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Summary

While prevailing statements often suggest that Kremlin disinformation is failing to make an impact on Western audiences, this Hybrid CoE Working Paper examines different pieces of evidence and explores a variety of indicators demonstrating that Kremlin disinformation does, in fact, influence Western audiences to varying degrees. The paper combines desk research and interviews with experts on Kremlin disinformation, drawing on several different themes and a number of states within the Euro-Atlantic space. First, the paper takes a retrospective look at the way in which the KGB assessed the success of its influence operations, providing informed and comprehensive insights into the Kremlin's potential approaches to measuring its contemporary influence operations. This is followed by an examination of possible indicators of the success of these operations today. The paper concludes by observing that while there is room for optimism regarding collective efforts to curb Russian disinformation, there are also many indications that the Kremlin's reach into foreign societies persists, serving to shape public discourse and precipitate effects. The paper recommends a concerted research approach to Kremlin disinformation and its impacts, as it is only through a nuanced and determined effort to ascertain the impact of disinformation that statements can be made about the success or failure of Kremlin disinformation campaigns today.

Introduction

In February 2022, *TIME* magazine published an article titled 'How Putin Is Losing at His Own Disinformation Game in Ukraine'.[1] A bold and declarative statement, and one that is reflective of a prevailing general sentiment in the West regarding the perceived lack of success of recent Kremlin disinformation campaigns.[2] For many years, the discourse on disinformation, particularly that stemming from the Kremlin, has centred on the possible detrimental impact it may have had in Western democracies. Several governmental investigations, for example, were conducted into Russian disinformation interference in the voting process of the Brexit referendum[3] or the 2016 US presidential election.[4] Amidst the COVID-19 pandemic, several officials discussed the consequences of a parallel 'infodemic', whereby Russia used the virus to erode trust in political institutions.[5] Concerns have also been raised about Russia using disinformation to foment or exacerbate conflicts in Georgia or Eastern Ukraine.[6]

However, other discussions, recently revived when referring to Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine, have focussed on the notion that the Kremlin's disinformation campaigns have been struggling to gain traction.[7] These notions are long held, since scepticism about the effects of Russian disinformation campaigns has existed since at least 2014, when Russia reinvigorated its information warfare capabilities. Much of this apparent underperformance has been attributed to the West seeming to have learned from the past and successfully adapting to Russian tactics. For example, Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy has been lauded for his ability to dominate and control the narrative about the war.[8] Meanwhile, the United States has set new

1 Vera Bergengruen, 'How Putin Is Losing at His Own Disinformation Game in Ukraine', *TIME magazine*, 25 February 2022, https://time.com/6151578/russia-disinformation-ukraine-social-media/.

2 For some examples, see: Stephanie Carvin, 'How to Explain the Failure of Russia's Information Operations in Ukraine?', *Centre for International Governance Innovation*, 25 March 2022, https://www.cigionline.org/articles/how-to-explain-the-failure-of-russias-information-operations-in-ukraine/; Peter Dickinson, 'Putin is facing defeat in the information war', *Atlantic Council*, 24 January 2023, https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/blogs/ukrainealert/putin-is-facing-defeat-in-the-information-war/.

3 Kate Holton and Guy Faulconbridge, 'UK investigates Brexit campaign funding amid speculation of Russian meddling', *Reuters*, 1 November 2017, https://www.reuters.com/article/us-britain-eu-investigation/uk-investigates-brexit-campaign-funding-amid-speculation-of-russian-meddling-idUSKBN1D157I.

4 Russian Active Measures Campaigns and Interference in the 2016 Election. Report of the Select Committee on Intelligence, United States Senate, https://www.intelligence.senate.gov/sites/default/files/documents/Report_Volume1.pdf.

5 Ben Dubow, Edward Lucas and Jake Morris, 'Jabbed in the Back: Mapping Russian and Chinese Information Operations During the COVID-19 Pandemic', CEPA, 2 December 2021, https://cepa.org/comprehensive-reports/jabbed-in-the-back-mapping-russian-and-chinese-information-operations-during-the-covid-19-pandemic/.

6 Emilio J. Iasiello, 'Russia's improved information operations: from Georgia to Crimea', The US Army War College Quarterly: Parameters, 47(2), 7 (2017).

7 Mark Galeotti, 'The west is too paranoid about Russia's information war', *The Guardian*, 7 July 2015, https://www.theguardian.com/world/2015/jul/07/russia-propaganda-europe-america.

8 Andrew E. Kramer, 'With Speeches to Ukraine, and the World, Zelensky Shapes Narrative of the War', *The New York Times*, 31 December 2022, https://www.nytimes.com/2022/12/31/world/europe/zelensky-ukraine-war.html.

precedents in intelligence sharing, effectively countering many of the Kremlin's narratives about its offensive in Ukraine before they had a chance to get off the ground.[9]

Research scrutinizing the effectiveness of the European Union's ban on Russian state-sponsored media outlets Sputnik and RT – which came into effect as a consequence of Russia's invasion – has also yielded promising results. In a 2022 report by the Institute for Strategic Dialogue, analysts reported a 74% average reduction in web traffic to Rossiya Segodnya websites, with traffic in many countries declining by as much as 90%.[10] Such figures indicate that the implementation of the ban has been successful in curbing the accessibility of these websites, creating an obstacle for the Kremlin when it comes to spreading war narratives in European societies.

Such developments potentially point to reasons for optimism regarding the fight against Kremlin disinformation. Of course, caution should be exercised when making statements about the extent to which (Kremlin) disinformation has, or does not have, an impact. Influence is notoriously challenging to measure, for several reasons. Firstly, unless a baseline measurement is established, it is impossible to know with certainty how far disinformative news has moved the needle on a certain topic. Moreover, the influence of other factors, such as pre-existing beliefs, political ideology, or personal experiences, can make it difficult to distil the true effect of exposure to disinformation, even with a reliable baseline measure. A final challenge stems from the widespread and multi-dimensional nature of disinformation. While disinformation about Russia's invasion of Ukraine, for instance, has been seen as less effective, disinformation about potent, more domestic issues may be very effective. Hence, while it is important not to overestimate the impact of Russian disinformation, it is also difficult to make conclusive statements about its lack of impact.

In light of this, the current Hybrid CoE Working Paper seeks to advance the assertion that prevailing statements suggesting that Kremlin disinformation is failing to make an impact may be too strong, or at least lacking in nuance. The paper aims to analyze different pieces of evidence that lend support to this notion, exploring a variety of indicators that can be viewed as demonstrating that Kremlin disinformation is, in fact, influencing Western audiences (albeit to varying degrees). It combines desk research and interviews with experts on Kremlin disinformation to build its arguments, drawing on several different themes and a number of states within the Euro-Atlantic space.

To narrow down the scope of the paper, the majority of examples used in the opening sections will be narratives from the last ten years

9 Ken Dilanian, Courtney Kube, Carol E. Lee and Dan De Luce, 'In a break with the past, U.S. is using intel to fight an info war with Russia, even when the intel isn't rock solid', *NBC News*, 6 April 2022, https://www.nbcnews.com/politics/national-security/us-using-declassified-intel-fight-info-war-russia-even-intel-isnt-rock-rc-na23014.

10 Kata Balint, Jordan Wildon, Francesca Arcostanzo and Kevin D. Reyes, 'Effectiveness of the Sanctions on Russian State-Affiliated Media in the EU – An investigation into website traffic & possible circumvention methods', *ISD Global*, 6 October 2022, https://www.isdglobal.org/isd-publications/effectiveness-of-the-sanctions-on-russian-state-affiliated-media-in-the-eu-an-investigation-into-website-traffic-possible-circumvention-methods-2/.

that would not have existed unless the Kremlin had introduced them into the information space. By focusing predominantly on narratives created and cultivated by Kremlin-affiliated sources, the impact that Kremlin disinformation may have can be clearly demonstrated. Nevertheless, the latter part of the paper looks at real-world manifestations and includes examples of Kremlin-supported, but not necessarily Kremlin-created, narratives – a decidedly more difficult task, but necessary when examining these more obscure instances of impact. For the same reason, the paper is geographically restricted to the impact of Kremlin disinformation in European and American societies. However, it should be acknowledged that there is a growing body of relevant literature discussing the reach and influence of Kremlin disinformation in Latin America[11] and Africa.[12]

The paper begins by taking a retrospective look at the way in which the KGB assessed the success of its influence operations. This provides informed and comprehensive insights into the potential approaches that the Kremlin might employ to measure its contemporary influence operations by drawing on historical lessons and applying them to the current information landscape. The paper then examines possible key indicators of the success of contemporary influence operations, exploring how they demonstrate influence and analyzing recent examples. This includes an analysis of several examples of behavioural manifestations of Kremlin influence, detailing how each instance was precipitated by a disinformation campaign that may have contributed to its emergence.

We conclude that while there is room for optimism regarding collective efforts to curb Russian disinformation, there are also many indications that the Kremlin's influence persists in foreign societies, serving to shape public discourse and precipitate effects to an extent that should be a cause for concern for governments and policymakers.

11 Gretel Kahn, 'Despite Western bans, Putin's propaganda flourishes in Spanish on TV and social media', *Reuters Institute*, 30 March 2023, https://reutersinstitute.politics.ox.ac.uk/news/despite-western-bans-putins-propaganda-flourishes-spanish-tv-and-social-media.

12 Maxime Audinet, and Kevin Limonier, 'Le dispositif d'influence informationnelle de la Russie en Afrique subsaharienne francophone: un écosystème flexible et composite' [Russia's information influence in French-speaking sub-Saharan Africa: a flexible and composite ecosystem], *Questions de communication* 41 (2022): 129–148.

How did the KGB measure the success of its influence operations?

The history of Soviet influence operations, most often in the form of so-called active measures, is now extensively documented in many respects. Far less attention has been given to how the KGB itself or other intelligence agencies measured their success, however. As early as 1985, researcher Dennis Kux pointed out that this was largely because the Soviet Union saw these operations as long-term and that the Soviets mainly relied on the cumulative effect.[13] Kux also noted that there were major differences between the impact of these operations in the US, European countries and Third World countries. To this end, he cited a 1982 FBI report, which had found that Soviet active measures had no significant impact in the US, but that the impact was more complex elsewhere. In the case of European countries, examples of success could be seen in the daily Greek newspaper *To Ethnos*, for example, which journalist Paul Anastasi accused of being a disinformation outlet sponsored by the KGB, and the publisher an agent of influence for the Soviet Union.[14] Kux stated, however, that the most affected by these operations were those Third World countries where the Soviet Union was able to successfully exploit anti-American sentiment with the help of active measures.

At least the temporal impact of Soviet influence operations is evidenced by the so-called Mitrokhin archive – a collection of confidential documents that a former KGB archivist, Vasili Mitrokhin, smuggled out of the Soviet Union when he defected to the United Kingdom in 1992. Mi5 historian Christopher Andrew analyzed the archive in his 1999 book *The Sword and the Shield*. Andrew wrote about operations in France and Italy, which he argued contributed in part to pro-Soviet sentiment in France. As Andrew reported on public opinion polls in the 1960s:[15]

> *"KGB active measures may have had a somewhat greater, though doubtless not decisive, influence on the evolution of French public opinion. According to opinion polls after de Gaulle's state visit (in 1966), 35 percent of French people held a favourable opinion of the Soviet Union (as compared with 25 percent two years earlier) while only 13 percent were hostile. Those with favourable opinions of the United States fell, partly as a consequence of the Vietnam War, from 52 percent in 1964 to only 22 percent at the beginning of 1967."*

While Andrew noted that these findings did not in themselves mean that the operations were successful and that Mitrokhin himself did not see any detailed analysis of success, it does appear that some quantitative indicators were involved in the KGB's operations.[16] This is consistent with the claims made by other defectors in the 1970s. One of them was Stanislav Levchenko, who, when asked how the effectiveness of operations was measured by officers in the field, replied as follows:

> *"Certain things are easy to measure and evaluate – for instance, the output of a journalist you had recruited (the number of articles published, or the amount of confidential information collected), or the parliamentary activities of one of your agents (making certain statements, initiating certain discussions, or creating a favourable atmosphere supporting Soviet goals in parliament). These elements are evaluated against certain standards by your superiors. Other operations, on the other hand, are more difficult to assess. For example, the success of the peace movement in Europe is a fact, and the KGB and the International Department (ID) have been extensively involved. However, the growth of the European peace movement cannot be attributed solely to KGB and ID involvement. Hence, the evaluation of the effectiveness of active measures operations in the growth of the peace movement is more subjective."*[17]

13 Dennis Kux, 'SOVIET ACTIVE MEASURES AND DISINFORMATION: OVERVIEW AND ASSESSMENT', *Parameters* 15, no. 1 (1985), doi:10.55540/0031–1723.1388, p. 27.

14 'AROUND THE WORLD; Rights Unit Asks Greece To Act for Reporter', *The New York Times*, 21 December 1983, https://www.nytimes.com/1983/12/21/world/around-the-world-rights-unit-asks-greece-to-act-for-reporter.html.

15 Christopher Andrew, *The Sword and the Shield: the Mitrokhin Archive and the Secret History of the KGB* (UK: Hachette, 2000), p. 466.

16 Ibid., p. 482.

17 Richard H. Shultz, *Dezinformatsia: Active Measures in Soviet Strategy* (Pergamon-Brassey's, 1984), p. 183.

Former Czechoslovak State Security (StB) officer Ladislav Bittman, who was in charge of active measures in socialist Czechoslovakia, confirmed this approach, saying:

> *"The KGB measures the success of propagandistic disinformation in two ways. First, it is interested in the attention given to the message outside the Soviet bloc, the amount of public discussion generated by the message, and the prevailing political tone of the discussion. Second, it determines whether a message forces a target country to make any political changes that could directly or indirectly benefit the Soviet Union."*[18]

Overall, the KGB's approach to measuring the success of influence operations seems to have broadly converged on several aspects:

- Firstly, gauging the penetration of media coverage and public discussion through disinformation campaigns. The KGB viewed widespread reporting and debate around its fabricated propaganda as an indicator that its narratives were penetrating and influencing public discourse.
- Next, observable policy changes or political developments in target countries that aligned with Soviet interests and undermined the West were sought. If an active measure contributed to shifting public opinion or government policy in the desired direction, it was seen as achieving its aims.
- Less concretely, the gradual fomentation of confusion, distrust, and division within or between Western countries and institutions was a goal. Active measures that insidiously sowed discord, conspiracy theories, and lack of trust in leadership were viewed as weakening enemies and making them more vulnerable to Soviet influence.
- Lastly, if an active measure helped identify and flip willing agents to provide intel, it was considered a significant win. KGB operatives also validated the impact of campaigns by monitoring target groups and foreign contacts to gauge effects over time.

The KGB therefore relied on both quantitative metrics concerning media penetration and qualitative intelligence data from agents and contacts on the ground to determine whether active measures were accomplishing the discrete and strategic goals set by the Soviet leadership. It is worth emphasizing that the KGB clearly depended on longitudinal and cumulative approaches to shaping public opinion and saw the dissemination of disinformation as a long-term game. This contrasts with more recent perspectives and measurements of impact, which tend to focus on shorter-term effects, such as the effect of exposure to tweets.[19]

18 Ladislav Bittman, *The KGB and Soviet disinformation: an insider's view* (Pergamon-Brassey's, 1985), p. 56.

19 Rubén Arcos, Manuel Gertrudix, Cristina Arribas, and Monica Cardarilli, 'Responses to digital disinformation as part of hybrid threats: a systematic review on the effects of disinformation and the effectiveness of fact-checking/debunking', *Open Research Europe*, 2(8), (2022): 8.

Indicators of the impact of contemporary Kremlin disinformation campaigns

The impact of the Kremlin's contemporary disinformation campaigns can be assessed by three particularly demonstrative indicators: the degree to which Kremlin narratives are repeated and disseminated more widely by (ostensibly) unaffiliated public figures or unaffiliated media; insights drawn from opinion poll data; and the real-world tangible effects of consuming Kremlin disinformation.

Narrative repetition as an indicator of success

The repetition of Kremlin narratives can be viewed as a potentially effective indicator of their success. More broadly, one can see how these indicators map onto the first overarching principle of KGB disinformation campaigns identified in section 2: the penetration of KGB narratives into the media and public discourse. In fact, this is a useful marker; the psychological principle of the "illusory truth effect" suggests that when certain narratives are consistently reiterated through various communication channels, they can gradually gain credibility and acceptance among the audience.[20] Psychologically, it is suggested that this phenomenon occurs because people tend to associate familiarity with truthfulness.[21] As these narratives gradually permeate societal discourse, they can reshape perceptions, generate consensus, and manipulate opinions.

Repetition by opinion leaders or groups

One example of repetition is the reiterated endorsement of Kremlin narratives by opinion leaders, which can be considered a significant indicator of their impact for several reasons. Firstly, repetition by opinion leaders suggests that these narratives have successfully penetrated mainstream discourse. If influential individuals are endorsing or promoting such narratives, it can be seen as an indication that they are being perceived as legitimate and credible by a wider audience. Further, the repetition lends a sense of validation to the disinformation, making it more likely to be accepted and believed by others. Ben Nimmo refers to this kind of impact as "celebrity amplification", whereby influential public figures inadvertently give the disinformation their seal of approval.[22] Opinion leaders, who often hold influential positions or have a large following, play a crucial role in shaping public opinion and influencing discourse. When they repeat Kremlin narratives, it amplifies the reach and credibility of the disinformation, as their words carry weight and are often trusted by their audience.

Some of the most salient examples of this indicator stem from recent political discourse in the United States about Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine. Several current or former elected officials, candidates for office or media figures have been accused of making pro-Kremlin comments. Republican members within the

20 Aumyo Hassan and Sarah J. Barber, 'The effects of repetition frequency on the illusory truth effect', *Cognitive research: principles and implications, 6*(1), (2021): 1–12.

21 Christopher Paul and Miriam Matthews, 'The Russian "Firehose of Falsehood" Propaganda Model', *RAND Foundation*, 2016, https://www.rand.org/content/dam/rand/pubs/perspectives/PE100/PE198/RAND_PE198.pdf.

22 Ben Nimmo, 'The breakout scale: Measuring the impact of influence operations', Brookings Foreign Policy, 2020, p. 7.

House Freedom Caucus are particularly relevant here, with several members repeating falsehoods propagated by the Kremlin aimed at reducing US support for Ukraine. Georgia Congresswoman Marjorie Taylor Greene, for example, was criticized for controversial statements in which she repeated Kremlin talking points, such as tweeting that "NATO has been supplying the neo-Nazis in Ukraine with powerful weapons and extensive training on how to use them. What the hell is going with these #NATONazis?".[23] Across her official and personal Twitter accounts, Greene has a combined following of over three million. Repetition of pro-Kremlin disinformation is, however, rife across the GOP, and many Republican politicians have been found publicizing pro-Kremlin talking points. Former White House Trade advisor to Donald Trump Peter Navarro, for example, appeared on a conservative talk show where he argued that Ukraine is "not really a country".[24]

In addition to political figures, several US far-right media figures have been accused of spreading pro-Russian disinformation. Tucker Carlson, whose platform as Fox News host meant he had a reach of millions of Americans,[25] was perhaps the most egregious in regularly promoting Kremlin perspectives on the war in Ukraine. For example, he referred to the "Russian port of Crimea" – echoing Russian perspectives that the Crimean Peninsula belongs to Russia.[26] He previously also echoed Russian propaganda that the United States is funding and developing biological weapons in secret laboratories in Ukraine.[27]

Examples outside of the US context are also plentiful. In the weeks after Russia invaded Ukraine, Dutch far-right politician Thierry Baudet controversially suggested at a conference that "Russia does not want to conquer Ukraine at all. The Russians are acting defensively".[28] In Hungary, Prime Minister Viktor Orbán publicly questioned Ukrainian sovereignty,[29] while far-right journalist Zsolt Jeszenszky posted on social media that he doubted that Russia was behind the bombing of a mall in Kremenchuk, Ukraine, suggesting that the main target was actually a repair workshop, that the mall was closed, and that it was a concealed weapons storage warehouse for the Ukrainian army.

23 @Marjorie Taylor Greene (@RepMTG), Twitter, 15 March 2022, https://twitter.com/RepMTG/status/1503858442892627974.

24 Gustaf Kilander, 'Former Trump aide calls Ukraine "not really a country" amid Russian military build-up at border, *Independent*, 10 December 2021, https://www.the-independent.com/news/world/americas/us-politics/trump-aide-ukraine-russia-border-putin-b1973730.html.

25 Jeremy Barr, Fox News regains some viewers lost after the firing of Tucker Carlson, *Washington Post*, 17 August 2023, https://www.washingtonpost.com/media/2023/08/17/fox-news-ratings-rebound-jesse-watters-carlson/.

26 Alisha Rahaman Sarkar, 'Tucker Carlson tries to echo Kremlin propaganda by referring to "the Russian port of Crimea"', *Independent*, 2023. https://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/americas/us-politics/tucker-carlson-ukraine-russia-war-b2288666.html.

27 Tucker Carlson, 'Someone needs to explain why there are dangerous biological weapons in Ukraine', *Fox News*, 2022. https://www.foxnews.com/opinion/tucker-we-have-right-know-this.

28 @dr. Marina (@mmeeuw), Twitter, 6 March 2021, https://x.com/mmeeuw/status/1632732159046762497?s=20.

29 Lili Bayer, 'Hungary has become the EU home of Kremlin talking points', *Politico*, 2022. https://www.politico.eu/article/russia-war-narrative-hungary-disinformation/.

In Greece, Efthimios "Makis" Triantafyllopoulos – a media personality – tweeted criticism of the European Union, using Kremlin narratives about the Estonian government's supposed oppression of Russian speakers as evidence.[30] In Italy, journalist Toni Capuozzo – significant because of his well-known war reporting – publicly insinuated that the Bucha massacre was staged propaganda.[31] Even Pope Francis suggested that Russia's invasion of Ukraine was "perhaps somehow either provoked or not prevented". Although the Pope suggested that he was simply "reducing complexity to the distinction between good guys and bad guys", many accused him of parroting Kremlin talking points.[32]

Social media influencers have also been spreading disinformation about Russia's invasion of Ukraine. An investigation conducted by Marc Owen Jones, Assistant Professor of Middle East Studies at Hamad bin Khalifa University, involved analyzing a network of 250,000 tweets mentioning the keyword 'Tochka-U' – the name of the missile that killed 39 people when it hit a station in Ukraine's eastern city of Kramatorsk in April 2022. His investigation revealed that French, Spanish, and Italian-speaking influencers were responsible for promoting the narrative that Ukraine itself was responsible for the missile attack on its own people.[33]

The above-mentioned examples are limited to more recent narratives concerned with Russia's full-scale invasion, but there are many examples of older Kremlin narratives being repeated by influential figures. Several European politicians, mainly from right-wing populist parties in Germany, France and Italy, have made remarks about the annexation of Crimea, suggesting that "Crimea was always Russian".[34] Similarly, in 2022, German politician Steffen Kotré, from the right-wing party Alternative für Deutschland, called for a parliamentary investigation into alleged bioweapons in Ukraine.[35] In 2021, former Scottish First Minister Alexander Salmond was accused of lending legitimacy to Russian propaganda by broadcasting from RT, and for refusing to blame Russia for the Salisbury poisoning.[36] Moreover, French and German influencers – using YouTube or online blogs –

30 'A Greek media mogul tried to spread false claims about Estonia. It did not go well', *Propastop*, 24 March 2022, https://www.propastop.org/eng/2022/03/24/a-greek-media-mogul-tried-to-spread-kremlin-propaganda-against-estonia-it-did-not-go-well/.

31 Filippo Passeri, 'Le fake news su Bucha di Toni Capuozzo spopolano su Facebook' [Bucha's fake news by Toni Capuozzo is all the rage on Facebook], *Il Foglio*, 2022, https://www.ilfoglio.it/esteri/2022/04/21/news/le-fake-news-su-bucha-di-toni-capuozzo-spopolano-su-facebook-3930983/.

32 Luanna Muniz, 'Pope Francis: Russian war in Ukraine was "perhaps provoked"', *Politico*, 2022, https://www.politico.eu/article/pope-francis-says-war-in-ukraine-perhaps-provoked-or-unprevented/.

33 @Marc Owen Jones, (@marcowenjones), Twitter, 10 April 2022, https://twitter.com/marcowenjones/status/1513166861579735042.

34 Myths and misconceptions in the debate on Russia, Chatham House, 13 May 2021, https://www.chathamhouse.org/2021/05/myths-and-misconceptions-debate-russia/myth-12-crimea-was-always-russian.

35 Christian Stöcker, 'So schafften es Putins Lügen bis in den Bundestag' [How Putin's lies made it into the Bundestag], *Spiegel*, 2022,https://www.spiegel.de/wissenschaft/mensch/russlands-krieg-gegen-die-ukraine-so-schafften-es-wladimir-putins-luegen-in-den-bundestag-a-5e7add2c-0523–491a-af43-c7bde8d345d6.

36 Severin Carrell and Dan Sabbagh, 'Salisbury poisonings: Salmond accused of "spinning Russian propaganda"', *The Guardian*, 2021, https://www.theguardian.com/uk-news/2021/apr/07/salisbury-poisonings-salmond-accused-of-spinning-russian-propaganda.

spread false information during the COVID-19 pandemic about the Pfizer/BioNTech vaccine, and were allegedly paid by a UK-based PR agency that was subsequently discovered to have links to the Kremlin.[37]

Russian disinformation narratives have also often been adopted by various unrelated political movements. For example, the European Digital Media Observatory has discussed how different social media channels based in several European countries shifted from COVID-19 disinformation conspiracy movements to parroting pro-Kremlin stances on the war in Ukraine.[38] Another example concerns the way in which the organizers of the Canadian Freedom Convoy protest in 2022 gradually co-opted narratives originating from the Kremlin to support their own cause. According to Dr Caroline Orr Bueno:

> *"Often, these pro-Kremlin/anti-Ukraine narratives coincided with other, more familiar talking points and disinformation – for example, false claims about the virus or the vaccine being a bioweapon, and false claims that the US was operating biolabs to produce bioweapons in Ukraine, or more generic conspiracy theory narratives about globalism and secret cabals plotting to destroy 'western civilization'".*[39]

Repetition by unaffiliated media

Related to but distinct from the repetition of Kremlin narratives by opinion leaders is the recycling of Kremlin disinformation in Western media or organizations. Similar to the repetition by opinion leaders, the reprocessing of Kremlin narratives via media unrelated to the Kremlin can signal impact, as the disinformation narrative is apparently perceived as legitimate and credible enough to be reproduced by media organizations. This notion is similar to Ben Nimmo's concept of a "cross-medium breakout", whereby information operations 'break out' to such an extent and have such a substantial impact that mainstream media begin to report on them. The phenomenon whereby respected media platforms lend credibility to unverified information from a source with unknown credibility has been called information laundering.[40]

Research has shown that Western news outlets can occasionally repeat narratives propagated by the Kremlin, a phenomenon that has been termed 'churnalism'. This describes the recycling of content from other news

37 Jon Henley, 'Influencers say Russia-linked PR agency asked them to disparage Pfizer vaccine', *The Guardian*, 2021, https://www.theguardian.com/media/2021/may/25/influencers-say-russia-linked-pr-agency-asked-them-to-disparage-pfizer-vaccine.

38 Laura Loguercio and Tommaso Canetta, 'How Covid-19 conspiracy theorists pivoted to pro-Russian hoaxes', European Digital Media Observatory, 20 March 2022, https://edmo.eu/2022/03/30/how-covid-19-conspiracy-theorists-pivoted-to-pro-russian-hoaxes/.

39 @Caroline Orr Bueno (@RVAwonk), Twitter, 18 March 2022, https://twitter.com/rvawonk/status/1504932595850698760.

40 Martha Stolze, 'Information Laundering via Baltnews on Telegram: How Russian State-Sponsored Media Evade Sanctions and Narrate the War', NATO Strategic Communications Centre of Excellence, https://stratcomcoe.org/publications/information-laundering-via-baltnews-on-telegram-how-russian-state-sponsored-media-evade-sanctions-and-narrate-the-war/257.

media outlets, without proper adherence to fact-checking.[41] Such journalistic practices have become more common in the increasingly fast-paced media environment, where journalists struggle to keep up with the vast flow of information.

In a 2015 report, researchers Gordon Ramsay and Sam Robertshaw showed that certain parts of the UK media sometimes repeated Kremlin narratives, occasionally lifting them directly from Kremlin state-sponsored media coverage.[42] Their investigation focussed on narratives pushed by RT and Sputnik, which frequently publish effusive stories about Russian military competence and advancements in weapon technology, and the degree to which these narratives are fed into or repeated in the UK media environment. Their results showed that the UK media frequently reported on Russian military capabilities, often focussing on Russia's highly destructive weaponry and its potential future capabilities. Such reporting is favourable to the Kremlin, as it chimes with how the Kremlin wishes to be seen as a Great Power. Most pertinently, however, the authors also identified articles in the UK tabloids that reproduced content verbatim from RT or Sputnik without attributing the sources.

In a 2017 study, Kohei Watanabe showed that Reuters – a US-based news agency – similarly spread Russian narratives about the Russo-Ukrainian war in 2014.[43] His investigation found that there was a high correlation between news stories published by Reuters and those published by ITAR-TASS – a Russian state-owned news agency. Watanabe showed that Reuters regularly published articles that relied heavily on statements by Kremlin officials and strongly resembled ITAR-TASS stories, concluding that a large number of American news readers were likely exposed to Kremlin narratives, as online news sites regularly use Reuters for their foreign news coverage.

A similar phenomenon was observed in research conducted by the Digital Forensic Research lab, which tracked the dissemination of a report by Russian state-controlled TV channel Rossiya-1's "Vesti" programme, which falsely claimed that Russian technology could now disable any hostile plane or ship by jamming its electronic systems.[44] The investigation showed how, over several days, the report was picked up by British tabloid media, and later by the American news site Fox News. Subsequent analysis showed that the Fox News article was shared over 27,000 times – an indication that the fake story spread far.

More recently, Italian media has received criticism for broadcasting coverage of Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine, which leans heavily on the Kremlin's version of events. Several mainstream Italian channels have acted as platforms where guests are invited and push the Kremlin's messaging. For example, on 1 May 2022, Rete 4 invited Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov to discuss the war, who claimed that Russia

41 Jane Johnston and Susan Forde, 'Churnalism: Revised and revisited', *Digital journalism* 5.8 (2017): 943–946.

42 Gordon Ramsey and Sam Robertshaw, 'Weaponising news: RT, Sputnik and targeted disinformation', King's College London Centre for the Study of Media, Communication & Power (2019).

43 Kohei Watanabe, 'The spread of the Kremlin's narratives by a western news agency during the Ukraine crisis', *The Journal of International Communication* 23.1 (2017): 138–158.

44 DFRLab, 'Russia's Fake "Electronic Bomb"', *Medium*, 2017, https://medium.com/dfrlab/russias-fake-electronic-bomb-4ce9dbbc57f8.

wanted peace and that the Bucha massacre was a hoax.[45] Meanwhile, Marc Innaro, a Moscow-based correspondent for Russian public broadcaster RAI, claimed that the Russian missile strike on a Ukrainian nuclear power plant in March 2022 was an act of sabotage by the Ukrainian army.[46] Alexander Dugin, a well-known Russian propagandist, was invited onto another prime-time evening show to explain how the war was a "spiritual war" against LGBTQ rights.[47] Such examples are demonstrative of the deep infiltration of Russian influence into the Italian media system.

Beyond simply noting the repetition of specific disinformation narratives when assessing the impact of Kremlin disinformation, it could be illuminating to examine how Western media outlets have adopted the Kremlin's framing of events more broadly. Russian security expert Keir Giles points to the fruitfulness of comparing contemporary news discourse with past discussions on the same topic, suggesting that specific Russian framings of events or processes have become embedded in Western media discourse due to "Russian injects into that decision-making process".[48] A salient example, according to Giles, is the term "Russian-backed separatists". He suggests that "Russian proxy forces in eastern Ukraine from 2014 onwards, and sometimes even the conventional forces coming in from Russia" are frequently incorrectly described by Western media as Russian-backed separatists "because Russia had invented this separatist movement, and everybody bought into that".[49]

This view is supported by legal scholars Evhen Tsybulenko and J'moul A. Francis of the University of Tallinn, who argue that the embedding of Kremlin-led characterizations of actors in Donbas as Russian-backed "rebels" or "separatists", or the activity in the region as "civil war" or "an internal affair" has a "legitimizing effect" on Kremlin narratives.[50] Media, academic literature or reports by international organizations using such labels lend credence to the Kremlin-championed explanation that the region is seeking liberation, which consequently feeds into everyday discourse about the conflict.

In sum:

- The repetition of Kremlin disinformation narratives by various opinion leaders or media outlets serves as a useful indicator of the impact of Kremlin information campaigns. When these narratives proliferate beyond Kremlin-affiliated sources and are echoed in foreign, unrelated media outlets or by opinion leaders, it suggests that they are perceived as credible and legitimate, high-

45 Russian propaganda in Italian media, Government of Poland, 9 June 2022, https://www.gov.pl/web/special-services/russian-propaganda-in-italian-media.

46 @Pietro Salvatori, (@PietroSalvatori), Twitter, 4 March 2022, https://twitter.com/PietroSalvatori/status/1499728741190283270.

47 @Dritto e rovescio, (@Drittorovescio_), Twitter, 18 March 2022, https://x.com/Drittorovescio_/status/1504594359760695297?s=20.

48 Personal communication, 2023.

49 Personal communication, 2023.

50 Evhen Tsybulenko and J'moul A. Francis, 'Separatists or Russian troops and local collaborators? Russian aggression in Ukraine: the problem of definitions', *The Use of Force against Ukraine and International Law: Jus Ad Bellum, Jus In Bello, Jus Post Bellum* (Springer, 2018): 123–144.

lighting the extent to which disinformation campaigns can influence societal discourse.

- Opinion leaders, with their powerful positions and large followings, hold the key to shaping public opinion and influencing the course of discussions. This phenomenon is evident in recent political debates in the United States, where elected officials, candidates, and media personalities have been accused of echoing pro-Kremlin statements.
- Additionally, the adoption and propagation of Kremlin disinformation by various European politicians, online influencers, and unrelated political movements reinforce its impact across different contexts.
- Examples from studies conducted in the UK, the US, and Italy demonstrate how Western news outlets have occasionally repeated Kremlin narratives, often due to the practice of churnalism and the challenges of keeping up with the fast-paced media environment.
- Furthermore, the gradual and insidious adoption of the Kremlin's framing of events by Western media and other organizations illustrates how Kremlin disinformation campaigns have steadily steered discourse to favour Russian objectives.

Evidence from opinion poll data

Data from opinion polls can be one of the sharpest and most accessible ways to reflect the impact of contemporary Kremlin disinformation campaigns, as it provides simple, easily accessible quantifications of the prevalence of different beliefs among a population. Surveys can be administered widely and quickly, allowing for the identification of regions or societies where support for Kremlin narratives is sizeable, and thus where disinformation can be assumed to be making an impact. Indeed, when we look at narratives created and cultivated by pro-Kremlin media, cross-national and national research has identified several societies where remarkably high levels of support have been garnered. This again resembles how KGB operatives measured the influence of their disinformation campaigns: as outlined in section 2, an active measure contributing to changes in public opinion was seen as achieving its aims.

A study conducted by YouGov's Cambridge Globalism project in September 2022 revealed that while there was a generally low level of public support across the European countries surveyed,[51] there were relatively sizeable minorities in Greek, Italian and Hungarian societies that indicated support for false Kremlin narratives about the Kremlin's justification for its invasion of Ukraine. In all three countries, around one in three citizens surveyed indicated that they believed ethnic Russians were being subjected to mass murder or "genocide" by ethnic Ukrainians before the invasion.[52] Similar levels of support in these societies were observed for the narrative that the Ukrainian government had fallen under the influence of Nazism.[53]

A separate study by the French Institute of Public Opinion (Institut français d'opinion publique) yielded similar findings. Twenty-eight

51 In most of the 25 countries assessed, support hovered around ~10% for most narratives.

52 In Greece, 39% of respondents replied that this narrative was probably or definitely true. In Hungary, this was 34% and in Italy, 21%.

53 In Greece, 43% of respondents replied that this narrative was probably or definitely true. In Hungary, this was 28% and in Italy, 26%.

per cent of French respondents were of the opinion that the "Russian military intervention in Ukraine is supported by Russian-speaking Ukrainians who wanted to free themselves from the persecution they face from the Ukrainian authorities", while 23 per cent agreed that Russian speakers had been subjected to attacks and violence by the Ukrainian authorities.[54]

These notions of a genocide of ethnic Russians by Ukrainians and a rise in Nazism in Ukraine stem from narratives that have long been peddled by the Kremlin, but that had intensified in the lead-up to the full-scale invasion and served as purported justifications for it.[55] Allegations of Ukraine committing genocide were central to the pretext for Russia's invasion in February 2022. Such allegations have been found to be baseless, however, with independent reports finding evidence of human rights violations by both sides but no evidence that would support claims of a genocide of Russian speakers.[56] Moreover, claims of neo-Nazism in Ukraine are largely viewed to have been exaggerated by the Kremlin.[57]

Serbia is another country where evidence of the impact of Kremlin disinformation in opinion poll data is particularly visible. In research conducted in autumn 2022 by Belgrade-based research company CRTA, 64% of respondents indicated that they believed Western actors were primarily responsible for the war in Ukraine, in contrast to just 15% who attributed this responsibility to Russia.[58] In addition, in data captured in May 2022 – mere months after the full-scale invasion – more than half of the Serbian respondents (66%) said that they felt that the Russian position in the conflict was "closer" to them.[59] This pattern of responsibility attribution has been consistent, as it was still 58% in November 2022. Prevailing anti-Western sentiments among the Serbian population might go some way to explaining these statistics. Daniel Sunter, founder of the defence and security portal *Balkan Security Network* and executive director of Belgrade-based Euro-Atlantic Initiative, says negative attitudes towards the West are long-standing and deeply ingrained. In such an environment, notions of the culpability of

54 Observatoire Reboot De L'information et du Raisonnent Critique – Désinformation et Populisme à L'heure de la crise sanitaire et de la Guerre en Ukraine [Disinformation and populism at a time of health crisis and war in Ukraine], Institut français d'opinion publique, 28 March 2022, https://www.ifop.com/publication/observatoire-reboot-de-linformation-et-du-raisonnement-critique-desinformation-et-populisme-a-lheure-de-la-crise-sanitaire-et-de-la-guerre-en-ukraine/.

55 Jon Greenberg, 'Ethnic Russians face "genocide perpetrated by the Kyiv regime"', *Politifact*, 25 February 2022, https://www.politifact.com/factchecks/2022/feb/25/vladimir-putin/putin-repeats-long-running-claim-genocide-ukraine/.

56 Alexander Hinton, 'Putin's claims that Ukraine is committing genocide are baseless, but not unprecedented', *The Conversation*, 2022, https://theconversation.com/putins-claims-that-ukraine-is-committing-genocide-are-baseless-but-not-unprecedented-177511; OHCHR, Report on the Human Rights Situation in Ukraine, 2022, https://www.ohchr.org/sites/default/files/2022-03/33rdReportUkraine-en.pdf.

57 James Farley, 'The Facts on "De-Nazifying" Ukraine', *Fact Check*, 2022, https://www.factcheck.org/2022/03/the-facts-on-de-nazifying-ukraine/.

58 CRTA, 'Opinion poll: Political attitudes of citizens of Serbia – fall 2022', https://crta.rs/en/opininon-poll-political-attitudes-of-citizens-of-serbia-fall-2022/.

59 Ibid.

the United States, NATO, and the EU regarding Ukraine likely find fertile ground and are capable of creating a sizeable impact.

Apart from the more recent examples relating to Russia's war in Ukraine, there have been several other instances of the Kremlin polluting the information environment enough to sow legitimate doubt or confusion about the veracity of information. The Kremlin is aware of the limits of its disinformation campaigns in many Western societies and does not seek to elicit overt and direct support for its narratives. Rather, Peter Pomerantsev suggests that it seeks to introduce enough uncertainty and doubt regarding the official narrative provided that a post-truth environment is created where people lose faith in the facts provided to them or are more convinced of alternative versions of events.[60] Opinion poll data seems to indicate that this approach is working. For example, pro-Kremlin narratives surrounding Russian involvement in the downing of Malaysian Airlines flight MH17 in Eastern Ukraine were enough to generate scepticism regarding who was responsible – even in the Netherlands, the country that lost the most nationals in the tragedy. This was despite the overwhelming international consensus that the plane was shot down by Russian-controlled forces.[61] Dutch market research company Peil.nl showed that approximately 20% of Dutch respondents were "not certain" about who was culpable, and 5% of respondents went further, indicating that they believed the Ukrainian army was behind it.[62] This aligns with the version of events propagated by the Kremlin, which disseminated many different stories pointing to Ukraine as the perpetrator.[63]

A similar pattern was observed after the poisoning of former Russian military officer Sergei Skripal and his daughter Yulia in Salisbury, UK. Again, there is an international consensus, based on investigations by several different countries, that Russian intelligence was behind the attack. However, the Kremlin vociferously denied the allegations, and research by Kings College London found that Russian state-sponsored media published 138 alternative accounts of the poisoning.[64] Indeed, a YouGov poll from 2018 showed that, despite the well-publicized publication of these investigations, 19% of British respondents said they were uncertain whether Russia was behind the poisoning, while 5% believed Russia was "probably not" or "definitely not" behind the attack. Higher degrees of uncertainty were found in countries such as Germany or France.[65]

60 Peter Pomerantsev, *Nothing is True and Everything is Possible: Adventures in Modern Russia*, (Faber & Faber, 2017).

61 'MH17 missile owned by Russian brigade, investigators say', *BBC News*, 24 May 2018, https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-europe-44235402.

62 Cees van Doorn and Theo Brinkel, 'Deterrence, Resilience, and the Shooting Down of Flight MH17', NL ARMS Netherlands Annual Review of Military Studies 2020: Deterrence in the 21st Century—Insights from Theory and Practice (2021): 365–383.

63 'MH17: Timeline of Pro-Kremlin disinformation narratives', *EUvsDisinfo*, https://euvsdisinfo.eu/mh17-timeline-of-pro-kremlin-disinformation-narratives/.

64 Ramsay and Robertshaw, 'Weaponising news'.

65 Matthew Smith, 'Eurotrack: Europeans overwhelmingly suspect Russia was behind the Salisbury poisoning', YouGov, 3 April 2018, https://yougov.co.uk/topics/politics/articles-reports/2018/04/03/eurotrack-europe-

In sum:

- Opinion polls conducted during the last 10 years can serve as a valuable tool in gauging the impact of Kremlin-planted disinformation narratives by quantifying prevailing beliefs in various populations. Such surveys enable quick identification of regions or societies where support for Kremlin narratives is substantial.
- Support for false Kremlin narratives in European countries has reached levels as high as one-quarter to one-third of societies.

Kremlin influence manifesting in public behaviour

A final way to illustrate how the impact of Kremlin disinformation can surface is by turning to tangible behavioural incidents and events which demonstrate that Kremlin narratives hold a persuasive power over the public. In some cases, the effect of Kremlin disinformation is singular and total – a definitive line can be drawn between events that occur and the proliferation of Kremlin narratives. However, in many cases, the influence of Kremlin disinformation is more subtle and harder to gauge, with Kremlin output amplifying and augmenting those narratives that already exist. Nevertheless, despite the difficulty in pinpointing the precise level of influence, it is evident that Kremlin disinformation has indeed had an impact to some degree. In some ways, this indicator is related to historical KGB assessments, which evaluated the success of disinformation campaigns by measuring the degree to which they fomented discord.

Particularly notable examples of Kremlin influence manifesting in real life might include election results where Russian subversion has been implicated. This can include both the 2016 US presidential election and the 2016 Brexit vote, both of which have been scrutinized for potential Kremlin disinformation campaigns attempting to sway the outcomes. Various investigations have, to differing degrees, revealed a level of Russian interference. Detailed accounts of Kremlin interference efforts in the lead-up to the US election, including unprecedented social media disinformation campaigns, have been reported. Several investigations have also made compelling cases for the influence of Russian disinformation in the UK's referendum on its EU membership. Indeed, in 2017, then British Prime Minister Theresa May accused the Russian government of "deploying its state-run media organisations to plant fake stories and photo-shopped images in an attempt to sow discord in the West and undermine our institutions".[66] Reports have indicated that Kremlin-sponsored news sites provided "systematically one-sided coverage" supporting a British departure from the European Union, and frequently featured statements by UKIP leader Nigel Farage.[67] The influence of these campaigns, while difficult to quantify in precise terms, is hard to deny.

ans-overwhelmingly-suspect-russia-.

66 Rowena Mason, 'Theresa May accuses Russia of interfering in elections and fake news', 14 November 2017, https://www.theguardian.com/politics/2017/nov/13/theresa-may-accuses-russia-of-interfering-in-elections-and-fake-news.

67 Putin's Asymmetric Assault on Democracy in Russia and Europe: Implications for U.S. National Security, Committee on Foreign Relations United States Senate, 10 January 2017, https://www.foreign.senate.gov/imo/media/doc/FinalRR.pdf.

A related and particularly infamous example of the influence of Russian disinformation in contributing to real-world events is the much-discussed example of "#Pizzagate". This conspiracy theory attracted significant media attention in 2016 when Edgar Welch, a 28-year-old man from North Carolina, drove to Washington DC and opened fire in a local pizza restaurant. Welch, having consumed large amounts of online information about the Pizzagate conspiracy theory, was convinced that members of the Democratic Party – including then presidential candidate Hillary Clinton – were sexually abusing children and performing satanic rituals. It is important to note in this context that the primary actors driving the #Pizzagate conspiracies were not Russian, but rather American. Nevertheless, the role played by Russia's disinformation infrastructure in promoting this conspiracy theory has been underscored. Alt-right figures and political opponents of Hillary Clinton spread the conspiracy across different social media outlets, including 4chan and Twitter. This process was facilitated to a great extent by Russian social media bots, which were part of a broader campaign by the Kremlin to undermine Hillary Clinton and bolster the position of her opponent, Donald Trump. These actors used social media platforms like Facebook, Twitter, and Reddit to spread divisive content, including Pizzagate-related material. This involved creating fake accounts posing as Americans to promote such content.[68] In 2019, the FBI included Pizzagate-related disinformation in its probe of Russian subversive actions against the US during 2016.[69]

A similar case can be made for Russia's involvement in the Canadian Freedom Convoy of 2022, a right-wing protest movement organized in response to the COVID-19 vaccine mandates and restrictions imposed by the Canadian government. Initially, the movement was created to oppose the vaccine mandates required for crossing the United States border. However, as the movement gained momentum, it evolved into a broader protest against all COVID-19 mandates in general. Russian state-sponsored media outlet RT was the first international media outlet to cover the convoy on 23 January 2022, which was premature as the first convoy had only departed the day before. RT covered the convoy extensively in the crucial early weeks of the protest, from late January through mid-February, with a dominating presence characterized by high volume and global amplification of the event. The coverage framed the convoy sympathetically, humanizing it as a "freedom protest", and employing specific language to portray the Canadian government in a negative light.

Analysis by Caroline Orr Bueno suggests that RT's early coverage helped set the agenda and narrative framing subsequently adopted by Fox News.[70] Fox News had the second-highest total volume of convoy coverage after RT, but still less than half of RT's volume. When RT's

68 The Tactics & Tropes of the Internet Research Agency, *New Knowledge*, https://cdn2.hubspot.net/hubfs/4326998/ira-report-rebrand_FinalJ14.pdf.

69 Jeff Stein, 'FBI's Russia Probe Expands to Include "PizzaGate" Threat, *Newsweek*, 22 March 2017, https://www.newsweek.com/pizzagate-trump-russia-clinton-podesta-comet-ping-pong-pedophiles-david-seaman-572578.

70 Caroline Orr Bueno (2023), 'Russia's Role in the Far-Right Truck Convoy: An analysis of Russian state media activity related to the 2022 Freedom Convoy', *The Journal of Intelligence, Conflict, and Warfare*, 5(3), https://journals.lib.sfu.ca/index.php/jicw/article/view/5101.

coverage started to drop off in late February, Fox News coverage picked up and increased, seemingly indicating a "symbiotic relationship" between the two outlets, according to Orr Bueno.[71] In essence, RT used high volume, early dominance, selective framing, interviews, emphasis on divisions, and specific terminology to strategically cover and shape narratives about the Freedom Convoy protests.

Another salient example – known as the "Lithium case" – stems from the Czech Republic. The case provides a contemporary example of how the "firehose of falsehood" disinformation strategy, characterized by the massive dissemination of false information to create confusion, can be applied in practice. The case revolved around the controversial issue of lithium mining in the Czech Republic and involved a disinformation narrative accusing the government of allowing foreign interests to profit from lithium reserves. The narrative was initially propagated by Aeronet.cz, a Czech-language website with ties to the Kremlin. In 2014, the Czech Security Information Service identified the site as a tool for spreading dangerous Russian propaganda.[72] The disinformation campaign reshaped Czech public discourse around lithium mining, framing it as a government failure serving foreign interests. The narrative gained traction in Czech society, eventually influencing the political landscape with mainstream political parties adopting it in their campaigns. The campaign culminated in an extraordinary parliamentary session and the victory of Andrej Babiš's populist political party ANO 2011 ("Ano" means "Yes" in Czech) in the 2017 parliamentary elections, highlighting how disinformation can significantly impact voters' decision-making and shape the outcome of elections.

Beyond these more political examples, one can examine events such as the COVID-19 pandemic to see instances of Kremlin influence seeping into people's behaviours. During the initial stages of the pandemic, there was an influx of false information spread by hostile political actors seeking to exploit the situation, and there are several examples where this disinformation led to real-world consequences. For example, George Barros of the Institute for the Study of War reports that Kremlin disinformation specifically targeted COVID-19-related fears to provoke protests in Ukraine. The disinformation revolved around the government's evacuation of Ukrainian nationals from Wuhan, China, and where the evacuees would be quarantined. Disinformation about the precise location began circulating, culminating in protesters attacking the convoy of evacuees when they arrived in Novi Sanzhary, Ukraine.[73]

The Kremlin is also thought to have amplified conspiracy theories linking the spread of COVID-19 to 5G communication networks. This conspiracy theory claims that 5G technology used for mobile and wireless communication

71 Ibid.

72 Jan Daniel and Jakub Eberle, 'Hybrid Warriors: Transforming Czech Security through the "Russian Hybrid Warfare" Assemblage', *Czech Sociological Review*, Vol. 54, No. 6 (2018): 907–932, https://www.jstor.org/stable/26581999.

73 George Barros, 'Viral Disinformation: The Kremlin's Coronavirus Information Operations in Ukraine', Institute for the Study of War, 11 March 2020, https://www.understandingwar.org/backgrounder/viral-disinformation-kremlin%E2%80%99s-coronavirus-information-operation-ukraine.

was causing or spreading COVID-19.[74] Anxiety regarding 5G's potential role in the pandemic culminated in several instances of vandalism and damage to 5G masts. For example, in April 2020, the UK government identified 20 instances of 5G phone masts being torched or otherwise vandalized, attributing the attacks to the spread of this conspiracy theory. Similar stories emerged from the Netherlands and Belgium.[75] According to *Wired*, RT had been reporting on the destructive potential of 5G technology since at least January 2019.[76] During the pandemic, EUvsDisinfo identified several articles published by Kremlin-sponsored or affiliated sites linking the spread of the virus to 5G telecommunications.[77] Moreover, there is evidence that Russian-linked social media accounts and bots played a role in amplifying 5G conspiracy theories related to COVID-19.[78]

In sum:

- There are several instances where narratives pushed by Kremlin disinformation outlets or amplified by Kremlin social media bots have led to tangible real-world effects, including those in the democratic arena where Russian disinformation campaigns have resulted in election interference.
- There are also instances where the consumption of disinformation narratives or conspiracy theories that have been promoted by the Kremlin to some degree have been potentially life-threatening or detrimental to people's health.
- While it is difficult to distinguish the precise contribution of Russian disinformation to these real-world manifestations, it would be hard to deny that the proliferation of Russian media or bots had some influence on these examples.

74 Nazia Parveen and Jim Waterson, 'UK phone masts attacked amid 5G-coronavirus conspiracy theory', *The Guardian*, 4 April 2020, https://www.theguardian.com/uk-news/2020/apr/04/uk-phone-masts-attacked-amid-5g-coronavirus-conspiracy-theory.

75 Hassan Bahara and Hessel von Piekartz, 'Wie zijn de mensen achter het 5G-protest? En wat kunnen we nog van hen verwachten?' [Who are the people behind the 5G protest? And what can we still expect from them?], *Volksrant*, 6 July 2020, https://www.volkskrant.nl/nieuws-achtergrond/wie-zijn-de-mensen-achter-het-5g-protest-en-wat-kunnen-we-nog-van-hen-verwachten~b8657afd/?referrer=https://www.google.com/.

76 James Temperton, 'How the 5G coronavirus conspiracy theory tore through the internet', *Wired*, 6 April 2020, https://www.wired.co.uk/article/5g-coronavirus-conspiracy-theory.

77 E.g., https://euvsdisinfo.eu/report/the-coronavirus-story-is-a-lie-its-all-about-5g.

78 Ryan Gallagher, ‚5G Virus Conspiracy Theory Fueled by Coordinated Effort', *Bloomberg*, 9 April 2020, https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2020–04–09/covid-19-link-to-5g-technology-fueled-by-coordinated-effort#xj4y7vzkg.

Conclusions

This Hybrid CoE Working Paper has shown the various ways in which Kremlin disinformation campaigns are (still) having a discernible and multi-dimensional impact on public opinion, despite recent discussions suggesting that the efficacy of these campaigns might be waning, and that the West had found effective methods of pre-empting or countering them before being launched. This effect can be seen in opinion poll data revealing the prevalence of false beliefs promoted by the Kremlin among different audiences, the repetition of Kremlin narratives by influential opinion leaders, and their infiltration into unrelated media. There have also been several instances of Kremlin-promoted disinformation narratives leading to tangible, real-world effects. This impact even pertains to very recent topics, such as Russia's invasion of Ukraine in 2022, a topic that many had claimed was illustrative of the demise of the Kremlin's influence. The indicators referred to in this paper collectively demonstrate the reach, influence, and longevity of Kremlin-generated disinformation in shaping perceptions and discourse in European societies.

Of course, none of the indicators are wholly indicative on their own, and nor do they provide a comprehensive understanding of Russian disinformation. More in-depth and accurate measurement of reception and impact is needed. It is difficult to demonstrate the impact of disinformation, and measuring the influence of the media is a notoriously slippery task. According to Johana Kotisova, assistant professor at the University of Amsterdam, to gather the most convincing evidence of the effects of Kremlin disinformation campaigns, we need more multi-method investigations into the reach and impact of certain disinformation narratives.[79] Specifically, in order to generate more nuanced discussions, Kotisova recommends combining various types of studies. Surveys can reveal opinions and potential correlations between media consumption and beliefs. In-depth interviews provide insights into how individuals perceive their opinions being shaped, although this method has limitations as people may not always be fully aware of the effects. Experimental approaches, such as exposing people to specific messages and observing changes in their opinions over time, can help establish causal links. Meanwhile, focus groups provide a means of analyzing how people construct arguments, potentially drawing parallels with propagandistic methods.

A concerted research drive, likely through the utilization and combination of such methods, is the most salient recommendation stemming from this paper. Only through a nuanced and determined effort to ascertain the impact of disinformation can we make statements about the success or failure of contemporary Kremlin disinformation campaigns. Without this effort, discussion on the scale of the impact of Kremlin disinformation remains purely speculative. While research into the reception and impact of Kremlin disinformation is growing, it remains a small area of research. However, such research holds promise; identifying and measuring the ways in which Kremlin disinformation impacts those exposed can provide evidence and direction that might motivate the development of effective and empirically-based intervention methods.

79 Personal communication, 2023.