French security experts identify Moscow-based disinformation network

French military and cybersecurity experts say they have identified a Moscow-based network spreading propaganda and disinformation in western Europe. France's Viginum agency, which was set up in 2021 to detect digital interference from foreign entities aimed at influencing public opinion, says Russia is paving the way for a new wave of online manipulation in the run-up to the European elections and other crucial votes this year. The agency says the online network, which it has named "Portal Kombat", includes at least 193 sites disseminating pro-Russian propaganda defending the Russian invasion of Ukraine and criticising the government in Kyiv. Much of the disinformation directed through social media sites and messaging apps is targeting those propagating conspiracy theories, it said. Viginum researchers, who identified and analysed the network between September and December last year, say the mass disinformation campaign can be traced back to Moscow. One pro-Russian channel on the French Telegram mobile and desktop messaging app is publishing "almost continuously" up to nine articles an hour. The European Commission, Nato and UN agencies have ranked disinformation among the biggest threats to democracy in 2024. At a recent high-level conference in Brussels, a senior Nato official said disinformation was now being classified as a "national security issue" and there was a recognition among allies that hybrid attacks using disinformation "could reach the level of an armed attack". The UN's communications secretary general, Melissa Fleming, told the conference that "disinformation [is] being used to create not just the fog of war, but more suspicion, and more hatred" and was undermining peacekeeping forces. Addressing the conference, the EU's chief diplomat, Josep Borrell, said this new warfare was "not about bombs that can kill you" but about words and ideas "that can colonise your mind". Věra Jourová, the EU's vice president for values and transparency, with responsibility for media and disinformation portfolios, said: "Every day we see the Kremlin's action to spread propaganda and interfere in democracies. From Putin's blatant lies in broad daylight to a hidden network of propaganda sources now just unveiled, the Kremlin spares no effort. And neither should the EU." She added that she welcomed the "strong determination" of France, Germany and Poland to "fight back". The sites linked to the disinformation network do not produce original material but were set up to flood the internet with material from Russian and pro-Russian figures on social media, Russian press agencies and other official accounts loyal to Moscow, French defence specialists say. Since the Russian invasion of Ukraine two years ago, the sites have targeted Russian communities in Ukraine and "several western countries", including France, Germany, Austria, Poland, Spain the UK and US. The Viginum report, released on Monday, states: "Although this network of at least 193 sites initially covered news from Russian and Ukrainian localities, it changed the day after Russia invaded Ukraine and started to target occupied

Ukrainian territories, then several western countries supporting Ukraine and its population. "The main objective seems to be to cover the Russo-Ukrainian conflict by presenting positively 'the special military operation' and denigrating Ukraine and its leaders. Very ideologically oriented, this content repeatedly presents inaccurate or misleading narratives." The report said the network also "directly contributes to polarise the Francophone digital public debate". To reach a wide audience, it selects "pro-Russian propaganda sources according to the targeted locality, massive automation in the distribution of content, or search engines optimisation". Viginum says the propaganda campaign involves three "ecosystems", one of which uses the website name pravda followed by the country code top-level domains (fr, de, pl, es, com), set up in June 2023 and found to have "identical technical characteristics: a common IP address hosted on a server located in Russia". "Furthermore, these sites broadcast content with similar pro-Kremlin narratives, particularly about the supposed legitimacy of 'the special military operation', denigrating Ukraine and its leaders, or criticising 'the collective West'," it says. Another network of websites targeted primarily Russian-speaking audiences in Ukraine and was set up between 3 April 2022 – just over a month after the Russian invasion – and 17 December 2022. "Some sites target very specific and strategic locations, such as Kherson or Mariupol," the report says. Although most of the propaganda is focused on the Ukraine conflict, Viginum says last summer the French Pravda site published material on "different crises" involving the presence of French troops in the Sahel, including those in Niger and Gabon. However, security experts say the mass propaganda and disinformation campaign appears to be having limited success: the average traffic on the five portals in November 2023 was 31,000 visits, the one targeting France being the least visited.