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The Russian influence in Eastern Europe and beyond



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

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Intro: clientelism and the disinformation in our region

At the end of 2018 and during the year 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. Ukraine, Poland and again Moldova are on the list after May 2019. These campaigns are likely to be marked by the two symptoms of poor government, encouraged from Kremlin but capitalizing on trends already inherent in each country's domestic policy:

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

The first element relies on the latter, and the latter is put in the service of first, together consolidating the poor governance both in the realms of reality and rhetoric. Here we have two faces of the same coin, leading to the visible degradation of governance standards across the region in just a few years.

This report summarizes the results of a project on manipulation and propaganda, focusing on two neighboring states: Republic of Moldova and Romania. In various projects, EFOR and its partners made efforts to understand and build tools to counteract the strategic disinformation, outline possible 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 possible comparisons between states and societies on relevant dimensions related to Kremlin's orchestrated disinformation.

Advances have been made in the last 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. By and large, many authors tried to assess the permeability of a state or society to various forms of Russian propaganda. This is surely useful, but the task remains work in progress. In our report the list of relevant variables for such a model are summarized and important new dimensions added. 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 reproducing content from the Sputnik portal, run by its employees or associates of the Russian state propaganda system who pretended to be "independent"². Being subject to public pressure and serious reputational costs, Facebook has recently removed from the virtual space whole groups of trolls with significant impact; in addition, it communicates more openly than before on the subject.

Clear and predictable identification and separation of what is online trolling or "fake news" and what isn't remain difficult tasks, technically and philosophically. "Fake" is difficult to operationalize in a form useful to the artificial intelligence (AI) or for human operators who handle large volumes of data: markers of intelligent disinformation are hard to construct so as to function reliably in automated processes. In the future we will see more scandals coming from both directions: around false negatives (i.e. sophisticated trolling which is not detected), but also *false positives* (i.e., honest online activity erroneously marked as trolling). There are signs that false-positive errors are multiplying lately, as a result of more aggressive countermeasures based mainly on AI filters, which have a hard time to understand the subtleties of natural language, professional jargons, or irony.

The difficulty here is that lying, exaggerating, telling half-truths, attacking *ad hominem*, making jokes and ironies (even bad ones) are since the beginning of time not only campaigning tools in politics, but part of the everyday speech of humans. Purging social networks of such language, sometimes associated with the fake news, is practically impossible: it would amount to the suppression of natural language.

Studies show that in informal contexts – that is, those that make up the bulk of human communication – our speech is full of systematic inaccuracies and distortions of meaning; the discourse which is purely factual, informative, falling clearly under the true / false criteria, represents the exception³. In this sense, the difference between the speech in traditional media (predominantly formal, produced by professionals) and that in the new, social media (mostly informal, coming from the public) is often overlooked in the big hunt for fake news: trying to judge the second by the standards of the first is bound to lead into dead ends.

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.

Moreover, "fighting the fake news" on social networks – which, regarded from another angle, is a form of censorship – can also be used strategically by illiberal political regimes, as history teaches us. At the time of writing this report a set of amendments is being debated in the Russian Duma to the toughen the anti-fake news legislation adopted in 2018: fines of up to \$15,000 are envisaged for the spread of false news or injurious language against "society, state, official symbols and public institutions". 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 comparable legislation.

It is probably not the best idea to tackle "fake news" through draconian legislation 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 widespread repression. At least at this stage, the notion of "inauthenticity" appears to work reasonably well when it is enforced in good faith by the private social media administrators, not by public authorities in countries where there is no guarantee of respecting the rights of citizens and the media: 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.

Another danger is that excessively tough legislation introduced by non-liberal states may lead to "strategic reporting": complaints orchestrated against the critics of the regime or members of various minorities. If such reporting is systematic, the content moderators (in general overworked and with no knowledge of the local context) may read the situation upside down and block precisely the victims of abuse; or the latter may even end up in court. In an environment where the 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 legal restrictions, 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 language. Australia has passed a law "against the sharing of violent and repugnant material" which holds responsible the managers of companies with pages and networks for any delayed reaction. And the British government has announced in a policy paper that it is considering comprehensive regulation to reduce the "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 for stricter regulation of the social media through public mechanisms, because the networks find

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

it hard to do it on their own⁵. The risk with these developments is that, while the pro-regulation activism may lead to a balanced and functional system in countries with rule of law, it could on the other hand be used as a legitimation for limiting the freedom of speech in countries with non-liberal regimes. Australian or UK legislation can be hypocritically presented as a model by a government who actually wants to impose censorship.

In one way or another, the action Facebook took in February, replicated by other Western social media companies (but not the ones from Russia), shed some light on 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 were active in the election campaign for the 24 February elections, including by buying advertising.

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 of the oligarch Plahotniuc. All were hiding their identity by pretending to be news channels or portals. Unlike what is happening in the West, there was nothing ideological in the conflict between trolls and their targets; the organized 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 identity, pretending to be news portals. As in the case of Moldova, it turned out that most of the trolls were clustered around the main ruling party, PSD, of the same ideological family as PDM in Chişinău. Shortly after being blocked on the Western social networks, these influencers resurfaced with new accounts on the Russian network Vkontakte (vk.com) where they shifted the whole content⁶. This is truly remarkable, as virtually no Romanian uses Facebook's Russian equivalent, if only because of the language barrier. As we will see below, the social networks located in Russia cannot ensure transparency or privacy, being under the legal obligation to share their databases and content with the state agencies.

2. Factors shaping the Russian influence

The cases of Romania and the Republic of Moldova may seem similar, but they are not: indeed they represent a good compare-and-contrast experience of combating fake news in the region. This is because, while they have things in common, Romania

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/sectiuni/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

and Moldova represent in other respects contrasting examples for the functioning of the fake news market, and especially for the Russian influence in the Eastern European region. This region is heterogeneous, linguistically and religiously fragmented, with radically different emotional connections to the major events of the modern history such as the World War II, the collapse of the USSR, or the NATO enlargement. We also detect 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.

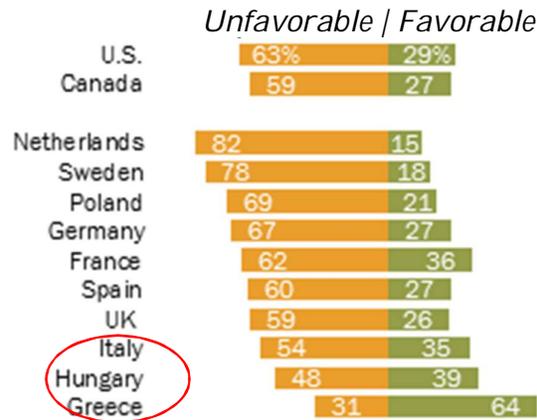
There are **features of the socio-political environment** that filters the transmission of fake news or other kinds of influence from the Kremlin in different countries. For example:

- a) Local culture, history, deep attitudes: there are countries with a rather **Russophobic** population, such as Poland or Romania; societies with more moderate attitudes, such as Bulgaria or Hungary; or even with Russophile leanings, like Italy or Greece among the old EU members. Such inclinations do not change easily over time. A recent poll (see Fig 1 below) shows how divergent the opinions about Russia and its current leaders are in Europe or the Balkans. This state of affairs is stable in time and significant for the practical political action.⁷
- b) The **Russian speaking community** may represent a significant percentage of the population in a country, with all the consequences deriving from here: political organization, ethnic parties, cultural ascendancy of Moscow etc. This is the situation in the Baltic States, Moldova or Ukraine. Things have a long history and there are shades of gray which make the analysis delicate. For instance, the notion of **Ruskiy Mir** ("the Russian world"), which plays an important role in Moscow's political and cultural diplomacy, is imprecise in a deliberate and strategical manner. It certainly goes beyond the merely 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 current borders. Similarly, the "**compatriots**" (*соотечественники*) who make up this Russian world are not only the formal citizens and possibly the ethnic Russians from the overseas communities, but also whoever identifies themselves voluntarily with Russia, politically or otherwise⁸.

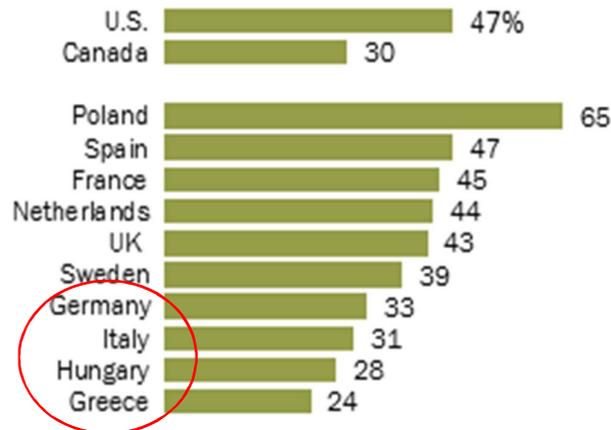
⁷ Pew Research Center. *Global Attitudes & Trends. Spring 2017 Questionnaire*. Sadly the research does not cover Moldova and Romania but the data from other important countries of the region paint a suggestive picture.

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.

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

These distant "compatriots" become amplifiers of the Russian influence abroad and create leverages for direct or indirect action in their proximity, especially when they feel alienated from the policies 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 deploying identity clues; or internationally, as a subject of diplomatic pressure and horse-trading⁹. There are state agencies and QUANGOS funded from the budget (for example the *Russkiy Mir Foundation*) with the mission to support and develop the cohesion of these communities of "compatriots".

- c) Widespread knowledge of **Russian as a second language** in some countries, which makes possible the retransmission and direct consumption of media programs imported from the Russian Federation without costly adaptations: domestic and international news, talk shows, and "entertainment" in which a certain vision of world politics is present, more or less subtly. Global conspiracy theories are a staple of such programs. Their oddity and broad dissemination abroad through the domestic Russian media channels makes indeed the *Russkiy Mir* a space with a common and 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; or the case of the Baltic States and their Russian citizens. These historically rooted realities lead to the "contamination" of electoral politics and campaigns on both sides of the respective border to some extent, both in terms of logistics (organization of polling stations, joint campaigns of some parties) and campaign rhetoric or and issues put on the agenda.
- e) **Connections of the local political and economic elite in the Eastern space**, in a very practical sense: personal relations, often stemming from a common past; a good understanding of the 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 not, in those parts; family or party links there. Things are more obvious in the former USSR republics, but not only. For example, it is estimated that **Bulgaria** has a dense network of business connections with Russia: up to 10% of the country's GDP is in one way or another generated within such networks¹⁰. In a sensitive sector like mass media, the relative share of firms with a real Russian beneficiary is even **higher in Bulgaria than in Ukraine**, while corporate control is exercised

⁹ *Ibid.*

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>

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 their massive advertising budgets.

- f) **Links to the economic environment in Russia of business sectors** in Western countries, or individual firms and industrial groups, which in turn develop more or less visible pro-Kremlin lobbying networks: "*the enablers*"¹¹. The authors of the *The Kremlin Playbook* series mention the energy and the financial&banking sectors, with an emphasis on **Austria** and **Italy**, notorious for their economic elite's Russophilia. This in turn shapes important political decisions: for example opposition to the sanctions imposed on Moscow by the European Union, or reservations towards Ukraine. Then we have **Germany**, where a good part of its energy sector, plus the predominantly exporting manufacturing industry, concerned with the high cost of the domestic energy inputs (in the global competition, a major disadvantage), are strongly pushing the government towards good relations with Russia and the continuation of projects running against the EU common policies, such as NorthStream II¹². 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; branches of *Ruskiy Mir Foundation*; or the *Gorchakov Foundation*, which stimulates and funds joint initiatives between German entities and Russia, and is lobbying for the abolishing of sanctions or the recognition of the annexation of Crimea, thus reinforcing the Kremlin's propaganda in Western public space. Things are facilitated in Germany by two additional factors: the post-communist nostalgia and social frustrations in the Eastern Lands, provoked by the post-unification depression and the latest economic world 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 the East. A similar and interesting case is that of the nearly 40,000 former Soviet citizens, the 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 target for Kremlin's international propaganda, but also an important bridgehead inside two EU member states with traditional pro-Russian attitude.
- g) **The history of USSR** as an identity and political filter for contemporary developments, playing on nostalgia or vicarious emotional attachments, including among younger generations. It is first and foremost about "*The Great Patriotic War 1941-1945*", as it was labelled by the canonic propaganda,

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

¹² True, the German business lobby could not stop the Berlin government from initiating European sanctions against Russia.

a narrative perpetuated until today by the state agitprop and dating from the times of Leonid Brejnev. Sometimes in the '60s the Soviet regime discovered that World War II could function as a new foundational myth for the Union, to replace the October Revolution which was losing its shine as people were becoming increasingly disillusioned with the Party and its ideology. Thus GPW '41-45 became a piece of professional fake news, i.e a package of lies by commission and omission, combining half-truths into a manipulative story with targeted message, perpetuated for decades by the Soviet / Russian education system and the anti-Western state doctrine, with the precise aim of strengthening deep attachments and political allegiances. In a divided society like **Moldova**, where identities are to still fluid, the effect of this alternative reading of history, based on emotional anti-Western rhetoric, is visible each year as May 9th (the Victory Day) approaches. Debates on current issues or the stance of the main political actors on the East-West dimension are cast into the reference framework of 1945¹³. As Timothy Snyder would put it, this is the *politics of eternity*¹⁴.

- h) **The Orthodox Church (OC)** as a factor of influence is a subject often mentioned, but one marred by imprecisions and clichés. For example, it is true that in countries with predominantly Orthodox populations, which are also among the most rural and rapidly aging in Europe, anti-Western and social-conservative propaganda themes could be deployed by the Kremlin agents. Official channels such as *Russia Today* or *Sputnik* do not miss the 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 – of course, by helping the camp that opposes modernization and the liberalization of society (understandable: the Vatican is not exactly an avant-garde of progress either). What is unique in the region is the prevalence of the argument for a "specific nature" of the peoples of the East, which makes them different – and morally superior – to Westerners. What is more, the Russian Orthodox Church (ROC) is one of the institutional links with the "fellow citizens" beyond borders, who form the expanded *Ruskiy Mir* community (see point above). And in former USSR states, such as Ukraine or Moldova, ROC still has official jurisdiction over most believers, the Orthodox parishes being subordinated to the Patriarchate of Moscow.

On the other hand, however, the landscape becomes more complex if we look closer. First, the nuclei of radicalism in Orthodox environments are located not

¹³ 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/>

¹⁴ Timothy Snyder, 2018. *The Road to Unfreedom*. Vintage books. London.

so much in the upper hierarchy (bishops) but rather in monasteries, especially those strongly connected with the fundamentalist *lavras* on Mount Athos. Sometimes tensions arise 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 towards pilgrimage centers. The Russian influence and doctrines originating in Kremlin's circles are spread mostly through these grassroots religious groups, not the formal establishment of the Orthodox church. Secondly, and very important, the national Orthodox Churches as such, i.e. the institutional arrangement with a Synod (council) and a Patriarch at the top, have always been closely controlled by the political power. This was true under the communist regime, before and after it. There was no major dissent against the regime in Romania or Bulgaria (or in Greece), not even when emotionally sensitive decisions of great historical importance were taken, such as to join the EU and NATO. When the political leaders of a country were pro-Western, the Orthodox Church played along without 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 the suicidal adventure. In either case the Orthodox hierarchy, though it may have its own inclinations, has toed the line imposed by the political power and did not become clients of Moscow; this happened only when the national political leaders did it themselves. Even the electoral trolling practiced sometimes by clerics in Moldova or Romania is done to help the parties in power who control the resources of the church, not out of 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. 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 to ballots should not be exaggerated: a referendum on the "traditional family" (read: anti-gay marriage) initiated by Orthodox clergy in alliance with the US-funded neo-protestants failed spectacularly in Romania in October 2018¹⁵.

Finally, the rivalry between the national Orthodox churches also limits Kremlin's influence in the region. The Romanian Orthodox Church (BOR) follows the general view in state and society to avoid getting too close to Moscow; there were visible differences of opinion and clashes between BOR and the Russians at the Ecumenical Synod of Crete in 2016. What is more, BOR is caught in a conflict over jurisdiction in the Republic of Moldova: most orthodox parishes belong to the Moldovan Metropolitan Church, subordinated to Moscow; the rest belong to the Metropolitan Church of Bessarabia,

¹⁵ <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2018/oct/07/romania-anti-gay-marriage-vote-voided-over-low-turnout>

subordinated to Bucharest. There were moments when the Romanian Patriarchate became target for the Russian black propaganda. The same thing happened in 2018 in Ukraine, just on a much larger scale, when Constantinople recognized the Patriarchate of Kiev, independent of Moscow. The move was part of the bigger project to consolidate the new Ukrainian national state, strongly pushed by former president Poroshenko. All this verify the idea that in Orthodox countries the church follow the political leaders of the day. 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”

So far we discussed about the Russian influence in Eastern Europe without analyzing how does the source of this influence look like. Many observers are naive or poorly informed when it comes to it. They may underestimate the Kremlin's ability to interfere in the political processes of other European states; or, on the contrary, portray it as a well-coordinated, hierarchical and well oiled machine, with clear command and control procedures.

In reality the system by which the Kremlin projects its influence is not a piece of machinery but an **ecosystem**¹⁶. Often there is no formal order issued, but a general and implicit direction of action that everyone understands and follows. This allows the center of power, which means Vladimir Putin and his entourage, to preserve the precious asset called *deniability*: distance from the concrete operations so that blame can be always put on someone else if something goes wrong.

"Ecosystem" means that the formal institutions through which the Kremlin is carrying out propaganda and its active measures are supplemented by a halo of para-state actors, from QUANGOs to companies controlled by officials or their friends and 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 permission 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 (or 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 with each other. It is notorious the rivalry among some intelligence services, including the military one; or between the General Prosecutor's Office and the FSB. Elements of the ecosystem fight to achieve the general strategic goals of the regime, but also interfere and undermine each other in their actions, sometimes betting on different tactics or clients in a particular country

¹⁶ <https://securingdemocracy.gmfus.org/russias-active-measures-architecture-task-and-purpose/>



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 Dughin** 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 editions¹⁷.

(for example, in Moldova). The overall goal may be affected by such decentralized and inconsistent implementation.

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

Following a long and cherished Russian tradition originating in Tsarist times and perpetuated under the Soviet regime, the 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

¹⁷ <https://doxologia.ro/arhimandritul-tihon-sevkunov>

to take distance from “the 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*) whom even the NKVD/KGB could not fully control; today they are put to work for greater political goals¹⁸.

The Russian-based Organized Crime (RBOC, a term coined by Galeotti) made themselves useful abroad as a bridge to the extremist or criminal groups from the European states; or as suppliers of highly specialized technical services to illegal groups from the West (finance, IT, military hardware); or in the policy to infiltrate and control the Russian communities in diaspora. Money laundering form an important part of their activity: the estimates are that in Cyprus 25% of bank deposits and 37% of foreign investments originate in Russia¹⁹. All this continuum, ranging from official institutions to the criminal circles (RBOC) coopted informally for state missions, generates illicit resources for 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 formal components of the manipulation apparatus, as of 2018, with the diplomatic service, the intelligence bodies, the agency for the regulation of internet (reinforced 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&hackers factory in St Petersburg.

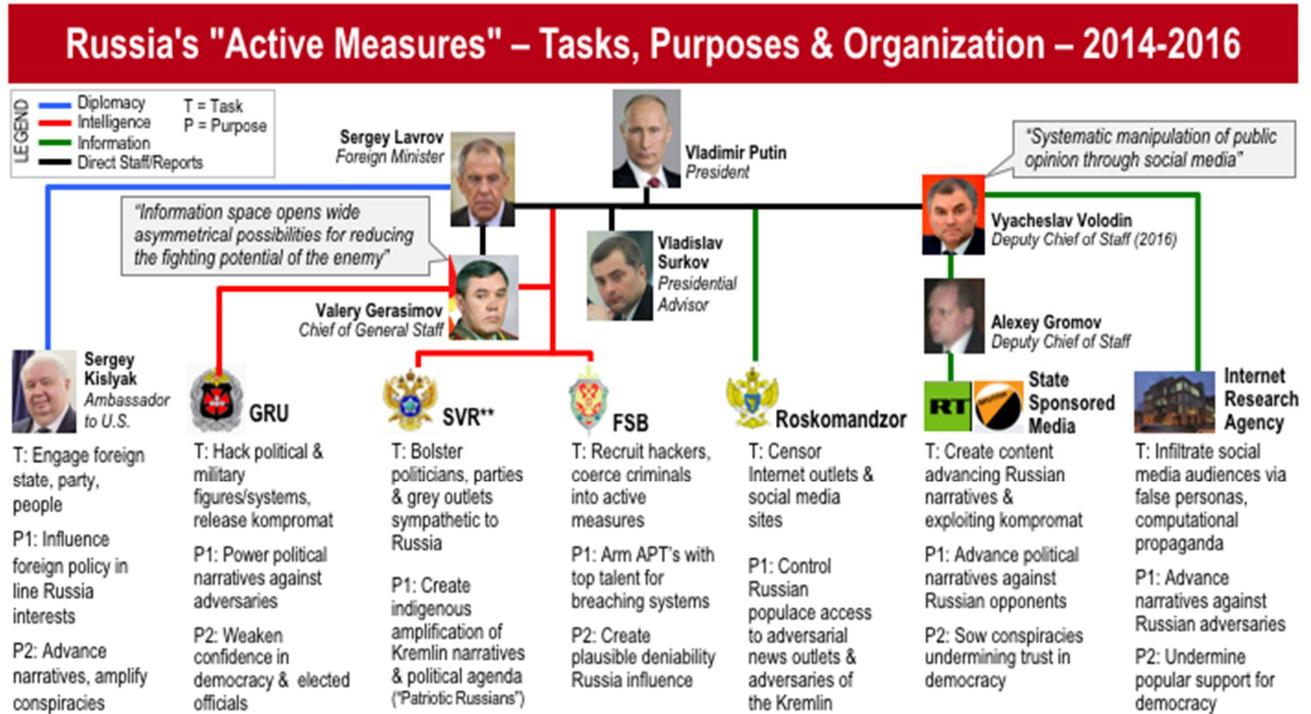
Around this network of institutions there is a whole plethora of private entrepreneurs, more or less connected to the power center, sometimes syphoning off public resources, other times investing their own money in new operations in the hope of hitting the jackpot. Their actions may take place in the business sphere, in culture, academia, mass media, on social networks, by trolling in the electoral campaigns of other states, through cyberattacks etc, all having operational independence under the broad strategy decided in Kremlin. An extreme example was the armed putsch organized in Podgorica in October 2016, with the help of local clients with connections in Serbia, in the attempt to stop Montenegro from joining NATO²⁰.

¹⁸ Mark Galeotti, 2017. *Crimintern: How the Kremlin uses Russia's criminal networks in Europe*. European Council of Foreign Relations. www.ecfr.eu

¹⁹ Ibid.

²⁰ <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 Russia²¹



Coming back to the soft measures, it is from this “ecosystem” perspective that the actions of such semi-detached actors must be interpreted when they create networks of influence in Romania, by coopting politicians and opinion leaders. Normally they deny any links with the regime in Moscow – this is for example the nototius case of **Aleksandr Dughin**. “The Dughin’s list” (a list of addresses of current and/or potential amplifiers of Russia’s messages, selected from the most persuadable opinion leaders, journalists, politicians etc)²² circulated in the media was real. It was made public by investigative journalists from Ukraine, where there is more expertize on such matters than in Romania and they take things more seriously. But this does not mean, as some people in Bucharest understood (or pretended to understand, to divert the discussion or engage in self-victimization) 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.

²¹ From: Clint Watts, 2018. *Russia's Active Measures Architecture: Task and Purpose*. <https://securingdemocracy.gmfus.org/russias-active-measures-architecture-task-and-purpose/>

²² https://adevarul.ro/news/politica/prietenii-rusiei-romania-deconspirati-presa-ucraineana-dan-puric-mircea-dogaru-lista-1_547ef05da0eb96501e529010/index.html

It was 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 were on opinion leaders attracted by the Christian-fascist and Eurasianist philosophical mélange found in the books of Ivan Ilyn and Lev Gumilev, theories openly embraced by Putin after his great shift towards cultural conservatism in the winter of 2011-12²³; or individuals who are Euro-sceptic and anti-Western by upbringing (such as former Securitate 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 personalities or hurt egos is a good way to co-opt marginalized leaders or aspiring political stars: their activity is presented in flattering light on Sputnik, they are invited to Russo-Romanian events when the rest of the society is avoiding them, exaggerated profiles of them as intelligent and cultured individuals are created for upcoming young leaders etc²⁴.

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



²³ 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 received the books of Ilyn 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.

²⁴ For instance, Sputnik in Romanian language has a strategy to warm up to young Social-Democratic leaders, whom it helps build notoriety as long as they warm up to the illiberal agenda of Russia. Unlike in Moldova, these people don't need to go to Moscow or be openly pro-Russia; it would be counter-productive with the broader public. Exalting the same values as Putin is usually enough.

The Romanian-speaking news portal **Sputnik** follows such strategy of *captatio benevolentiae* towards influencers with anti-Western and anti-EU leanings, even when these are not 100% sincere. Sputnik is managed from Chişinău (Rep of Moldova) by an interesting combination of formerly pro-Romania unionists, who swapped 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 money.

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 acceptable, 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 (un)transparency (France, Greece, Cyprus, Slovakia, Italy again). The targets can be the parties or think tanks, other social action groups, in general conservative, but also neomarxists clubs, anarchists movements and so on. Aleksandr Dughin has regular and public contacts not only in Romania, but even more substantial in Hungary (Jobbik), Greece (the New Dawns) or Serbia (countless friendly groups). Last year he held a series of public conferences in Macedonia as "the ambassador of the people," promoting panslavism and anti-Western values²⁵.

A new social group emerged as a priority target for Russia recently, which became to be cultivated by (i) the services in charge with disinformation and active measures, (ii) the organized crime-based networks in Russia (RBOC) and (iii) various European extremist movements. Namely, "**the angry young men**": a category harbouring deep frustrations, anti-globalization views, is organized along tribal lines and very much in the spotlight of sociologists who monitor the political trends in the West after the crisis²⁶. The Kremlin regards with sympathy and interest environments such as the violent football galleries, martial arts clubs, skinhead or motorcyclist groups, and invests in developing cross-border links between these nuclei of white young men with no clear skills or occupation, but very keen on 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 became mercenaries and have travelled, or intend to do so, in Donbass and Crimea.

The most famous bikers band from Russia, the **Night Wolves**, has demonstrated connections inside the Kremlin, meets Putin regularly and took part in the

²⁵ <https://balkaninsight.com/2018/03/05/kremlin-guru-rouses-anti-western-feeling-in-macedonia-03-05-2018/>

²⁶ Michel Carpenter. *Russia is Co-opting Angry Young Men*. TheAtlantic, Aug 2018. <https://www.theatlantic.com/ideas/archive/2018/08/russia-is-co-opting-angry-young-men/568741>

asymmetric warfare in Crimea in 2014, probably under the coordination of GRU²⁷. Today they make tours in the region – for example in Republika Srpska, on a grant from Kremlin – and ventilate a form of romantic, rebellious anti-capitalism, peppered with anti-Islam and conservative social values. One of the Serb radicals involved in the failed *coup d'etat* in Montenegro in 2016, Saša Sinđelić, was a member of the Serbian branch of the Night Wolves and had spent time with them in Donetsk²⁸.

As the author 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 niches and contribute to the polarization of debates and amplifying the strategic trolling originating in Russia. The final goal is that, through groups like this, to undermine the Western democracies by radicalization, destabilization and discredibilization of civic street actions: these must be associated in the minds of citizens with chaotic and violent movements, creating a general feeling of insecurity²⁹ and discouraging participation. 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 its failures and preaches 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 millenarist ruin, as we learn from the *Great Replacement Theory*³⁰?

Semi-private cultural endeavors like that of Alexander Dughin may or may not be successful in the end. This does not preclude other entrepreneurs to make similar efforts, in business, through party financing operations or cyberattacks – all being, naturally, deniable by the Kremlin. This decentralized, lively and resource-rich ecosystem is currently active in the whole East-European region for the elections of May 2019. The general line to be followed is clear and no novelty: to fuel the cynicism of electors in the new EU Member States and their mistrust in democratic institutions; to demobilize the losers (real or imaginary) of the post-communist transition and EU integration; to strengthen relativism and moral equivalence in international relations; to underline 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 shown above.

²⁷ <http://readrussia.com/2015/07/14/the-rise-of-russias-night-wolves/>

²⁸ <https://www.rferl.org/a/montenegro-russia-serbia-coup-plot-witness-identifies-suspect-funding/28819658.html>

²⁹ 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 exalting the narrative of anti-Ottoman resistance.

³⁰ The Great Replacement Theory (*grand remplacement*): conservative-racist conspiracy theory alleging that certain global actors, such as the EU (or Merkel, Soros etc) deliberately act to replace the Christian population of Europe with immigrants of different races and faiths brought 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. Sometimes they may push 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, probably 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, the Western 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 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 subordinated to executives or parliaments (i.e. political parties) and too weak to act as true arbiters of the profession and the market³¹. Thus, 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 of the public in homogeneous and hysterical bubbles, or to agenda capture by various oligarchs and, when conditions allow it, by the Kremlin's propaganda machine.

This are realities difficult to explain to our 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, with the mass media absent from the picture!*

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 and hysteria. 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

³¹ 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 followership³². 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 Putin; but on the other hand it offers uncensored news about domestic 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 how low the rest of the Turkish press has descended.

4.2. Second, the **real political will to counter Russian** fake news and propaganda is a red line that divides the states in the region into separate 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 perfect in Ukraine, where political actors are present with double agendas, but because of the external military aggression, the critical mass of public authorities supports the fight against the Kremlin's propaganda. In the Baltic States things are much more straightforward in this respect.

The intelligence services of these states publish risk assessments, and government agencies edit manuals and good practice guidelines to help the public understand and combat online attacks, following Scandinavian good practices. The companies managing social networks are approached and 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 against disinformation.

On the other hand, **(4.2.2)** much more governments in the region rely on manipulations and fake news in order to stay in power. For them, clientelism and fake news propaganda are 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 created 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 is not irrelevant if, for example, on a terrain

³² <https://www.economist.com/europe/2019/02/28/a-russian-propaganda-outlet-prospers-in-turkey>

already predisposed to disinformation, such as in Ukraine, the parties in power try in good 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: the operation was carried out solely by groups of civic activists in cooperation with Facebook. Moldova's government and state institutions proved to be hindrances, 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 differences 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, in the form in which 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 national 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 create hostility among the public.

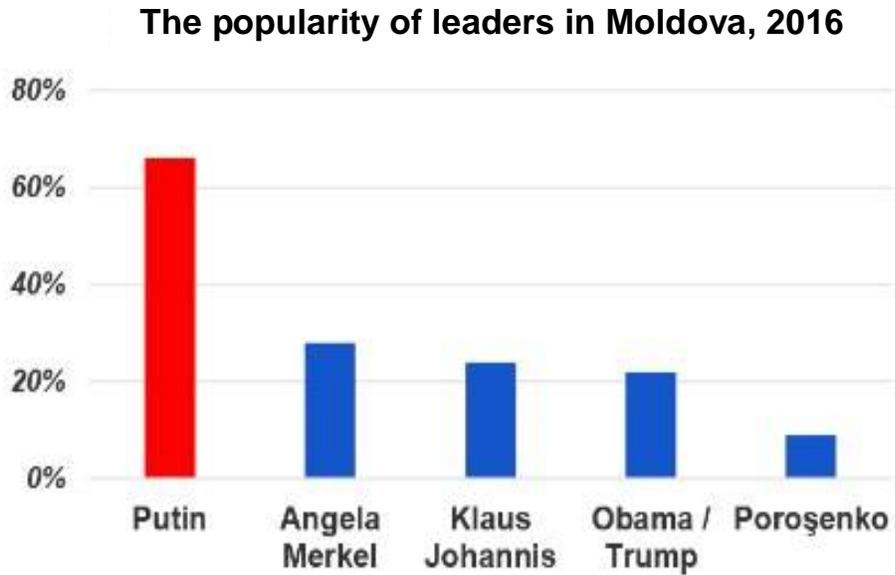
At the other end of the spectrum of attitudes we find states like the Republic of Moldova, where the open display of Russophilia can be even beneficial to a politician, who may want to be seen together with Vladimir Putin. He is by far the most popular leader, not only on the international scene, but even among the local politicians (Fig. 4)³³. Therefore, despite the promises to fight propaganda and manipulation made 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 (Plahotniuc) and the Socialist president of the country (Dodon). The main source of international news for the Moldovan public continues to be the Russian stations, broadcasting content shaped for the Russian cultural sphere (Fig. 4)³⁴.

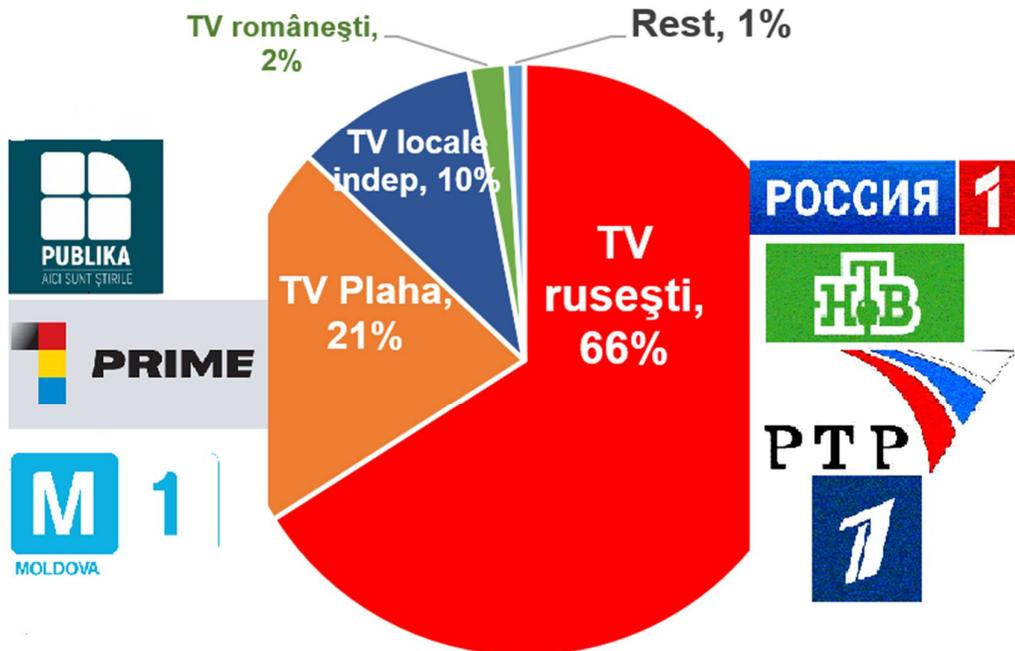
³³ Valeriu Paşa, Vasile Cantarji, Irina Sterpu, 2018. *Republic of Moldova's television content and the manner in which it is shaping electoral behavior: an assessment of russia's influence on the country's geo-political options*. WatchDog.MD Community, Chişinău.

³⁴ *Ibid.*

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



Sources of international news in Moldova



The Russian influence in Eastern Europe and beyond

- The laws banning the funding of parties and electoral campaigns from abroad are ignored in broad daylight, with no consequences, as long as the funds come from the East. Many countries in the region, including the 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. The illicit funds may be acquired from past activities, like the notorious *Russian laundromat* affair, or obtained more recently but from the same sources, as it was clear in the 2019 campaign. A good part of these resources are invested in the propaganda apparatus of the regime and its clients, on traditional and online media.
- Unlike Ukraine, Moldova has not taken steps to limit the penetration of Russian-language social networks, Odnoklassniki (ok.ru) and V Kontakte (vk.com), owned by firms 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; just recently it dropped on second place, after Facebook. It is officially under the control of Russia's intelligence service FSB. Together, V Kontakte and Ok.ru have more users in Moldova than the rest of Western networks. Their databases are legally open to inspection by the Russian state, as the law allows the public agencies discretionary access to content.

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

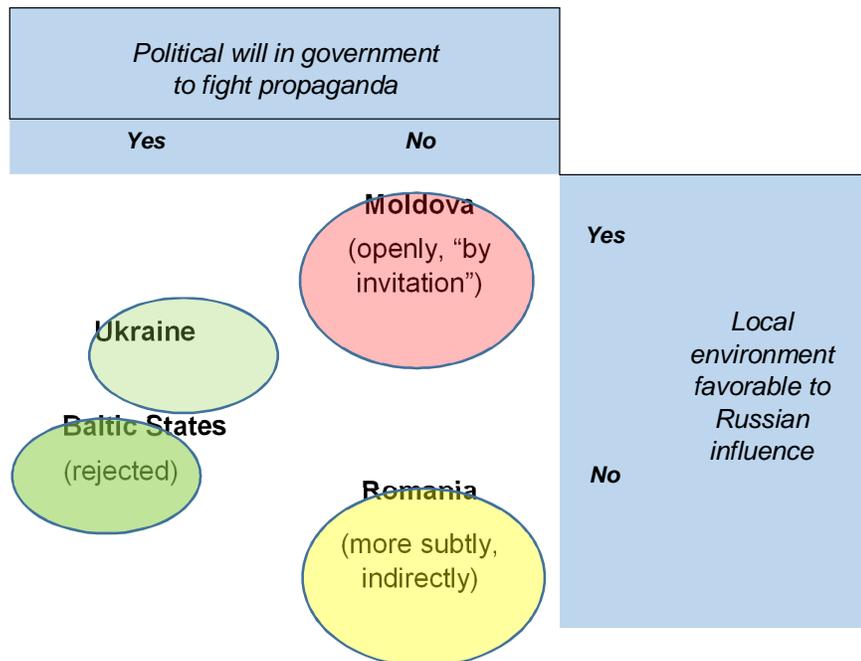
- Knowledge of Russian, which is spoken by virtually all citizens as a first or second language;
- An important Russian community, including members who consider themselves "compatriots" in the *Russkiy Mir*;
- Ambiguous identity for a good part of the population, visible in the public disputes over 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 elections³⁵;
- Links of the Moldovan political and economic elite with the area east of the river Nistru, due to the recent or more distant history and the realities of life;
- Business interests on a large scale, and very visible, such as those in the energy sector, involving members of the government in Chişinău and 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.

³⁵ Or even the European elections of May 2019, as an unknown number of Transnistrian residents may have Romanian passports too.

All these things together determine the analysts to talk about a certain "**Russian influence by invitation**" in the case of Moldova. This means 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 sector³⁶.

Fig. 5 summarizes the situation of Moldova and Romania on a stylized map of manipulation in Eastern Europe, in contrast to other states where the topic is relevant. If we plot the two variables 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 purely endogenous, Moldova and the Baltic States stand as contrasting cases. Romania differs from Moldova in the sense that the Russian influence encounters a much less favorable environment 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



³⁶ https://anticoruptie.md/ro/stiri/analiza-moscova-vaneaza-vulnerabilitati-intr-o-romanie-anti-rusa?fbclid=IwAR0FtAkoZZ9sCKWEVK-fWQ8QIDz6BIsQ9zi1Fs_LHiSUabPj1kBkIDraZV0

4.3. By combining the factors (4.1) and (4.2) discussed 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?"³⁷

In some instances urgent and massive intervention is required, as it was the case in 2016 with **Montenegro's** rapid progress towards NATO (it failed, 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). The same is true in **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 in 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 Italy³⁸, 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.

³⁷ This good 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

³⁸ <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/05/12/world/europe/russian-propaganda-influence-campaign-european-elections-far-right.html?fbclid=IwAR1-IM0a8qhtJUOtSZkFC6CKfr-6oL12WTqo-dAXYyGWq7Ifc2DrCRCXzM>

Putin's strategic calculation is that, given the current political situation in such capitals, his interference cannot improve things much; on the contrary, a more aggressive posture may backfire³⁹. **Italy** is already 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 plays on the no. 1 national fixation: the danger posed by immigrants. **Austria** has investments in the same two strategic business sectors, plus a lady minister of foreign affairs who is Putin's dancing partner, plus 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 willingly doing Putin's bid in energy, finance and many other sectors 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 channels with a decent history like Studio B air today 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"⁴⁰. The Serbian-speaking Sputnik also functions as the main platform connecting the media programs in Serbia and Bosnia-Herzegovina⁴¹.

Austria and especially **Italy** are 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 fund his party by means of a deal with natural gas, are technically legal in Italy, 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 enforced 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, operation not covered by the legal ban but in which Russian officials were involved much too visibly for comfort.

³⁹ Shekhovtsov, 2019, p. 34

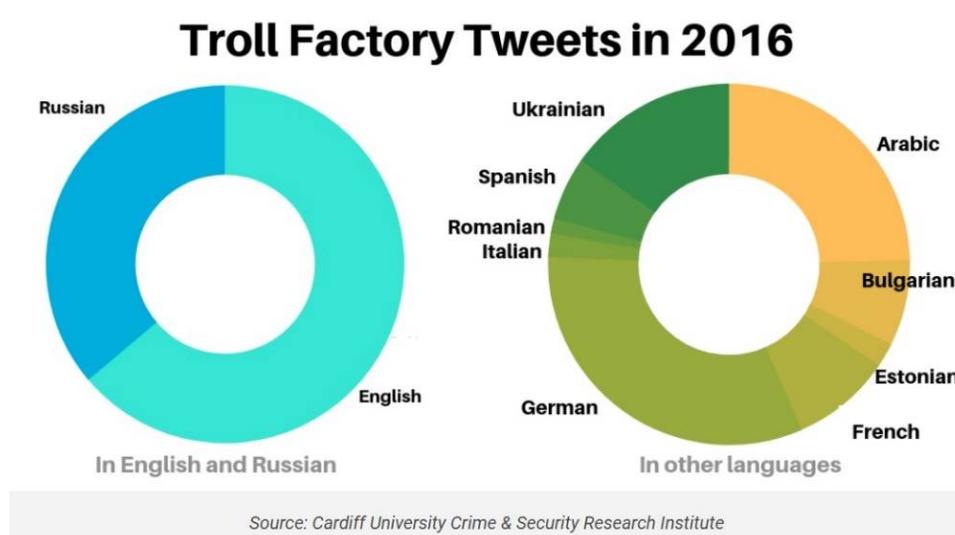
⁴⁰ <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-serbia-russia-media-analysis/on-serbian-airwaves-a-battle-for-heart-of-balkans-idUSKBN17ZOX1>

⁴¹ <https://www.stopfake.org/en/how-serbian-sputnik-infiltrated-a-disinformation-hub-in-bosnia-and-herzegovina/>

Fig. 6. Restrictions to party and campaign financing from abroad in the EU countries⁴²

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.

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 decisive, carried out through multiple instruments. 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 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 Emanuel Macron.

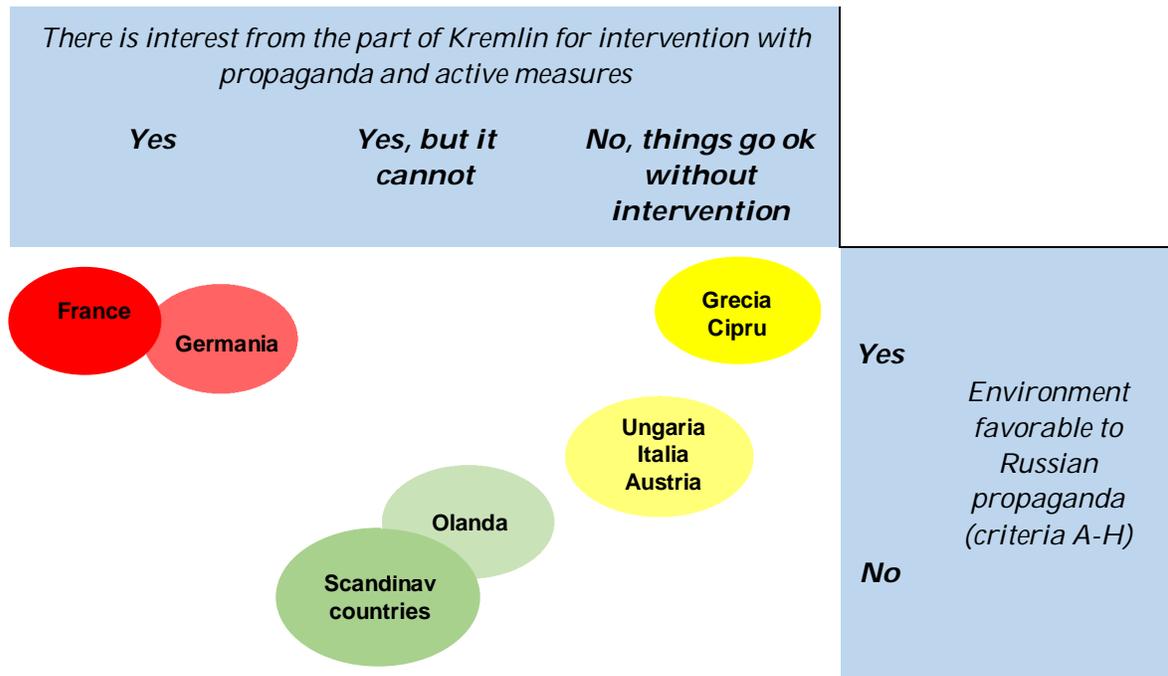
In **Germany** the things are more complicated, but the conclusion is similar: from Kremlin's point of view, things could improve with a good push, so there is decisive intervention with trolling, underground financing and soft power in the German political life. Warm bilateral relations with Russia are backed by the business circles, out of sheer 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 NordStream II later this year, when the EU Commission proves in front of the European Court that the EU rules are being broken by the project: 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; therefore they can be stimulated and supported from abroad. Second, there is good potential for polarization by encouraging actors from the 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 areas of Germany⁴⁴. 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).

⁴⁴ <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ostalgie>

As Shekhovtsov suggests in his paper, a third category of countries exists (**Denmark, Sweden, Norway, Finland**, and possibly the **Netherlands**) where the Kremlin does not intervene too much because, although it would have an interest in doing so (for example, to prevent Sweden or Finland from taking 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 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-contrast⁴⁵



The situations described above are summarized in Fig. 8. Naturally, the proposed framework of analysis is tentative: things may change during the electoral year 2019 or in the future⁴⁶; the context in each country can be interpreted differently by other analysts, from various perspectives. This report is just an invitation to debate in more precise and measurable terms, in order to devise realistic plans against

⁴⁵ Following an idea by Anton Shekhovtsov, 2019. *Russian interference and where to find it. European Platform for Democratic Elections*. <https://www.epde.org/en/>

⁴⁶ This report was written before the European elections of May 2019.

disinformation and illicit 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 plans. A plausible strategy to counteract propaganda and disinformation which threaten democracy, originating from domestic sources or from Kremlin, may be for example included among the set of conditionalities, alongside the rule of law.



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