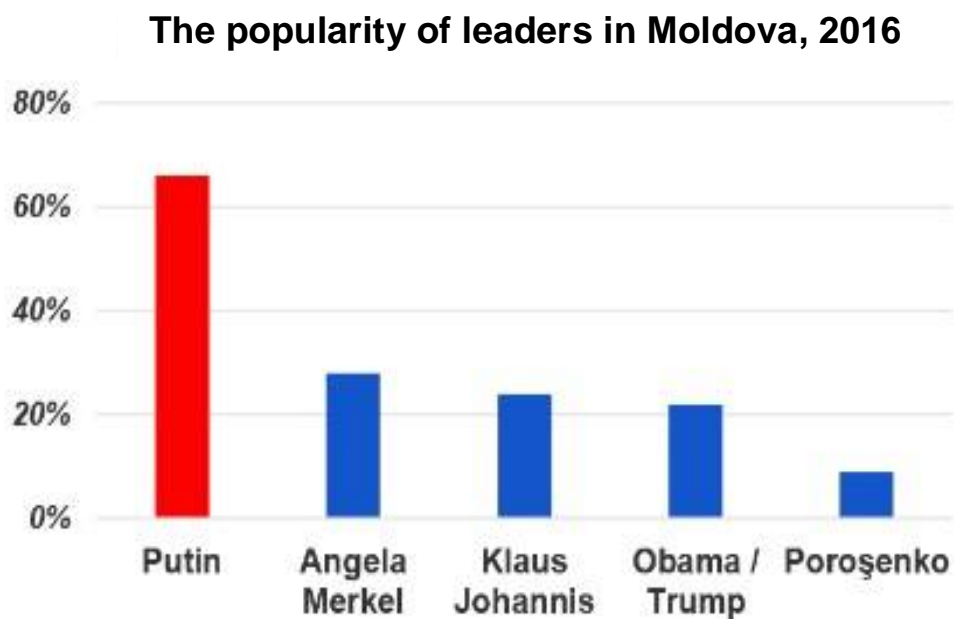
At the other end of the spectrum of attitudes we find states like the Republic of Moldova, where the open display of Russophilia can be even beneficial to a politician, who may want to be seen together with Vladimir Putin: he is by far the most popular leader, not only on the international scene, but even among the local politicians (Fig. 4)³². Therefore, despite the anti-manipulation rhetoric delivered to their foreign partners, the authorities in Chişinău are in fact an integral part of the Russian propaganda system across borders. For example:

- A law meant to limit the re-broadcasting of TV content from the Russian Federation is in fact toothless and easy to circumvent by media operators; the first who do so are the TVs associated with the two most important people of the regime: the Democratic Party leader and the Socialist president. The main source of international news for the Moldovan public to continue to be the Russian stations, broadcasting content shaped for the Russian cultural sphere (Fig. 4)³³.

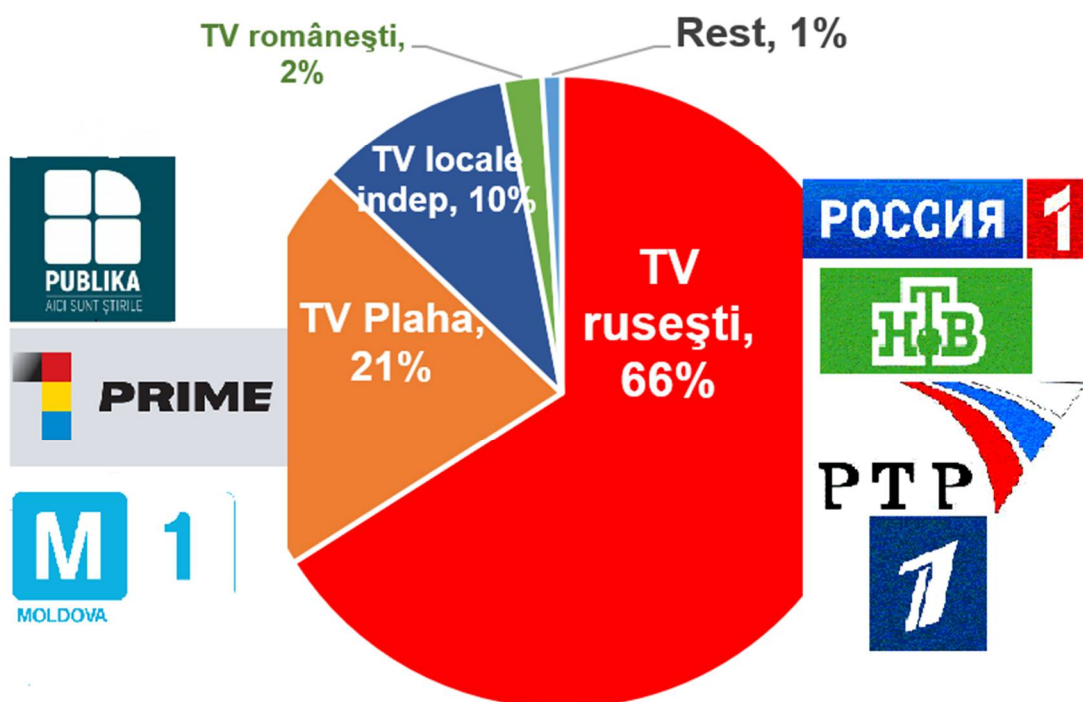
³² Valeriu Paşa, Vasile Cantarji, Irina Sterpu, 2018. *Republic of Moldova's television content and the manner in which it is shaping electoral behavior: an assessment of russia's influence on the country's geo-political options*. WatchDog.MD Community, Chişinău.

³³ *Ibid.*

Fig. 4. Media capture and its effects in the Republic of Moldova



Sources of international news in Moldova



- The laws banning the funding of parties and electoral campaigns from abroad are broken in broad daylight, with no consequences, as long as the funds have as their source the East. Many countries in the region, including new EU member states, are guilty of not doing enough against the illicit funds fueling politics, but nowhere are the violations as blatant as in the Republic of Moldova. Such funds may be gains from in the past, from the famous *Russian laundromat* affair, or obtained more recently but from the same sources, as it became clear in 2019. A good part of these resources are invested in the propaganda apparatus of the regime and its clients, on the traditional or online media.
- Unlike Ukraine, Moldova has not taken steps to limit the penetration of Russian-language social networks, Odnoklassniki (ok.ru) and Vkontakte (vk.com), owned by firma based in Russia. With almost 1 million unique visitors a month, the Ok.ru network was until recently the first in the Republic of Moldova; now it is second after Facebook. It is officially under the control of Russia's intelligence service FSB. Together with Vkontakte, Ok.ru has more users in Moldova than the Western networks; their databases are legally open to inspection by the Russian state, as the law allow the public agencies discretionary access to content.

This non-combat on the media market, or rather the double play of the Moldovan authorities, in total contrast with what happens in the Baltic States, must be associated with the other factors of influence mentioned:

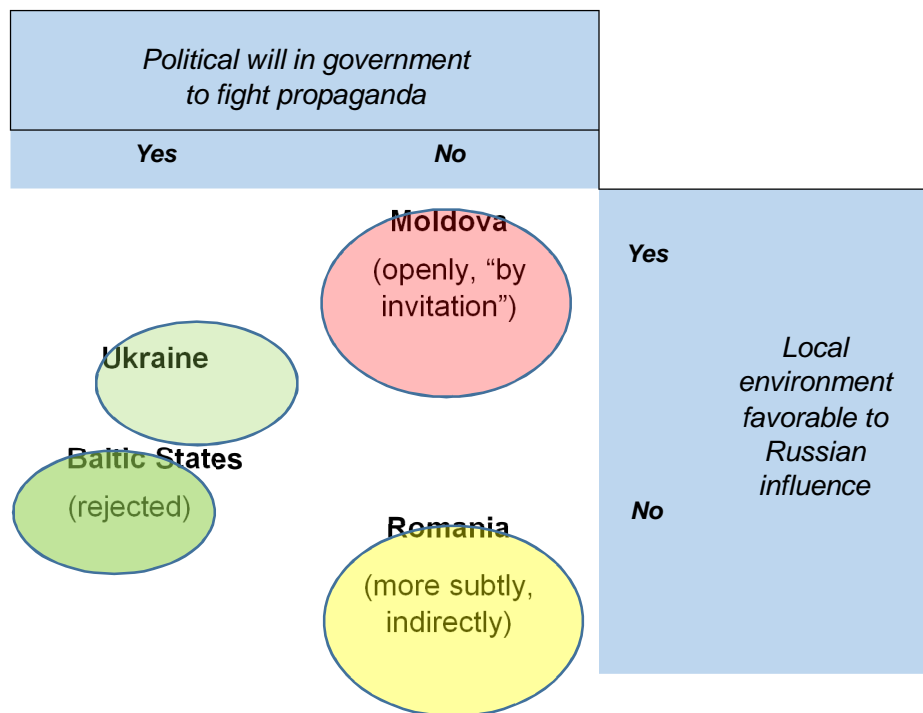
- Knowledge of Russian by the majority of the public;
- An important Russian community, including members who consider themselves "compatriots" in the *Russkiy Mir*;
- Ambiguous identity for a good part of the population, visible in the public disputes over the reevaluation of the Soviet period; the political ambiguity at the border on river Nistru, where a large number of citizens from the uncontrolled territory can vote in (and influence) the national elections³⁴;
- Links of the Moldovan political and economic elite with the area east of the river Nistru, given by the recent history and specific experience of the place's life;
- Business interests on a large scale, quite visible, such as those in the energy sector, involving government members hand in hand with the leaders of the Transnistrian separatist entity;
- Links between Moldova's political and economic elite and the Russian-based organized crime system (RBOC) described in previous sections.

³⁴ Or even the European elections of May 2019, as an unknown number of Transnistrian residents may have Romanian passports

All these things together made the analysts talk about "**Russian influence by invitation**" in the case of Moldova, meaning that manipulation from the East is not only tolerated or used occasionally when it occurs, but even encouraged by the way politics works and by the measures (not) enforced in the media sector³⁵.

Fig. 5 summarizes the situations of Moldova and Romania on a stylized map of manipulation in Eastern Europe, in contrast to other states where the topic is equally relevant. If we consider the two factors discussed, namely the **permeability of the local environment** to fake news and disinformation coming from the east (measured on the a-h dimensions) and the **political will to counteract** the fake news phenomenon, which is a purely endogenous variable, Moldova and the Baltic States are contrasting cases. Romania differs from Moldova in the sense that the Russian influence falls on a much less favorable ground in Bucharest. However, it does not differ much in terms of the attitude of the political authorities and elites in power towards fake news and disinformation: these are tolerated, when not used proactively, including those "made in Kremlin".

Fig. 5. Romania, Moldova and the Russian influence, *compare-and-contrast*



³⁵ https://anticoruptie.md/ro/stiri/analiza-moscova-vaneaza-vulnerabilitati-intr-o-romanie-anti-rusa?fbclid=IwAR0FtAkoZZ9sCKWEVK-fWQ8QIDz6BlS09zi1Fs_LHiSUabPj1kBkIDraZV0

4.3. By combining the factors (4.1) and (4.2) discussed above we obtain the analytical matrix in Fig. 5. But there is a last determinant that helps us predict the intensity of Kremlin's influence in the old EU member states, which were not part of the communist world and where the mechanisms are more diverse, or in other countries situated farther away from Russia (the Balkans). The decisive factor in these cases is whether **Russia has an interest to intervene in the local politics**, or whether it has a **chance to make a difference** if it did.

"When Russia does not meddle in elections in European countries, this happens for one of two reasons: either it cannot interfere, or it does not have to. ... A discussion of Russian interference in electoral processes in European nations ought to go beyond the problem of meddling as such and lead us to consider the erosion of liberal-democratic values and/or conflict of political and economic interests. This discussion also raises the question of what is more detrimental to the liberal-democratic values: Russian interference in electoral processes, or political developments in European societies that make Russian meddling excessive and needless?"³⁶

In some instances urgent and massive intervention is required, as it was the case in 2016 with **Montenegro's** rapid progress towards NATO (failed intervention, the event occurred); or as it happens during the current campaign for European elections, when the **French** President Emmanuel Macron and his liberal, pro-EU agenda have been designated by the Kremlin priority targets for hostile intervention.

Other times the interests of Moscow are served without any significant investment in active measures, so things can be let to run their course. This explains why there are no propaganda campaigns, trolling or cyber-attacks perceived as hostile against **Austria** (except for an episode originating in Turkey, a traditional EU opponent), **Italy** or **Greece**, apart from the usual RBOC operations with economic motivations: these countries are welcoming hosts for the "enablers," which means local companies with substantial business with Russia or political actors who support the cooperation with Russia.

When an intervention still takes place bearing a Russian fingerprint, as it happened a few weeks ago in Italy³⁷, it is meant to endorse the line taken by the ruling coalition in Rome – in this case, anti-immigration – and is not by any means hostile, because the government is perceived as an ally to Kremlin.

³⁶ This excellent framework of analysis was proposed by Anton Shekhovtsov, 2019. *Russian interference and where to find it. European Platform for Democratic Elections*. <https://www.epde.org/en/>. Quotation on pg. 33

³⁷ <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/05/12/world/europe/russian-propaganda-influence-campaign-european-elections-far-right.html?fbclid=IwAR1-IM0a8qhtJUOtSZkFC6CKfr-6oL12WTqo-dAXYyGWg7Ifc2DrCRCXzM>

Putin's strategic calculation is that, given the current political situation in these capitals, his interference cannot improve things much; on the contrary, a more aggressive posture may backfire³⁸. **Italy** is not happy with the European sanctions against Moscow (contested by both parties in power) and has serious investments in the Russian energy and financial sectors. In addition, it hosts a lively Sputnik platform that permanently feeds the no. 1 national fixation: the danger posed by immigrants. **Austria** has also investments in the same two strategic business sectors, plus a lady minister of foreign affairs who is Putin's dancing partner and an anti-EU party always close to the power; there is no imminent danger that the country may give up neutrality and join NATO. **Greece** (like Cyprus) is tied to the *Ruskiy Mir* by countless cultural, religious, and especially financial connections. **Hungary** is also willingly doing Putin's bid and there are no actors on the political stage who would be more trustworthy than FIDESZ in this respect.

In some Balkan countries, less covered in this report, Russia's influence is welcome by invitation, as we have seen in Moldova, because it plays into the hand of the local elites. For instance, radio stations owned by local governments in **Serbia** re-broadcast fully the Sputnik radio programs, offered to them free of charge. Even decent channels such as Studio B air real news back-to-back with manipulations served from Russian sources, thus confirming Kremlin's relativism: there is no such thing as objective reality; it is all about equally valid "points of view"³⁹. The Serbian-speaking Sputnik also functions as the main platform connecting the media programs in Serbia and Bosnia-Herzegovina⁴⁰.

Austria and especially **Italy** are also interesting in the broader European context from another perspective: they apply weak – or even nonexistent restrictions in the case of Italy – to the financing of political parties from abroad (see Fig. 6). As a result, the semi-official talks of Deputy Prime Minister Salvini in Moscow, exploring a route to finance his party by means of a deal with natural gas, are legal, though controversial. The recent scandal in **Austria**, highlighting a possible traffic of influence through contracts in public construction and mass media by a leader of the extreme right, demonstrates that not only legal restrictions are important, but also how they are implemented in practice. Even **France**, a state with restrictive regime of political funding from abroad, could not avoid a controversy a few years ago over a loan took by Marine Le Pen's party from a foreign (Russian) bank, an operation not covered by the legal ban but in which Russian officials were involved.

³⁸ Shekhovtsov, 2019, p. 34

³⁹ <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-serbia-russia-media-analysis/on-serbian-airwaves-a-battle-for-heart-of-balkans-idUSKBN17Z0X1>

⁴⁰ <https://www.stopfake.org/en/how-serbian-sputnik-infiltrated-a-disinformation-hub-in-bosnia-and-herzegovina/>

France is, however, different from the cases discussed above when it comes to the Kremlin's determination to interfere in its politics: here the active measures are clear and massive, carried out by multiple means. The current political regime in Paris must be fought against with all the energy, because from Putin's point of view, it stands for all the wrong things. In the presidential campaign of 2017, the whole arsenal was deployed to prevent Macron's victory, ranging from political propaganda to cyberattacks and leaks of information that should have affected the candidate (as it was the case in 2016 with Hilary Clinton). False accounts of "worried citizens" (in fact, bots) were created to plant anti-Macron themes in online conversations. In 2019, as in 2017, there are important actors on the political scene in Paris who have real chances to gain power and do the Kremlin's bid: the far-right Marine Le Pen, assisted financially in the past; but also the anti-globalist and anarchist left; or even some religious-conservative circles. Apart from George Soros himself, there is no other international personality today incarnating the enemy on all the relevant dimensions of the Kremlin agenda than Emmanuel Macron.

In **Germany** the things are more complicated, but the conclusion is similar: from the Kremlin's point of view, things could improve with a good push, so there is decisive intervention with trolling, underground financing and soft power in the German political life. Warm bilateral relations with Russia are backed by the business circles, out of economic interest; and the NordStream II strategic gas pipeline project clearly undermines the European common policies in energy. But on the other hand, the Merkel government is presently cool to the Kremlin and a decisive factor in continuing with the sanctions. In addition, we have to see how Berlin will defend the NordStream II project later this year, when the EU Commission proves in front of the European Court that the EU rules are being broken: German leaders do not like to be seen in Machiavellic postures, preferring to have at least some procedural cover for their actions.

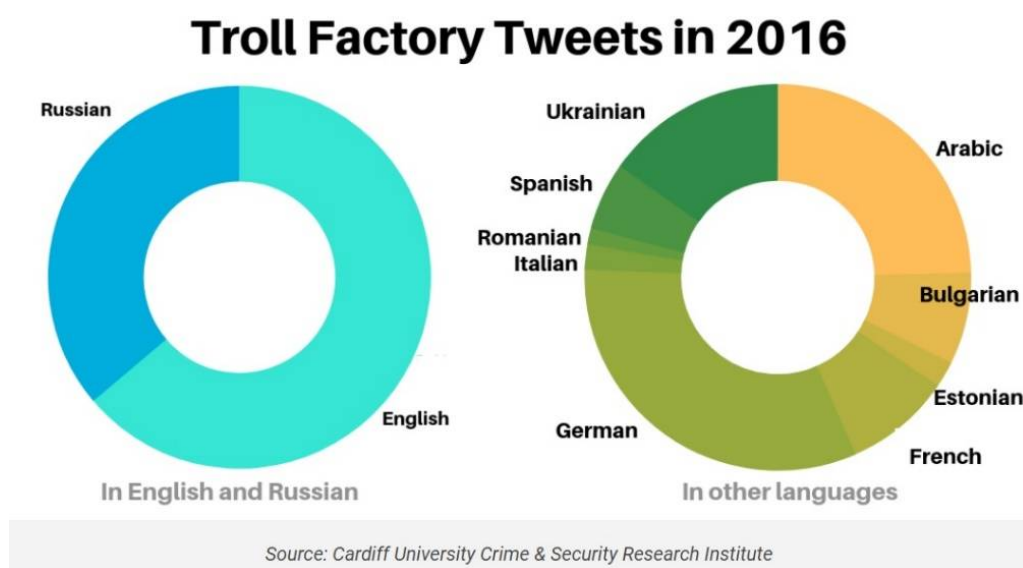
In German politics there are players with a more favorable attitude towards Russia than those who are now in power; they can be encouraged from abroad. Second, there is good potential for polarization by encouraging actors from extremes (AfD, Die Linke) and by exploiting the themes of immigration and increasing anti-Americanism. Finally, the Russian-speaking community in Germany is large, consisting of both recently emigrated ethnic Russians and ethnic Germans repatriated from the former communist countries after 1990. They are all targeted with intense and bilingual propaganda through traditional (RT) or online channels (Sputnik). In addition, "Die Ostalgie" can be played upon: the post-communist nostalgia in the Eastern Lands, a social reality in the poorest area of Germany⁴¹. Therefore, together with France, Germany is the European country with the highest concentration of "active measures" initiated by Russia during all these years, as the assessments tend to show (Fig 7).

⁴¹ <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ostalgie>

Fig. 6. Interdictions to party and campaign financing from abroad in the EU⁴²

Total restriction	Partial restriction	No restriction
Croația	<i>Austria</i>	<i>Italia</i>
Cipru	Bulgaria	Belgia
Cehia	Estonia	Danemarca
Grecia	Finlanda	Olanda
Irlanda	Franța	
Luxemburg	Germania	
Polonia	Latvia	
Portugalia	Lituania	
România	Malta	
Slovenia	Slovacia	
Suedia	Spania	
U.K.		
Ungaria		

Fig. 7. Intensity of activity in the “trolls factory” of St Petersburg, by destination / language⁴³

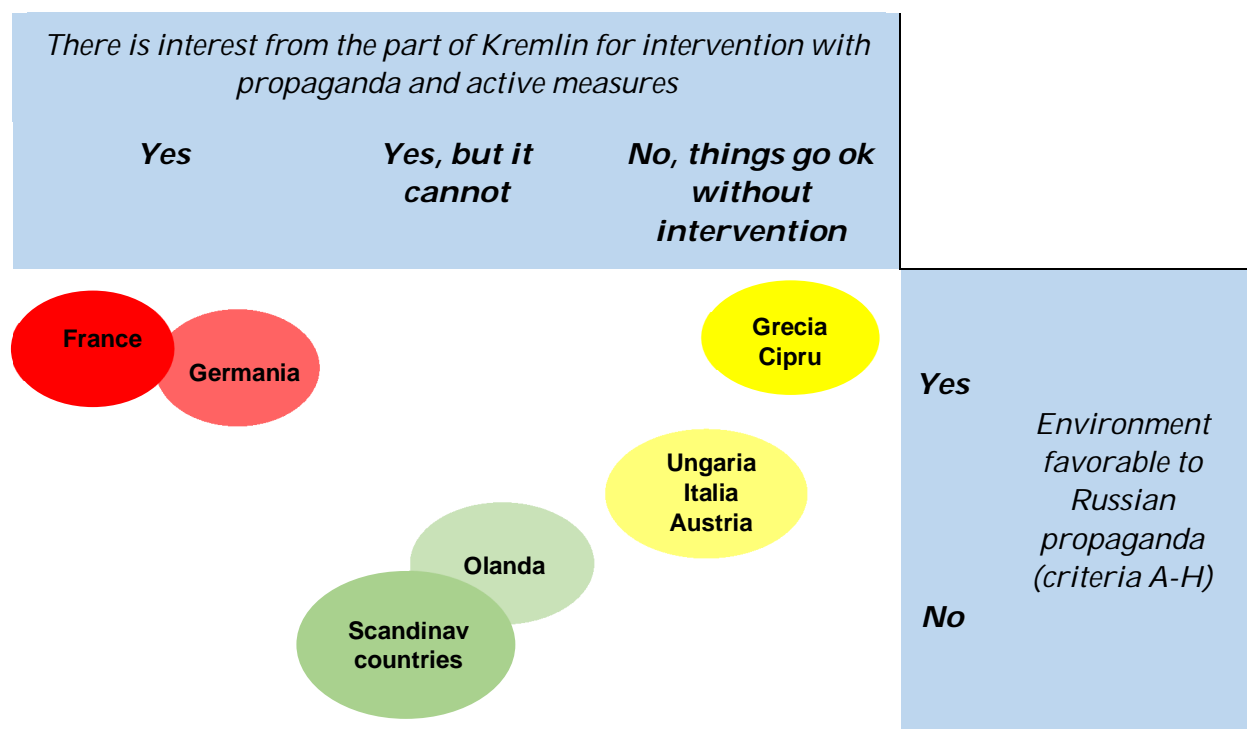


⁴² *Financing of political parties: Bans and limits on donations to political parties, 2014*, IFO Institute, Munich, the DICE Database <http://www.cesifo-group.de/DICE/fb/4XvSY2zrM>

⁴³ *"The Internet Research Agency in Europe 2014-2016"*. Cardiff University Crime & Security Research Institute, May 2019.

As Shekhovtsov suggests in his paper, a third category of countries exists (**Denmark, Sweden, Norway, Finland**, possibly the **Netherlands**) where the Kremlin does not intervene much because, although it would have an interest in doing so (for example, to prevent that Sweden or Finland take steps to join NATO), it does not have the means to do it. Parliaments are traditionally fragmented in these countries, but all relevant parties, even the Eurosceptic and anti-immigration ones, have strong reservations about cooperating with Russia and are rather liberal in terms of socio-cultural values. There are not many "cultural anchors" to make the Russian trolling successful in Scandinavian societies, nor enough resources to support credible propaganda in difficult languages spoken by few people: the Sputnik in Swedish lasted only one year before it was closed.

Fig. 8. Europe and the Russian influence in the electoral year 2019, compare-and-contrast⁴⁴



The situations described above are summarized in Fig. 8 above. Naturally, the proposed framework of analysis is tentative: things may change during the electoral year 2019 or in the future⁴⁵; the context in each country can be interpreted differently, from other perspectives. This report is just an invitation to debate in more precise terms, in order to devise realistic plans against disinformation and illicit

⁴⁴ Following an idea by Anton Shekhovtsov, 2019. *Russian interference and where to find it. European Platform for Democratic Elections*. <https://www.epde.org/en/>

⁴⁵ This report was written before the European elections of May 2019.

interventions aimed at undermining democracy in the European societies, in particular in Eastern Europe.

If this analysis is correct, the measures to counteract disinformation will have to take into account not only the content of the messages and the platforms on which they are transmitted, but also the relevant contextual and political factors mentioned above:

- The permeability of the domestic socio-economic environment to influence and rhetoric originating in Russia
- And, crucially, the real willingness of national authorities to make honest efforts to combat disinformation through concrete measures.

The dialogue between the EU and other external partners with the new member states, those with Accession of Association Agreements must take into account these dimensions which are indicative for how serious the commitments of the various governments are to implement good governance. A plausible strategy to counteract propaganda and disinformation which threaten democracy, coming from domestic sources or from abroad, may be for example included among the set of conditionalities, alongside those on the rule of law.