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PUTIN'S EUROPE

RUSSIAN INFLUENCE
IN EUROPEAN DEMOCRACY

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Foreword

FRANCESCO CAPPELLETTI

As Russia's war of aggression against Ukraine continues, Europe appears to have roused from the slumber in which it had pampered itself for some decades: the illusion of a global peace. Although the world has never truly been at peace in recent years, war now looms large and its casualties are counted at the doorstep of the Old Continent. However, matters are not as straightforward as they seem: the world changes, evolves, or rather, leans towards a perpetual metamorphosis of itself. Alliances and ideologies clash, change, or remain ingrained in the minds of those who resist transformation. This generates tensions, frictions, and, as the tragic events in Ukraine illustrate, anachronistic military conflicts. Is there no solution to this outdated 'State of Nature'?

To misconstrue the war as a catastrophe, an unforeseeable 'black swan', driven by the expansionist ambitions of a deranged and isolated leader, would be to do history a disservice. Indeed, as the book *Putin's Europe* seeks to demonstrate, the warning signs of Russia's 'Dark Power' have long been present. Over the past decades, many signs can be found — indicators of an aggressive Russia, akin to a bear that has been sharpening its claws for years. And if it seemed as though this was waged to defend its own lair since 2014, the moment many pointed as the 'true beginning of the war in Ukraine' — as of February 2022, all cards are on the table. There was no lethargy, but rather a sustained moment of perpetual deceptiveness, perpetrated with the scope of 'making the other believe' in something. But it is fair to consider that the Kremlin's military and related hybrid initiatives are, as of now, a *de facto* aggression not only against a geographical neighbour, Ukraine, but against the entire West.

In this context, *Putin's Europe* is a unique volume, a sort of compendium of reflections about this new world order and testimonies from Eastern Europe and the Balkans to Latin America, on how Russia has invested over time in the realm of information warfare, disinformation, and external interference. The volume outlines how this strategy has been executed with extreme meticulousness — and a certain know-how accumulated during the years of the Cold War — to manipulate opinions, politics, and politicians, and to seek consensus among different crowds in the European Union and beyond.

Millions of pages have been written since the end of the Cold War on how developments within the Russian Federation have led to the events we are currently witnessing. Authoritative publications elucidate and interpret the choices and shifts in the Kremlin's foreign policy, and subsequently Putin's, starting from the early 2000s. Discussions on security strategies, constitutional matters, NATO, Europe, and geopolitical and geoeconomic interests are fundamental to put together the puzzle of this messy-polar world we are facing. Perhaps a 'State of Nature' will never exist, and no 'End of History' will be accomplished, but this volume aims to go beyond that — to provide the alternative that so unsettlingly gnaws at the walls of the Kremlin, to be worrying for the Kremlin's establishment, much like a woodworm in timber. This is the alternative that liberal democracy can offer.

In all this, it is the duty of liberals, and the aim of this volume, to shine a light not only on the influence that Putin's propaganda machine wields over Europe but to offer a lens through which to view a free and interconnected world as the best course of action. This paves the way towards safeguarding what remains the most crucial gravitational centre of our united European system — our democracy.

Intro

MIŁOSZ HODUN

For the last few decades Europeans have slept soundly, convinced of the uniqueness and permanence of the house they have built together. They saw that there was a large neighbour living nearby, just across the border, but they did not treat him as an equal. They knew the neighbour could be threatening, but they trusted that a network of business and social relationships would curb his rampant antics. Or at least confine them to their own home, where only the household would feel the consequences. The calm Europeans looked on with a smile of superiority at their neighbour's behaviour, at his maudlin posturing and the insolent lies with which he fed his own on a daily basis. Occasionally, they were only anxiously reminded of their neighbour's dark past. When, in a frenzy, he set fire to other houses across the road, considering them his property, they would stick a note on his door saying 'not nice'. They ignored warnings that he had a criminal plan in mind. A plan to invade another house — this time much closer to the Europeans — raze it to the ground and kill anyone who stood up to defend it. On 24 February 2022, the Europeans awoke from their peaceful slumber. They were roused to their feet by rumbles and cries not heard here for a long time. The tranquillity of the last few years turned out to be a delusion, and Europeans began to fear seriously for the future of their beautiful home. On 24 February 2022, it became clear that Europe, the European Union and its member states were not free from Putin. From his influence, his money, his ideology, his rhetoric. A wave of self-audits overflowed from east to west. The east started the process earlier and with much more commitment; the west only when it had no choice. Areas of the

economy, politics, the media world, and social organisations that acted in the interests of, and often on behalf of, the Kremlin were pinpointed. The high price Europe paid for years of looking the other way and comfort was revealed. The price of subordination and dependence. The connections of parties and their leaders, companies and their boards of directors, news portals and their editors to Russian principals became increasingly clear. Exposing these connections made it possible to understand many of the undertakings of recent years, their motivations and their true beneficiaries. Suddenly, the dirt and the dangers could be seen in a new light. Without this alarm bell, there would have been no question of taking defensive action. And without defensive action there will be no security.

The European Liberal Forum, with the support of the Projekt: Polska Foundation, undertook the task of outlining what Putin's Europe is. We invited twenty experts and editors from across the continent to show how the Russian dictator influences the lives of Europeans. We describe universal phenomena and trends. When the starting point for describing a problem is a single country or a group of countries, it does not at all mean that this problem is limited to this particular geographical area. On the contrary, it should be assumed that it is or will be present in one form or another in other countries as well. The question is: when and with what intensity? There are no places in Europe in which Putin would not be interested. Destabilising or subjugating every patch, even small or remote from Moscow, brings the dictator closer to his goal: reconstructing the empire, building Putin's Europe.

The first four articles in this volume deal with geopolitical issues and the Kremlin's general ideology. They allow us to understand the foundations of Putin's thinking, his vision of the world and the rules he has drawn for a conflict he wants to win at all costs. Silvia Nadjivan and Lukas Sustala of NEOS Lab discuss the autocratic elements and methods of Putin's system. They guide us through the intricacies of the way power has been built up over the years by helping us understand Putinism in accordance with the principle of 'violence'. They explain how important the existence of an enemy is to power in the Kremlin. 'For the first time since

the end of the Cold War Putin's Russia built its ideology on clear enemy stereotypes, leading to a new view of systematic war between imagined "blocs". This is no longer the constructive competition of countries that was the foundation of policymaking for a brief period after the collapse of the Soviet Union and our believed "end of history", they remind us. Nadjivan and Sustala point to a common pluralist Europe which proves to be a politically and economically independent and thus well established global player as an antidote to the poison of Putinism. In a similar vein, Renata Gravina of Fondazione Luigi Einaudi writes: 'The Russian President's narrative developed around an evolving struggle-defence against that collective West supposed defiance, and versus the liberal model as a whole. Western is perceived by Russia as the bridgehead of a democratic export as well as a destabiliser of Russia's foreign neighbour'. Gravina identifies the successive stages in the evolution of Putin's ideology — marked by the 2003–2005 coloured revolutions, the 2007 Munich conference, the 2011 Arab Spring, and eventually the 2014 Dignity Revolution — and describes some features of the Putinist propaganda, taking into account the defence/offence elements in Russian foreign policy, or the parallel construction of a post-Soviet ideology for the use and (even forced) consumption of the Russian citizenry.

Velina Tchakarova of FACE FOR A Conscious Experience outlines Russia's geopolitical and geoeconomic strategies within the framework of its war against Ukraine, with particular emphasis on the impact on the European economic model. 'Moscow's multifaceted strategy revolves around three intertwined fundamentals: an overt military invasion of Ukraine, an information warfare to erode Western principles, norms, and standards, and a geoeconomic offensive, utilising commodity manipulation as a weapon against the European economic model', she writes. She points out the consequences of diverging geopolitical interests and ambitions, fostering a potential split in Europe, and outlines three scenarios for the future of the war.

Valeriya Korablyova of the Ukraine In A Changing Europe Research Centre describes the clash between Russia's 'dark power' and Europe's 'light power', exposing the former. 'It is neither visionary (future-oriented) nor constructive (suggestive)', she writes. 'The ideological underpinning

is moral relativism and instrumental rationality: no values should guide political actions, only pragmatic interests and power balances. In a way, the “non-West” appropriates and weaponises Western pragmatism and market rationality against it. Accepting the Russian–Chinese proposal of “globalisation without hypocrisy” would be suicidal for the European civilisation: it would provide adversaries with a competitive advantage while killing the cultural legacy that secured European development’, Korablyova concludes.

Some authors focus on particular sections of the Kremlin’s activities in Europe, discussing them in detail. Thus Pavel Havlicek devoted his chapter to disinformation. He questions the so-called ‘red button’ logic giving the state a competence that would allow it to completely take down online (dis)information sites. But he is also considering less invasive options for defence, including implementation of the EU’s digital regulation represented primarily by the EU’s *Digital Services Act (DSA)*, demonetisation of harmful but legal content or cooperation with the social media platforms. Analysing the situation from the Prague perspective, Havlicek evaluates the area of communication in its strategic as well as crisis element, and comes to a conclusion. In his opinion, the Czech Republic represents an interesting model that other countries could learn from, both in the positive and some negative ways too. “In the CEE, Czech society proved to be one of the most resilient towards the Russian and other authoritarian influences, even if there remain several significant weak spots that need addressing’, Havlicek concludes.

Ricardo Silvestre of Portugal’s Movimento Social Liberal also devotes a significant part of his chapter to the online sphere, which interests him as an element of ‘foreign interference’. Silvestre explains how Russia and its allies use interference tactics to erode democratic processes in the EU (and beyond), particularly in the context of electoral processes. Illegal access to computer networks with collection or alteration of data, dumping of information targeting politicians, manipulation of voter registration, changing vote counts to are just a few examples of actions that qualify as hybrid warfare strategies. Silvestre points out that an effective defence against the Kremlin’s actions must be multi-faceted

and consist not only of institutional strengthening of the Union and its member states, but also of actions that improve the resilience of all sections of society and from the young to the older voter.

The topic of direct influence on politics in individual countries is also developed by Juan Pina of the Madrid-based think tank FundaLib. He analyses how the Kremlin exploits allegedly independent Russian connections with grassroots organisations and think tanks. ‘The Kremlin’s key tool in its strategies to influence Western societies is money. The Putin establishment has managed to amass what is most likely the largest slush fund in human history’, Pina reminds us. Using the example of the Spanish far right, he points to the flow of funds from Russian oligarchs to the party and its satellites represented at various levels of government. He also goes further, pointing to evidence that, through intermediaries in the Iberian Peninsula, the Kremlin’s influence is spreading to Latin America. On the other side of the Atlantic, precisely because of the involvement of huge financial resources, the traditional right is being pushed out of the political scene and its place taken by radical anti-democratic and anti-Western movements.

Patrik Oksanen of the FORS think tank takes on just one pro-Kremlin organisation, but an exceptionally influential one, under special protection from the Russian authorities and operating in many countries — the Moscow Patriarchate of the Russian Orthodox Church (MP). He shows how interwoven with Putin and the secret services of the Russian Federation and the ideology of the Russian state the Moscow Patriarchate is. He argues that this religious exposition of the Kremlin actively promotes the vision of Russia as a ‘defender of traditional values’. ‘Today the MP gives the Putin regime a moral and spiritual framework that goes hand in hand with the ideas of *Russkij Mir*, the Russian World. The Church is tying compatriots to the Motherland and is used as a source of influence for the diaspora and beyond. But the power is far more than soft — the war in Ukraine has shown the MP also as a chess piece in the military aggression’, Oksanen argues, listing the instruments the Moscow Patriarchate uses in Sweden as well as other Western countries, namely corruption, influencing political processes, storing military assets, and subversion.

The next chapter deals with the very important topic of Russian-speaking minorities in Europe, with a particular focus on the Baltic States. Jelena Jesejana, former secretary general of the liberal party Latvijas Attīstībai and a representative of the Russian-speaking minority of Latvia, deconstructs the notion of a monolithic pro-Putin group living in Latvia, but also in Estonia and Lithuania. Yesejana describes the group as heterogeneous and undergoing dynamic changes, particularly since the day the full-scale war in Ukraine began. 'For the first time in the history of public research in Latvia, the Russian-speaking population favoured Western focus for the country's foreign affairs over Russia', the author points out. She also writes about 'shifting identities', 'new Europeans' and the need for a responsive and far-sighted government policy to fully integrate those viewed with distrust by the majority.

The last chapter of this part of the publication is devoted to the economy. Dejan Ravšelj and Aleksander Aristovnik from the Faculty of Public Administration at the University of Ljubljana and Zavod 14 describe how war significantly affected the European economy, which citizens felt mainly through the higher prices of goods and services. They describe Europe's dependence on Russian fossil fuels as an instrument of war and blackmail regarding energy security and food stability as a war tactic. The second section of the chapter presents Russian influence and European response through the lenses of young people with a specific focus on Russian strategy to influence politics in Europe, the response of Europe to Russian energy coercion and the perspective of young Europeans.

The last part of the publication is a brief study of the Kremlin's influence on three countries in Europe, Hungary, Bulgaria, and Serbia (in the broader context of the Western Balkans), where the ideological and economic presence of Putin's Russia is undeniable and has left its mark on domestic and international politics and socio-economic relations. The first of these chapters shows how Viktor Orbán has turned the country he governs, a member of NATO and the EU, into Putin's Trojan horse. The authors affiliated with the progressive Momentum party took 'a look at how corruption and influence-buying are transformed into talks of national or European interests in the public sphere to mask

the ultimate goals and private business interests, how various stages of elite capture steer countries in directions that the public might not have otherwise accepted, how institutions can be hollowed out to serve as weaker brakes on both power and Russian influence. How this goes parallel to the gradual change of narratives from real problems into talks about sovereignty, then gradual anti-Americanism and anti-NATO-ism, and finally to culminate into Kremlin outright narratives in the span of just a few years’.

Bulgaria differs from Hungary in its starting point. Sofia was linked to Moscow by a network of historical relations that created convenient channels of entry for Russian interests in the 1990s. ‘The historical narrative of “saviour” and liberator from Ottoman rule, was dominant for most of the 20th century and remains largely unchallenged in public imagination even decades after Bulgaria’s Soviet satellite state status formally came to an end’, writes Mila Moshelova of the Friedrich Naumann Foundation in her chapter. She mentions bilateral profitable business projects that easily turned into political dependencies. She writes about top state officials who do not hide their own Russophilia and points out what its practical consequences are. She analyses the dynamically changing language of pro-Kremlin propaganda — with special attention to groups on social media — pointing out shifts in emphasis, from support for ‘neutrality’ to overt support for the aggressor.

Finally, Alen Gudalo of the Boris Divković Foundation analyses how the Russian influence in the Western Balkans — in particular in Serbia, Bosnia and Herzegovina, and Montenegro — has its contours within the influence of the Russian-sponsored organisations and how the enlargement fatigue helps Russia in spreading its political and economic interests in the region. He questions the potential impact of enlargement fatigue on the influence of Russia in the Western Balkans and Eastern Europe, i.e. how potential exclusion of these regions from enlargement actually helps Russia in spreading its influence. He points to the dangerous trend of declining support among citizens for joining the EU, particularly in Serbia, where the Russian influence has been the most visible, and answers the question of whether it is too late to reverse this trend.

Reading the thirteen chapters will not be pleasant. It will be disturbing to see how far and how deep the Kremlin's tentacles reach and how unfettered they have penetrated Europe. But we cannot afford not to take this knowledge and build on it a strategy for the total elimination of Russian influence. Today we see that there are only two scenarios for the future: either a strong Union based on liberal democracy, the rule of law and human rights, united in diversity — or Putin's corrupt, authoritarian and dangerous Europe for its own citizens.

United in Pluralism

Liberal Counter Strategies to Putin's Hybrid War Against Europe

SILVIA NADJIVAN | LUKAS SUSTALA

Russia's current war of aggression against Ukraine not only represents a breach of international law but is also part of a far-reaching attack on liberal democracy in Europe and abroad, an attempt to systematically destroy human civil rights, checks and balances, and thusly liberal values, freedom, and all characteristics of the free way of life. To develop sound recommendations for how to tackle all these unprecedented challenges, it is necessary to deeply understand the current war in Ukraine as one tragic element of Putin's system, or Putinism and hybrid warfare. The first part of our contribution therefore elaborates the autocratic elements and methods of this system (referring to Hannah Arendt) and serves as the background for the second part where liberal counter strategies will be developed.

Understanding Putinism in accordance with the principle of 'violence'

According to the (self-declared) political theorist Hannah Arendt, the most important difference between power and violence is that, unlike power, violence is not dependent on speaking or acting with one another. After all, it is based on tools or 'means of violence'¹. In case

¹ Arendt, H. (2003). *Macht und Gewalt*. München: Piper Taschenbuch Verlag, p. 42.

of direct violence, the plurality of actors is replaced by the quantity of weapons. Power on the one hand and (direct) violence on the other are opposites in political terms, so that one disappears when the other completely dominates. ‘Violence can destroy power; it is entirely incapable of generating power.’² Thus, totalitarian regimes are mostly built on violence, including restrictions, fear and isolation, as violence just needs tools or weapons to hold onto power, or precisely to get into force.³ As a matter of fact, power needs to be strictly differentiated from violence. Power requires human interactions, communication, and public opinion, whereas violence requires weapons to reign. Despite its instrumental character, violence and, therefore, totalitarian regimes need secret police, a network of spies and loyal followers who have a positive attitude towards the totalitarian regime or benefit from such a system of rule. Sheer violence occurs when power is lost.⁴ The various dimensions of violence are defined here in accordance with the social scientist and founder of peace and conflict studies Johan Galtung. In concrete, Galtung emphasises the double distinction between ‘personal/structural’ and ‘direct/indirect’ violence. He describes violence with a clear ‘subject-object relationship’ as manifest because it can be seen as an action. Violence without this relationship is structural or ‘built into the structure’. Galtung also describes ‘conditions of structural violence’ as ‘social injustice’.⁵ Finally, structural violence is based on mechanisms of exclusion.⁶ Although there are blurring boundaries between direct and indirect violence and between personal and structural violence,⁷ they help to characterise Putin’s system or Putinism as a right-conservative populist and personalised autocracy⁸ — with censored media,

² Arendt, H. (2003). *Macht und Gewalt*, p. 57.

³ Arendt, H. (2003). *Macht und Gewalt*, p. 8.

⁴ Arendt, H. (2003). *Macht und Gewalt*, pp. 51, 55.

⁵ Galtung, J. (1975).

⁶ Galtung, J. (1975), p. 14.

⁷ Galtung, J. (1975), p. 23.

⁸ Fish, M. S. (2017). What is Putinism? The Kremlin Emboldened. *Journal of Democracy*, 28(4), 61–75. <https://www.journalofdemocracy.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/10/Fish-28-4.pdf>. Burkhardt, F. (2022, March 29). The Fog of War and Power Dynamics in Russia’s Elite: Defections and Purges, or Simply Wishful Thinking? *Russian analytical*

a corruption-infiltrated executive and systematic intransparency in legislative and jurisdiction⁹.

Direct and structural violence (murder and exclusion of oppositional politicians) define the conditions for forms of pluralistic power — however suppressed — in Putin’s system. This approach enables a holistic view on the following totalitarian elements and methods of Putinism.

- 1 Centralising political, military, economic, civilian, media, and cultural decision-making in Kremlin

When Vladimir Putin, after the surprising resignation of President Boris Yeltsin, succeeded his mentor and took over the Russian presidency in 2000, the Russian state, and especially the ruling elite, were characterised by clientelism, corruption, and oligarchy. Competing clans had built up their own competing businesses, media companies, political representatives, and parties, and secret services.¹⁰ After such ‘para-state’¹¹ entanglements — meaning informal and parallel to and outside of state institutions’ regulation existing mafia — and even chaotic developments since the 1990s, a time when presidency followed oligarchy, President Putin started to turn the table. So from now on the oligarchs had to follow him personally and in his new function. Putin, a former KGB intelligence officer, referred to the heritage of the bureaucracy from the former USSR as well as from the Russian empire, when all political, economic, military, and cultural decision-making had been centralised.

digest, 281, 10–14, p. 11. <https://www.research-collection.ethz.ch/bitstream/handle/20.500.11850/539633/RAD281.pdf?sequence=3&isAllowed=y>.

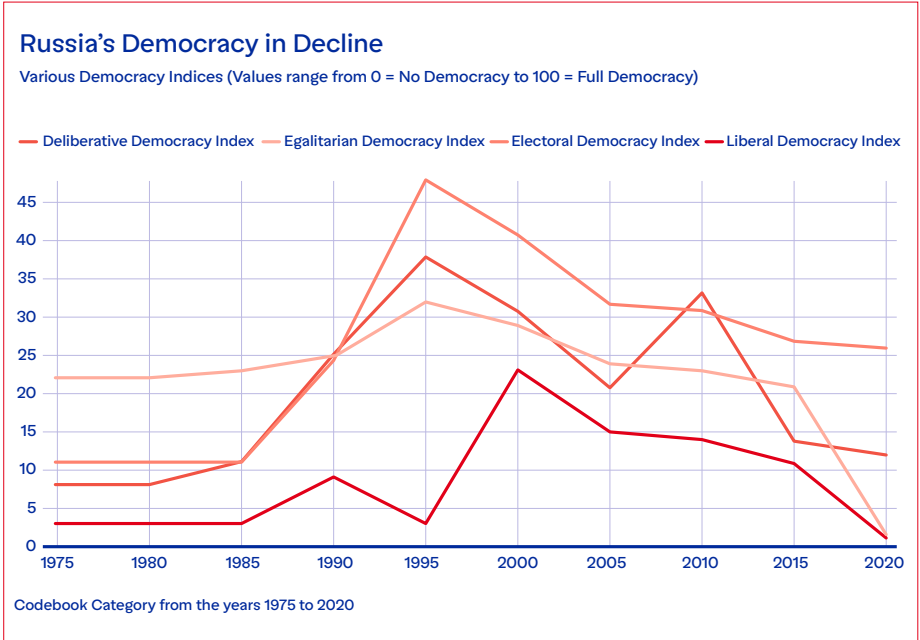
- 9 Aron, L. (2010). Putin’s Agenda and Medvedev’s Dilemma. *American Enterprise Institute for Public Policy Research*, Fall 2010, 1–6, p. 4. <https://www.aei.org/wp-content/uploads/2011/10/RO-Fall-2010-g.pdf>. Pieper, M. A. (2012). From Proto-State to Para-State Accountability: Russian Political Regimes Under Yeltsin, Putin, and Medvedev. *Inquiries. Social Sciences, Arts & Humanities*, 4(9). <http://www.inquiriesjournal.com/articles/702/3/from-proto-state-to-para-state-accountability-russian-political-regimes-under-yeltsin-putin-and-medvedev>.
- 10 Kryschtanowskaja, O. (2004). *Anatomie der russischen Elite: Die Militarisierung Russlands unter Putin*. Köln: Kiepenhauer & Witsch, pp. 38.
- 11 Pieper, M. A. (2012).

With the beginning of the monocentric state, the ‘defective democracy’ under Yeltsin came to an end and Putin’s ‘pseudo-democracy’ was heralded.¹² Under Yeltsin’s reign competing clans and clientelism had made it obvious that checks and balances had not worked appropriately. Putin’s pseudo-democracy has been able to give the impression that calm has returned to the political system and that the rule of law is finally functioning — at least superficially. Against the background of centralising all decision-making, the perfidious and well-prepared radicalization of the Russian regime has taken its course. All influential Russian oligarchs were, after 2000, obliged to finance Putin’s regime. In case of disagreement, imprisonment followed, as former oligarch Michail Chodorkowski’s ten-year (2003–2013) sentence for tax evasion illustrates. With the help of centralised bureaucracy, secret service, and financial support by the oligarchs, Putin turned the Russian state into an anti-democratic political system. This trend is easy to grasp when looking at various indices of democratic and liberal developments, such as the ones provided by V-Dem, the project on Varieties in Democracy at the University Gothenburg. It has developed several indices to show various aspects of democratic types such as egalitarian democracy, electoral democracy or liberal democracy. Russia is only in one regard obviously more democratic than under Soviet rule according to V-Dem, and that is regarding electoral democracy.¹³

The radicalisation of Putin’s system has — after provoking the second war in Chechnya (1999–2009), the war in Georgia (2008), the occupation of Crimea (2014) — reached a peak with the war of aggression against Ukraine that began in 2022. Political correspondents such as Greg Myre see parallels between the long-lasting Chechen war and the current Ukrainian war, namely the intention of complete destruction of a country and its infrastructure, followed by a horrifying high number of

¹² Kryschtanowskaja, O. (2004), pp. 82, 111.

¹³ Papada, E., Lindbergh, S. I. (2023). *Defiance in the Face of Autocratization. V-Dem Report 2023*. Gothenburg: V-Dem Institute. https://v-dem.net/documents/29/V-dem-democracyreport2023_lowres.pdf.



civilian victims.¹⁴ As such, wars pose a tragic combination of Galtung's structural and direct violence. In all cases, especially with Ukraine, the Russian public has been continuously disinformed by state-controlled media about an alleged 'external threat'.¹⁵

2 Propagating the narrative of the 'external threat', based on history revision and disinformation

According to the political analyst Andrei Kolesnikov the Russian invasion into Ukraine was not only performed as a so-called 'special military

¹⁴ Myre, G. (2022, March 22). Russia's wars in Chechnya offer a grim warning of what could be in Ukraine. *NPR*. <https://www.npr.org/2022/03/12/1085861999/russias-wars-in-chechnya-offer-a-grim-warning-of-what-could-be-in-ukraine>.

¹⁵ OECD (2022). Disinformation and Russia's war of aggression against Ukraine: Threats and governance responses. *OECD Policy Responses on the Impacts of the War in Ukraine*. Paris: OECD Publishing. <https://doi.org/10.1787/37186bde-en>.

operation'¹⁶, but also as a so-called 'natural' continuation of World War II, or the 'Great Patriotic War', as known in Russian society. As a result, all the official statements and fake news on 'denazification'¹⁷ and 'de-satanisation'¹⁸ of Ukraine refers to a newly constructed and absurd kind of Russian ideology, namely 'Scientific Putinism', or as it is officially called 'Fundamentals of Russian Statehood'.¹⁹ The scratched and revisionist ideology snippets refer to an imagined (rather than evidence-based) historiography, to common Russian traditions and values, to Russia's position in the world, and to visions for the future. In this deeply clero-fascistic logic, the Orthodox religion and church are merged with the Russian nation and state, with the effect that the thusly constructed group is morally and spiritually superior compared to the 'other', and moreover must be defended against the 'other', mostly designated as the enemy. The reason for merging Orthodox religion and church with the nation and state lies in the concept of 'symphonia', which is rooted in the Byzantine Empire and calls for a 'symphonic', or coordinated commitment between state and church to reach material welfare and spiritual wellbeing at the same time.²⁰ So, after decades of the atheistic Soviet State Socialism, Orthodox religion and church have

- ¹⁶ Kolesnikov, A. (2023, April 10). How Putin's "Special Military Operation" Became a People's War. *Carnegie Politika*. <https://carnegieendowment.org/politika/89486>.
- ¹⁷ Kroeker, J. (2023, January). A war of narratives: Russia's disinformation abuses history. *New Eastern Europe*. <https://neweasterneurope.eu/2023/01/23/a-war-of-narratives-russias-disinformation-abuses-history/>.
- ¹⁸ As Aleksey Pavlov, assistant secretary of the security council of the Russian Federation, stated without any evidence, hundreds of sects were spread across Ukraine, where-as people had turned away from religious values. *The Guardian* (2022, October 26). Russia-Ukraine war at a glance: what we know on day 245 of the invasion. <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2022/oct/26/russia-ukraine-war-at-a-glance-what-we-know-on-day-245-of-the-invasion>. *Ukrainska Pravda* (2022, October 25). Russia's Security Council claims there are "hundreds of sects" in Ukraine and demands "desatanisation". <https://www.pravda.com.ua/eng/news/2022/10/25/7373464/>.
- ¹⁹ Kolesnikov, A. (2022, November 21). Scientific Putinism: Shaping Official Ideology in Russia. *Carnegie Politika*. <https://carnegieendowment.org/politika/88451>.
- ²⁰ L. N. Leustean (2011). The concept of symphonia in contemporary European Orthodoxy. *International Journal for the Study of the Christian Church*, 11(2-3), 188-202. https://www.researchgate.net/publication/233253396_The_concept_of_symphonia_in_contemporary_European_Orthodoxy.

been revitalised after the collapse of the USSR, and especially by Putin's system. As a result, Orthodox religion and church have regained their traditional importance, guaranteed by the Russian legislature. In 2009 a new law was passed for teaching 'history of religions'. Similar laws followed in 2012 and 2014 to silence civic protest (especially due to the annexation of Crimea) by reinforcing Orthodox church as a (traditional) hegemonic power and to enable legal proceedings against (alleged) offences of religious feelings.²¹ Parallel to the intimidation of the internal opposition, public sentiment was also raised against external opponents. For the first time since the end of the Cold War, Putin's Russia built its ideology on clear enemy stereotypes, leading to a new view of systematic war between imagined 'blocs'. This is no longer the constructive competition of countries that was the foundation of policymaking for a brief period after the collapse of the Soviet Union and the so-called end of history.²² External enemies according to this isolationist and paranoid ideology are primarily the decadent, immoral West. Internal enemies are mostly cosmopolitan, oppositional politicians, and civil society activists as well as LGBTQI+ representatives who are, according to such abstruse thinking, infiltrated by the West and therefore traitors to the pure Russian society and state.²³ As the Russian society has not yet experienced a democratic transition, meaning a system of checks and balances, tolerating the opposition, and negotiating around political decision-making, Putin could easily stop the 'pluralism by default' which had gone along with weakened state institutions under his predecessor Boris Yeltsin.²⁴ The following re-autocratisation process is based on Putin's ideology snippets — an arbitrary combination of Russian tsarism and Soviet totalitarian communism — embody counter-modernisation thinking, which

21 Cappelletti, F. (2019). *Russian-Western Relations*. Moscow: Moskovskij gosudarstvennyj institut meždunarodnyh otnošenij.

22 Stelzenmüller, C. (2022, November 4). The free world and its enemies: What Putin's war and China's global ambitions mean for us. *Brookings*. <https://www.brookings.edu/articles/the-free-world-and-its-enemies-what-putins-war-and-chinas-global-ambitions-mean-for-us/>.

23 Kolesnikov, A. (2022, November 21).

24 Snegovaya, M. (2023). Why Russia's Democracy Never Began. *Journal of Democracy*, 34(3), 105–18. <https://www.journalofdemocracy.org/articles/why-russias-democracy-never-began/>.

forms the opposite of the prosperity oriented (oligarch) stakeholders' interests of the 1990s. The Russian state of that decade was however far away from being democratic, nor relying on a free market system, as the new emerging businesses still remained dependent on the state. But the new businessmen or oligarchs 'found their interests closely intertwined with those of state officials' — until Putin's takeover²⁵. Under his reign a new anti-Western narrative in which the West's opposition to Russia's 'greatness' has started to spread through the Russian public. Additionally, it promotes revisionism as well as the 'Great Patriotic War', which might not have ended according to this fatal narrative.²⁶ Such paranoid phantasms severely contradict any kind of building up civil society activities as well as liberal-democratic structures, and of course a liberal market and economic growth. Instead, paranoia, as one aspect of Arendt's violence definition, feeds self-isolation — and in the end self-destruction, ironically self-prepared with restrictions in all aspects of life.

3 Legitimising all restrictions in civilian, political, economic, and cultural life

Instead of opening up to international exchange, as was also the case after the collapse of the Soviet Union in the 1990s, the deeply paranoid 'historical *super Troika* of ... Russia's foreign policy' proves to be the basis for such horror scenarios. This Troika includes a 'fear of external threats', furthermore a 'dispersed economic and political inefficiency', meaning all efforts for nothing, and finally the 'focus on securing citizens' support — by all means, ranging from propaganda to political repressions'.²⁷ So, instead of starting an open communication and exchange process with Russian citizens, they shall be on the contrary stirred up and mobilised against imagined enemies. What follows is a radicalisation and

²⁵ Snegovaya, M. (2023).

²⁶ Alesina, M., Cappelletti, F. (2022, August 2). The End of History, Delayed: The EU's Role in Defining the Post-War Order. *ModernDiplomacy*. <https://modern diplomacy.eu/2022/08/02/the-end-of-history-delayed-then-eus-role-in-defining-the-post-war-order/>.

²⁷ Alesina, M., Cappelletti, F. (2022, August 2).

personalisation of the Russian regime which has taken root under Putin. A new institutionalised order gave way to particular interests of the autocrat Putin and his inner ruling circle, a ‘power elite’, consisting of ‘political, economy and military men’²⁸, in reference to C. Wright Mills. With the constitutional reform in 2020, Putin succeeded in extending the limit of his presidency to 2036.²⁹ In his age and health condition this means securing a lifetime ruling through monopolising political, economic, and military power. In parallel, freedom of speech has continuously eroded, while increasing media censorship was accompanied by celebrating the personal cult around Putin in state-controlled media, either owned by the state or state-loyal oligarchs. Although presidential and parliamentary elections, accompanied by manipulation and censorship, do take place in Russia as a kind of democratic façade,³⁰ a consolidated democratic culture is still missing due to actual, isolationist restrictions and to an authoritarian heritage of the century-old tsarism and decades-long Soviet system, where liberal-democratic values and habits could hardly come to life. And when civil protest arises, its protagonists must fear for their lives as — among many others — the case of the influential oppositional politician Alexei Navalny shows. With the aim to neutralise, or eliminate popular and far-reaching oppositional voices, Navalny was poisoned in August 2020 and, after his return to Russia, was imprisoned and sentenced to 30.5 years imprisonment, which means he might not be freed during Putin’s lifetime.³¹ By that, an

²⁸ Mills, C. W. (1972). *The Power Elite*. London/Oxford/New York: Oxford University Press, p. 276.

²⁹ Anderson, E., Sheftalovich, Z. (2020, July 1). Putin wins right to extend his rule until 2036 in landslide vote. *Politico*. <https://www.politico.eu/article/vladimir-putin-wins-right-to-extend-his-russia-rule-until-2036-in-landslide-vote/#:~:text=Constitutional%20amendments%20allow%20Russian%20president%20to%20run%20two%20more%20consecutive%20times.&text=Surprise!,extending%20his%20rule%20until%202036>.

³⁰ Kim, L. (2022, October 30). Why Isn’t Russia a Democracy? The country wasn’t pre-ordained to despotism or a clash with the West. *Foreign Policy*. <https://foreignpolicy.com/2022/10/30/russia-democracy-putin-soviet-union-cold-war/>.

³¹ Sauer, P. (2023, April 14). Alexei Navalny in ‘critical’ situation after possible poisoning, says ally. *The Guardian*. <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2023/apr/14/alexei-navalny-in-critical-situation-after-possible-poisoning-says-ally>. Knight, M., Lau, C. (2023, August 11). Kremlin critic Alexei Navalny slams Russia’s ‘corrupt’ elite for bringing Putin

example was set with regards to all other oppositional and civil society activism.

As often happens in corrupt political systems and also, according to Arendt, the violent system under Putin, there is a need for consistent loyalty within his inner circle of power. This loyalty or taciturnity however bears the problem that this isolationist system is becoming isolated from necessary feedback and information which is not only relevant for democratic development, but also for economic growth and prosperity. In their study, the political experts Andrei Kolesnikov and Denis Volkov interviewed 23 leading economists and businessmen and received clear insight into a mostly disillusioned picture of the then current situation in Russia in 2021, before the war against Ukraine. The biggest challenge for them all, as Kolesnikov and Volkov summarised, was ‘the state’s excessive interference in the economy and indeed all other aspects of life, creating an over centralised and ineffective administrative state. This overcentralization, coupled with constraints on the media and other outlets for freedom of speech, means that the Russian authorities get little feedback and consequently have at best a blurry picture of what life is really like for average Russians’.³²

Although all of them seemed to be aware of that dilemma, they neglected to become active to change the situation, either because of confidence in their then current situation or because of fear of losing their position and prestige³³ — and maybe even life. As the suspicious deaths of (for now, eight) leading Gazprom managers probably show, giving honest feedback might be dangerous for the sake of someone’s own life. All of them had reportedly not agreed with starting and continuing the war against Ukraine³⁴ —

to Power. *CNN*. <https://edition.cnn.com/2023/08/11/europe/navalny-criticize-russia-elites-intl-hnk/index.html>.

³² Kolesnikov, A., Volkov, D. (2021, November 24). The Coming Deluge: Russia’s Looming Lost Decade of Unpaid Bills and Economic Stagnation. *Carnegie Politika*. <https://carnegieendowment.org/2021/11/24/coming-deluge-russia-s-looming-lost-decade-of-unpaid-bills-and-economic-stagnation-pub-85852>.

³³ Kolesnikov, A., Volkov, D. (2021, November 24).

³⁴ Kottasová, I. (2022, September 2). At least eight Russian businessmen have died in apparent suicide or accidents in just six months. *CNN*. <https://edition.cnn.com/2022/09/02/business/russian-oligarchs-deaths-intl/index.html>.

for sure not only because of such obvious irrationality causing enormous destruction and suffering, but also because of the consequences for Russia itself, as further international sanctions have followed the ones caused by the annexation of Crimea in 2014.

As the ‘feedback system’ is being destroyed due to ‘centralization, the repression of media freedom, and censorship’³⁵, visions and innovations for further economic, cultural, social, and even political proceedings can hardly arise. On the contrary, being himself a former KGB agent, Putin has been consulted by the Russian secret service for years. As the investigative journalist Catherine Belton submits, even the secret service has started to tell Putin what he wants to hear, as was the case before the so-called ‘special operation’ in Ukraine.³⁶ As such, the preparation of this war followed the principle of ‘ad hoc’³⁷, meaning a vertical ruling technique,³⁷ without any broader exchange and consultation within public administration.

The ‘Russian power vertical’ is principally based on public unity, while controversies have been hitherto clarified ‘behind closed doors and moderated by the senior leadership’.³⁸ In case of disagreement or disloyalty, officials have been removed from their positions. By that vertical practice, all public bodies from the Duma to the ministries, from state media to regional authorities, are directly interlinked with the presidential office, while information exchange has hardly taken place on a horizontal level, where misinformation and mistrust prevail.

³⁵ Kolesnikov, A., Volkov, D. (2021, November 24).

³⁶ Niederndorfer, F. (2022, September 25). Russland-Kennerin Belton: ‘Palastrevolte gegen Putin ist möglich. *Der Standard*. <https://www.derstandard.at/story/2000139363652/russland-kennerin-belton-palastrevolte-gegen-putin-ist-moeglich>. Belton, C., Szyszkowitz, T. (2022, October 1). Putin’s Roots in KGB and the Road to War in Ukraine. Lecture within Vienna Humanities Festival. *IWM*. <https://www.iwm.at/event/putins-roots-in-kgb-and-the-road-to-war-in-ukraine>.

³⁷ Maggard, A. (2023, April 4). Russia’s Wagner Group is a feature not a bug of the Putin regime. *Atlantic Council*. <https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/blogs/ukrainealert/russias-wagner-group-is-a-feature-not-a-bug-of-the-putin-regime/>.

³⁸ Busygina, I. (2022, June 15). Moscow is Trapped: Centre-regional Relations in Russia After the Invasion of Ukraine. *ZOIS Spotlight*. <https://www.zois-berlin.de/en/publications/zois-spotlight/moscow-is-trapped-centre-regional-relations-in-russia-after-the-invasion-of-ukraine>.

As the war against Ukraine lacks the needed success and victory, Putin appears to be distracted by military issues so much that on the civilian side, for the first time, public debates have arisen without being immediately ‘solved’ by removal.³⁹ Such contradictions also appeared in the ‘centre-regional relations to Moscow’⁴⁰. From its power logic, the Kremlin must ‘preserve its dominant position in the country’s territorial structure’ and ‘only allow limited forms of economic, political and social development in the regions’⁴¹. So, by preventing horizontal exchange and cooperation the centre secures its dominance.

However, the international sanctions against Russia and the increasing lack of resources lead to the necessity of horizontal cooperation and decentralisation which as such is not allowed by the political system.⁴²

As the political scientist Fabian Burkhardt has pointed out in his 2022 text, such autocratic and adhococratic leadership bears the risk of rebellion when a forged war lacks the expected success. A rebellion poses the biggest threat to such a war and furthermore isolationist regime, either because some parts of the ruling elite have not been involved in the decision-making or because of the war’s failure.⁴³ Catherine Belton also suspects that a defeat of the Russian army in the symbolic Donbas in Eastern Ukraine might lead to the end of Putin’s presidency and power.⁴⁴

The volatile developments of 22–23 June 2023, during which Yevgeny Prigozhin’s short rebellion and the sudden stop of his paramilitary Wagner Group’s march to Moscow have just confirmed these assumptions for now. Yevgeny Prigozhin and his mercenaries have been ordered to and paid by Putin to fight in Ukraine but refused to submit to the Ministry of Defense and regular Russian army. On the contrary, Prigozhin accused them of having attacked his troops, which also seemed to be the main

³⁹ Busygina, I. (2022, June 15).

⁴⁰ Pertsev, A. (2023, February 21). Russia Has Lost Its Decisionmaking Centres to the War. *Carnegie Politika*. <https://carnegieendowment.org/politika/89073>.

⁴¹ Pertsev, A. (2023, February 21).

⁴² Pertsev, A. (2023, February 21).

⁴³ Burkhardt, F. (2022, July 8). Das System Putin. Regimepersonalisierung in Russland und der Krieg gegen die Ukraine. *Aus Politik und Zeitgeschichte*. <https://www.bpb.de/shop/zeitschriften/apuz/krieg-in-europa-2022/510256/das-system-putin/>.

⁴⁴ Niederndorfer, F. (2022, September 25).

reason for his short-lived rebellion.⁴⁵ Its immediate and long-lasting effect is the damage to Putin's image of having everything under control.⁴⁶ It seems that the prospect political analyst Timothy Snyder gave one year ago — that Putin's power is weakening in the course of military losses — is slowly becoming true.⁴⁷ More suppression and aggression against internal and external so-called enemies might be expected, at least in the short run.

4 Homogenising the Russian public by defeating pluralism

Except for spontaneous demonstrations mostly in Moscow, no mass anti-war protests have taken place so far. This is not surprising due to the isolationist and totalitarian characteristics of Putinism. First, even calling the war by its name — instead of the official term 'special military operation' — has been sanctioned from the beginning. Therefore, all signs of protest have been suppressed with protestors immediately sentenced to imprisonment to scare off all others.⁴⁸

It seems that all current developments embody the learnings Putin's system took from the hitherto largest Russian protest movement 'for fair elections' in the years from 2011 to 2013. Coincidentally, this protest movement began before the Euromaidan in Ukraine (2013–2014) and seemed to lose importance after the Russian annexation of Crimea in 2014. As it

⁴⁵ BBC News (2023, July 6). What is Russia's Wagner mercenary group and where is its leader, Prigozhin?. <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-60947877>. Doyle, K., Mohamed, H., Hatuqa, D. (2023, June 24). Russia-Ukraine updates: Wagner boss orders troops to pull back. *Aljazeera*. <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/liveblog/2023/6/24/russia-ukraine-live-news-russia-accuses-wagner-chief-of-mutiny>.

⁴⁶ Skrypchenko, M. (2023, June 25). The Wagner rebellion revealed Putin's weakness. *Al Jazeera*. <https://www.aljazeera.com/opinions/2023/6/25/the-wagner-rebellion-revealed-putins-weakness>. Prokopenko, A. (2023, July 4). Band-Aid Politics. How the Kremlin is Dealing With the Fallout from Prigozhin's Mutiny. *Carnegie Politika*. https://carnegieendowment.org/politika/90120?utm_source=rssemail&utm_medium=email&mkt_tok=ODEzLVhZVS00MjIAAAGMxOo-5YKpt4RRh8AqyesRiYjkyWVEjtpHQiVzNsHHY-DWbmuE4AwM5snvEogiVOh-YU-kC4jHdG_cpf80AYWI5llgdEqY4gabZ135WLnQ91Q.

⁴⁷ Snyder, T. (2022, July 20). Putin's rule is weakening. So what comes next? *Substack*. <https://snyder.substack.com/p/putins-rule-is-weakening>.

⁴⁸ Burkhardt, F. (2022, July 8).

is often observed, autocratic regimes need a so-called external threat or conflict to suppress inner protests and conflicts, and thereby homogenise public discourse. Broader oppositional protests followed in 2019 which were, as usual, quickly suppressed.⁴⁹

Soon after the start of the Russian war of aggression against Ukraine, 181 media outlets were blocked, 150 criminal proceedings opened, and 2,100 persons sentenced to heavy fines due to alleged ‘discrimination’ of the Russian army. As a result, more than 500,000 Russians have fled their country — a ‘historic exodus’.⁵⁰ Many of them are younger generations fleeing for the sake of their own lives, as opposing the regime has proved to be dangerous.⁵¹ Official opinion polls, however, show a high popularity of Putin — in his fourth term which began in 2018 — so that more than 70 percent might vote for Putin in the upcoming presidential elections in 2024.⁵²

In case of Putin leaving office prematurely — for whatever reason — there is little cause for hope of democratisation since democratic and pluralistic opponents are either imprisoned or in exile, while the Kremlin seems to totally control the information sphere as one crucial part of hybrid warfare.

5 Forging a ‘hybrid war’

Apart from conventional warfare as with Russia’s invasion of Crimea in 2014 and war of aggression against the whole Ukraine, ‘electronic warfare’ is, as Zsolt Haig points out, gaining increasing importance in ‘military operations’. It is defined as ‘military action involving the use

49 Tsvetkova, M., Stolyarov, G. (2019, August 9). Thousands defy crackdown in Moscow’s biggest protest for years. *Reuters*. <https://www.reuters.com/article/uk-russia-politics-protests-idUKKCN1UZ2EC>.

50 Ebel, F., Ilyushina, M. (2023, February 13). Russians abandon wartime Russia in historic exodus. *Washington Post*. <https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/2023/02/13/russia-diaspora-war-ukraine/>.

51 Kim, L. (2023, March 19). Putin’s War on Young People. *Foreign Policy*. <https://foreign-policy.com/2023/03/19/russia-youth-culture-putin-migration/>.

52 Martyniuk, J., Motyl, A. (2023, March 22). How much can we trust Russian opinion polls on the war? *EuroObserver*. <https://euobserver.com/opinion/156857>.

of electromagnetic and directed energy to control the electromagnetic spectrum or to attack the enemy'.⁵³ The three main areas of electronic warfare are: 1) 'electronic warfare support measures (or electronic warfare support)'; 2) 'electronic countermeasures (or electronic attack)'; and 3) 'electronic protection'.⁵⁴ With the invention of the internet in the context of Cold War,⁵⁵ cyberspace is — apart from its boom in everyday life — crucial to modern warfare. As a result, using 'the electromagnetic spectrum and cyberspace as a specific information environment' and 'operational domain' has become 'fundamental to military operations'.⁵⁶ Cyberspace operations include external ones, specifically offensive attacks and exploitation, and internal ones, such as defence (DCO) and security (DODIN).⁵⁷

Russia's 'hybrid warfare'⁵⁸ is therefore based on 'an interplay of fusion of conventional as well as unconventional instruments of power and tools of subversion'. Cyber attacks are combined with kinetic operations 'in a synchronised manner to exploit the vulnerabilities of an antagonist and achieve synergetic effects'.⁵⁹ All efforts in the political, diplomatic, economic, and bureaucratic areas as well as military, technology, media and even para-state and criminal fields are put together to harm, damage, or even destroy the proclaimed enemy,⁶⁰ namely Ukraine.

⁵³ Haig, Z. (2015). Electronic Warfare in Cyberspace. *Security & Defence Quarterly*, 7(2), 22–35. <https://doi.org/10.5604/23008741.1189275>.

⁵⁴ Haig, Z. (2015), p. 23.

⁵⁵ Tarnoff, B. (2016, July 15). How the internet was invented. *The Guardian*. <https://www.theguardian.com/technology/2016/jul/15/how-the-internet-was-invented-1976-arpa-kahn-cerf>.

⁵⁶ Haig, Z. (2015), p. 26.

⁵⁷ Kerttunen, M. (2023, June 24). The Absolute Ideal: Military Cyber Capabilities in War and Society. *Working Paper SWP*. https://www.swp-berlin.org/publications/products/arbeitspapiere/Kerttunen_Military_Cyber_Capabilities_in_War_and_Society_Working_Paper.pdf.

⁵⁸ Bachmann, S. D., Gunneriusson, H. (2015). Russia's Hybrid Warfare in the East. The Integral Nature of the Information Sphere. *Georgetown Journal of International Affairs*, 16, 198–211. https://papers.ssrn.com/sol3/papers.cfm?abstract_id=2670527.

⁵⁹ Baker, M. S., Baker, J., Burkle, F. M. (2023). Russia's Hybrid Warfare in Ukraine Threatens Both Healthcare & Health Protections Provided by International Law. *Ann Glob Health*, 89(1). <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC9881440/pdf/agh-89-1-4022.pdf>.

⁶⁰ Baker, M. S., Baker, J., Burkle, F. M. (2023).

As a matter of fact, Russia's 'intelligence preparation' of the war of aggression against Ukraine began long before 2022. Intensive cyber attacks started in 2014 and additionally intensified since November 2021.⁶¹ Parallel to positioning military troops at the border to Ukraine in 2022, 'Russian phishing efforts attempted to gain access to emails and networks, and subsequently sensitive information'.⁶² On 23 February, the day before the war, Russia's intelligence service started 'destructive data-wiping attacks' against the Ukrainian government, financial, IT, and energy sector.⁶³ The following kinetic military attacks soon made clear that they followed the same goal as the electronic warfare, namely to completely destroy the Ukrainian infrastructure. For that reason, even civilians, social organisations and hospitals have been targeted, without any relevance for tactical operations, but only for mass destruction.⁶⁴ Neither the military operations nor the cyberspace offensive operations have for now reached their goals. As Ukraine has been the target of numerous Russian cyberwar activities since the 2010s, it was broadly supported by Western governments and cybersecurity companies to build up a well-developed and resilient cyber security system, based on appropriate legislation, policy, institutions, competencies, and skilled workforce. The international cooperation in supporting Ukraine as well as its outcome of being resilient proved to be good practice for now. To develop appropriate counter strategies, Western states are already studying the Kremlin's cyber attacks and subversive operations, as it is necessary for every countermeasure to understand the violent logic of Putinism.⁶⁵ While it is not possible to achieve 100% security, Western states might cooperate in developing common strategies to strengthen cyber resilience through shared exercise and establish a common cyber threat intelligence. Whereas, according to Hannah Arendt, violence leads to fear, isolation, and, in the worst case, to terror and war, liberal counter strategies to overcome violence are based on Arendt's concept of pluralist power.

⁶¹ Kerttunen, M. (2023, June 24).

⁶² Kerttunen, M. (2023, June 24), p. 37.

⁶³ Kerttunen, M. (2023, June 24), p. 37.

⁶⁴ Kerttunen, M. (2023, June 24), p. 43.

⁶⁵ Baker, M. S., Baker, J., Burkle, F. M. (2023).

Liberal counter strategies in accordance to Arendt's principle of 'power'

In clear distinction to isolationist violence, Hannah Arendt has defined 'power' as highly pluralist and inclusive, formed by human interactions in the so-called 'space of appearance'.⁶⁶ This space arises when people interact with each other by acting and speaking, thereby appearing and consequently creating a spatial in-between.⁶⁷ In that sense, power does not belong to anyone, but rather emerges out of open communication and diverse interaction. It forms the basis of civic engagement and political action, whereas the purpose of political action and, furthermore, politics and policy is freedom.

In contrast to other spaces that people create, the space of appearance does not survive the actuality of its creation but disappears together with the end of human interaction. Arendt thus understands the space of appearance as a space 'which lights up as an in-between every time people are acting and speaking together, only to suddenly darken again when they disperse'⁶⁸.

Consequently, Arendt defines the public sphere as a space which is created by people communicating with each other. This public space is based (like the space of appearance before it) on interpersonal interactions, meaning acting and speaking, whereby it does not lose its basic character even in institutionalised form. The space of appearance, the associated public space, and power are in an interdependent relationship. Power is herein characterised by its potential character, changeability, immeasurability, and unreliability. With the end of this interaction, power also evaporates.⁶⁹

This process is intangible because, unlike the storable and ready-to-use means of violence, power exists through human communication. Not only an individual, but also a group can have power — if it sticks together.

⁶⁶ Arendt, H. (2003). *Vita activa oder vom tätigen Leben*. München: Piper Taschenbuch Verlag (1st edition 1967), p. 250.

⁶⁷ Arendt, H. (2003). *Macht und Gewalt*, p. 36.

⁶⁸ Arendt, H. (2003). *Vita activa oder vom tätigen Leben*, pp. 250, 259.

⁶⁹ Arendt, H. (2003). *Vita activa oder vom tätigen Leben*, pp. 251, 252, 263.

When a person is claimed to ‘have the power’, it means that other people empower the person ‘to act on their behalf’ — if they support and legitimise this person.⁷⁰ Otherwise the legitimacy and power just disappears. So, referring to Arendt, we define Europe’s public space as a *space of appearance*, and further as the basis for liberal counter strategies to totalitarian attacks against Europe:

1 Strengthening pluralistic dialogue in Europe

This strategy first and foremost refers to the most important principle, which is constant communication. The common dialogue includes the European integration as well as the enlargement process to a common *European space of appearance*. Russia clearly sees the EU as a threat and enemy to its autocratic system. The Russian disinformation or propaganda campaigns should be actively challenged. In the logic of hybrid wars, the information space, namely the propaganda sphere, plays an important role. As a result, the information space, misused for hybrid warfare, must not be left out by European counter strategies, but rather filled with pluralistic views in order to minimise the public impact of the Kremlin’s propaganda. As a matter of fact, the ‘us’ can only exist in a plural way which means that continuous communication leads to mutual understanding. Arendt’s definition of public freedom lies in communication which leads to pluralist power.⁷¹

2 Fostering democratic engagement and participation in Europe

This strategy is based on the empowerment to liberal self-defence on the individual and collective level by formal and non-formal education. The best remedy against feelings of powerlessness and stagnation is to create space for self-determined action and political participation. For that

⁷⁰ Arendt, H. (2003). *Macht und Gewalt*, p.45.

⁷¹ Heidlberger, B. (2021, September 5). Wie aktuell ist Hanna[h] Arendt? Der Sinn von Politik ist Freiheit. *Zentrum Liberale Moderne (LIBMOD)*. <https://libmod.de/wie-aktuell-ist-hanna-arendt-der-sinn-von-politik-ist-freiheit-heidlberger/>.

a common European narrative should be developed, ideally in exchange with Europeans, with the questions of what it means for them to be European, to enjoy the freedom of speech, etc. At the end of such a participatory process a common definition and thus narrative of the ‘European way of life’ might be reached. As is well known, democracy does not only consist of regular ballots, but of continuous citizen participation. Participation also creates freedom to have a say in what is essential for responsible and active citizens, and at the same time it strengthens liberal democracy. It is therefore important to create low-threshold and skillfully coordinated participation opportunities and platforms, both onsite and online, to use participatory democracy to counter standstill and powerlessness. In this participation process the individual feeling of freedom and the associated trust in the political system of being able to represent citizens’ interests strengthen democracy in the long term.

3 Building up a participatory counter narrative in Europe

‘What is liberal Europe to me’, might be the title of a new Europe-wide participatory campaign which could include awareness raising and capacity building at the same time.

Interestingly a global opinion poll (European Council on Foreign Relations 2023), conducted from December 2022 to January 2023,⁷² showed that the European public views have rather converged than diverged. Paradoxically, the current war of aggression against Ukraine has somehow led to agreement among principally ideological opponents, among various nationalists and liberal cosmopolitans, that Putin’s imperialism poses a security threat for all of Europe which needs to find appropriate answers. And the ‘strongest supporters of the Ukrainian struggle are the bureaucrats in Brussels’⁷³. The Conference on the Future of Europe

⁷² Ash, T. G., Krastev, I., Leonard, M. (2023, February 22). United West, Divided from the Rest: Global Public Opinion One Year into Russia’s. War on Ukraine. Policy Brief. *European Council on Foreign Relations*, p. 2. <https://ecfr.eu/publication/united-west-divided-from-the-rest-global-public-opinion-one-year-into-russias-war-on-ukraine/>.

⁷³ I. Krastev, M. Leonard (2023, March 16). Russia’s War Has Unified Europe’s Opposing Sides: The invasion of Ukraine has finally reconciled Europe’s liberals and nationalists.

has proved to be a first step in the direction of involving citizens to discuss European issues on a broader level. Many further efforts for such exchange in onsite or online form are needed, also including citizens in EU member states and candidates as well as EU neighbourhood states.

4 Restoring citizens' trust in Europe and its institutions

Corruption is simply poison for democracy because corruption scandals fundamentally shake people's trust in the system. And distrust thrives where there is a lack of information. This is why transparency is so important after the centre's confidence in parliament and government has been massively shaken in recent years, as in several EU member states such as Hungary and Poland, but also Austria to some extent and recently even in the European Parliament in Brussels. What is clearly needed in this regard is clear, unambiguous legislation (including the abolition of official secrecy) and consistent implementation. After all, freedom of information, transparent party coffers, and transparency about every tax euro used are helping to make up ground again after the loss of trust in politics, partly on the EU level and partly on national levels.

5 Positioning Europe as a global player — and producer

In a multipolar system, Europe has to clarify its position to other global players such as the United States, China, India, Iran, and many more, and strengthen its global influence as a trustworthy and well-respected partner in international relations and as a trading partner and producer in the global economic field. If Europe does not want to take a fundamentally different path from the US on questions of its relationship with China, global trade policy, Iran, or even arms control treaties and on whose military support it can count worldwide, it should clarify for what it stands and clearly communicate that to European citizens and possible international partners. Such a clear positioning of the relationship

would also serve multilateral relations especially between Europe and the US and offer less opportunity for external weakening of the transatlantic partnership.

6 Reaching energy autonomy and independent energy supplies through renewable energy

As energy exports are an important economic factor for Russia, Europe should therefore stop importing gas and oil from Russia as soon as possible. Some countries, such as Sweden, Latvia, and Estonia, are already showing this by investing in and using renewables. In order to ensure stability throughout Europe, the EU is called upon to promote security of energy supply not only within the Union, but also in the immediate vicinity and in the (potential) accession candidates. In this way, apart from climate protection, resilience strategies against Russia's ideologically intriguing influence on the economy and politics of the countries concerned have to be developed and implemented.

All this should go hand in hand with appropriate climate policy measures, especially if they are intended to achieve more efficient use of energy. This also means that credible and expertise-based climate diplomacy or climate foreign policy must become Europe's foreign policy priority in the long term, because strict rules and high standards only in Europe will not protect humanity in Europe and worldwide from the effects of climate change.

7 Developing a common sustainable European foreign and security policy

The brutal Russian aggression against Ukraine and, at the same time, European security and democracy has triggered the loudest security policy debate in Europe since the Cold War. A common security and defence policy seems more urgent than ever. Instead, common security and defence discussions at the European level continue to be driven by domestic policy impulses from the member states. In order to achieve the goal of a geopolitically strong Europe, it is the task of each EU member

state to ensure that it is not a target for undesired influence by third parties. The current Sky Shield initiative among some EU and NATO member states appears to be a step in the right direction. Additionally, a European wide resilient communication, mass and social media security system against propaganda and manipulation attempts from abroad is also deeply in need (e.g. the ban of ‘Russia Today’, 5G regulations, and current investigations regarding Telegraph and TikTok).⁷⁴

8 Stabilising sustainable networks to oppositional civil society in Russia and abroad

Since Putin’s system does not include, nor represent, each citizen in Russia, the currently oppressed and silenced political opposition and civil society must not be forgotten. Instead, stable and sustainable networks to liberal-democratic oppositional politicians and activists have to be built up within and outside Russia. It is however important to build up such networks against the background of common liberal values to avoid having a tsarist, or ‘Great’ Russia with several satellite states in the close neighbourhood. While a common narrative and liberal-democratic value system is necessary to further involve EU citizens to strengthen democracy, liberal-democratically oriented cooperation partners in and outside Russia are needed for good neighbourhood relations, even if this might be long in the future. Although the Russian regime for now seems to be stable, the option of a regime and system change should not be overlooked, for the time when the ‘window of opportunity’ might open in the future. These networks will also be relevant for supporting the investigation work of the International Criminal Court in The Hague against accused Russian war criminals such as Vladimir Putin and others.

⁷⁴ Cappelletti, F. (2023). Towards a New European Security Architecture. *ELF Study 6*. https://liberalforum.eu/wp-content/uploads/2023/06/BOURCHIER_ELF_New_European_Security.pdf.

Prospects of a unified pluralist Europe

The main aim of all liberal counter strategies should be to build up a common pluralist Europe which proves to be a politically and economically independent and thus a well established global player, resilient to any future scheming infiltrations or totalitarian-driven attacks. As often experienced in previous years, the current polycrisis might serve as a chance to strengthen Europe in a way it has never been done before. The current tragic war in Ukraine and all the far-reaching consequences for Europe might not only have led to a *Zeitenwende* from a holistic security point of view, but also to a liberal reconception of Europe as a multi-faceted space of appearance, as a sustainable and resilient democracy project and finally global player.

‘United in pluralism’ might be the current motto of a new attempt building up the United States of Europe, with the prospect of soon including the states of the Western Balkans and EU Neighbourhood countries — and Ukraine. Maybe it is this tragic war which gives Europe a new reason to unify and facilitate integration within and outside the EU through enlargement efforts. European scepticism of the last decades consisted of the critique that the EU only embodies a technocratic organisation lacking emotions. Now, in the context of Putin’s aggression war against Ukraine it has become more than evident what European spirit means.

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Paradoxically, the current war of aggression against Ukraine has somehow led to agreement among principally ideological opponents, among various nationalists and liberal cosmopolitans, that Putin's imperialism poses a security threat for all of Europe which needs to find appropriate answers.

SILVIA NADJIVAN | LUKAS SUSTALA

Putin, Liberalism, and the Struggle Between East and West

RENATA GRAVINA

Since the outbreak of Russia's war of aggression against Ukraine, President Vladimir Putin has enhanced references to what he considers to be both the hypocrisy and the danger of the democratic façade of the American-driven liberal system; Putin's invective versus the liberal order appears as *the other side* of the fight against the *collective West*. The Russian President's narrative developed around an evolving struggle-defence against that *collective West* supposed defiance, and versus the liberal model as a whole. *Western* is perceived by Russia as the bridgehead of a democratic export as well as a destabiliser of Russia's foreign neighbour. Since the early 2000s the passages of the Russian-Western Euro-Atlantic fight have been marked by the 2003–2005 coloured revolutions, the 2007 Munich conference, the 2011 Arab Spring, and eventually the 2014 Dignity Revolution, as a prologue to the current Russian-Ukrainian war, seen as unhealed. The chapter, starting from current events, will then focus on some passages. Among the topical moments of Vladimir Putin's explicit statement opposed to the liberal order is 2019 when the Russian President defined liberalism as obsolete.

After analysing some features of the *Putinist* propaganda, taking into account the defence/offence elements in Russian foreign policy, or the parallel construction of a post-Soviet ideology for the use and (even forced) consumption of the Russian citizenry (*Rossiyajnini*), the chapter attempts to suggest some ways to break free from the Russian official ideological impasse. To reveal the lying nature of Russian propaganda it

seems helpful to stress the Russian public's use of history, and reaffirm the inescapability of a liberal international order made urgent by the chaotic evolution of the state's behaviour in the international community. If the freedom of expression in the context of the rule of law is one of the most commonly prized points of the liberal order, then one possible response fielded by the international community to the challenges of Putin's anti-liberal policies could be to target the Russian diaspora, as an old method of soft power which has become more relevant than ever, given the increasing number of migrants from Russia since the start of the Russian-Ukrainian war. The diaspora, indeed, is able to leverage Russian society eager for freedom. In fact, Russian dissent can act directly (through NGOs) and indirectly from the outside (through the media and within public grievances), contributing to a slow mobilisation of the slumbering Russian society.

New Ideology

The chapter aims to show how Putin's 20-plus years in power developed around interweaving (which came to an impasse with the war) between a two-faced attitude of attack and defence related to the international relations with the West (or Europe and the United States)¹. Moreover, the chapter intends to give a glimpse into how Putin's Russia built a new internal attitude around the revival of a mysticism about Russia.

Following and responding to the collapse of the Soviet system, the Putin-led narrative extols the grandeur of an *eternal Russia* in the face of an *aggressive and decadent West* and serves the geopolitical interests of a dictatorial regime². Through the eternal Russia narrative, the Russian war of aggression against Ukraine has been justified by the Russian

¹ Russia and the West are also linked through the history of mutual representations, in which the idea of imperial Europe was the prodrome of the entire West. See Kimmage, M. (2020). *The Abandonment of the West*. New York: Basic Books.

² Werth, N. (2022). *Poutine historien en chef*. Paris: Gallimard.

government³ referring on the *Russkyi mir*⁴ (the *Russian World*), specifically the triadic unity between Russia, Belarus and Ukraine; that misrepresentation regained value with Putin's era⁵. Putin and his entourage are running the war against the purported universality and rightness of the American-led collective West claiming to intervene in the near abroad of the Russian sphere⁶. As the other side of the fight against the West, the Russian invective versus the liberal order is cultural as well as political (according to Richard Sakwa 'Russian security concerns thus became part of a broader cultural alienation')⁷. The collective West liberal order actions are seen by the Russian institutions as a reaction to the provocations initiated by the American-led liberal world after the collapse of the USSR⁸. In the official text of the Russian Federation president's speech to the Duma one year after the military invasion of Ukraine, Putin stated: 'we were open, sincerely ready for a constructive dialogue with the West, we said and insisted that both Europe and the world as a whole needed an indivisible security system that was the same for all states, and for many years we suggested to our partners that we discuss this idea together and work on it. But in response, they

- 3 Preceded, as an ideological support, by the publication of the Putin's article: Putin, V.V. (2021, July 21). Stattya Volodimira Putina «Pro istorichnu ednist rosiyan ta ukrainsiv». *Kremlin*. <http://kremlin.ru/events/president/news/66182>
- 4 Bennett, O. (ed) (2020). *Cultural Diplomacy and International Cultural Relations*, vol. I. London: Taylor & Francis, ch. 3.
- 5 Shortly before the invasion, the Kremlin had presented a list of demands to the United States in order to ensure compliance with the principle of 'indivisible security'. See Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation (2022, December 17). *Dogovor mezhdru Rossyskoy Federatsiyey i Soyedinennymi Shtatami Ameriki o garantiyakh bezopasnosti*. https://mid.ru/ru/foreign_policy/rso/nato/1790818/.
- 6 Bennett, O. (ed) (2020).
- 7 Sakwa, R. (2022, April 13). Putin's revolt against liberal modernity. *The Loop — European Centre Policy and Research*. <https://theloop.ecpr.eu/russian-alienation-and-putins-revolt-against-liberal-modernity/>.
- 8 Some authors demonstrated, using documents on the foreign policy of the USSR, that more than a collapse it was the unwillingness of the Soviet authorities to keep these states in the orbit of socialism which ended the Soviet-American confrontation. See i.e. Ayriyan, R.S. (2019). *Revolyutsii 1989 g. I Okonchaniye kholodnoy Voyny. Novoye proshloye* 3, 232–237. <https://cyberleninka.ru/article/n/revolyutsii-1989-g-i-okonchanie-holodnoy-voyny-r>.

received an indistinct or hypocritical reaction. These are words. But there have also been specific actions: the expansion of NATO to our borders, the creation of new areas for missile defence in Europe and Asia'⁹. The global reach of the US has been a perennial topic in Russian political discourse. Nikolai Patrushev and Sergei Naryshkin, the Russian's Secretary of the Security Council and the Head of the Foreign Intelligence Service (SVR) respectively, agreed with the idea that Russia was 'the only obstacle to the realisation of American plans to take full control of the deposits and transport corridors in the Black Sea, Caucasus, and Caspian Sea regions' because 'it retained the military capacity to inflict unacceptable damage on the United States. ... American strategists saw the solution to this difficulty in a final collapse of the system of state power and subsequent dismemberment of our country'¹⁰. 'us and their obedient allies have increasingly resorted to advancing their interests by force at the expense of multilateral negotiations. They are making blatant attempts to destabilise the situation in most regions of the world'¹¹. Eastern/Western international relations are explained by Russian propaganda through the prism of a permanent attack to the Russian territorial sovereignty (that leads also to cultural isolation¹²). As stated Sakwa: 'the defensive (Western) actions of one party were interpreted as threatening by the other, provoking an action-reaction cycle that in the end tipped over into the abyss'¹³. The 'historical super troika' of the Russia's foreign policy consists of fears of external threats, dispersed economic and political inefficiency, and focuses on securing citizens' support, ranging from propaganda to political repressions¹⁴.

9 Putin, VV. (2023, February 21). Poslaniye Prezidenta Federalnomu Sobraniyu. *Kremlin*. <http://kremlin.ru/events/president/news/70565>.

10 N. Patrushev (2014, October 15). Vtoraya 'Kholodnaya'. *Rossiiskaya Gazeta*. rg.ru/2014/10/15/patrushev.html.

11 Naryshkin, S. (2019, September). Vystuplenie Direktora SVR Rossii Na Mezhdunarodnoi Moskovskoi Konferentsii Po Bezopasnosti. *Izvestiya*. [iz.ru/915277/izvestiia/sistema-kollektivnoi-bezopasnosti-rushitsia-ne-pod-sobstvennym-vesom](http://izvestiya.iz.ru/915277/izvestiia/sistema-kollektivnoi-bezopasnosti-rushitsia-ne-pod-sobstvennym-vesom).

12 The *collective West* attack causes a sort of defence-offence reaction intended as both military and value-based.

13 R. Sakwa (2022).

14 Alesina, M., Cappelletti, F. (2022). The End of History, Delayed: The EU's Role in Defining the Post-War Order. *Modern Diplomacy*. <https://moderndiplomacy.eu/2022/08/02/the-end-of-history-delayed-then-eus-role-in-defining-the-post-war-order/>.

The Russian militarisation of history¹⁵, ‘a deformation of politics, expressed in the militarisation of its means, in the fetishisation of armed violence’¹⁶, a part from international relations features, refers also to philosophical (or eschatological and teleological) terms¹⁷. Putin and his advisors had learned how to interpret the history and traditions of the Russian people, while executing them into specific intellectual and political contexts. According to the Russian historian and political scientist Yuri Sergeyevich Pivovarov, even the war waged against Ukraine is a part of a long-term rationale chain that looks like this: ‘militarisation of history — militarisation of public consciousness — militarisation of domestic and foreign policy’¹⁸. The dual Russian attitude of defence and attack related to the West has been experienced along with an internal process of: a deepening of the Orthodox element, a shift away from European values and ideals, and a centralisation-nationalisation of the Russian domestic community¹⁹. In particular, Putin had revived historical elements²⁰ from contradictory Tsarist and Soviet times, while also giving life to ideas from (Neo-)Eurasian thinkers together with Count Sergey Uvarov’s 19th century’s doctrine of ‘Orthodoxy, Autocracy, and

- 15 See also Bortnikov, A. (2017, December 19). FSB Rossii svobodna ot politicheskogo vliyaniya. *Rossiyskaya Gazeta*. <https://rg.ru/2017/12/19/aleksandr-bortnikov-fsb-rossii-svobodna-ot-politicheskogo-vliianiia.html>.
- 16 Kuznezov, A. (2023, February 23). «Rebyonok boitsya avtomata — razve eto normalnoye yavleniye?» Militarizatsiya rossiiyan: kult pogon i proslavljeniye «Satany». *Discurs*. <https://discours.io/articles/social/russian-militarization>.
- 17 An analysis which argues that paranoid and conspiratorial talks are based on a widely shared feeling of an historical insecurity is given from Borogan, I, Soldatov, A. (2022). Dead Water: How the Russian Security Services’ Paranoid Mindset Justifies the War. *SCEEUS Guest Report*, 5. <https://sceeus.se/en/publications/dead-water-how-the-russian-security-services-paranoid-mindset-justifies-the-war/>.
- 18 Pivovarov, Y. S. (2022, March 21). Russkoye pole spetsoperatsy. Kak lyubiteli geopolitiki i istoriosofii priveli stranu k katastrofe. *Novaya Gazeta*. <https://novayagazeta.ru/authors/102313>.
- 19 On the difference between *Russkyi* (ethnic) and *Rossiyanin* (citizen belonging to the Federation and before to the USSR) and the question of nationalities, see Tishkov, V. (2017, November 1). Glava 3. Vnutrennyaya Politika- Obshchestvo. *Observo*. <https://obsfr.ru/report/15222/12506/>.
- 20 Caro, C. J. V. (2022, August 31). Vladimir Putin’s “Orthodoxy, Autocracy, and Nationality”. *The Rule of Law Post*. <https://www.penncenter.org/the-rule-of-law-post/vladimir-putins-orthodoxy-autocracy-and-nationality/>.

Nationality’²¹. A process of isolation, which started with Putin’s third term, in 2012, envisaged the construction of a new hybrid ideological identity. The intermingling of a neo-conservative and a pseudo- Eurasian ideology renewed Orthodoxy as the Russian state religion²². Moreover, the new ideology deepened the Eurasian idea, as the expression of both Russian special path and its multi-vector foreign policy ‘in the east’. Besides, the new ideology led to an increasing centralisation of powers in the head of the President of the Russian federation as ‘the national leader’²³.

Russia, liberalism and the international order

As Boris Yeltsin’s heir, Vladimir Putin within his two first terms (2000–2004 and 2004–2008) seemed focused on maintaining an image of modernity, sophistication and international respectability. But since 2012, the Russian President has begun a process of bureaucratisation of the Russian political system. An increasing centralisation of powers in the hands of the presidency²⁴ culminated in the 2020 referendum that gave an identitarian, sovereign turn to the future Russia, and sanctioned Putin’s guaranteed presence until 2036. The Russian system was already ‘a French semi-presidentialism in the absence of cohabitation’, but the ‘reformed’ 1993 constitutional text intervened with a further strengthening of the

²¹ V. Tishkov (2017).

²² Caro, C. J. V. (2022). See also (this concerns precisely the Russo Ukrainian war) how Russian orthodoxy is instructed Pertsev, A. (2023, July 27). ‘Nazi satanists are entrenched in the holy Russian city of Kyiv’ The Kremlin’s guide for covering an upcoming religious holiday instructs propagandists to push territorial claims to Ukraine and Poland. *Meduza*. <https://meduza.io/en/feature/2023/07/27/nazi-satanists-are-entrenched-in-the-holy-russian-city-of-kyiv>.

²³ Steunebrink, G., van der Zwerde, E. (2022). *Civil Society, Religion, and the Nation Modernization in Intercultural Context: Russia, Japan, Turkey*. Boston: Brill.

²⁴ Chapter IV of the Constitution is dedicated to the President, which precedes the one on the other constitutional bodies. The key provisions for understanding its role are Article 80 and 83. Cfr. Russian Constitution. <http://www.constitution.ru/en/10003000-05.htm>.

role of the Head of State accepting the chief's proposals for change in an even more centralising direction²⁵.

The Russian political vision took from the former Byzantine imperial-territorial conception, an idea which defended the sacred character of unitary and indivisible land. The same idea found realisation and development in the different historical phases and forms of statehood in Russia. With Putin's era, and even more so with the start of the Russian-Ukrainian war, the role of the President of the Federation as the guarantor of Russian state sovereignty has increased to the extent that the list of presidential functions includes: 'the protection of the independence, sovereignty, state and territorial integrity of the country, the prevention of military aggression against Russia and its allies, and the provision of conditions for the peaceful, democratic development of the state belonging to the sphere of national interests. State sovereignty is exercised with the State's power represented by its federal bodies. The President is the guarantor of the sovereignty of the country. He determines the main directions of the state military policy, approves the concept of national security and military doctrine, directs the Armed Forces, other troops and military formations, bodies and forces for ensuring national security, conducts negotiations and signs international treaties in the field of ensuring Russian sovereignty'²⁶.

Speaking at the St. Petersburg Economic Forum on 16 June 2023 the Russian President reaffirmed that the country's primary need is 'self-sufficiency in all key areas'. Moreover, Putin added that 'the demand for sovereignty is forming in all areas, including education and culture, linked to the traditions of the people and the country's history'. He also noted that the 'country's strong sovereignty in the future could ensure the

²⁵ According to the 1993's Russian Constitution (the current even though emended) the 'presidentialist' practice became a French semi-presidentialism *in the absence of cohabitation* (the President can outline policy direction and dismiss the premier). In the Russian way it risks potentially undemocratic hybrid forms by thwarting the natural flexibility of the semi-presidential model. Chenoy, A. M., Kumar, R. (2017). *Re-emerging Russia Structures, Institutions and Processes*. Singapore: Springer Nature.

²⁶ Prezident Rossii, Status i polnomochiya Prezidenta, Okhrana suvereniteta. <http://krem-lin.ru/structure/president/authority/protection>.

development of international relations and an increase in Russia's role in solving world problems'²⁷.

In this framework, three major factors seem to have possibly guided Putin's decision to attack Ukraine. The first is the domestic factor, as the use of an ideological legitimization of external and internal threats allowed Putin to boost nationalism. Moreover, the ideological factor of Putin's reasoning aligned the neo-colonial stance towards Ukraine (Russian neo-colonialism questioned the Ukrainian right to exist as a sovereign state) and forged the image of Putin as a new 'Peter the Great'. Eventually, the geopolitical factor expressed the need for the maintenance of Russian hegemony in the post-Soviet space. As for the Russian inner circle, it supported the government's strategic will of restoring the sovereignty of the Russian state²⁸. Such militarised thinkers²⁹ are convinced of the moral rightness and the necessity of defence of the Russian civilised state³⁰ that has settled over the years, starting from certain classics of the Russian political thought³¹.

²⁷ Of course, the sovereignty discourse is typical of so-called illiberal democracies and is in stark contrast to the idea of ceding sovereignty that characterises European and international law. Putin, V. V. (2023, June 16). Plenarnoye zasedaniye Peterburgskogo mezhdunarodnogo ekonomicheskogo foruma. *Forum SPB*. <https://forumspb.com/news/news/plenarnoe-zasedanie-peterburgskogo-mezhdunarodnogo-ekonomicheskogo-foruma/>.

²⁸ And according to Belton, the West naïvely stood by passively while Putin adopted in Russia a kind of new Russian Empire. See Belton, C. (2020). *Putin's People: How the KGB Took Back Russia and Then Took On the West*. New York: Farrar Straus & Giroux.

²⁹ Listed at Kirby, P. (2023, June 25). Ukraine conflict: Who's in Putin's inner circle and running the war? *BBC News*. <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-60573261>.

³⁰ The idea of a civilised state since the beginning of the Russian-Ukrainian war has become a renewed paradigm of foreign policy and international relations. Timofeev, I. (2023, May 18). A State as Civilisation and Political Theory. *Russian Council*. <https://russiancouncil.ru/en/analytics-and-comments/analytics/a-state-as-civilisation-and-political-theory/>.

³¹ The antithetical-dialectical relationship between Russian self-consciousness and European (and then Western) self-consciousness and the cultural and military clash between the two hemispheres have accompanied the imperial, Soviet and post-Soviet Russian rhetoric. The two traditions of anti-Western Russian political thought are the Slavophile and the Eurasist. But, currently the latter is more functional in the fight against the West. See Abbas, S. R. (2022). Russia's Eurasian union dream: A way forward

Russian political thought (traditional spiritual and moral values) is used in service of Putinist propaganda either in terms of the exaltation of the specificity of Russian civilisation, and in terms of a proud battle against the alleged rightness of Latin civilisation³².

Among Russian contemporary renowned intellectuals, the philosopher, writer, and Nobel laureate Aleksandr Isaevich Solzhenitsyn, during a 1974 Harvard University speech denied the centrality of the Western model saying: ‘if I am asked if I propose the West, as it is today, as a model for my country, I frankly answer in the negative’³³. After 2003 Solzhenitsyn castigated NATO, accusing it of trying to bring Russia under its control³⁴.

The liberal model, in addition to the association with the American-led world, is also attacked in Russia because it plays on the disappointment about the economic reforms imported from the United States at the time of Boris Yeltsin’s presidency; an epoch of collapse. The economic liberalism introduced in Russia in 1991 with the shock therapy reform from state capitalism to market economy at the time of Yeltsin’s presidency gave globalised capitalism the definitive label of gambling imperialism. Talking about the Egor Gajdar age of monetarism in an interview, the Russian economist Larisa Piyasheva stated that, as it had been the case with socialism, even capitalism was attempted to be planned in Russia. Piyasheva remembered: ‘they (United States and Europe) did what they wanted to do’. In a word, the Russian liberal westernist phenomenon of the 1990s in economics has been accused of distortedly imitating the West³⁵. Russia has also been historically

towards multipolar world order. *Journal of Global Faultlines*, 9, 1, 33–43. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/48676221>.

³² Kolesnikov, A. (2022, November 21). Scientific Putinism: Shaping Official Ideology in Russia. *Carnegie Endowment*. <https://carnegieendowment.org/politika/88451>.

³³ Solzhenitsyn, A. I. (1974, June 8). A World Split Apart. *American Rhetoric*. <https://www.americanrhetoric.com/speeches/alexandersolzhenitsynharvard.htm>.

³⁴ BBC News (2006, April 28). Solzhenitsyn warns of NATO plot. <http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/europe/4953690.stm>.

³⁵ Piyasheva, L. (2011). Liberalnoy reformy v Rossii ne bylo i v blizhaysheye vremya ne predviditsya. *Kontinent*. 147. <https://magazines.gorky.media/continent/2011/147/liberalnoy-reformy-v-rossii-ne-bylo-i-v-blizhajshee-vremya-ne-predviditsya-2.html>.

affected (from the 19th century onwards) by a liberal movement, however, the Western model of it was built in opposition to an ancient Russian liberal phenomenon. A political liberalism (of the constitutional type) based on the rule of law and the recognition of fundamental freedoms was opposed by a more traditional and conservative type of philosophical liberalism, belonging to a tradition of imperial statehood defence³⁶. In contemporary times the differentiation between a rule of law and a statehood defence liberal attitudes took shape on the political figures of the scientist Dmitriyevich Sakharov and the philosopher Solzhenitsyn, as representatives of civil³⁷ and moral³⁸ freedoms respectively. While both embodied Soviet dissent, their iconic landing in contemporary Russia places them in an almost entirely different condition. Sakharov incarnated the apologist of human rights, of external, visible freedoms, of the absence of constraint, while Solzhenitsyn has been the heir of a Slavophilism faithful to the orthodox idea, a cultivator of inner freedom and moral truth. Putin's Russia censures the one³⁹ and exalts the other⁴⁰. Putinism, indeed, on the one hand plots an historical and philosophical propaganda that justifies the exaltation of Russian territorial unity⁴¹ and considers Western rhetoric on human rights as

³⁶ See Walicki, A. (1987). *The Legal Philosophies of Russian Liberalism*. New York: Clarendon Press of Oxford University Press.

³⁷ A. Sakharov starting being against nuclear proliferation became an activist pro rule of law and with the Helsinki conference of 1975 one of the most important Russian theoretician of the defence of human rights and fundamental freedoms. Sakharov, A. (1970). *Memorandum akademika A. Sakharova: Tekst, otkliki, diskussiya*. Frankfurt Main: Posev.

³⁸ Robinson, P. (2022). Inner freedom in Russian philosophy. *Canadian Slavonic Papers*. 64, 2–3, 353–371. 10.1080/00085006.2022.2102399.

³⁹ Established by the European Parliament in 1988, the prize is named after the creator of the hydrogen bomb and human rights activist Andrei Sakharov. Turkina, K. (2022, December 14). Evroparlament vruchil premiyu Sakharova za 2022 god narodu Ukrainy. *Gazeta RU*. <https://www.gazeta.ru/social/news/2022/12/14/19270027.shtml>.

⁴⁰ Saraskina, L. (2009). *Solzhenitsyn*. Moskva: Molodaya gvardiya.

⁴¹ According to Putin, referring to Russia: 'For the United States and its allies, it is a policy of containing Russia, with obvious geopolitical dividends. For our country, it is a matter of life and death, a matter of our historical future as a nation'. Putin, V. V. (2022, February 24). Vystupleniye Prezidenta Rossyskoy Federatsii, Kremlin. *Kremlin*. <http://en.kremlin.ru/multimedia/video/by-date/22.02.2022>.

empty⁴², while on the other has built — and continues to build even more since 2022 — a web of rhetoric against the idea of an attack by the West⁴³. In this sense, Sakharov is now associated with Memorial, an organisation founded in Moscow 1989 and playing a fundamental role both in terms of historical research and as a centre actively engaged in the defence of human rights. Solzhenitsyn, instead, has been evoked to justify, from a literary and philosophical point of view, the idea of the trinity of Russia, Belarus and Ukraine⁴⁴.

Russia, liberalism and the *revolutionary* collective West

In an interview with the *Financial Times* in June 2019 President Putin classified the Western liberal idea as obsolete, meaning, in his perspective, that ‘traditional values’ were ‘more stable, more important to millions of people than (the) liberal idea, which’, in his opinion, was ‘ceasing to exist, really’⁴⁵. Putin’s statement had both an historiographical and a foreign policy value. From an historiographical point of view, it amounted to a kind of voluntary Russian break with the idea that the liberal order had been victorious in the Cold War (the Francis Fukuyama’s idea⁴⁶). Regarding Russia’s stature in the context of foreign policy, according to Putin, Russia was self-appointed as the arbiter of multilateralism, and repeatedly challenged for that by the US attacks⁴⁷. Russia has accused

42 Putin, V. V. (2022, December 7). Zapad ispolzuyet prava cheloveka dlya opravdaniya dominirovaniya. *Ria Novosti*. <https://ria.ru/20221207/putin-1837004203.html>.

43 According to Putin, referring to the collective West: ‘they have deceived us, or, to put it simply, they have played us’. Putin, V. V. (2022, February 24).

44 Ideas taken, albeit extreme, from Solzhenitsyn, A. I. (1990). *Kak vosstanovit nashu Rossiyu*. Moskva: Komsomolskaya Pravda.

45 Barber, L., Foy, H., Barker, A. (2019, June 27). Interview of V.V. Putin. *Financial Times*. <https://www.ft.com/content/670039ec-98f3-11e9-9573-ee5cbb98ed36>.

46 Fukuyama, F. (1992). *The End of History*. New York: Free Press. As is well known, the controversial thesis on the victory of the liberal order was called into question by the philosopher himself after more than thirty years. See Fukuyama, F. (2022). *Liberalism and Its Discontents*. New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux.

47 According to the idea of Russia as a revisionist IR player. See Sakwa, R. (2017). *Russia Against the Rest The Post-Cold War Crisis of World Order*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

the West of interfering in its internal affairs, undermining its security interests on several occasions since the early 2000s. The so called ‘coloured revolutions’⁴⁸, namely the Georgian Rose Revolution of 2003, the Ukrainian Orange Revolution of 2004, and the Kyrgyz Tulip Revolution of 2005 were all seen by Russia as a demonstration of Western electoral manipulation and mass support⁴⁹. President Putin viewed the revolts that took place in the post-Soviet space between 2003 and 2005 as major international setbacks and threats to its national security and regional influence. Moscow saw these regime changes as part of a wider strategy of the West to encircle and weaken Russia by expanding NATO, and promote democracy and human rights in the post-Soviet space. Indeed, Russia suspected that the West (and especially the United States) was behind these popular uprisings that overthrew pro-Russian regimes and replaced them with more pro-Western ones⁵⁰. If the West expressed its support for the pro-democracy movements in Ukraine, Georgia and Kyrgyzstan, and offered them economic and political aid to consolidate their reforms and move closer to the European Union to counter the perceived threat, Russia adopted various measures, such as creating a pro-government youth movement (*Nashi*⁵¹), delegitimizing liberal democracy, supporting authoritarian leaders in the region, and using energy as a political tool⁵².

The coloured revolutions set a precedent for Vladimir Putin’s Russia which responded with a paradigm shift in its foreign policy. At the Munich

48 The term “colour revolutions” was coined to describe nonviolent mass protests against political elites that broke out in the post-Soviet region, a decade after the breakdown of the USSR. Bērziņa, I. (2019). Weaponization of “Colour Revolutions”. *Journal of Political Marketing*, 18, 4, 330–343. [10.1080/15377857.2019.1678905](https://doi.org/10.1080/15377857.2019.1678905).

49 Finkel, E., Brudny, Y.M. (2012). Russia and the colour revolutions. *Democratization*, 19, 1, 15–36. [10.1080/13510347.2012.641297](https://doi.org/10.1080/13510347.2012.641297).

50 See Karaganov, S. (2022, April 15). We are at war with the West. The European security order is illegitimate. *Russian Council*. <https://russiancouncil.ru/en/analytics-and-comments/comments/comments/we-are-at-war-with-the-west-the-european-security-order-is-illegitimate/>

51 Nashi Manifesto, <http://www.nashi.su/ideology>; see also: <http://nashi.su/manifest>; <http://www.nashi.su/manifest/comments>.

52 Leichtova, M. (2016). *Misunderstanding Russia. Russian Foreign Policy and the West*. London: Taylor & Francis.

conference in 2007, Putin enshrined the idea that Russia would have to definitively consider the unipolar world to be over⁵³. In 2007, Putin had stated: ‘this is a world with one master and one ruler’. The Russian President denounced very harshly NATO’s eastward enlargement saying: ‘we have the legitimate right to ask against whom this enlargement is made’⁵⁴. With the subsequent Arab Springs of 2011 and 2012, the West accused Russia, especially in Syria and Libya, of meddling with the revolts. Putin supported the regimes of Bashar al-Assad and Muammar Qaddafi, and was accused of violating the principles of democracy, human rights, and international law, exercising an influence in the region at the expense of the aspirations and welfare of the Arab people and undermining the prospects for a peaceful transition and a stable order in the Middle East. Russia responded to these charges answering that the West was using hypocrisy and double standards in supporting regime changes and military interventions in the region⁵⁵. Seen from the Russian perspective, what happened with the Arab springs already constituted a later moment in what for Putin was the establishment of a kind of a revolutionary collective West. The collective West according to Russia moved through a semantic architecture built on human rights and meanwhile acted by building a structured barrier on the indefinite expansion of NATO. The Russian reaction to the collective West attitude, for the economic security and foreign policy advisor Sergei Karaganov, is the release from a liberal beam. Karaganov stated that ‘Russia happens to be at the forefront of this struggle, acting as a kind of icebreaker that crushes the remains of the neocolonial system of Western dominance’ as ‘the liberation of the world from the Western yoke is a trend that has developed over the past several years’⁵⁶.

53 Putin, V. V. (2007, February 10). Vystupleniye i diskussiya na Myunkhenskoj konferentsii po voprosam politiki bezopasnosti. *Kremlin*. <http://www.kremlin.ru/events/president/transcripts/24034>

54 V. V. Putin (2007, February 10).

55 Leichtova, M. (2016).

56 Karaganov, S. (2023, June 20). We Are Shaking off the Western Yoke. *Russian Council*. <https://russiancouncil.ru/en/analytics-and-comments/comments/we-are-shaking-off-the-western-yoke/>.

Conclusion: Liberal challenges — future answers Between East and West

A year after Russia's invasion of Ukraine, there is little doubt the war is a turning point in world history. The conflict has challenged Europeans' most basic assumptions about their security, brought the spectre of nuclear confrontation back to their continent, and disrupted the global economy, leaving energy and food crises in its wake⁵⁷. The conflict between the Russian and the Western systems against the background of the Russian-Ukrainian war is the sign of an identitarian and systemic challenge that firstly the free world cannot miss⁵⁸. It is sufficient to compare articles from a few years before the acceleration that the Russian-Ukrainian war and the resurgence of opposition between East and West⁵⁹ have unleashed, to understand how this clash is in large part fuelled by the Russian propaganda that combines foreign policy and the rewriting of history in a philosophical, eschatological, teleological key. *Putinism* is, indeed, built on an ideological architecture whose *forced nourishment* has overflowed with the beginning of the war⁶⁰.

As an unconstrained field, a regulated, agreed, plural, challengeable, interlocutory, open, democratic system, the international liberal

⁵⁷ Garton Ash, T., Krastev, I., Leonard, M. (2022, February 22). United West, divided from the rest: Global public opinion one year into Russia's war on Ukraine. *European Council on Foreign Affairs*. <https://ecfr.eu/publication/united-west-divided-from-the-rest-global-public-opinion-one-year-into-russias-war-on-ukraine/>.

⁵⁸ Also from Russia it is not loseable. As stated Dmitri Trenin: 'for Russia, this conflict is existential: should it lose it, the country will not only be stripped of its great power status but also, de facto, its sovereignty. Some fear that Russia may even be broken into a few pieces for better management from the outside'. Trenin, D. (2023, June 1). Two Worlds of Russia's Foreign Policy. *Russian Council*. <https://russiancouncil.ru/en/analytics-and-comments/analytics/two-worlds-of-russia-s-foreign-policy/>.

⁵⁹ Dmitri Trenin stopped working for Carnegie Moscow and started writing analysis for RIAC after the beginning of the Russian- Ukrainian War. Indeed in 2014 he was afraid about Russian and West tensions. See Koshkin, P., Trenin, D. (2014, September 15). Russia-West Rivalry Over Ukraine Is Higher Priority Than Security. *Carnegie Moscow*. <https://carnegiemoscow.org/2014/09/15/russia-west-rivalry-over-ukraine-is-higher-priority-than-security-pub-56632>.

⁶⁰ Kolesnikov, A. (2022).

order⁶¹ (LIO)⁶² has existed since the late 1940s. The Liberal Order is challenged by many tendencies, such as the new rising of authoritarianism and political and social populism, a new wave of protectionism as well as a general discontent growing among societies and some states⁶³. Modern nation-states privilege sovereignty and national identity guarantee trouble when institutions become powerful and borders porous⁶⁴. Furthermore, the hyperglobalisation that is integral to the liberal order creates economic problems among the lower and middle classes within the liberal democracies, fueling a backlash against that order. As stated by Marlene Laruelle, it is important to understand the spread of the illiberal phenomenon, understood as a rejection of the values associated with liberalism. The illiberal momentum manifests itself with the political reaffirmation of the nation-state to the detriment of supranational organisations and multilateralism, at the economic level, with various forms of protectionism, and at the cultural level with the rejection of multiculturalism and minority rights⁶⁵. But the set of global, rule-based, structured relationships established upon ideas of political, economic and international liberalism, despite the aggressive appeals coming from Russia's political, defence and foreign policy entourage, still appear as the prism through which the international community could give itself shared principles. With different gradations, the Liberal Order has ensured international cooperation, a general development, and in many contexts the maintenance of a certain level of peace (at least with a guarantee of deterrence from provoking wars through economic

61 For a definition of LIO see Kundhani, H. (2017, May 3). What is the Liberal International Order? *GMF*. <https://www.gmfus.org/news/what-liberal-international-order>.

62 Lake, D., Martin, L., Risse, T. (2021). Challenges to the Liberal Order: Reflections on International Organization. *International Organization*, 75, 2, 225–257. <https://www.cambridge.org/core/journals/international-organization/article/abs/challenges-to-the-liberal-order-reflections-on-international-organization/2FE0E2621F702D1DD02929526703AED3>.

63 Mearsheimer, J. J. (2019). Bound to Fail: The Rise and Fall of the Liberal International Order. *International Security*, 43, 4, 7–50. <https://direct.mit.edu/isec/article/43/4/7/12221/Bound-to-Fail-The-Rise-and-Fall-of-the-Liberal>.

64 Lake, D., Martin, L., Risse, T. (2021).

65 Laruelle, M. (2021). *Is Russia Fascist? Unraveling Propaganda East and West*. Londres: Cornell University Press.

means). On the basis of that reasoning, Russia has to realise not only that the liberal order contributed to write the rules it is living with⁶⁶, but also that some of the Liberal Order most ambitious achievements', such as the liberal dissent, challenge Russian propaganda. Indeed, independent media outlets (e.g. *Novaya Gazeta*⁶⁷), opposition parties (e.g. Yabloko⁶⁸), civil society organisations (e.g. Memorial⁶⁹) and protest movements (e.g. Navalny supporters) provoke Russian official censorship and repression.

If the rule of law, and the freedom of expression is one of the most appreciated features of the Liberal Order, the international community could try other ways to target the Russian diaspora, as a method of soft power which has become more relevant than ever with the beginning of the Russian-Ukrainian war, given the process of Russian transition from Federation. The diaspora has already raised Russians eager for freedom, even if weakly. Nonetheless, it seems the only smooth path through which to try is a slow mobilisation of the slumbering Russian society. Western liberals should, therefore, reaffirm the dignity and universality of liberal ideology. Liberalism, indeed, is not only a political doctrine, but also a moral philosophy that respects the dignity and autonomy of each person. Liberals could appeal to the values of individual rights, liberty, and equality that are central to liberalism, concentrating on supporting and developing more dialogue exchanges, solidarity and advocacy in Russian civil society (for example through *Samizdat* apps to avoid controls⁷⁰). Increasingly broadening the channels of free expression and debate between European and international intellectuals, liberals

66 As stated by 'Russia doesn't necessarily accept a liberal world order, but it's quite willing to have a world order as long as Russia has a prominent seat at the table and is involved in the discussion of that world order... It is far more concerned with notions of unity and order within its country than it is with democracy.'

67 See the website, <https://novayagazeta.ru/>.

68 See the website, <https://eng.yabloko.ru/>.

69 See the website, <https://www.memo.ru/en-us/>.

70 *Novaya Gazeta* (2022, November 11). Proekt, IStories, The Insider, Bellingcat, Navalny's team launch Samizdat app, allowing to view investigations without VPN. <https://novayagazeta.eu/articles/2022/11/11/proekt-istories-the-insider-bellingcat-navalnys-team-launch-samizdat-app-allowing-to-view-investigations-without-vpn-en-news>

should show how liberalism could enhance the freedom of the individual from oppression, coercion, and discrimination. Besides, the best way to unmask a certain Russian martial populism⁷¹ seems to remind of the benefits of free spirit, pluralism, supportive debate, and to recall the privilege of free expression elements that also belonged to great Russian thinkers, whose thoughts have been twisted to serve the purposes of the current rhetoric and narratives⁷².

⁷¹ To have an overview on Russian freedom in 2021 see Freedom House (2022). <https://freedomhouse.org/country/russia/freedom-world/2022>

⁷² See Eltchaninoff, M. (2018), *Inside the Mind of Vladimir Putin*. London: Hurst.

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Geopolitics and Goeconomic Warfare

Russia's War Against Ukraine. Implications and Challenges for European Security Policy

VELINA TCHAKAROVA

Introduction

This chapter outlines Russia's geopolitical and goeconomic strategies within the framework of its war against Ukraine, with particular emphasis on the impact on the European economic model, the liberal political order, and the regional security architecture. In response, EU member states and EU institutions have adopted mostly coordinated and occasionally conflicting security policies. A primary catalyst for such a situation is the divergence in geopolitical interests and ambitions, fostering a potential bifurcation¹ within Europe. The contribution culminates in drawing conclusions and formulating liberal policy recommendations and presenting a geopolitical outlook. The objective is to navigate this complex political landscape and foster unity, security, and economic stability within the EU in the face of these emerging challenges.

As the European landscape remains engulfed in the extended turmoil between Russia and Ukraine², the shadow of significant, far-reaching

1 Tchakarova, V. (2023, March 2). Europe on the Verge: Zeitenwende or 'The World of Yesterday'? *ORF Online*. https://www.orfonline.org/expert-speak/europe-on-the-verge/#_edn7.

2 Bailey, R., et al (2023, June 30). Russian offensive campaign assessment. *Institute for the Study of War*. <https://www.understandingwar.org/backgrounder/russian-offensive-campaign-assessment-june-30-2023>.

consequences casts a pall over the region. Moscow's multifaceted strategy revolves around three intertwined fundamentals: an overt military invasion of Ukraine; a non-kinetic warfare³ to erode Western principles, norms, and standards; and a geoeconomic offensive, utilising commodity manipulation as a weapon against the European economic model.⁴ The visible, but more important invisible erosion of Western values, norms, and standards presents a direct threat to the EU's internal security framework. By subverting the foundational principles upon which the Union was built, this aspect of the clash could gradually erode the Union's integrity from within. Simultaneously, the geoeconomic warfare⁵ poses a substantial threat to the EU's external security, placing Europe in a precarious position amidst the volatile fluctuations of an increasingly complex global scene. One year and a half after this persisting war started, it becomes crucial to reflect upon these layers of Russia's geopolitical and geoeconomic approach and to assess their ramifications. This involves generating informed liberal responses and providing an anticipatory outlook for the future.

- 3 A non-kinetic warfare comprises measures and actions against an adversary without a direct conventional military action.
- 4 European Commission (2023, June 20). Joint communication to the European Parliament, the European Council and the Council on 'European economic security strategy. <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/HTML/?uri=CELEX:52023JC0020>
- 5 Council of the European Union (2023, February 25). One year of Russia's full-scale invasion and war of aggression against Ukraine, EU adopts its 10th package of economic and individual sanctions. <https://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/press/press-releases/2023/02/25/one-year-of-russia-s-full-scale-invasion-and-war-of-aggression-against-ukraine-eu-adopts-its-10th-package-of-economic-and-individual-sanctions/>.

Geopolitics and geoeconomic warfare: Russia's war against Ukraine

1 Background

Against the background of an emerging Cold War 2.0⁶, Russia has aimed to exploit to its advantage the prevailing systemic rivalry⁷ between the us and China. Its geopolitical approach has unfolded along three dimensions. Firstly, Russia is waging a war against Ukraine, an invasion that jeopardises Ukraine's very existence as an independent nation and is concurrently pushing Russia's novel project of a trilateral union with Belarus and the illegally occupied territories of Ukraine.⁸ Secondly, its actions are directed against Europe's security architecture, which, despite imposing the harshest sanctions against Moscow in a series of eleven packages, could not prevent Russia's aggression against Ukraine and is thereby rendered geopolitically inconsequential. Lastly, Russia's strategy plays out against China and the us, with Moscow⁹ markedly augmenting the weight of its future involvement in the competition between these systemic rivals depending on its success in Ukraine.

Ukraine, a country with a turbulent political evolution etched into its history, has found itself in the throes of vast changes within its socio-political and economic structures in the post-Soviet epoch. Since the Soviet Union's dissolution, Ukraine's geopolitical choices have been marked by a deepening polarisation, split along the lines of pro-Western and pro-Russian factions. These diverging leanings not only signify contrasting ideological inclinations but also underscore the existential contest at

6 Tchakarova, V. (2021). Is a Cold War 2.0 inevitable? *ORF*. <https://www.orfonline.org/expert-speak/is-cold-war-2-inevitable/>

7 Tchakarova, V. (2022). Enter the 'DragonBear': The Russia-China Partnership and What it Means for Geopolitics. *Observer Research Foundation. Issue Brief 538*. <https://www.orfonline.org/research/enter-the-dragonbear/>.

8 Kuzio, T. (2023, March 9). Putin's plan for a new Russian Empire includes both Ukraine and Belarus. *The Atlantic Council*. <https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/blogs/ukrainealert/putins-plan-for-a-new-russian-empire-includes-both-ukraine-and-belarus/>.

9 Tchakarova, V. (2022). Enter the 'DragonBear'.

the heart of the nation's quest for a suitable geopolitical orientation. The emphatic rise of pro-Western political forces in 2014, highlighted by the Euromaidan protests, signalled a pivotal shift in Ukraine's geopolitical narrative.¹⁰ The country's aspirations for tighter integration with the European Union, pursued through trade and economic policy harmonisation, along with its quest for NATO membership, denoted a major pivot in its geopolitical stance. Whilst these shifts fostered a robust sense of Ukrainian national sovereignty, they were perceived within the Kremlin as a concerning harbinger of a looming shift in the regional equilibrium. This perspective catalysed a resurgence of Russian revisionist tendencies, leading to an escalation in geopolitical aggression and imperialistic aspirations.¹¹

However, it is crucial to emphasise that these developments, though significant, were not the singular triggers for Moscow's confrontational posture. Rather, they served as symbolic episodes within a wider narrative of Russia's strategic realignment towards its self-proclaimed 'near-abroad'.¹² The situation in this region took a serious turn for the worse in 2014 when Russia invaded Ukraine and then unlawfully took over Crimea.¹³ After this key event, separatist groups in Eastern Ukraine, created and continuously supported by Russia through financial means, political backing and military aid, managed to take control over a significant part of the Donbas region.¹⁴ This resulted in the creation of

10 Minakov, M. (2018). The Significance of Euromaidan for Ukraine and Europe. *Wilson Center*. <https://www.wilsoncenter.org/blog-post/the-significance-euromaidan-for-ukraine-and-europe>.

11 Kotoulas, I., Pusztai, W. (2022). Geopolitics of the War in Ukraine. *Foreign Affairs Institute*. <https://www.aies.at/download/2022/Geopolitics-of-the-War-in-Ukraine-FINAL.pdf>.

12 Sprague, A. (2016). Russian Meddling In Its Near Abroad. The Use of Frozen Conflicts as a Foreign Policy Tool. *Institut Barcelona Estudis Internacionls*. https://www.ibei.org/ibei_studentpaper28_71440.pdf.

13 Kofman, M., et al (2017). Lessons from Russia's Operations in Crimea and Eastern Ukraine. *RAND Corporation*. https://www.rand.org/pubs/research_reports/RR1498.html.

14 Fischer, S. (2019). The Donbas Conflict. *Stiftung Wissenschaft und Politik (SWP Berlin) — German Institute for International and Security Affairs*. https://www.swp-berlin.org/publications/products/research_papers/2019RP05_fhs.pdf.

the breakaway Donetsk and Luhansk People's Republics, making the situation in the area even more complicated.¹⁵

Despite determined attempts by Western countries to negotiate peace, including numerous talks and constant diplomatic efforts, Moscow has obviously never ceased preparing for total war against Kyiv.¹⁶ This military stance, maintained for the past eight years prior to 2022, reveals Russia's ultimate aim of complete political and economic control over Ukraine.¹⁷ Russia's ongoing war against Ukraine is therefore a complex quandary. It involves a tangled web of issues related to geopolitics, military matters, and security. Through the seizure of Crimea and the military conflict in Eastern Ukraine, Russia has already achieved a set of key geopolitical goals such as the expansion of Russian territory and power, as it has gained control over the strategically important peninsula and the northern Black Sea. Additionally, Moscow has been able to hinder Ukraine's potential membership in the EU or NATO by disrupting the country's territorial integrity and unity. These events also allowed Russia to showcase its military might while simultaneously expanding the scope of its hybrid warfare¹⁸ by conducting large-scale cyber operations and intensifying its information warfare.¹⁹ Moving for-

15 Weisflog, C., Mijnsen, I. (2022, April 22). Chronology of the Maidan Revolution. *Neue Zürcher Zeitung*. <https://www.nzz.ch/international/ukraine-chronologie-der-maidan-revolution-ld.1290571?reduced=true>.

16 Lohsen, A., Morcos, P. (2022, February 9). Understanding the Normandy Format and Its Relation to the Current Standoff with Russia. *Center for Strategic & International Studies (CSIS)*. <https://www.csis.org/analysis/understanding-normandy-format-and-its-relation-current-standoff-russia>.

17 Yudin, G. (2022, February 22). Putin is about to start the most senseless war in history. *Open Democracy*. <https://www.opendemocracy.net/en/odr/russia-ukraine-most-senseless-war-nato-history/>.

18 Russia's hybrid warfare entails not only the cyber domain, information warfare but also other critical components of warfare. 'In Ukraine, Russia employed a hybrid strategy by combining irregular warfare and cyber warfare to achieve its strategic objectives.' Brigadier (Rtd) Anthony Paphiti & Dr Sascha Dov Bachmann (2016). Written evidence submitted on February 5, 2016. <https://committees.parliament.uk/writtenevidence/64088/html/>.

19 The Military Academy of the General Staff's glossary distinguishes between the broad Russian definition of 'information war' (*informatsionnaya voyna*) and the more limited, tactical Western interpretation, noting that Russia perceives ongoing information

ward, it became clear that Russia's aim was to gain control over Ukraine politically, economically, and socially in the long run. It sought to extend its influence in the region and assert its national interests in a strategic sphere recognised by other regional players. As per the view of well-known geopolitical thinker Zbigniew Brzezinski, Russia could only be considered a major power if it could completely control Ukraine.²⁰

To achieve this, Russia has been aiming to build a 'sphere of influence' based on a tripartite union with Ukraine, and Belarus, which would make it a significant player in Eastern Europe, the South Caucasus, and Central Asia. If Putin succeeds in taking control of Ukraine, it will serve his aim of resurrecting a great power and significantly boost his position in global politics. In this pursuit, Russia is looking to expand its geopolitical and geoeconomic interests, spanning from the Arctic Ocean to the Barents Sea, and extending into Eastern Europe, the South Caucasus, Eurasia, the Middle East, and North Africa.²¹ Therefore, one can conclude that Russia's invasion of Ukraine is to be interpreted as an attempt to regain territories and populations considered part of the 'Russian World'²² and thus 'belonging to Russia'²³, and reviving the Russian imperial project, rather than creating a new Soviet Union. In contrast, Ukraine is primarily aiming to secure its existence as a nation and defend its independence and sovereignty against Russia's aggression and interference. Ukraine's main geopolitical goal is to regain its territorial integrity dating back to 1991, which includes recapturing the areas controlled by Russia and reintegrating the annexed Crimea back into Ukraine.²⁴

warfare with the West as a current reality. Giles, K. (2016). Russian Information Warfare. *NATO Defense College*. https://css.ethz.ch/content/dam/ethz/special-interest/gess/cis/center-for-securities-studies/resources/docs/NDC%20fm_9.pdf.

20 Lehming, M. (2022, February 22). Without Ukraine, Russia is not a great power. *Tagesspiegel*. <https://www.tagesspiegel.de/politik/ohne-die-ukraine-ist-russland-keine-grossmacht-5419849.html>.

21 Tchakarova, V. (2022). Enter the 'DragonBear'.

22 Inosemzev, V. (2014). Who belongs to the Russian World? *Internationale Politik*, 6, 94–101. <https://internationalepolitik.de/de/wer-gehört-zur-russischen-welt>.

23 DW News (2022, June 9). 'Reclaiming land': Is Putin doing it like Peter the Great? <https://de.euronews.com/2022/06/09/land-zurueckholen-macht-s-putin-wie-peter-der-gro-e>.

24 Kotoulas, I., Pusztai, W. (2022).

2 Layers of Russia's geopolitical and geoeconomic approach²⁵

The war in Ukraine has repercussions for many former Soviet states, as well as countries geographically close to Russia, due to the risk of becoming caught in the crossfire or being targeted directly. The question of culpability or the trigger for this war of aggression is often attributed primarily by Russia but also some experts in the field of International Relations to NATO's eastern enlargement, which Russia utilises as a narrative of 'preventing further NATO expansion' to justify its war against Ukraine.²⁶ However, this is a carefully devised calculus by the Kremlin, employing it as a plausible argument for Western audiences and its own populace.²⁷ Whether Russia genuinely perceives NATO as a threat is a challenging question to answer. Looking at the tactical nuclear weapons capability on both sides within the European continent alone reveals that the quantity of Russia's tactical nuclear weapons is approximately tenfold that of the West.²⁸

Since the collapse of the Soviet Union, there have been recurring military confrontations and frozen conflicts in former Soviet territories, with Russia playing a predominant role.²⁹ Nonetheless, the West has progressively expanded its economic and trade relationships with the Russian Federation pursuing a 'Russia-first' approach to its relations with Eastern Europe. In the past, Russia frequently escalated tensions by deploying troops along Ukrainian borders under the guise of military

²⁵ Geoeconomics refers to the strategic deployment of macroeconomic instruments, such as tariffs, sanctions, and dependencies on raw materials and commodities, to further geopolitical aims. The term gained prominence in the 1990s when Edward Luttwak juxtaposed it with the traditional concept of geopolitics. Luttwak, E. N. (1990). From Geopolitics to Geo-Economics: Logic of Conflict, Grammar of Commerce. *The National Interest* 20 (Summer), pp. 17–23. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/42894676>.

²⁶ Mearsheimer, J. (2022, March 19). John Mearsheimer on why the West is principally responsible for the Ukrainian crisis. *The Economist*. <https://www.economist.com/by-invitation/2022/03/11/john-mearsheimer-on-why-the-west-is-principally-responsible-for-the-ukrainian-crisis>.

²⁷ Yudin, G. (2022, February 22).

²⁸ Congressional Research Service (2022). Nonstrategic Nuclear Weapons. <https://sgp.fas.org/crs/nuke/RL32572.pdf>.

²⁹ Coyle, J. J. (2018). *Russia's Border Wars and Frozen Conflicts*. Cham: Palgrave Macmillan.

exercises, a move that has not elicited an adequate response from the West. Moreover, it can be asserted that the Kremlin does not fear direct military intervention by the West in the war against Ukraine. The only conceivable exception would be if a red line were crossed by the use of nuclear weapons in this war. Both the United States and China have made it unequivocally clear that such a deployment would cross their respective red lines.³⁰ At present, ‘nuclear blackmail’ (the threat by use of nuclear weapons as well as the threat of nuclear disaster) appears to be the preferred strategy as part of Russia’s non-kinetic warfare, but there are no indications of preparations for an actual deployment of nuclear weapons by Russia.

Further motive behind Russian aggression could have been to halt the economic enlargement of the European Union, not from a military or security perspective, but rather from a geoeconomic standpoint. From Moscow’s perspective, this represented a considerable curtailment of its economic sphere of influence. The EU drastically altered its foreign policy towards Russia following the assault on Georgia (2008) and the initial invasion of Ukraine (2014), shifting its focus from Russia to the countries of the Eastern Partnership, and more specifically the frontrunners Ukraine, Georgia, and Moldova.³¹

Europe has meanwhile recognized that the European security order was significantly assaulted on 24 February 2022, in the form of a non-kinetic geoeconomic war orchestrated by Russia. This war saw the weaponization of geoeconomic dependencies on energy, food, and fertiliser raw materials as strategic levers.

Prior to the military escalation in Ukraine, global food prices surged to their highest point in nearly a decade, causing deep concerns as the world grappled with the fallout of the COVID-19 crisis. The United Nations

³⁰ Gittings, J. (2023). China’s nuclear red line: An opportunity for dialogue. *SOAS China Institute*. <https://blogs.soas.ac.uk/china-institute/2023/04/04/chinas-nuclear-red-line-an-opportunity-for-dialogue/>.

³¹ Meister, S. (2022). A Paradigm Shift: EU-Russia Relations After the War in Ukraine. *Carnegie Europe*. <https://carnegieeurope.eu/2022/11/29/paradigm-shift-eu-russia-relations-after-war-in-ukraine-pub-88476>.

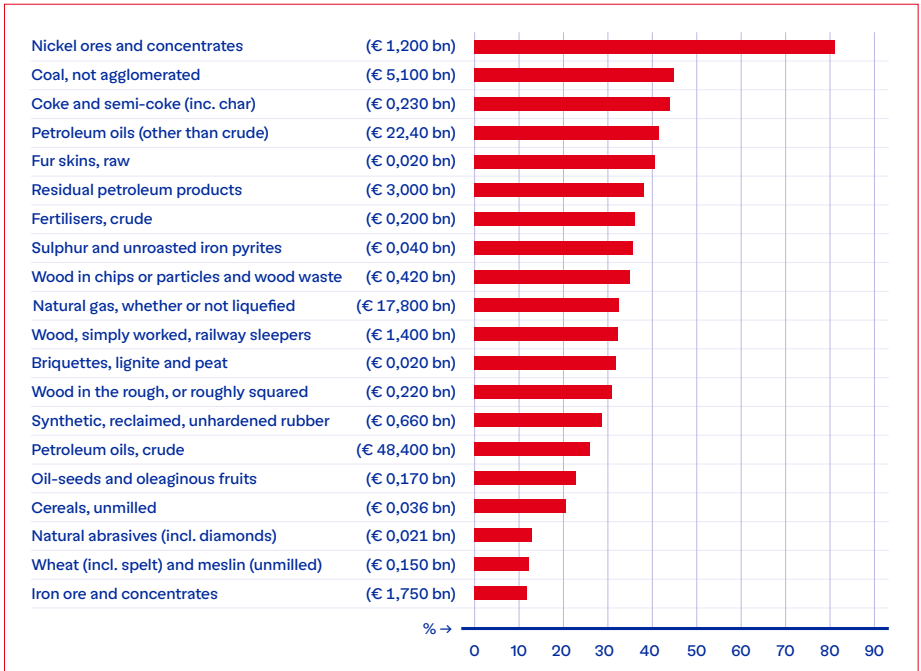


Figure 1: Top 20 EU Commodity Imports from Russia (2021)³²

food index rose for twelve consecutive months at that time, the longest such stretch in ten years.³³ This escalation in food prices had significant ramifications; by December 2021, food prices had reached levels last seen during the 2011 food crises which led to the Arab Spring.³⁴ This period also saw Russia instigate a substantial military escalation along Ukraine’s borders. The pivotal importance of food was underscored

32 European Parliament (2022). Russia’s war on Ukraine: Implications for EU commodity imports from Russia. [https://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/ATAG/2022/729341/EPRS_ATA\(2022\)729341_EN.pdf](https://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/ATAG/2022/729341/EPRS_ATA(2022)729341_EN.pdf).

33 Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (2023). FAO Food Price Index. <https://www.fao.org/worldfoodsituation/foodpricesindex/en/>.

34 Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (2021, November 4). World food prices reach new peak since July 2011. from <https://www.fao.org/newsroom/detail/world-food-prices-reach-new-peak-since-july-2011/en/>.

in January 2022, during Russia's heightened military activities along Ukraine's borders. The Turkish Straits, through which a fifth of global wheat exports pass, became a significant global bottleneck, considering that Russia and Ukraine are respectively the first and fifth largest wheat exporters worldwide. Following a full-scale war against Ukraine initiated by Russia in February 2022, global food prices spiked by nearly 13% in March.³⁵ Russia announced a temporary ban on exports of grains and fertilisers next to the pre-war blockade of Ukrainian Black Sea ports under the pretext of military drills with Belarus. This move and subsequently the launch of the war led to the logical increase in global food prices of 60% compared to March 2020.³⁶ It became increasingly evident that Russia had strategized a commodity war, using food as a geopolitical weapon.

As Europe was already grappling with an acute energy crisis, the blockade of critical food exports and the intentional destruction of grain terminals were symptomatic of Russia's economic warfare against the West. By deftly blaming Western sanctions for the escalating food crisis, Putin managed to steer the narrative towards accusing the West, particularly within the Global South, as part of its information warfare.³⁷ To counter Russia's narrative that EU sanctions were exacerbating global food shortages, the EU made exceptions in July 2022 for the purchase, import or transport of agricultural and food products, including wheat and fertilisers, whilst also demonstrating solidarity with Ukraine.³⁸ In addition, the EU established solidarity lines to help Ukraine export its agricultural

³⁵ Trompiz, G. (2022, April 8). Food prices hit record high in March, U.N. agency says. *Reuters*. <https://www.reuters.com/world/food-prices-surge-new-record-high-march-un-agency-says-2022-04-08/>.

³⁶ Council of the European Union (2023, July 3). Food security and affordability. <https://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/policies/food-security-and-affordability/>.

³⁷ European External Action Service (2023). Agrifood trade and EU sanctions adopted further to the invasion of Ukraine by the Russian Federation and the support of Belarus to it. https://www.eeas.europa.eu/sites/default/files/documents/Food%20Security_Factsheet.pdf.

³⁸ Kijewski, L. (2022, July 20). EU slaps more sanctions on Russia, introduces food exceptions. *Politico*. <https://www.politico.eu/article/eu-slap-sanction-russia-introduce-food-exception/>.

products.³⁹ In a notable development, the Joint Coordination Centre (comprising the UN, Turkey, Ukraine, and Russia) initiated the Black Sea Grain Initiative in July 2022, establishing a humanitarian maritime corridor to facilitate the export of grain, foodstuffs, and fertilisers from Ukraine.

Russia's orchestrated behaviour regarding the energy commodities tells a similar story. Before Russia's incursion into Ukraine, the EU heavily relied on Russian energy. In 2021, EU nations imported 155 billion cubic metres of Russian gas. Russia also provided substantial amounts of crude oil and was the largest supplier of petroleum products to the EU. Roughly half of the EU's coal imports were also sourced from Russia. Furthermore, 18 EU nuclear blocks, spread across the Czech Republic, Hungary, Slovakia, Finland, and Bulgaria, ran on Russian fuel.⁴⁰ As Russia was supplying more than 40% of Europe's gas⁴¹, President Putin deftly factored in the inevitable Western sanctions in response to the war on Ukraine. In the face of escalating political tensions, Russian energy giant Gazprom took the dramatic step of suspending gas supply to several EU members, while President Putin insisted on rouble payments for Russian gas. Matters further intensified when Gazprom suspended supply to Bulgaria, Denmark, Finland, the Netherlands, and Poland, and then proceeded to cut supply to Germany by half via the Nord Stream during the summer of 2022, ostensibly for maintenance purposes.⁴² This move was expected to cause significant disruption to Europe's gas supplies ahead of the winter season, particularly given that Nord Stream 1 was operating at a mere 20% of its full capacity

39 Directorate-General for Mobility and Transport (2022, May 12). European Commission to establish Solidarity Lanes to help Ukraine export agricultural goods. European Commission. https://transport.ec.europa.eu/news-events/news/european-commission-establish-solidarity-lanes-help-ukraine-export-agricultural-goods-2022-05-12_en.

40 Kardaś, S. (2023, February 13). Conscious uncoupling: Europeans' Russian gas challenge in 2023. *European Council on Foreign Relations*. <https://ecfr.eu/article/conscious-uncoupling-europeans-russian-gas-challenge-in-2023/>.

41 Kardaś, S. (2023, February 13).

42 Deutsche Welle (2022, August 31). Nord Stream 1: Russia's Gazprom halts gas supply to Germany. <https://www.dw.com/en/nord-stream-1-russias-gazprom-halts-gas-supply-to-germany/a-62978155>.

afterwards.⁴³ Both France and Germany publicly accused Russia of manipulating energy supply, effectively weaponizing it in this non-kinetic warfare against the European economic model. The situation took a darker turn following the explosion of the Nord Stream pipelines.⁴⁴ The identity of the perpetrator remains unknown, yet Gazprom seems to be the primary beneficiary, particularly given the cessation of gas flow to Europe. Had it not been for the immediate invocation of force majeure, Gazprom would have found itself contractually obligated to provide financial compensation for the undelivered volumes. At the time of these events, Gazprom was already embroiled in arbitration court proceedings over billions of euros in compensation for the suspension of gas flows.

In addition, Russia's strategy of nuclear intimidation was also key to Russia's geopolitical approach. It is noteworthy that Russia is the first nation to incorporate nuclear threats into its strategy of territorial expansion. Any acceptance of Russia's territorial advances, achieved through force and nuclear intimidation, would not only signify a defeat for Ukraine, but also establish a perilous precedent for the European security architecture and the global rules-based order. The use of 'nuclear blackmail' follows the unsettling revelation that the Kremlin has initiated the deployment of tactical nuclear weapons to Belarus, a move which has significantly heightened global tensions.⁴⁵ Despite the tense situation, the likelihood of Russia resorting to the use of tactical nuclear weapons against Ukraine remains minimal. Moscow finds strategic advantage in the threat of nuclear action, which can be exploited without resorting to actual use. A secondary aspect of Russia's nuclear intimidation involves creating fear among European citizens of a potential Chernobyl-style

43 Deutsche Welle (2022, July 25). Russia to further slash gas deliveries to Germany via Nord Stream pipeline. <https://www.dw.com/en/russia-to-further-slash-gas-deliveries-to-germany-via-nord-stream-pipeline/a-62588620>.

44 Lee, M. (2023). A global mystery: What's known about Nord Stream explosions. AP News. <https://apnews.com/article/us-germany-russia-denmark-ukraine-gas-pipeline-attack-nord-stream-2561f98ba6462db700f7609352a28c24>.

45 Talmazan, Y. (2023, June 20). Biden warns the threat of Putin's using tactical nuclear weapons is 'real'. NBC News. <https://www.nbcnews.com/news/world/putin-nuclear-weapons-threat-real-biden-warns-rcna90114>.

disaster. Such fear could exert pressure on European politicians to urge Ukraine to restrain its actions and consider concessions in negotiations and peace agreements with Russia. In this context, Russia has enhanced the risk of nuclear disaster following the Kakhovka Dam incident.⁴⁶ The risk of such a disaster in the Zaporozhia Nuclear Power Plant is being instrumentalised by Russia.

Another important layer of Russia's geoeconomic warfare is linked to migration flows towards the EU. One has already witnessed a hybrid migration crisis, one meticulously orchestrated by Belarus, at the Polish and Baltic borders, back in 2021. Migration flows have been wielded as a hybrid weapon to exert substantial pressure on Poland and to blackmail the European Union. With the onset of Russia's war, millions of Ukrainians have sought refuge in Europe, testing its resilience to the limit. Russia has strategically exerted migration pressure with the intention of imposing socio-economic distress on the comparatively more fragile systems of Central and Eastern Europe. Following Prigozhin's mutiny and the deployment of Wagner Group's troops in Belarus, Polish Prime Minister Mateusz Morawiecki once again warned that the Wagner fighters in Belarus could disguise themselves as migrants and infiltrate the EU. He also mentioned the potential of Wagner facilitating 'hybrid warfare' through illegal migration from Belarus.⁴⁷

As the Russian invasion of Ukraine has not proceeded as anticipated by the Kremlin, Russian disinformation campaigns have been forced to adapt and modify their fraudulent narratives about the war, fuelling the fire of unchecked aggression. The tried-and-tested Soviet tactics of disinformation, misinformation, the propagation of fake news, and the creation of a 'fog of war' will undoubtedly continue to characterise the war of attrition in Ukraine. Russia's state-controlled disinformation

⁴⁶ Robinson, J. (2023, June 21). Explainer: what threat does the Kakhovka dam breach pose to the Zaporizhzhia nuclear plant? *Chemistry World*. <https://www.chemistry-world.com/news/explainer-what-threat-does-the-kakhovka-dam-breach-pose-to-the-zaporizhzhia-nuclear-plant/4017601.article>.

⁴⁷ Cooper, C. (2023, July 29). Wagner fighters may pose as migrants to enter EU, Polish PM claims. *Politico*. <https://www.politico.eu/article/wagner-fighters-may-pose-as-migrants-to-enter-eu-polish-pm-claims/>.

machinery, often led by well-financed platforms such as RT and Sputnik had been crafting fallacies and unjustifiable pretexts for the invasion of Ukraine for years, tracing back to at least 2014.⁴⁸ Moreover, Russia has adeptly utilised disinformation campaigns to persuade the Global South that the current crises in energy, food, and fertilisers are a direct result of Western sanctions.⁴⁹ Furthermore, it has manipulated disinformation to depict Ukraine as an irrational state actor disinterested in negotiations, attributing the onset of the war to NATO expansion rather than acknowledging Moscow's own revisionist and imperialistic ambitions.⁵⁰ In this complex web of power struggles, the fog of disinformation and the subtle machinations of information warfare emerge as significant tools in Russia's geopolitical arsenal.

Repercussions for the European security and economic order

The war on Western values puts the EU's internal security at risk, while the economic warfare leaves Europe vulnerable in a rapidly changing global landscape. German Chancellor Olaf Scholz's February 2022 speech on '*Zeitenwende*'⁵¹ marked a significant shift in German and European foreign and security policy, although it's still unclear a year and a half on just how big this change is or what it truly means, as German politics and bureaucracy move slowly. Berlin's reluctance to take the lead, shown in its hesitancy to discuss tank and later military jet as well as other critical weapons systems deliveries to Ukraine, has been a recurring theme.

48 EU vs Disinfo (2023, June 1). War is being waged against Russia on all fronts. <https://euvsdisinfo.eu/war-is-being-waged-against-russia-on-all-fronts/>.

49 Savage, S. (2023, March 17). Russians bearing gifts shove Ukraine aside to win over Global South. *Politico*. <https://www.politico.eu/article/russia-ukraine-war-win-global-south-fertilizer-grain/>.

50 Pifer, S. (2022, July 26). One. More. Time. It's not about NATO. Brookings Institution. <https://www.brookings.edu/articles/one-more-time-its-not-about-nato/>.

51 Deutsche Welle (2021, December 2). '*Zeitenwende*' Amid Ukraine War Named German Word of the Year. <https://www.dw.com/en/zeitenwende-amid-ukraine-war-named-german-word-of-the-year/a-64041617#:~:text=%22Zeitenwende%2C%22%20literally%20%22times,of%20Ukraine%20on%20February%2024.>

With another major escalation of Russia's geoeconomic warfare looming this summer following Russia's withdrawal from the Black Sea Grain Initiative and the upcoming winter season, a quick adequate response is crucial. Regrettably, Europe has a track record of slow responses until unity is achieved, as demonstrated by the delivery of military jets and other critical weapons systems to Ukraine. At present, Ukraine's ongoing counter-offensive has been slowed due to a shortfall in military jets and a general deficiency in necessary military equipment.⁵² This highlights a recurring issue: Western powers often struggle with internal politics and don't always agree on geopolitical issues, making it harder to respond to external security threats. Furthermore, the West has fulfilled merely half of its military aid commitments to Ukraine. Though pledges were made for the period between March to May, only approximately 50% of the promised weaponry has been delivered.⁵³ Despite these challenges, Europe has managed an impressive level of coordination and coherence in response to Russia's war against Ukraine. The EU's ability to implement eleven sanctions packages and provide diplomatic, political, and humanitarian aid to Ukraine is testament to this. But there were disagreements among member states, largely due to their reliance on Russian resources, their national interests, and their internal politics. Countries like Austria, Hungary, Italy, and Germany have been heavily affected because they depend on Russian energy commodities. Internal policy issues have also affected decision-making, such as when Austria prevented Bulgaria and Romania joining the Schengen Area due to a domestic political campaign on migration policy.⁵⁴ Exceptions had to be made for different sanctions packages, with issues ranging from diversifying energy resources, to expelling Russian

52 Khurshudyan, I. (2023, June 30). Ukraine's top general, Valery Zaluzhny, wants shells, planes and patience. *The Washington Post*. <https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/2023/06/30/valery-zaluzhny-ukraine-general-interview/>.

53 Bushnell, K., et al (2023). Ukraine Support Tracker. A Database of Military, Financial and Humanitarian Aid to Ukraine. *IFW Kiel*. <https://www.ifw-kiel.de/topics/war-against-ukraine/ukraine-support-tracker/>.

54 RFERL (2022, December 9). Austria's President Blasts Own Government For Blocking Romania And Bulgaria's Schengen Entry. <https://www.rferl.org/a/austria-bellen-romania-bulgaria-schengen-accession-blocked/32169501.html>.

diplomats, to supporting certain Russian narratives about the invasion of Ukraine for the sake of domestic audience. Public opinion in Europe has been another divisive factor, with governments having to bear in mind their citizens' scepticism about becoming involved in a military conflict. Disunity among EU member states has roots in the historical, diplomatic, geoeconomic and cultural ties some European countries have with Russia. France and Germany, for example, were engaged in geopolitical rapprochement with Moscow in the last years and were working to normalise relations with Moscow before the war began.⁵⁵

Implications for the European security order

Since the war in Ukraine erupted on 24 February 2022, Europe's 'strategic autonomy' debate has hit a wall. Had it not been for the immediate US support, providing weaponry and other aid at the initial phase, Ukraine would've likely succumbed to Russia's comprehensive military assault. This illustrates Europe's ongoing reliance on US intervention during times of conflict, demonstrating that Europeans are yet to be capable of independently handling wars on their home turf. This fact is underscored by Sweden and Finland's NATO membership, a significant change for these previously neutral nations. This shift could represent a turning point for European security and defence policy, as more member states lean on US and NATO assurances rather than those provided by the *Common Security and Defence Policy (CSDP)* of the EU. Since Sweden will also join NATO following Finland's membership, one can anticipate a significant power shift in Europe, elevating the geopolitical importance of Poland, the Baltic and Scandinavian states. Consequently, Germany's '*Zeitenwende*' — their goal to invest 100 billion Euro in defence — may be challenged to deliver as Poland is currently more successful in equally spending 100 billion Euro in new defence purchases.⁵⁶

⁵⁵ Tchakarova, V. (2023).

⁵⁶ Harper, J. (2023, January 30). Military spending boost to give Poland largest army in EU. *AA.com.tr*. <https://www.aa.com.tr/en/economy/military-spending-boost-to-give->

Meanwhile, Russia's multi-faceted war has thrown Europe into a string of crises, from rising inflation due to food and energy shortages to growing fears of new migration waves, threats of nuclear weapon use and nuclear disaster, amid ongoing information warfare. Some analysts now use the term 'permacrisis' to describe the current situation, as each resolved issue seems to be swiftly replaced by another, perpetually challenging European decision-making process.⁵⁷ This concept replaces the previous 'polycrisis' term, highlighting the simultaneous crises we face across various sectors, from finance and economics to domestic policies and security.⁵⁸

In this geopolitical context, Russia remains determined to subjugate Ukraine through a military victory, thereby attaining full political control over the country, its resources, and its population as a maximum goal. Ukraine, on the other hand, aims to drive Russian forces off its entire territory and permanently end their presence. In this stalemate situation, Ukraine will be reliant on the sustained military, financial, humanitarian, and diplomatic support of the West. Russia will count on its partners, such as China, India, and Turkey, to evade the comprehensive Western sanctions and prevent international isolation. Concurrently, Moscow will continue to receive military support from partners like Iran, Belarus, and others.⁵⁹

These dynamics underscore the need for sustained international engagement and robust support for Ukraine. The nature of this war and the goals of both sides suggest that any resolution will require a multi-faceted strategy that goes beyond military and economic assistance.

poland-largest-army-in-eu/2801841#:~:text=Between%20onw%20and%202035%20C%20Warsaw,defensive%20capabilities%20in%20recent%20months.

⁵⁷ Zuleeg, F., Emmanouilidis, J., De Castro, R. (2021). Europe in the Age of Permacrisis. *European Policy Centre*. <https://epc.eu/en/publications/Europe-in-the-age-of-permacrisis~3c8a0c>.

⁵⁸ European Commission (2016). Speech by President Jean-Claude Juncker at the Annual General Meeting of the Hellenic Federation of Enterprises (SEV), Athens. https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/de/SPEECH_16_2293.

⁵⁹ Kuzio, T. (2023, May 23). China, Iran, Belarus, and Armenia all fear a Russian defeat in Ukraine. *Atlantic Council*. <https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/blogs/ukrainealert/china-iran-belarus-and-armenia-all-fear-a-russian-defeat-in-ukraine/>.

From the outset of the war, Russia was presented with a choice between a short or a protracted war, while Ukraine found itself forced to select between war and total subjugation. The war thus has implications not only for the future of Ukraine and Russia but is also pivotal for the future of the European security order. The European population in some countries still believes that it can choose between war and peace ignoring the profound disruption it has caused to the established security norms and rules in the region. This non-kinetic war has exposed the vulnerabilities of European states and highlighted the urgency for robust collective defence mechanisms and strategic autonomy, particularly in crucial sectors such as energy, food security, and defence resilience. Moreover, Russia's demonstrated willingness to use nuclear blackmail as a tactic in this war underscores the gravity of the current situation and the potential consequences of any miscalculation. This strategy not only represents a serious violation of international norms but also threatens to destabilise the entire global nuclear order which must be built anew given the absence of any current strategic pillars of nuclear regimes between the US, China, and Russia. Furthermore, the significant migratory waves and substantial information campaigns sparked by the war serve as potent reminders of the diverse threats faced by contemporary societies and the need for adequate tailor-made responses to these challenges.

Against this background, a bifurcation of the global system due to the deepening systemic conflict between the United States and China is having an immense impact on the changing international order.⁶⁰ This dynamic compels Russia to reposition itself by striving for a pole position as a wild card in the newly emerging global power recalibration. Russia's war against Ukraine marks the manifestation of a new Cold War 2.0 scenario⁶¹, in which all significant regional actors perform a balancing act between the US and China to avoid entrapment in binary choices. Russia

⁶⁰ Tchakarova, V. (2022). Bifurcation of the Global System. In Werther-Pietsch, U. (ed). *Envisioning Peace in a Time of War. The New School of Multilateralism*. Vienna: Facultas.

⁶¹ Tchakarova, V. (2021, April 23). Is a Cold War 2.0 inevitable? *ORF Online*. <https://www.orfonline.org/expert-speak/is-cold-war-2-inevitable/>.

is slowly but surely shifting its focus from geoeconomic interdependence with Europe towards the Indo-Pacific, anticipating this area to be the future epicentre of significant economic growth and a major market for Russian commodities. Consequently, Russian President Putin is keen to finalise the Russian ‘sphere of influence’ in Eastern Europe by subjugating Ukraine and thereby tipping the balance of power within the European security architecture in Russia’s favour.

Liberal answers

To navigate the interconnected impacts on European economy, energy security, and political stability, European actors and institutions need to unite their efforts. Policies put forth by the European Commission, such as the *Next Generation EU*, *EU Battery Regulation*, *European Chips Act*, and the *New Green Deal*, present an efficient way forward, helping to address some of the current challenges and capitalise on the opportunities. What is clear is that no single European power, big or small, can tackle these issues alone. Failing to find a comprehensive and sustainable solution could see Europe once again sidelined in the geopolitical arena, much like a century ago.

Addressing Putin’s challenges and risks from a liberal perspective requires a multi-faceted approach that champions universal values, human rights, economic liberalism, and democratic political order. This includes strengthening existing alliances with democratic countries, both within and outside of Europe, as well as forging new relationships and partnerships. This should be driven by shared values of democracy, human rights, rule of law, and commitment to a liberal international order. Furthermore, sanctions are a powerful tool that can be used to exert pressure on Putin’s regime.⁶² At the same time, one needs to provide robust support to countries affected by Putin’s kinetic and non-kinetic

⁶² European Council (2023). EU sanctions against Russia explained. <https://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/policies/sanctions/restrictive-measures-against-russia-over-ukraine/sanctions-against-russia-explained/>.

warfare such as Ukraine. This can take various forms, including military aid, economic support, and humanitarian assistance. In an increasingly fractured world, one needs to champion the benefits of a liberal economic order and globalisation. This entails maintaining open and fair trade, supporting economic integration and cooperation, and opposing protectionist policies. Moreover, measures should be taken to address the potential downsides of globalisation, such as economic inequality and job displacement, which can fuel discontent and drive support for authoritarian leaders like Putin. Given Putin's use of energy resources and food commodities as a geopolitical tool, diversification of energy and food sources and suppliers as well as the reshoring of supply chains of critical raw materials should be a priority. Investing in renewable energy and other clean technologies can reduce dependence on Russian energy and contribute to climate-related goals in the mid-term. Given the threat posed by Russian cyber-attacks and disinformation campaigns, it's crucial to invest in strengthening cyber defence capabilities and promoting media literacy in coordination with the member states. The goal should be to build resilient societies that can withstand these types of threats in an increasingly vulnerable information landscape. Despite the challenges and risks posed by Putin's regime, maintaining channels of communication at the level of military-to-military with Russia is important to manage tensions and prevent miscommunications and miscalculations that could escalate crisis situations. In the face of these challenges, it's important for liberal democracies to stay united and true to their values, while demonstrating strength and resilience. The most comprehensive liberal answers are summarised in the table on the next page.

Conclusion: future challenges and options

Beyond the war in Ukraine, Europe's security order, norms, values, and global geoeconomic clout continue to be under perpetual attack. Despite Russia's efforts to weaponize energy, food, and fertiliser supplies, which has caused inflation to hit double digits in Europe for the first time in history, Europe has managed to soften the impact by dedicating 758 billion Euro for the mitigation of the negative effects on households

Liberal Policy Response	Description
Strengthening European Energy and Food Security	Continue reducing the dependence on Russian energy, food, and fertilisers by accelerating the shift towards renewable sources, diversifying the energy mix, and exploring options for importing energy from a wider range of countries as well as continuing diversification of a wide range of food commodities.
Solidarity and Assistance to Ukraine	Deepen continuing comprehensive financial aid, humanitarian assistance, and support for refugees fleeing the war next to macroeconomic assistance and military aid. Support can be direct aid to Ukraine or through international organisations working in the region.
Bolstering European Defence Capabilities	Emphasise the need for a robust, unified European defence industry. This includes increased cooperation between EU nations on defence and ensuring fair contribution to shared defence spending. The focus shall be put on the coherence of the European military-industrial complex as well.
Promoting Rule of Law and Human Rights	Advocate for international law, human rights, and democratic principles, even in times of conflict and war. This involves holding Russia accountable for any breaches of international law and supporting investigation and prosecution of human rights abuses.
Supporting the Democratic Aspirations of Eastern European Nations	Actively support the continuing aspirations of Ukraine and other Eastern European nations to join the EU and NATO, provided they meet all criteria. This includes institutional, political, and technical support for their European integration and providing technical assistance during the accession process.

Table 1: Liberal Answers (own table)

and firms linked to the energy crisis between September 2021 and January 2023.⁶³ But, as the second winter during the war approaches, European governments and institutions will have to prepare for more geopolitical and geoeconomic challenges and risks.

⁶³ Sgaravatti, G., et al (2023, March 2). The fiscal side of Europe's energy crisis: the facts, problems and prospects. *Bruegel*. <https://www.bruegel.org/blog-post/fiscal-side-europes-energy-crisis-facts-problems-and-prospects/>.

Food

Russia and Ukraine, responsible for a significant share of global wheat exports, play a key role in the world's food supply. But the ongoing war has severely disrupted this supply, leading to a sharp price rise of over 30% since 2022.⁶⁴ This sudden increase continues to pose a direct threat to millions of people in Africa, heightening their risk of hunger and malnutrition. The situation is especially serious in countries like Egypt, Sudan, and Ethiopia, where wheat is a staple part of the diet. Previous experience reveals the potential fallout from such a crisis as witnessed during the Arab Spring in 2011, when soaring wheat prices led to bread riots in these nations, highlighting the serious implications of the current situation.⁶⁵

South African President Ramaphosa, during his visit to Ukraine and Russia as part of an African negotiation delegation, highlighted the serious economic consequences of this war for the Global South.⁶⁶ He stressed the risk of another rise in food prices and the resulting disruption in Africa, illustrating the harmful effects on Africa and the wider global community. However, Russian President Putin later rejected any link between the war and the increase in commodity prices, a viewpoint that appears to be at odds with the current situation.⁶⁷ Additionally, he extended an offer of free grain supplies to six African nations during the second Russia-Africa summit, utilising it as a potent geoeconomic instrument to gain political influence over the continent.⁶⁸ This move

⁶⁴ Nwafor, J. (2023). Comorian President: How Africa is Affected by the War in Ukraine. *BNN Network*. <https://bnn.network/breaking-news/comorian-president-how-africa-is-affected-by-the-war-in-ukraine/amp/>.

⁶⁵ Carleton, A. (2022, March 24). Scientist Who Predicted Arab Spring: Skyrocketing Wheat Prices Are Creating a Global 'Regime of Risk'. *Vice*. <https://www.vice.com/en/article/5dgab8/scientist-who-predicted-arab-spring-skyrocketing-wheat-prices-are-creating-a-global-regime-of-risk>.

⁶⁶ Radford, A. (2023, June 17). Ukraine war must end, South African President Ramaphosa tells Putin. *BBC News*. <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-65940655>.

⁶⁷ Radford, A. (2023).

⁶⁸ Al Jazeera (2023, July 28). Putin promises grains, debt write-off as Russia seeks Africa allies. <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2023/7/28/putin-promises-grains-debt-write-off-as-russia-seeks-africa-allies>.

is aimed at securing African political support in the UN and other global organisations against Western sanctions.

The landscape of global geoeconomics has undergone a seismic shift following Russia's departure from the Black Sea Grains Initiative on 17 July 2023.⁶⁹ By mid-2023, the initiative had channelled nearly 33 million tons of food products, with a staggering 65% of the wheat directed to developing nations. These volumes include more than 655,000 tonnes for countries like Ethiopia, Yemen, and Afghanistan under the World Food Program.⁷⁰ The Black Sea Grain Initiative has allowed for the export of food and fertiliser through three Ukrainian ports — Chornomorsk, Odessa, and Pivdennyi (Yuzhny), but they have been unable to supply enough grain over the last three months prior to Russia's withdrawal from the initiative.⁷¹ Moreover, the destruction of the Kakhovka Dam, reportedly by Russian forces, could amplify the food crisis because the damage has wiped out the irrigation systems with a significant number in Kherson, Zaporizhia, and Dnipropetrovsk now without a water source.⁷² This impact goes beyond Ukraine, affecting countries that depend on its food supplies — particularly grains — for their food security. In addition, Russia has been blocking the Ukrainian Black Sea ports and its missile assaults on the Odessa region left 60,000 tons of grain destroyed at Chornomorsk port afterwards.⁷³

69 UN News (2023, July 17). UN chief regrets Russia's decision to withdraw from grain deal. <https://news.un.org/en/story/2023/07/1138752>.

70 United Nations (2023). Black Sea Grain Initiative. <https://www.un.org/en/black-sea-grain-initiative/data>.

71 United Nations (2023).

72 The New Voice of Ukraine (2023, June 7). Ukraine's Agriculture Ministry describes coming damage due to dam destruction. *Yahoo News*. https://news.yahoo.com/ukraine-agriculture-ministry-describes-coming-112900900.html?guccounter=1&guce_referrer=aHRocHM6Ly93d3cuZ29vZ2xlLmF0Lw&guce_referrer_sig=AQAAAGgYli4bjtyEEJW2lqfRvwTvSpTPIQwoyoww1_omlX7oH6igTaeBjmBSEUzouyC4hDZFT8osB9Ukw7c6rP-jqqaXAI7DVH7t2afPjL1PMblrn6O2xXlbexX5jMVYJ2MD-M2Nda8OokbGfGQJqMts4dyMdDKiDNDBFK9Li5D_VGcfEgW.

73 *Economichna Pravda* (2023, July 19). Russians destroy 60,000 tonnes of grain in Chornomorsk port. *Pravda.com.ua*. <https://www.pravda.com.ua/eng/news/2023/07/19/7412037/>.

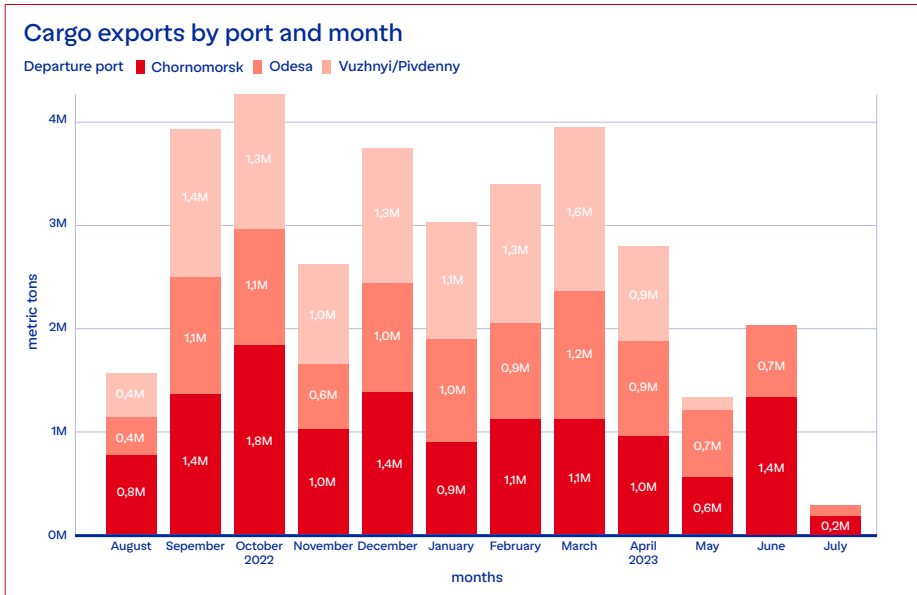


Figure 2: Departure ports of the Black Sea Grain Initiative⁷⁴

Russia’s strategic withdrawal appears to be a calculated gambit to corner the West. The geopolitical endgame would be to secure a green light for the Russian Agricultural Bank’s inclusion in the SWIFT international payments system.⁷⁵ Achieving this would enable freight, logistics, and the shipment of Russian food and fertiliser, setting a precedent to sidestep Western sanctions and infusing foreign currency into Russia’s budget. Moreover, the spectre of a ‘Food Crisis 2.0’ would give Russia leverage over African and Asian nations heavily reliant on Russian commodities. Concurrently, it would deal a financial blow to Ukraine because it would hinder the supply of key Ukrainian agricultural products.

⁷⁴ United Nations (2023).

⁷⁵ B. Eryugur, (2023, May 25). Moscow ties inclusion of its agriculture bank in SWIFT system to grain deal extension. *AA.com.tr*. <https://www.aa.com.tr/en/russia-ukraine-war/moscow-ties-inclusion-of-its-agriculture-bank-in-swift-system-to-grain-deal-extension/2906182>.

With Russia's exit from the Black Sea Grain Initiative and continuous assaults on Ukrainian ports, Ukraine's lifeline for grain export now hinges on EU solidarity routes across the Danube.⁷⁶ These channels are pivotal not only for grain but also for other exports and vital imports. The solidarity routes have facilitated exports of around 60% of Ukraine's grain since the war onset.⁷⁷ Furthermore, they have allowed Ukraine to lucratively export non-agricultural commodities, raking in a whopping 33 billion Euro. The precarious situation at the Danube port of Reni underscores the looming threat.⁷⁸ Russia's strategic strikes, particularly around the Danube and near Romania, seem to follow a clear blueprint. These actions threaten not only regional security but also global food stability. Should Russia enforce a blockade, the repercussions will reverberate across the global grain market, potentially triggering a surge in worldwide food prices.

Although the Food and Agriculture Organization's Food Price Index⁷⁹ was showing a decrease compared to its value a year ago (as of the latest update in August 2023), there is a contrasting trend that hints at a possible rise in global food prices soon again. International wheat prices surged by 1.6 %, witnessing their first month-on-month ascent in nearly nine months. This uptick was predominantly fuelled by the growing unease surrounding Ukraine's exports, stemming from Russia's decision to cease its involvement in the Black Sea Grain Initiative and the ensuing damage to Ukraine's port infrastructure along both the Black Sea and the Danube River.

76 European Commission (2023). Factsheet EU-Ukraine Solidarity Lanes — Lifeline for Ukrainian economy, key for global food security. https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/fs_22_6862.

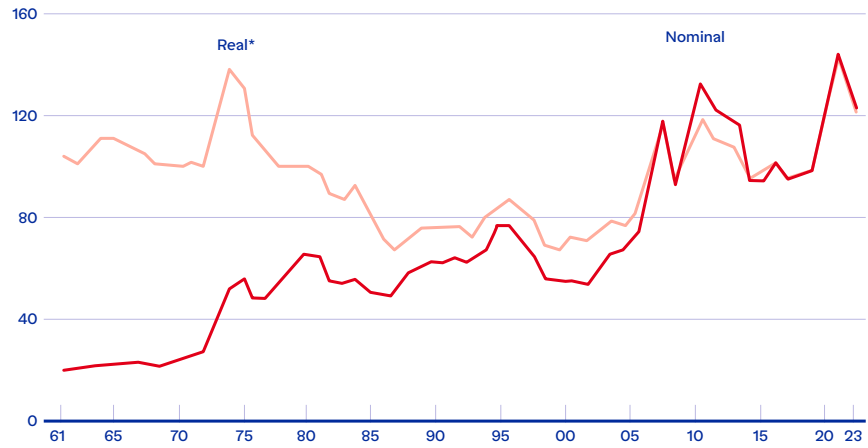
77 European Commission (2023).

78 Kim, V. (2023, August 16). Russia Attacks Ukrainian Ports on Danube River. *The New York Times*. <https://www.nytimes.com/2023/08/16/world/europe/russia-drone-attack-danube-port-ukraine.html>.

79 Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (2023).

FAO Food Price Index in nominal and real terms

2014–2016 = 100



* The real price index of the nominal price index debated by the World Bank Manufactures Unit Value Index (MUV)

FAO Food Price Index

2014–2016 = 100

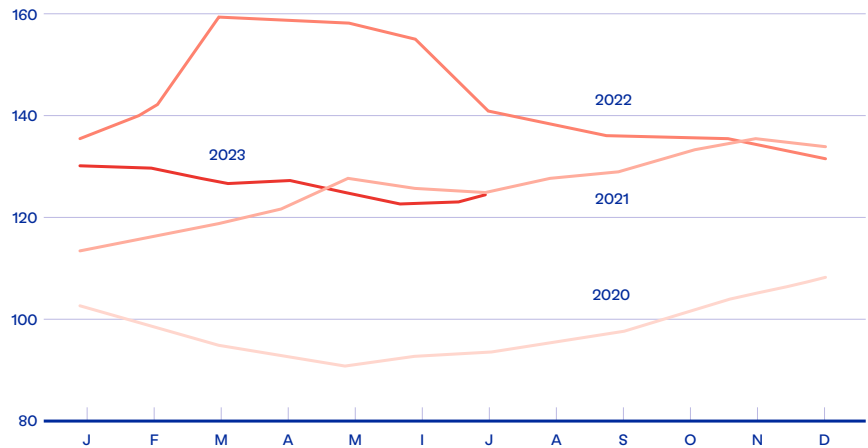


Figure 3: FAO Food Price Index⁸⁰

⁸⁰ Food and Agriculture Organization (2023).

The risk of a blockade in the Black Sea region could profoundly alter geopolitical dynamics. In retaliation, Ukraine deployed drones to target Russian ports in the Black Sea, disrupting the shipment of essential Russian commodities such as oil and grain.⁸¹ This appears to be Ukraine's strategic manoeuvre to counteract a potential blockade by Russia on its own shipping pathways. The domino effect of the Ukrainian commodities crisis could potentially plunge parts of Africa and Asia into acute food scarcity. A looming global food emergency, intensified by Russian machinations and the persistent Ukrainian war, is the worst-case scenario for the world in terms of food commodities.

The EU's role is pivotal. It's imperative for the European members to embrace Ukrainian agricultural products and revisit existing restrictions. The transit of these goods remains the sole viable solution in this dire scenario. To stave off a potential crisis, the EU must unconditionally welcome Ukrainian agricultural products, even if met with resistance from member states like Poland. Concurrently, the EU must steadfastly maintain sanctions against Russia. The outcome of this grain export dispute will undoubtedly shape the EU's future cohesion and the efficacy of the sanctions. Amid the ongoing counter-offensive by Ukraine, Russia's hunger games remain a part of its geopolitical and geo-economic manoeuvres. All these elements combined threaten to cause a sharp rise in commodity prices and worsen food insecurity in Africa and Asia.

Energy

As the winter season of 2023–24 approaches, Europe is also being overshadowed by the looming threat of a new energy crisis. Already struggling with an energy squeeze, Europe's challenges are escalating due to the ongoing war in Ukraine and Russia's aggressive role in it. This is further depleting Europe's energy supplies and heightening inflation. Before Russia's aggression towards Ukraine, Europe was already grappling with

⁸¹ Plichta, M. (2023). Ukraine strikes back against Russia as world's first drone war escalates. *Atlantic Council*. <https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/blogs/ukrainealert/ukraine-strikes-back-against-russia-as-worlds-first-drone-war-escalates/>.

an energy crisis. This was fuelled by an imbalance in supply and demand caused by the pandemic, a rapid but incomplete shift towards renewable energy, and the lack of practical alternatives for an energy-starved continent. The situation worsened when Russia, a key supplier of oil, gas, and coal to Europe, reduced the flow of gas via the Nord Stream pipeline and the pipeline to Poland in 2022.⁸² This was in response to Western sanctions placed on Russian commodities. Russia, despite global sanctions, could craftily channel its crude oil to Europe via third parties such as China and India. Additionally, Russian natural gas is finding its way into the European market. According to a CERA report⁸³ Russia's fossil fuel export revenues fell by 50% compared to the same time last year. Yet, despite a nearly 90% fall in export revenue to the EU, Russia still manages to rake in around 560 million Euro per day from fossil fuel exports. Europe currently has a shortfall of around 40 billion cubic metres of Russian gas. To fill the gap, the continent has been drawn into the highly competitive liquefied natural gas (LNG) market. But this scenario is complicated by the predicted surge in Asian economies, expected to increase competition even further in the second half of 2023. Against this background, Europe needs to use all energy resources available, like maximising nuclear and hydroelectric output, especially in countries like France that have substantial capacities. Although Germany's decision to shut its remaining nuclear power plants is a setback⁸⁴, policy initiatives need to focus on energy security and a sustainable gas supply, alongside pushing for renewable energy sources, modernising grid infrastructure, and promoting energy efficiency.

⁸² Deutsche Welle (2022). Nord Stream 1: Russia's Gazprom halts gas supply to Germany.

⁸³ Centre for Energy Research and Analysis (2023). One year on, who is funding Russia's war in Ukraine? Energy and Clean Air Research. <https://energyandcleanair.org/publication/one-year-on-who-is-funding-russias-war-in-ukraine/>

⁸⁴ Pitel, L., et al (2023, August 9). Germany should stop lecturing France on nuclear power, says Eon boss. *Financial Times*.

Who's buying Russia's fossil fuels after EU bans?

shipment arriving in 2023 to date, with flows banned from February 5 excluded

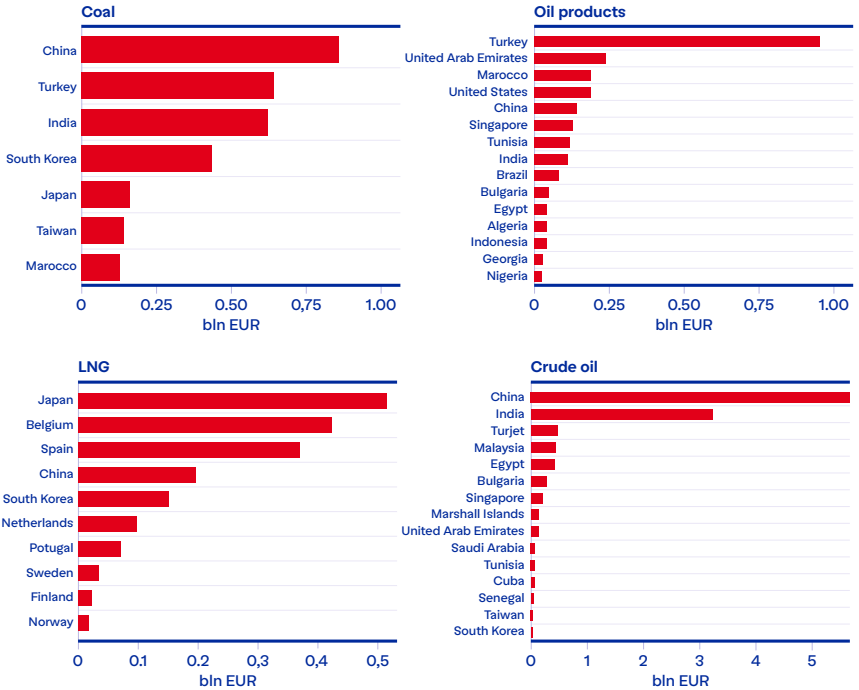


Figure 4: Who's buying Russia's fossil fuels after EU sanctions? ⁸⁵

The EU Energy Platform's new requirement for member countries to collectively meet 15% of their storage obligations is a major step towards shared resilience. Demand for around 11.6 billion cubic metres of gas has been met with a robust response from reliable international suppliers. ⁸⁶ These offers have resulted in a successful match of around 10.9 billion

⁸⁵ Centre for Energy Research and Analysis (2023).

⁸⁶ European Commission (2023, May 24). Questions and answers on the 2023 European Semester Spring Package. https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/qanda_23_2873.

cubic metres. LNG makes up over 20% of the volume, with pipeline gas meeting the remaining 80%. As winter approaches, the situation will become more serious. Recent data shows a 9.7% drop in fuel demand in major European countries, signalling struggles in recovery from the energy crisis resulting from Russia's invasion of Ukraine. Industrial activity is shrinking, causing fears of permanent damage. Germany, the largest economy in Europe, saw a 15% drop in industrial gas demand in May and subsequently entered a recession.⁸⁷ The Netherlands followed suit in August.⁸⁸ A prolonged energy crisis could severely impact the German economy and by extension, the European economy. Fears of the biggest industrial downturn since the 2008 financial crisis are now surfacing, as important industries like chemicals and steel show reluctance to restore demand. The combined effect of these issues is severe. As Europe braces for the coming winter, urgent strategic actions are needed to avoid a full-blown energy crisis. This includes ensuring that European gas storage facilities reach at least 90% capacity by the start of autumn⁸⁹. Europe also needs to keep gas demand at least 15% below the five-year average until the heating season begins.

Moreover, Europe is still at risk of further reductions in gas flows from Russia. Therefore, it needs to diversify its natural gas supply and secure long-term contracts with reliable LNG suppliers. This will mean partnering with countries like the United States, Algeria, and Azerbaijan and exploring opportunities with countries like Qatar. However, a reluctance to commit to long-term LNG contracts due to climate goals presents a challenge in the short term. Failure to secure these contracts could lead to another major energy crisis, with potential gas shortages and record spot prices. To effectively tackle this escalating crisis, Europe

⁸⁷ Rocha, P. (2023, June 9). Weak European Industry Is Keeping Gas Demand Depressed. Bloomberg. June 9, 2023. <https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2023-06-09/weak-european-industry-is-keeping-gas-demand-depressed#xj4y7vzkg>.

⁸⁸ Reuters (2023, August 16). Dutch economy enters recession as inflation bites.://www.reuters.com/markets/europe/dutch-economy-enters-recession-inflation-bites-2023-08-16/.

⁸⁹ European Commission Directorate-General for Energy (2023, August 18). EU reaches 90% gas storage target ahead of winter. https://energy.ec.europa.eu/news/eu-reaches-90-gas-storage-target-ahead-winter-2023-08-18_en.

needs to adopt a firm but balanced approach that aligns immediate energy security needs with long-term sustainability goals.

Scenarios

Against the backdrop of these challenges, there are currently three primary scenarios for the future of the ongoing war. In the first scenario, Ukraine receives a sufficient supply of heavy weapons systems and ammunition, enabling it to repel Russian forces from all or at least a large portion of Ukrainian territory in 2023. Simultaneously, Western sanctions may lead to an economic collapse or even the dissolution of the Russian Federation, particularly in the context of Russia's increasing international isolation and growing political fracture following Prigozhin's mutiny.⁹⁰ Russian President Vladimir Putin is known for his assertion that the collapse of the Soviet Union was the greatest geopolitical catastrophe of the 20th century. He is arguably the most prominent proponent of the 'realist' school of thought and has a keen understanding of 21st century geopolitics. However, he could lead Russia from the 'greatest geopolitical catastrophe' of the 20th century to a probable ultimate dissolution of the Russian Federation in the 21st century. East European historian Karl Schlögel posits, 'the fall of the empire is the condition for self-discovery, regeneration, and survival of Russia.'⁹¹

In the second scenario, one could envision a future where due to insufficient and slow delivery of heavy weapons to Ukraine, the country is not able to conduct further successful counter-offensives and a Russian victory in the Donbas region becomes plausible. This scenario would enable Russia to shift its focus southwards towards Odessa and continue the war of attrition through further mobilisation waves. Lastly, the third scenario envisions Ukraine being too slow in procuring heavy weapons systems due to indecisive political decision-making process in Europe

⁹⁰ Cimmino, J. (2023, July 6). Four scenarios for Russia's future after the Wagner Group mutiny. *Atlantic Council*. <https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/blogs/new-atlanticist/four-scenarios-russia-future-after-wagner-mutiny/>.

⁹¹ Kleine Zeitung (2022, December 18). Interview: 'Putinismus? Das Ist Völkische, Anti-westliche Rhetorik, Stalinkult und Nackter Oberkörper'. <https://www.kleinezeitung.at/>

and shift in the US focus towards the Indo-Pacific region, while Russia remains internationally connected despite comprehensive Western sanctions, primarily due to partners such as China, India, Turkey, Iran, UAE, and others. This scenario paves the way for a new ‘frozen conflict’ in the coming years. The development of these scenarios is dependent on the interplay of many unknown variables, and thus it is crucial to continually monitor and evaluate the situation accordingly. The three main geopolitical scenarios regarding Russia’s war against Ukraine look as follows:

What lies ahead?

SCENARIO 1: “UKRAINE WINS”

- The West continues delivering of heavy weapons to Ukraine (long-range missiles, F-16s, etc.)
- Ukraine conducts further successful counteroffensives and reclaims Russian occupied territories in 2023.
- Growing international isolation of Russia due to nuclear blackmail and weaponization of geo-economic dependencies.
- Western sanctions lead to a significant contraction of Russian economy and trade.
- Political power shift or “black swan” in the Kremlin.
- Beginning of negotiations under Ukraine’s conditions.

SCENARIO 2: “WAR OF ATTRITION”

- The West is too slow in delivering sufficient heavy weapons to Ukraine (due to political reshuffles or geo-economic turmoil).
- The lack of sufficient military aid for Ukraine slows down the conduct of further successful counteroffensives.
- Russia fortifies its defense lines in the illegally occupied Ukrainian territories, further mobilizes reservists (up to 500,000).
- Global South led by China and India helps Russia bypass sanctions, regional hubs of trade.
- This results in an ongoing war of attrition and diplomatic shuttle ties China’s initiative lead to no success.
- The war may continue until 2025–2026.

SCENARIO 3: “FROZEN CONFLICT”

- Socio-economic repercussions from Russia’s war will lead to political crises in Europe in the upcoming winter (Germany is already in recession; energy/food security is hindered).
- Government reshuffles in Europe and key elections in the USA and Europe lead to a fragmentation of the Western approach to Russia.
- Ukraine doesn’t succeed in regaining significant territories due to the lack of sufficient military aid.
- Russia convinces more and more countries to exercise pressure on Ukraine to agree on negotiations.
- The West pressures Ukraine to agree on the launch of peace talks with Russia.
- Cease-fire agreement “freezes the war” temporarily and legitimizes the illegal annexations of the four regions of Ukraine by Russia or launches a demilitarized zone between Russia and Ukraine with the mediation of China and US in early 2025.

Table 2: Geopolitical Scenarios: What lies ahead? (Own table)

Thus far, Ukraine has received no security guarantees and must fight for its survival, while approximately 17% of its territory, an area abundant

in minerals and raw materials vital for Ukraine's reconstruction, remains under Russian control. The country finds itself in a geopolitical grey zone between the Euro-Atlantic community and Russian imperialism and revisionism. After more than a year, the situation in Ukraine has severely intensified due to the major escalation phase following the launch of the new counter-offensive against the Russian troops.⁹² Ceasefire or peace talks remain unviable due to the diametrically opposed objectives of both states at least during the hot phase of Ukraine's counter-offensive in 2023. It remains unclear how the war will end, and which scenario will materialise. To enable the first scenario, Europe must not only continue its military support for Ukraine but also intensify it, while simultaneously diversifying its relations with third countries in Asia, Africa, and Latin America to amplify Russia's isolation. What is most urgently needed is a strategic consensus within the EU and its member states not only to secure Ukraine's survival but to facilitate Ukraine's actual victory over Russia to restore its borders from 1991, including Crimea.

Future Outlook

Against the backdrop of escalating tensions, a divide is widening between the 'Anglosphere' (the US and the UK) and the EU (led by France and Germany) over how to handle the 'DragonBear' duo of China and Russia.⁹³ This split is evident amid the reshaping of the global order, and it persists even if Russia, seen as China's junior partner, alters Europe's geopolitical landscape in its favour by succeeding in the war against Ukraine. The war has unfortunately driven a wedge between some EU members, despite a unified approach to sanctioning Russia. Central and Eastern European (CEE) members align more with the US position on supplying heavy weaponry to Ukraine, whereas France and Germany

⁹² Institute for the Study of War (ISW) (2022, August 15). Ukraine Conflict Update. <https://www.understandingwar.org/backgrounder/ukraine-conflict-updates>.

⁹³ Tchakarova, V. (2023).

are attempting to kickstart peace negotiations with Russia, helping it to ‘save face’ amid its military failures.

In 2023, two developments could have a significant impact on European security: the inclusion of Finland and Sweden in NATO, and a potential political union between Poland and Ukraine.⁹⁴ Both Nordic and CEE countries are more inclined to see the US as their security backstop, rather than the EU or the Franco-German coalition. The political union of Poland and Ukraine could act as a geopolitical echo of the German reunification of the 1990s, fast-tracking Ukraine’s entry into the EU and NATO without the need for a formal application process. Should this occur, the balance of power within Europe would tilt eastwards, ushering in entirely new geopolitical realities for the continent. Both these potential developments remind of another subtle yet significant shift — the re-emergence of a new ‘Iron Curtain’ along the Eastern Flank of European NATO members. This shift could drastically influence the evolving European security architecture.

In summary, the EU is grappling with a number of strategic challenges. Still, there remains an opportunity for both the Union and its member states to emerge stronger, more competitive, and more secure in the medium to long term. This optimism hinges on adopting a realistic approach to bolster the EU’s collective security and defence as per the Strategic Compass.⁹⁵ Responding proactively and adequately to ongoing geopolitical events and threats, such as the current war in Ukraine, its socio-economic fallouts, and reducing dependence on Russian commodities, is essential. However, it’s equally important for the EU to establish a unified European military-industrial complex in the future.⁹⁶ The EU has already made strides in this direction with the adoption of

⁹⁴ Kuzio, T. (2023). Poland and Ukraine: The emerging alliance that could reshape Europe. *Atlantic Council*. <https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/blogs/ukrainealert/poland-and-ukraine-the-emerging-alliance-that-could-reshape-europe/>.

⁹⁵ European External Action Service (2023). A Strategic Compass for the EU. https://www.eeas.europa.eu/eeas/strategic-compass-security-and-defence-1_en.

⁹⁶ Tchakarova, V., Hrabina, J. (2023). State Your Case: The European Union Needs To Embrace Realism Before It’s Too Late. *The Defence Horizon*. from <https://www.thedefencehorizon.org/post/european-union-realism>.

its Strategic Compass, but there's still much to be done to keep up with other geopolitical players. The EU must concentrate on efficiently using its resources and putting into action its grand strategy, beginning with domestic policies to consolidate its power base. To create an effective military deterrent, Europe needs a robust military-industrial complex⁹⁷ and a revival of the European industry in general. In doing so, the EU will be better positioned to vie for a place amongst the global superpowers as a new geopolitical actor.⁹⁸ The insights offered in this chapter, rooted in the liberal perspectives, will bolster the European response to Russia's geoeconomic and geopolitical approaches in the future.

⁹⁷ Tchakarova, V., Hrabina, J. (2023).

⁹⁸ Tchakarova, V. (2021).

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One can conclude that Russia's invasion of Ukraine is to be interpreted as an attempt to regain territories and populations considered part of the 'Russian World' and thus 'belonging to Russia', and reviving the Russian imperial project, rather than creating a new Soviet Union.

VELINA TCHAKAROVA

Fighting Russia's 'Dark Power'

The 'Bright Power' of Enacted Values

VALERIA KORABLYOVA

Intro: Revelations of the big European war

The all-out Russian invasion of Ukraine on 24 February 2022 exposed several surprising developments, only one of which directly concerned Ukraine and Russo-Ukrainian relations. By calling them 'surprising' we imply that those trajectories, on the one hand, challenged the general consensus and expert prognoses, and on the other, point to broader trends that resonate far beyond local settings.

They could be summarised as follows:

- Ukraine is willing and capable to resist Russian aggression;
- The Euro-Atlantic world gets united in condemning the Russian war and related atrocities; and
- The collective West fails to impose its visions on 'the rest', as it loses its hegemony.

While all three points are interconnected and worth a closer examination, this article focuses on the last one as the most far-reaching and least studied. The declining soft power of the West — increasingly challenged internally and globally — is a complex phenomenon, which is both an outcome and a premise for Russian aggression. The Kremlin rulers saw a window of opportunity in the growing resentment against the US dominance and in its relative decline as compared to rising non-Western actors. They capitalised on those political sentiments in the so-called global South, while enhancing this decline

through ‘active measures’ in consolidated democracies to shatter them internally.¹

As Ivan Krastev aptly remarks², when Putin’s ‘special military operation’ to capture the entirety of Ukraine within weeks if not days failed, he escalated his rhetorical scale to the global standoff against Western hegemony. If one compares his speeches in February (at the brink of the full-scale invasion) and in autumn 2022 (after Ukraine’s successful counter-offensive in Kyiv and Kharkiv regions), they note a salient shift from historical revisionism with conservative undertones to a leftist vocabulary of an anti-colonial fight aimed to align with former subalterns of European maritime empires.³ To quote from Putin’s speech at the Valdai Forum 2022: ‘Standardisation, financial and technological monopoly, the erasure of all differences is what underlies the Western model of globalisation, which is neocolonial in nature. Their goal was clear – to establish the unconditional dominance of the West in the global economy and politics.’⁴ Further in this speech with a telling title ‘A Post-Hegemonic World: Security and Justice for Everyone’, he makes several strategic moves that directly target the foundations of the still-intact global order: (a) calls liberalism a radical ideology; (b) claims that ‘universal values’ are a smokescreen for Western interests and an instrument of neocolonial oppression; (c) labels cosmopolitanism and globalisation a new guise of Western colonialism.⁵

While Russian military engagement in Ukraine is mostly perceived negatively, which voting in the UN General Assembly and sociological data

1 Galeotti, M. (2022). *Putin’s Wars: From Chechnya to Ukraine*. Oxford: Osprey Publishing. Giles, K. (2023). *Russia’s War On Everybody: And What It Means For You*. London: Bloomsbury Academic. Shekhovtsov, A. (2020). *Conceptualizing malign influence of Putin’s Russia in Europe*. Washington, D.C.: Free Russia.

2 Krastev, I., Snyder, T., Glenny, M. (2023, June 26). The Russo-Ukrainian War And The Future of The World [video]. *IWM*. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rqCGUVYkcmM>.

3 Korablyova, V. (2022). Russia vs. Ukraine: A Subaltern Empire Against the ‘Populism of Hope’. *Acta Universitatis Carolinae — Studia Territorialia*, 2: 39–60. <https://doi.org/10.14712/23363231.2023.3>.

4 Putin, V. V. (2022, October 27). Valdai International Discussion Club meeting. *Kremlin*. <http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/69695>.

5 Putin, V. V. (2022, October 27).

from various countries illustrates⁶, the anti-Western rhetoric of the Kremlin falls on fertile ground in many places. Re-branding Russia as a global challenger that prefigures the emergence of a multi-polar order resonated well in non-Western settings. A large-scale sociological survey, jointly conducted December 2022–January 2023 by the European Council on Foreign Relations and the Oxford project *Europe in a Changing World*⁷, shows indicative results. When asked what the war is about and why the US and EU back Ukraine, most respondents outside of the region take it as a plea to defend Western dominance and Western security (basically, buying into Putin's narrative): 65% of respondents in China and Turkey and 60% in Russia are in favour of this explanation. Three side notes are thereby due: (1) India deviates in all the major responses from the dominant non-Western perspective by simultaneously believing that Ukraine's democracy is at stake and demonstrating admiration towards Putin's Russia. (2) Latin America was not included in this survey. Despite structural similarities with India related to the colonial past and the populist present, this region is far less favourable towards Putin's Russia.⁸ (3) EU citizens separate themselves from the US geopolitically (while it is not matched in the external perception) — they lean towards the same reading of the US motives, whereas declaring that their own rationale is to support Ukraine as a sovereign democratic country. Even more revealing are the answers about the global order expected ten years from now: the majority of non-Western respondents are certain that a multipolar world is emerging; most Western

- 6 UN News (2023, February 23). UN General Assembly calls for immediate end to war in Ukraine. <https://news.un.org/en/story/2023/02/1133847>. Fagan, M., Poushter, J., Gubbala, S. (2023, July 10). Large Shares See Russia and Putin in Negative Light, While Views of Zelenskyy More Mixed. *Pew Research Center*. <https://www.pewresearch.org/global/2023/07/10/large-shares-see-russia-and-putin-in-negative-light-while-views-of-zelensky-more-mixed/>. Boyon, N. (2023). One year in, global public opinion about the war in Ukraine has remained remarkably stable. *Ipsos*. <https://www.ipsos.com/en/war-in-ukraine-january-2023>.
- 7 Garton Ash, T., Krastev, I., Leonard, M. (2023). United West, divided from the rest. Global public opinion one year into Russia's war on Ukraine, *European Moments*. <https://europeanmoments.com/changing-world/ecfr-joint-report-feb2023-global-opinion-russia-ukraine>.
- 8 Fagan, M., Poushter, J., Gubbala, S. (2023, July 10).

respondents expect chaos and turbulence — or, at best (the second most popular reply), a bipolar US–China configuration; and only in India, the majority believe in the perpetuation of the US dominance.⁹

Alas, most citizens in the dominant, rising, and dominated countries agree on the fact that Western hegemony is at stake in the ongoing war and are inclined to believe it is doomed. That clearly signals the decline of Western soft power but also challenges the dominant readings of the very nature of power. Interestingly, the majority of Westerners believe that Putin's Russia revealed its weakness throughout this war and non-Westerners read strength into it.¹⁰ The paradigm of soft power rests on the assumption that the ability to compromise and maintain peace is a source of strength and power.¹¹ The Kremlin beats it with the dark power approach (to be described in detail further on) where concessions and compromises signal weakness to be taken advantage of. The core belief is that by daring to break the rules, one manifests their power and strength. The outcome of this battle is yet to be seen. Most probably, it will define the rules and principles of the coming world order. To grapple with it, we need to expand our vocabulary. The once-fruitful framework of hard power vs. soft power, recently rebranded in the concept of smart power¹², must be complemented with another one: dark power vs. bright power. Its conceptual nodes will be described in the following chapters.

⁹ Garton Ash, T., Krastev, I., Leonard, M. (2023).

¹⁰ Over 60% of Indian respondents admit that in this conflict, Russia turned out stronger than they thought; and the majority of Chinese, Turkish, and Russian respondents side with that (even if with more moderate figures). At the same time, almost half of Britons claim that Russia looks weaker than before, and Americans and Europeans side with that perspective (Garton Ash, T., Krastev, I., Leonard, M. (2023)).

¹¹ Hannah Arendt captures this spirit well: 'Power and force are opposites; where the one rules absolutely, the other is absent' (Arendt, H. (1970). *On Violence*. New York: Harvest, p. 56.).

¹² As Joseph S. Nye puts it, 'Smart power is neither hard nor soft. It is both. [...] Smart power means learning better how to combine our hard and soft power'. Nye, J. S. (2005). *Soft Power: The Means To Success In World Politics*. New York: Public Affairs, xiii, p. 32.

The end of soft power: towards new ramifications

Joseph S. Nye famously coined the notion of soft power to explain the changes in the global order after two world wars when a new consensus on limiting military means to achieve geopolitical goals gained ground. As Nye admits, 'soft power came in the Marshall Plan'.¹³ The decision to invest in the transformation of Germany instead of destroying the defeated enemy was a game-changer that enabled the rise of the US as a superpower. Nuclear deterrence between the US and the Soviet Union sealed the deal — from that moment on, global dominance was connected not to the deployment of the military might but more so to its display and also, quite importantly, to the capability to win hearts and minds. The latter came to be known as the ideological dimension of the Cold War.

Soft power is the power of attraction: it is 'the ability to get what you want through attraction rather than coercion or payments. It arises from the attractiveness of a country's culture, political ideals, and policies'.¹⁴ The ability to influence other actors' decisions might rest on command power that deploys coercion and inducement or on co-optive power that implies the capacity to shape others' preferences as aligned with yours due to their appeal.¹⁵ This competition of soft powers turned into an ideological rivalry between market democracy and Soviet-style socialism. The victory of the West in the Cold War was swiftly proclaimed 'the end of history' that allegedly heralded the unquestioned appeal of liberal democracy. As Francis Fukuyama worded it: we '...may be witnessing... the end point of mankind's ideological evolution and the universalization of Western liberal democracy as the final form of human government'.¹⁶

The following developments turned out much gloomier, though. No alternative ideological package managed to garner support worldwide, yet the game itself was proclaimed Western-centric and unfair. Arguably,

¹³ Nye, J. S. (2005), ix.

¹⁴ Nye, J. S. (2005), x.

¹⁵ Nye, J. S. (2005), p. 7.

¹⁶ Fukuyama, F. (1989). The end of history? *The National Interest*, Summer, 3–18: 4.

the tragedy of 9/11 marked the end of soft power as the guideline in international relations and we are currently observing its final deconstruction. Failing to beat the West at par, either militarily or ideologically, its adversaries shifted the objective to discrediting and destroying it. This strategy became labelled as ‘sharp power’ or ‘dark power’. While some researchers use them interchangeably, the former could be ascribed to China and the latter to Russia to point out — at least analytically — some important differences. In a nutshell, sharp power implies disruptive operations to weaken an enemy while keeping the global order intact and dark power presents a zero-sum game with maximal stakes where a subjectively perceived ‘mission’ prevails over any rational calculations. Putin expressed this escalation of symbolic stakes in his notorious remark: ‘Why do we need a world if Russia is not in it?’¹⁷

Walker, Kalathil, and Ludwig use the notion of ‘sharp power’ to mark ‘a wider offensive by antidemocratic powers in the realm of ideas’.¹⁸ They show how the openness of Western societies and their willingness to engage with opponents made them fragile and vulnerable — ‘activist autocrats’ harness new technologies to spread their values and visions, while corroding democratic standards everywhere. ‘Media-manipulation infrastructure’ pioneered by Russia and supplemented with ‘active measures’ in the West put consolidated democracies in ‘an unexpectedly precarious position’.¹⁹ Instead of defending their own preferences, beholders of sharp power aim to discredit their opponents by attempting ‘to impair free expression, to compromise and neutralise independent institutions, and to distort the political environment’.²⁰

Keir Giles notes that Russia has been waging a war against the West for a while, while Western leaders and commoners fail to recognise this fact

17 The Moscow Times (2022, February 28). Why Do We Need a World if Russia Is Not In It?: State TV Presenter Opens Show With Ominous Address. <https://www.themoscowtimes.com/2022/02/28/why-do-we-need-a-world-if-russia-is-not-in-it-state-tv-presenter-opens-show-with-ominous-address-a76653>.

18 Walker, Ch., Kalathil, Sh., Ludwig, J. (2020). The Cutting Edge of Sharp Power. *Journal of Democracy*, 31, 1, p. 125. <https://doi.org/10.1353/jod.2020.0010>.

19 Walker, Ch., Kalathil, Sh., Ludwig, J. (2020), p. 126–127.

20 Walker, Ch., Kalathil, Sh., Ludwig, J. (2020), p. 127.

being 'lulled into a false sense of security by an extended period of peace between themselves'.²¹ This statement rhymes well with the diagnosis put forward by Popescu and Wilson: 'The EU will have to get used to operating in a more competitive environment' when it cannot rely on the presumed 'magnetism' of the EU model (2009: 25–26). Even if Russian bold actions before the full-scale invasion — from the annexation of Crimea to resonant poisoning attempts and corruption scandals — shocked the Western audience, they were largely perceived as one-off events, deviations from a trajectory of Russia as a 'normal country'. Those two strategic misperceptions, namely of Western infallibility and of Russian 'normalcy' — probably derive from inertia and unwillingness of the majority of populations and elites to face an uncomfortable reality. There is also more to it. On a deeper level, all the sides project onto each other their patterns and beliefs, thus engaging in 'mirror imaging' — assuming that the other side thinks and acts the same way you do'.²² From the dominant Western perspective, up till recently, Russia is a 'normal' European country where elected rulers enjoy the support of their electorate and they pursue their national interests guided by 'normal' rationality. Keir Giles warns against this: 'The Kremlin's view of the world is so distinctive from what is taken for granted in Europe and North America that all preconceptions of what is rational or 'makes sense' have to be set aside'.²³ Russia engages in projections, too, assuming that political elites everywhere are as corrupt and profit-seeking, and values are just declared but never enacted. Ekaterina Schulmann aptly labels it a 'reverse cargo cult'. Taking as a starting point the story of aborigines building a plane from straw and manure and expecting it to fly or deliver desired goods (cargo cult), Schulmann follows up assuming that failed expectations result in 'a kind of reverse cargo cult — a belief that white people's aeroplanes are also made of straws and manure, but they are better at pretending that it's not so'.²⁴ If Russian democracy

²¹ Giles, K. (2023), p. xvi.

²² Giles, K. (2023), p. 3.

²³ Giles, K. (2023), p. 24.

²⁴ Arthenice (2010). Solomennyi samolet. *Livejournal*. <https://users.livejournal.com/-niece/126963.html>.

is Potemkin-style, fake, then so too are Western democracies.²⁵ One might add the trauma of the Soviet collapse — if our utopia failed, then no utopia is feasible. This creates moral nihilism and an obsessive desire to expose the opponent’s hypocrisy. Both are parts and parcels of Russian ‘dark power’.

Russia’s ‘Herostratos syndrome’: from bullying to state terrorism

A well-informed researcher of Russia, Mark Galeotti provided several important insights on Russian foreign policy. Firstly, he called Putin a judoka who interprets international relations not as a chess game but as a judo (his sports hobby) where one needs to use the opponent’s strength against them: ‘He has a sense of what constitutes a win, but no predetermined path towards it. He relies on quickly seizing any advantage he sees, rather than on a careful strategy.’²⁶ As Pekka Toveri observes, ‘Putin’s regime started to play the game with [the] West in the beginning of the 2010s with a very weak hand. But they noticed soon that by being aggressive and active, they can dance around the West and achieve their goals without any real reactions.’²⁷

Secondly, Galeotti called the Kremlin leader a ‘bully’: ‘If you are going to be a bully, then be a fearsome and formidable one. That way, rivals are deterred from challenging you, and are inclined to pacify you with deals and exemptions.’²⁸ Paul Goble seconds that: ‘Russia’s national strategy under Vladimir Putin is based on behaving so badly that others don’t

²⁵ Keir Giles gives illuminating examples of Putin expecting to be invited to a castle where spheres of influence are being distributed; and of Sergei Lavrov interpreting NATO as operating similar to the Warsaw Pact which satellite states were forced to join (Giles, K. (2023), p. 4–5).

²⁶ Galeotti, M. (2019). *We Need To Talk About Putin: How The West Gets Him Wrong*. London: Ebury Press.

²⁷ Giles, K. (2023), p. 85.

²⁸ Galeotti, M. (2018, March 15). Russia Pursues ‘Dark Power’ and the West Has No Answer. *Raam op Rusland*. <https://raamoprusland.nl/dossiers/kremlin/894-russia-pursues-dark-power-and-the-west-has-noanswer>.

seem to know how to react'.²⁹ This is quite close to the mafia mentality when one must show no weakness, and give disproportionate retribution to scare less resolute opponents away. Bomb civic infrastructure³⁰; torture civilian population³¹; create an ecocide by blasting a dam³²; threaten with global hunger through quitting the grain deal³³; set grain storages on fire.³⁴ Promise to continue the warfare but resume grain supplies if all the sanctions are lifted.³⁵ If that does not work, threaten to blast a nuclear power plant.³⁶ Rinse and repeat.³⁷

It is the essence of Russian dark power. Stout resolve has an upper hand over available resources: 'The Kremlin's working assumption is that while the West has more capacity, it lacks the will to use it to the fullest. Russia, by contrast, has the will and can thus do more with less, so long

29 Giles, K. (2023), p. xvii.

30 Lu, C. (2022, October 11). Putin Targets Ukrainian Infrastructure. *Foreign Policy*. <https://foreignpolicy.com/2022/10/11/russia-ukraine-strikes-civilian-infrastructure/>.

31 Farge, E. (2023, Septemehr 25). Russia tortured some Ukrainian victims to death, UN inquiry says. *Reuters*. [https://www.reuters.com/world/europe/russia-tortured-some-ukrainian-victims-death-un-inquiry-says-2023-09-25/#:~:text=GENEVA%2C%20Sept%2025%20\(Reuters\),latest%20findings%20from%20the%20field.](https://www.reuters.com/world/europe/russia-tortured-some-ukrainian-victims-death-un-inquiry-says-2023-09-25/#:~:text=GENEVA%2C%20Sept%2025%20(Reuters),latest%20findings%20from%20the%20field.)

32 Hajdari, U. (2023, June 7). Biggest ecocide in Ukraine': thousands of species threatened by breach at Kakhovka Dam. *Euronews*. <https://www.euronews.com/green/2023/06/07/biggest-ecocide-in-ukraine-thousands-of-species-threatened-by-breach-at-kakhovka-dam.>

33 Picheta, R., Krever, M., Chernova, A. (2023, July 17). Russia pulls out of Ukrainian grain deal, in potential blow to global food supplies. *CNN*. <https://edition.cnn.com/2023/07/17/europe/russia-ukraine-grain-deal-intl/index.html>.

34 Polityuk, P. (2023, August 23). Russia hits grain facilities at Ukrainian Danube River port. *Reuters*. <https://www.reuters.com/world/europe/russia-attacks-grain-facilities-ukraines-danube-region-military-2023-08-23/>.

35 Gavin, G., Busvine, D. (2023, September 4). Russia ready to restart grain deal if sanctions lifted, Putin tells Erdogan. *Politico*. <https://www.politico.eu/article/russia-turkey-restart-grain-deal-ukraine-if-sanctions-lifted-putin-tells-erdogan/>.

36 Miller, C. (2023, July 5). Volodymyr Zelenskyy warns of Russian threat to 'attack' Ukraine nuclear power plant. *Financial Times*. <https://www.ft.com/content/cd980f56-d41d-46f3-a205-abaedcb3cdd>.

37 Evans-Pritchard Jayanti, S. (2023, September). Russia resumes bombing campaign of Ukraine's civilian energy infrastructure. *Atlantic Council, Ukraine Alert*. <https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/blogs/ukrainealert/russia-resumes-bombing-campaign-of-ukraines-civilian-energy-infrastructure/>.

as it retains the initiative and the psychological advantage'.³⁸ Other components that guarantee Russia's strategic prevalence would be zero moral restraints and a disregard for human suffering or other losses.³⁹ There is no such thing as cost inefficiency on the path to performing the Russian 'historic mission': the kamikaze mentality always beats the 'Davos man' and the commoner alike. As Galeotti rightly notes, dark power is self-destructive but quite efficient in the short run.

Following the rationale to exhaust the West, Russia finds weak spots in its social and political construction and consolidates its destructive efforts there.⁴⁰ Notably, only a fraction of Russian disruptive actions in the West gets covered in the media, while manifold low-key operations go unnoticed.⁴¹ The Kremlin efficiently works with enablers and 'useful idiots' using the MICE strategy. The leverage boils down to four aspects often deployed in combination:

- *Money* — bribery of different levels of egregiousness already became infamous among top EU officials;
- *Ideology* — alliances against the common enemy (usually, US imperialism or global capitalism — quite often, both);
- *Compromise* — blackmail is another legitimate tool of the Kremlin, often conveniently prepared or fabricated;
- *Ego* — cooperation with the Kremlin boosts careers and the sense of self-worth of previously ignored academics, journalists, and activists.⁴²

All those strategies present the legacy of Soviet secret services, as they were refined during the Cold War years, being geared towards weakening the enemy rather than extracting secret information. The important point is while the positive component of Soviet propaganda faded away

³⁸ Galeotti, M. (2019).

³⁹ Alesina, M., Cappelletti, F. (2022, August 2). The End of History, Delayed: The EU's Role in Defining The Post-War Order. *Modern Diplomacy*. <https://moderndiplomacy.eu/2022/08/02/the-end-of-history-delayed-then-eus-role-in-defining-the-post-war-order/>.

⁴⁰ Shekhovtsov, A. (2020).

⁴¹ Giles, K. (2023), p. xii.

⁴² Giles, K. (2023), ch. 6.

due to its symbolic bankruptcy, the destructive side of corroding the West from within remained: 'Unlike in communist times, Russia does not seek to try to spread a precise ideology or set of beliefs, but this hasn't diluted the destructive counterpart to that effort — its determination to undermine the beliefs and values that are broadly common to Western democracies, and set their societies against themselves in the process.'⁴³ This lopsided vehicle runs into an abyss, as only a dystopian vision of a planet covered with nuclear dust is suggested.⁴⁴ This suicidal messianism converges with Jihadism in promising gratification in the otherworld. Arguably, Putin's Russia made a way from a geopolitical bully to a terrorist state.

Given the outspoken irrationality of a full-scale invasion with all its disastrous long-term consequences for people and nature, let alone a non-zero probability of a nuclear disaster, the decision to launch and perpetuate it cannot be fully explained from a rational perspective. A certain engagement with political psychology is required, and the Herostratos syndrome provides useful insights. The ancient arsonist dreamt of becoming famous by setting a temple on fire, as no other means to remain in history seemed available to him. Along similar lines, (collective) Putin got frustrated with the non-recognition of the special status of Russia as a great power, and he opted instead to become a great enemy. As a Kremlin propagandist recently noted: 'This must be the essence of our greatness...Enemies, enemies everywhere.'⁴⁵

Albert Borowitz in his sociological study of terrorism describes the mindset of a terrorist belonging to the Herostratos archetype. The bottom line is craving notoriety and self-glorification, while pursuing eternal fame through crimes of violence. Other distinctive features are:

- Feeling the injustice of the world perceived as deprivation from positive opportunities;

⁴³ Giles, K. (2023), p. 76.

⁴⁴ Kelly, L. (2014, March 16). Russia can turn US to radioactive ash — Kremlin-backed journalist. *Reuters*. <https://www.reuters.com/article/ukraine-crisis-russia-kiselyov-idUSL6NOMDOP920140316>.

⁴⁵ Davis, J. (2022, April 29). Twitter status. <https://twitter.com/JuliaDavisNews/status/1387805812257693698>.

- Intoxicating empowerment through committing crimes;
- Absorbing the power of the victim (the greatness of the victim translates into the greatness of the perpetrator); and
- Envy of more successful rivals known for their merits.⁴⁶

The last point describes the choice of Ukraine to be punished for being more successful in escaping the post-Soviet dependence and getting some recognition abroad. The previous point explains the choice of the West, and, more specifically, the United States as the symbolic opponent whose rank is the only co-equal with pursued Russian greatness.

Properly acknowledging the setup helps in understanding the motives of the Kremlin leadership and finding a potential antidote to it. It must unfold in steps.

- (1) We must admit that tackling the Kremlin challenge requires not the craftsmanship of compromises from international relations but rather the techniques of negotiations with terrorists or, at best, with muggers. Compromises are rendered not favours to be returned but signs of weakness that provoke to demand more.
- (2) Terrorism is a war waged in the media. Media coverage provides it with the 'oxygen of publicity' (Margaret Thatcher). We need to cut admiration and awe with Putin's strong leadership, until recently omnipresent in the European public space. Let us be aware that those sentiments encourage war crimes and crimes against humanity.
- (3) We must track the proven algorithm of the Kremlin actions: in any critical situation, raising the stakes and demanding concessions for returning to the status quo ante. As a result, Russia ends up better off than before, even if the situation was initially unfavourable for them. Calling out Russian bluff without blinking, as, for instance, Turkish President Erdoğan did repeatedly, contains violence more efficiently than concessions and negotiations.
- (4) Strength and resolve are important but some homework is required as well. Russia usually exploits and deepens the already existing issues in the West. It found its sweet spots in Western pragmatism

⁴⁶ Borowitz, A. (2005). *Terrorism for Self-Glorification: The Herostratos Syndrome*. Kent: The Kent State University Press, pp.9–14.

and moral blindness, especially in economy and politics. Bringing values back in and enacting them in those domains could be an efficient cure. Let us call it 'bright power' and extract some lessons from Ukraine.

The emergent bright power: Ukrainian resilience as an inspiration

Mirror imaging was at play while various actors were making prognoses anticipating the full-scale Russian invasion. Westerners and Russians converged in expecting a quick win for Putin's army; the former were confident that resisting a stronger enemy did not make any sense, the latter expected Ukrainian elites to surrender and lay citizens to obey whoever takes the high office in Kyiv. Both were wrong. Ukrainians resisted and fought back without any orders and despite calculations against them. Testimonies show a repetitive pattern: they stood up for what was dear to them, as 'no other choice was plausible'. Several phrases and actions from the early days of the all-out war became iconic. The border guards from Zmiinyi Island refused to surrender to a Russian warship. President Zelensky allegedly refused the offer to relocate safely to Poland: 'I need ammo not a ride.' And the breaking video 'We are all here' shows top Ukrainian officials staying in their offices in downtown Kyiv under the siege and assassination threat. That was how Ukraine's bright power emerged.

In the second year of the big war, Ukrainian national symbols are ubiquitous — from the streets to top ceremonies; Zelensky tops the ratings of the most popular politicians; and 'the spirit of Ukraine' was proclaimed the *TIME* person of the year. A pragmatist would ascribe it to successful marketing campaigns, the Ukrainian President's acting skills and good speechwriters. A cynicist would call it symbolic compensation for insufficient support on the side of the West. What seems to be true, however, is that Ukrainian resistance brings hope, badly needed in the dystopian world with multiple looming dangers. A Politico reader who voted for Zelensky as the most influential person in Europe described him as 'a beacon of hope' who was striving for 'peace, democracy,

decency'.⁴⁷ This language of values had been missed in the technocratic world of institutions, procedures, and regulations.

Max Weber famously distinguished several types of reasoning behind the human activity, arguing that some actions are geared towards certain set goals, which presents instrumental rationality, and some actions 'are determined by a conscious belief in the value for its own sake...independently of its prospects of success',⁴⁸ and then value rationality is at play. A 'means to an end' mindset is most efficient in the economy. Yet, its expansion over other domains — politics and private life — makes them purely transactional, hence immoral. Only value-rational action is capable of reinforcing values, as it puts convictions into practice, and manifests them in real life.

Putin's attack on the West is rhetorically packed as an attack against its hypocrisy — it dwells on the cleavage between declared values and patterns of behaviour. The Kremlin's discursive attacks point to political decisions and bureaucratic practices not aligned with proclaimed ideals. As Giles points out: 'Paradoxically, in its new dealings with the West and with its own people, Russia is being more open and honest. Not in the sense of giving up its routine denials of everything it is caught doing, but instead no longer trying to even superficially hide the fact that it is a repressive, authoritarian country that is content to behave as a rogue state because it sees the West as its enemy'.⁴⁹ Slovenian philosopher Slavoj Žižek captures it in the following way: 'What Russia is offering is a world without hypocrisy — because it is without global ethical standards, practising just pragmatic 'respect' for differences. We have seen clearly what this means when, after the Taliban took over in Afghanistan, they instantly made a deal with China. China accepts the new Afghanistan while the Taliban will ignore what China is doing to Uyghurs — this is, *in nuce*, the new globalisation advocated by Russia.

47 Posaner, J. (2022, March 22). Ukraine's Volodymyr Zelenskyy tops POLITICO 28 poll as most powerful person in Europe. *Politico*. <https://www.politico.eu/article/ukraine-zelenskyy-europe-most-powerful-person-politico28-2022-poll/>.

48 Weber, M., Roth, G., Wittich, C. (eds) (1968). *Economy and Society: An Outline of Interpretive Sociology*. Oakland: University of California Press, p. 24–25.

49 Giles, K. (2023), p. 1.

And the only way to defend what is worth saving in our liberal tradition is to ruthlessly insist on its universality. The moment we apply double standards, we are no less 'pragmatic' than Russia'.⁵⁰

A way out of this world is paved with actions, not declarations — a realignment of political decisions and strategies with proclaimed values would close the gap that makes the West fragile in front of Russia's dark power. Eastern Europe, often missing the safety net of institutions, has long known this recipe against authoritarianism. Living in truth as a working strategy suggested by Václav Havel back in the 1970s⁵¹ points in the same direction: when a proverbial greengrocer refuses to pretend to believe party ideology, it shatters the authoritarian system; when he refuses to always seek profits irrespective of the common good, it beats consumerism and creates space for solidarity and joint political action. When Ukrainian operators deliver water and food with drones to people locked in flooded houses, they show that every human life matters. When people rescue animals under fire they show that every life matters. When communal workers repair civic infrastructure risking their lives, they demonstrate solidarity not just declare it. When they plant flowers and paint fences in shelled Kharkiv, it proves their firm belief in its future. When Polish citizens rushed in their cars — with no orders from above — to the Ukrainian border in late February 2022 to pick up people fleeing the war zone, they showed care and sympathy. When Czechs and Lithuanians crowdfunded military supplies to Ukraine, they believed it was a just cause — not necessarily a sure deal. When European companies quit the Russian market, it goes against their business interests but it is perceived as the right thing to do. In all those cases, there are no external objectives but an inherent sense of righteousness born out of a special moral feeling.⁵²

⁵⁰ Žižek, S. (2022, May 23). We must stop letting Russia define the terms of the Ukraine crisis. *The Guardian*. <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2022/may/23/we-must-stop-letting-russia-define-the-terms-of-the-ukraine-crisis>.

⁵¹ Havel, V., Keane, J. (1985). *The Power of the Powerless: Citizens Against the State in Central-Eastern Europe*. Armonk: M. E. Sharpe.

⁵² Korablyova, V. (2022). Ukrainian phronesis: bottom-up resistance and the banality of goodness. *Topos*, 2: 48–55. <https://doi.org/10.24412/1815-0047-2022-2-48-55>.

Several important distinctions are due. When one complies with values imposed from outside it is a traditional action — in Weber’s terminology, social conformism without genuine moral choice. A value-rational action is different — it is a personal choice, a self-binding commitment to a subjectively perceived value.

Bright power differs from soft power. Even if they might overlap, there are important nuances. Bright power derives from a precarious, unresourceful position, and it stands as an end goal not a means to a certain end. In terms of resonance, they are different, too. Soft power creates the desire to emulate and bandwagon; bright power produces respect and admiration.

	Smart power	Sharp power	Dark Power	Bright Power
Positionality	Strong / dominant	Strong / dominant	Precarious	Precarious
Main actor	Institutions	Party-state	Mafia-state	People
Main objective	Retaining dominance	Acquiring dominance in the existing structure	Improving geopolitical standing / changing the structure	Retaining sovereignty / improving the structure
Methods	Persuasion (coercion + attraction)	Covert operations (weakening the opponent)	Geopolitical blackmail with no limits	Moral action
Effects	Emulation / Bandwagoning	Respect / fear	Fear	Respect / admiration

Conclusion

Any war is a disruptive event that shatters the present and reopens the future. Any choice or its absence, for that matter, influences future configurations in the making. It sheds off the institutional veil and exposes the worst and the best sides of humankind. Keir Giles dedicates his book *Russia’s War On Everybody* to Vladimir Putin thanking him

'for finally convincing the world of the depths of evil his country is still willing to perpetrate'.⁵³ A popular song by Belarusian performers about the Maidan participants that gained a second life after the full-scale invasion is called *Warriors of Light, Warriors of Goodness*.⁵⁴ In the geopolitical realm, those sentiments translate into dark and bright power, respectively.

Joseph S. Nye, the author of the notions of soft and smart power, notes that world politics has turned into 'a three-dimensional chess game in which one can win only by playing vertically as well as horizontally'.⁵⁵ The complexity is defined by the inclusion of heterogeneous factors and actors where 'power is widely distributed and chaotically organised among state and nonstate actors'.⁵⁶ On top of that, assets might turn into liabilities — if the rules change. As Nye aptly reminds us, it is important to know 'who is holding the high cards' but it is crucial to figure out first what game one is playing. Arguably, we might find ourselves at a tipping point where the game is changing: it is no longer the growth but the morals that are at stake.

The orientation of Western economies and politics on economic growth as the main rationale of efficient governance has been substantially criticised by public intellectuals at least since the establishment of the Club of Rome for its side effects that could undermine the entire system: the ecological crisis, rising social inequality, and the hollowing-out of liberal democracy result from the prioritisation of market rationality over value-based rationality. The bottom-line of current criticism towards the West is that it does not live up to declared liberal values but aims at maximising profits by exploiting nature, other nations, and its own social underdogs.

Western dominance has been challenged by the rising non-Western powers not through them outperforming the Euro-Atlantic world but due to the very criteria of prevalence being put in question. Russia, backed by

⁵³ Giles, K. (2023), p. v.

⁵⁴ LYAPIS 98 — Voiny sveta [Warriors of Light] (2017). <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Chxr5srLuhk>.

⁵⁵ Nye, J.S. (2005), p. 4.

⁵⁶ Nye, J.S. (2005), p. 4.

its allies, calls out the West's hypocrisy claiming that it does not live as it preaches and that so-called liberal values are a fig leaf for greedy colonisers. This ideological fight must not be mistaken for Cold War 2.0 — it is not about competing 'soft powers', rivalling versions of a better future like it was in the rivalry between capitalism vs. socialism. It is neither visionary (future-oriented) nor constructive (suggestive). The ideological underpinning is moral relativism and instrumental rationality — no values should guide political actions, only pragmatic interests and power balances. In a way, the 'non-West' appropriates and weaponises Western pragmatism and market rationality against it. Accepting the Russian-Chinese proposal of 'globalisation without hypocrisy' would be suicidal for the European civilisation; it would provide adversaries with a competitive advantage while killing the cultural legacy that secured European development.

Mark Galeotti's 2018 article has a telling title 'Russia pursues "dark power" and the West has no answer'.⁵⁷ The all-out invasion helped Ukrainians and other Europeans to find an answer, which lies not in the institutional or rhetorical domain but in their everyday actions that demonstrate and, by the same token, establish the bright power of European values of democracy, freedom, and horizontal solidarity. It awaits proper conceptualisation, yet the tendency must not be overlooked. As Alesina and Cappelletti rightly point out, the current standoff between the West and Russia is 'driven not by ideology or religion but by the two conflicting standpoints on human life — as a value and a non-value'⁵⁸, and it is the EU's responsibility to design a new world order built on commonly accepted principles and values.

In the increasingly turbulent world of today, where power is fluid and situationally re-distributed between state and non-state actors, and those finding themselves in weaker positions with limited resources often choose not to surrender to the strongest but to indulge in disruptive activities, when terrorist strategies of (geo)political blackmail are embraced not only by marginal groups but by declining powers

⁵⁷ Galeotti, M. (2018, March 15).

⁵⁸ Alesina, M., Cappelletti, F. (2022, August 2).

like Russia, we must revise our readings of power and dominance. The emerging global order is no longer defined solely by great powers imposing their hegemony by 'hard' (political and economic domination) and 'soft' (civilizational appeal) means. A new power of attraction derives from a moral right to decide on the future order, and this right comes from performed actions. Ukraine presents a case of a peripheral nation, allegedly doomed to give in to a stronger rival, that earned global recognition through sound manifestations of its values (freedom and democracy being the main ones), demonstrated across the social and political spectrum. The EU, ceding its defence autonomy to the US and losing its cultural appeal in the eyes of the global majority, must learn from Ukraine's experience on how to elevate its geopolitical status by bringing values back into the public domain — not rhetorically but through decision-making and political performance. Europe's prosperity resulted from peace, not the other way around.⁵⁹ To provide sustainable peace, we must enact the value of human life and liberal principles in our collective actions.

⁵⁹ Alesina, M., Cappelletti, F. (2022, August 2).

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Ukraine presents a case of a peripheral nation, allegedly doomed to give in to a stronger rival, that earned global recognition through sound manifestations of its values (freedom and democracy being the main ones), demonstrated across the social and political spectrum.

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Building a case for proactive communication against pro-Kremlin narratives and disinformation spread by the Russian Federation

PAVEL HAVLICEK

After 24 February 2022, the Czech Republic, like the rest of the European Union, switched off Russian state propaganda media — namely Sputnik Czech Republic — from all platforms following the guidance of the European Commission after the start of the Russian Federation war against Ukraine. At the same time, the Czech Republic has also tried to minimise the domestic space for other pro-Kremlin disinformation and other fringe outlets but struggled with concrete implementation when lacking legal tools and instruments to do so. After all, most of the disconnected pro-Kremlin fringe sites returned to the public domain without any significant problem for their future operations due to a lack of robust plan for a longer-term sustainable solution.

The year 2022 proved that it is still somehow controversial for the Czech political class and society — unlike for some other countries in Central and Eastern Europe (CEE) — to introduce the so-called ‘red button’ logic giving the state a competence that would allow it to completely take down online (dis)information sites. However, other options — including implementation of the EU’s digital regulation represented primarily by the EU’s *Digital Services Act (DSA)*, demonetisation of harmful but legal content or more efficient cooperation with the social media platforms proved unexplored and unutilised in practice by the national authorities. Concurrently, the state has so far struggled to develop more efficient

strategic and crisis communication and establish a more robust system of coordination that would decrease the space for misinterpretation and other forms of manipulation with large-scale events, news, and crisis situations. Exactly that, however, could be the right way forward, as it proves ideologically and politically hard to realise a more significant boost of competence on the side of the state.

At the end of the day, much is going to depend on the willingness of the state and society as well as political will of the ruling elite to put proactive measures into practice, which will determine if the fight against disinformation and pro-Kremlin manipulations in the Czech Republic is going to be successful. This would also be the liberal answer to well balance the more punitive measures with the general concept of fundamental freedoms, while taking into consideration the new intensity of security needs for action and taking a more proactive approach to compensate for the lack of robust legal instruments in place.

Thus, the paper is going to answer the following questions: will the Czech state have the competence to (temporarily or completely) switch off websites promoting harmful content, including pro-Kremlin disinformation — while also taking into consideration the checks and balances and a solid dispute mechanism? Or rather, will it primarily focus on other proactive tools and instruments as well as softer measures to decrease the influence and reach of such sites, including — for example — demonetisation, fact-checking or minimising reach and output thanks to collaboration with the social media platforms? Finally, where, from the state's perspective, is the place for crisis and strategic communication and societal resilience, including educated society and independent press, as these areas proved to play out positively for the country and helped it to perform well in the CEE?

To answer these questions, the paper is going to take into consideration both the current academic discussion on the subject matter as well as political and policy related aspects of the debate, which are still unfolding in front of our eyes on a daily basis in the Czech Republic.

General assessment of Russian influence from a specific angle

The Czech Republic, similarly to other CEE countries, has been traditionally exposed to high-intensity disinformation and influence campaigns from the Kremlin. This has been particularly the case since 2014 when Russia launched its initial phase of the war against Ukraine, illegally annexing the Crimean Peninsula and starting a long-term conflict in Donbas.

In the post-2014 period, the Czech Republic has seen ¹ dozens of disinformation websites spreading manipulative content on Russia and Ukraine as well as migration-related topics or any other anti-systemic issues that could be utilised to undermine public trust into the state and its institutions. While it is sometimes difficult to discover the direct link to Russia, the Kremlin-inspired narratives and ideological leaning could be generally traced in a number of cases within the disinformation ecosystem profiting from the anti-mainstream positioning and alternative views. Over a number of years, the Czech think-tank European Values Centre continued monitoring the disinformation scene and discovered that with small variations on a year-to-year basis, around 40 websites and online portals were operating in the Czech disinformation space. ² The first group was directly linked or closely following and inspired by the Russian official sources, while being led by the Sputnik Czech Republic officially operating for a number of years in the Czech Republic before 24 February 2022.

Another distinct group was manipulative news outlets. While also often inspired by the Kremlin in terms of their content, these sites generally focused on the sensational pieces of information, click-bait logic as well as catchy headlines that would allow them to profit from the online

1 Smolenova, I. (June 2015). The pro-Russian Disinformation Campaign in the Czech Republic and Slovakia. *Prague Security Studies Institute*. http://www.hom-bre.cz/images/253_is-pro-russian-campaign.pdf.

2 Krátká Špalková, V., et al (2023). Annual Report: On the State of the Czech Disinformation Scene For 2023. European Values Center for Security Policy. *European Values*. https://europeanvalues.cz/wp-content/uploads/2023/06/EN_Annual_Report_on_the_State_of_the_Czech_Disinformation_Scene_for_2022.pdf.

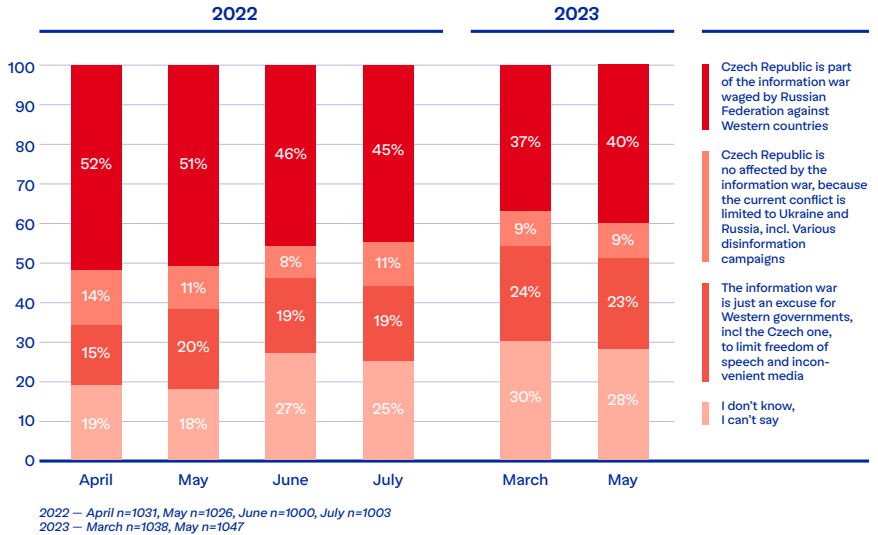
advertising schemes and earn in high hundreds of thousands of Czech Crowns monthly, as the investigation of the Czech journalists proved.³ Many others as described by the Prague Security Studies Institute⁴ are until today a combination of both approaches, even if less visibly pro-Russian. These sources are currently looking for a new agenda that would satisfy the anti-state and anti-systemic leaning of their followers. Ukraine and its refugees that had to flee the Russian war became a frequent target. Since COVID-19 pandemic, there has generally been a trend toward more diversification, both in terms of actors as well as topics and agendas, bringing more motivations and fragmentation of the disinformation scene in the Czech Republic. More and more information sources are also migrating to the social media sites and networks, particularly closed channels like Telegram, that are more difficult to monitor. This is one of the unintended consequences of an atmosphere that is less beneficial for openly pro-Russian messaging and pro-Kremlin views in the society.

Ruptures after 24 February 2022

What happened after the start of the full-scale Russian offensive against Ukraine on 24 February 2022 was a true shock for the disinformation and pro-Kremlin community operating in the information environment. Similar to the past high-shock moments like the COVID-19 pandemic, the both groups waited for several weeks to find a new approach in order to adapt to the circumstances determined by the state and society with a very clear anti-Kremlin and pro-Ukrainian sentiment.

- 3 The practice of the Czech and Slovak (closely interconnected) disinformation scene has been described by the Association for International Affairs here: Blablová, V., et al (2022, April 12). From East with Love: Dissecting Pro-China Bias in Czech and Slovak Alternative Media. *MapInfluence.cz*. <https://mapinfluence.eu/en/from-east-with-love-dissecting-pro-china-bias-in-czech-and-slovak-alternative-media/>.
- 4 Tkáčová, N., Šefčíková, K. (2023, June 20). Organizational and Financial Background of Disinformation Actors in the Czech Republic. *Prague Security Studies Institute*. <https://www.pssi.cz/publications/105-organizational-and-financial-background-of-disinformation-actors-in-the-czech-republic>.

Which of the following statements best describes your view of the war in Ukraine and its impact on the Czech Republic?



Source: CEDMO Hub ⁵

At the same time, the Czech state has acted decisively being inspired by the resolute actions at the level of the European Commission, which has decided to completely switch off all Russian state information sources, most notably Sputnik and RT (formerly Russia Today), from all platforms available on the territory of the EU. This brought to light a unique Czech approach to limit the influence of the most prominent disinformation sites when taking them down from the .cz domain operated by the CZ NIC private operator. As became clear only later, this action was pursued upon the recommendation by the Military Intelligence (vz). The massive scale Russian aggression has also put significant pressure on the traditional Kremlin allies in the country, most notably the President

⁵ Central European Digital Media Observatory (2023). *One Third of Czechs are Content with the Functioning of Democracy*. https://cedmohub.eu/wp-content/uploads/2023/05/CoffeeBeans_IPSOS2_EN.pdf.

Miloš Zeman, who has backtracked from his previous strongly pro-Putin views⁶ and admitted mistakes in his previous behaviour, both towards Russia and Ukraine, which he visited last in 2013.⁷ Being followed by a large part of the pro-Kremlin disinformation scene, this has also challenged them in their strongly embedded views, even if not entirely changed their mindset when approaching Eastern European affairs. Finally, strong language also came from the Highest Prosecutor's Office⁸ warning against praising the Russian aggression against Ukraine for standing in a direct opposition to a number of Czech laws, for example, on approving genocide and hatred against particular parts of the society. All of which has caused a toned-down public debate and contributed to lower impact of the pro-Kremlin and pro-war minded part of the society due to the new atmosphere in the society.

Discussion on the 'red button'

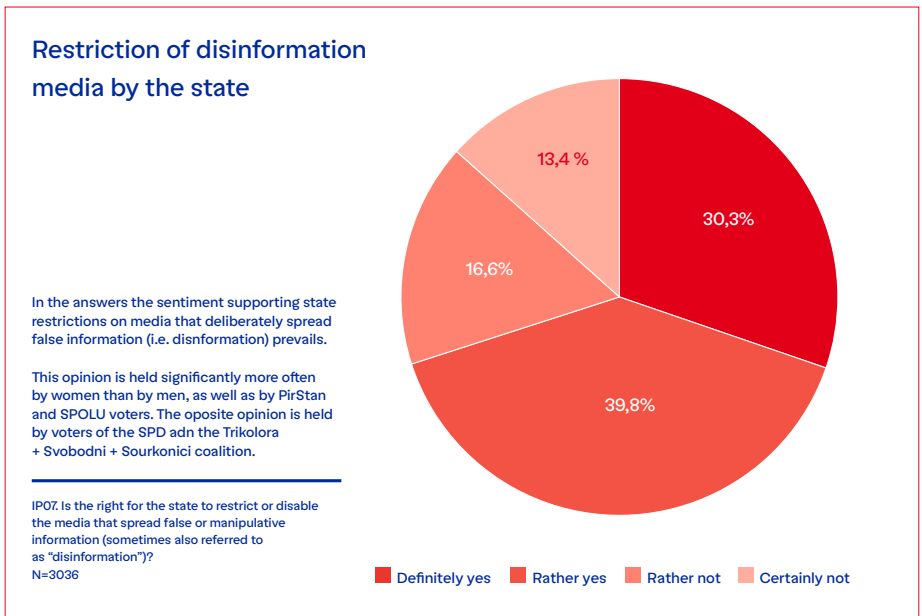
After this initial shock caused by rapid and relatively decisive actions by the state, the disinformation community started gradually operating more freely, especially since the pro-Kremlin channels managed to re-register under a different name and recover relatively swiftly, even if losing part of their fellowship. This, once again, exposed the weakness of the state and its competences, which could not even copy the resolute action taken by the European Commission that decided to take down Russia's RT and Sputnik, including the Czech version, from all its servers and platforms available in the EU.

6 Web references RFE/RL Ukraine Service (2022, June 3). Interview: Czech President Wants Putin Before War Crimes Court. <https://www.rferl.org/a/czech-president-wants-putin-before-war-crimes-court/31882412.html>.

7 Interfax-Ukraine (2013, October 18). Czech president to make official visit to Ukraine on October 20–22, says Honcharuk. <https://archive.kyivpost.com/article/content/ukraine-politics/czech-president-to-make-official-visit-to-ukraine-on-october-20-22-says-honcharuk-330700.html>.

8 Pancíř, T. (2022, April 29). Jednoznačné veřejné výroky schvalující násilí jsou za hranou. Stiháme pro ně třicet osob, říká Bradáčová. *Český rozhlas Radiožurnál*. <https://radiozurnal.rozhlas.cz/jednoznacne-verejne-vyroky-schvalujici-nasilii-jsou-za-hranou-stihame-pro-ne-8734969>.

The debate, in the policy and decision-making circles, started about introducing a new law that could, after a sufficient and democratic and legal debate, introduce a new instrument of the so-called ‘red button’, a mechanism that would allow the state in extreme cases to shut down websites that would violate a clearly stated series of rules and norms valid in the Czech Republic. The responsibility for this fell to the Ministry of Interior after some initial consultations with the Ministry of Justice promoted active discussion with the legal experts and also, after some deliberations, civil society on how to best fine-tune the law and the appeal mechanism for conflict resolution – which was, however, not originally foreseen and to some degree remained problematic.⁹



Source: CEDMO Hub¹⁰

⁹ Síť k ochraně demokracie (2023, January 31). Experti na politická a občanská práva: Plán vlády na boj s dezinformacemi hrozí omezením svobody slova, Síť k ochraně demokracie. <https://www.ochranademokracie.cz/aktuality/experti-na-politicka-a-obcanska-prava-plan-vlady-na-boj-s-dezinformacemi-hrozi-omezenim-svobody-slova>.

¹⁰ Central European Digital Media Observatory (2023). Cedmo Trends. https://cedmohub.eu/wp-content/uploads/2023/04/1523801_CEDMO_vlna01_prezentace_web-1.pdf.

However, due to the general lack of political will and ideological struggle among the country's elites, this was never introduced to the government, and the discussions only remained on the paper.¹¹ This blockade was connected to a bigger backlash from the Government and its parliamentary majority that fell victim to the ideological and political conflict on the real nature of the fight against disinformation, which was strongly pushed as a counterargument to the freedom of speech agenda, which was particularly strongly supported¹² by the main ruling party of ODS and its more conservative wing within the party. Nevertheless, this was not so much about the freedom of speech issue as much about putting the whole agenda of hybrid threats secretly on ice after a clash within the ruling coalition.

Liberal answers

The rather tense societal atmosphere, political confrontation (further worsened by the presidential campaign in January 2023)¹³ as well as ideological fights in the political elite resulted in a number of backlashes in the domain of fight against disinformation.

One of them was the dismissal of the government's special envoy for disinformation, media as well as strategic communication Michal Klíma who was at least partially replaced by the new National Security Advisor Tomáš Pojar. He, however, never fully accepted the portfolio of disinformation and hybrid threats as such. Another one of the setbacks was the refusal to adopt the *Action Plan Against Disinformation*¹⁴ developed by

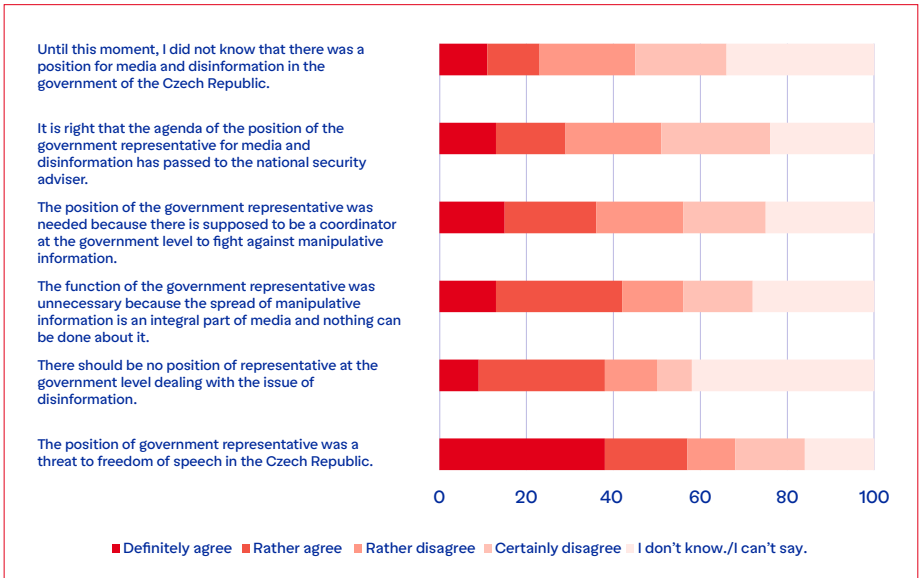
¹¹ Hronová, Z. (2023, June 27). Škodí web národní bezpečnosti? Vypnout ho umožní nový zákon. *Deník.cz*. https://www.denik.cz/z_domova/vypnuti-dezinformacnich-webu.html.

¹² Hronová, Z. (2023, June 27).

¹³ Tkáčová, N., Šefčíková, K. (2023, January). Czech Presidential Elections in the Online Space (1st round). *Prague Security Studies Institute*. https://www.pssi.cz/download//docs/10208_czech-presidential-elections-in-the-online-space-1st-round.pdf.

¹⁴ Prchal, L. (2022, December 27). Jak chce Česko čelit konspiracím: Vláda hodlá stíhat jejich šíření i dávat desítky milionů médiím. *Deník.cz*. <https://denikn.cz/1039555/jak-chce-cesko-celit-konspiracim-vlada-hodla-stihat-jejich-sireni-i-davat-desitky-milionu-mediim/>.

Klíma’s team that prepared a number of concrete measures to advance the agenda and support a number of actors, including civil society or independent media in the common process.



Source: CEDMO Hub¹⁵

The third and final political confrontation was about the no-go position on the so-called ‘red button’ measure that received clear opposition from the governing parties in its suggested variant and poisoned the debate on the issue of content moderation and enforcement of the Czech laws in the online space for some time.

Concurrently, this decision paved the way for new tools and means to minimise the impact of disinformation, including by demonetisation of the harmful content, promoting closer cooperation with the social media platforms as well as efficient national implementation of the EU’s digital regulation, including most notably DSA. Under the influence of a pro-active group within the ruling government elites, the cabinet of

¹⁵ Central European Digital Media Observatory (2023).

Petr Fiala approved a new methodical guidance for the state companies not to advertise at the disinformation sites. The Ministry of Industry and Trade in cooperation with other Czech institutions started getting ready for the implementation of the EU's DSA and with that closely connected *Code of Practice on Disinformation* which was updated in the middle of 2022 to include more robust, even if still rather soft, measures to tackle the spread of manipulative content online. Finally, the government started paying more attention to the issue of communication in its strategic as well as crisis element, even if there is still a long way to go before the state develops a more efficient means to act in crisis situations as well as learns how to promote its strategic priorities and long-term interests of the whole society.

From the original rather restrictive and punitive set of measures that became largely unpopular, the state and its apparatus gradually learned how to better understand the opportunities coming from the softer types of measures that would be very well balanced with the freedom of speech and other fundamental freedoms, even if clearly realising that the security risks only got worse since 24 February 2022. One of the most obvious opportunities in this sense came from the *Digital Services Act* that actually provides a full toolbox on stripping the social media platforms of ultimate decision-making power over the content moderation. This is the case both for the introduction of the appeal mechanisms and promoting the culture of law and national rules and norms that we now more central to the online environment, as well as for the general principle of promoting transparency and empowerment of users that are about to decide about more issues on the social media platforms (especially the very large ones) than it used to be in the past.

This is, however, not to say that there are no other approaches that would combine more restrictive (and securitised) approaches with softer tools and instruments. These might be seen in the Baltic states, in Poland, or in Germany, which combine both legislative and non-legislative measures to contribute to minimisation of problematic content online. One example of the legislative tool is the *German Network Enforcement Act* (*Netzwerkdurchsetzungsgesetz, NetzDG*) law that obliges the platforms to

take down the illegal content within a 24-hour period.¹⁶ On the other hand, in Lithuania, the state and its institutions have the competence not only to shut down whole TV channels that help to spread Russian official propaganda,¹⁷ but even to block the IP addresses that channel Internet traffic to them,¹⁸ based on the decision of the Radio and Television Commission. This illustrates that the Czech debate on this issue is really only at the beginning and it is important to learn from the best (and worst) practice and reflect on how far and by which tools and instruments the state and its political elite want to respond to the omnipresent problem of disinformation and their harmful impact on the society.

Conclusions, future challenges and options

The Czech case of fighting Russian disinformation post-February 2022 has shown that it is of crucial importance to well balance the freedom of speech and other fundamental freedoms with a more security-driven set of measures that the state might need to push back against the Russian influence and propaganda machine.

In order to be successful, the full spectrum of tools and instruments needs to be explored and come together to minimise the space for the spread of disinformation and other types of manipulations, particularly in the online space. While this is still work in progress in the Czech Republic, there are some notable successes and best practices when approaching the topic, when — for example — the Czech authorities finally adopted a methodology to ban the advertising of the state institutions and enterprises on the fringe websites. Even if this might be only a small step

¹⁶ Germany: Network Enforcement Act Amended to Better Fight Online Hate Speech. Library of Congress. <https://www.loc.gov/item/global-legal-monitor/2021-07-06/germany-network-enforcement-act-amended-to-better-fight-online-hate-speech/>.

¹⁷ Kropaite, Z. (2015, April 9). Lithuania bans Russian TV station. *EUObserver*. <https://euobserver.com/news/128267>.

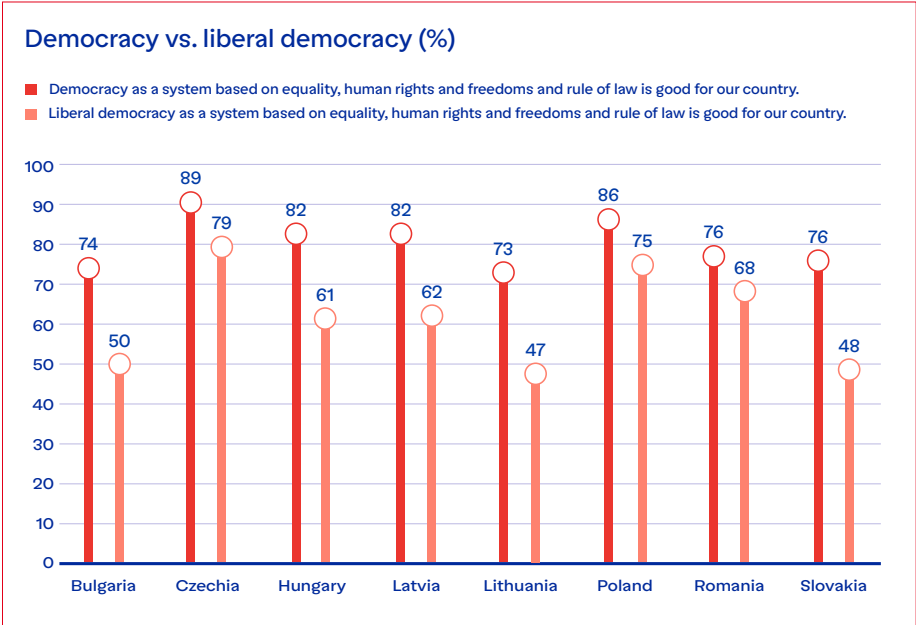
¹⁸ Interfax (2023, March 13). Lithuanian Internet providers ordered to block IP addresses that help access Russian TV channels. <https://interfax.com/newsroom/top-stories/88645/>.

forward, it illustrates a gradual shift from the more punitive and restrictive measure to more soft and normative types of actions that might over time help to minimise the space for the spread of manipulative and illegal content online.

Nevertheless, much remains to be done and implemented at the level of state and that new political will needs to be mobilised to advance the missing tools and instruments. This is, for example, the case when it comes to the implementation of the digital regulations of social media platforms where there is a big potential for limiting the problematic and illegal content online. However, for that to happen, several conditions need to be fulfilled also when rightly combining the market principles of regulations with the more security-driven perspective to the given agenda, which the Czech state has not fully understood and put in practice yet. Similarly, other areas, including strategic and crisis communication, education, or the public support for independent press, remain a work in progress with uncertain results now.

In any case, the Czech Republic represents an interesting model that other countries could learn from, both in the positive and some negative ways too. As a fully-fledged liberal and democratic country with a pluralistic public discussion, it is naturally struggling with issues that require building a stronger consensus and leadership among the fragmented elite and five-party-government currently in power. In the CEE, Czech society proved to be one of the most resilient towards the Russian and other authoritarian influences, even if there remain several significant weak spots that need addressing.¹⁹ On the other hand, after 24 February 2022, the Kremlin will find it immensely difficult, if not impossible to win the hearts and minds of the local population, thus switching for the more destructive tactics and techniques both in the information space and beyond that. Therefore, there is still a profound need to continue solidifying the public consensus and building up societal resilience that would help the country to become better prepared for another crisis in the future.

¹⁹ GLOBSEC (2023).



Source: Globsec Trends 2023²⁰

²⁰ GLOBSEC (2023). *GLOBSEC Trends 2023*. <https://www.globsec.org/sites/default/files/2023-05/GLOBSEC%20Trends%202023.pdf>.

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Protecting Western Democracies and Democratic Acts from Putin's Russia

RICARDO SILVESTRE

On 26 April 2023, members of the European Parliament alerted for the need of a 'coordinated strategy against foreign interference and information manipulation', and for the 'protection of the entire electoral process as a top EU and national security issue'¹. The MEPs urged the European Commission to develop a Defence of Democracy Package, so that the European Union can generate a risk-based approach evaluation of actions taken by hostile countries 'such as Russia, China or Iran'². Not long after that, on 1 June 2023, the Parliament again called for a strategy to 'increase EU's resilience ... and protect the 2024 European elections'³, including digital platforms, protection of critical infrastructure and strategic sectors.

The Kremlin has been trying to weaken western democracies since it was the centre of power in the Soviet Union. Some examples include

- 1 European Parliament (2022, March 9). Foreign interference in all democratic processes in the European Union. *European Parliament Texts Adopted*. https://www.europarl.europa.eu/doceo/document/TA-9-2022-0064_EN.pdf.
- 2 European Parliament (2023, April 26). MEPs call for coordinated EU strategy against foreign interference. *European Parliament news*. <https://www.europarl.europa.eu/news/en/press-room/20230424IPR82034/meps-call-for-coordinated-eu-strategy-against-foreign-interference>.
- 3 European Parliament (2023, June 1). Foreign Interference: MEPs call for urgent protection of 2024 European elections. *European Parliament news*. <https://www.europarl.europa.eu/news/en/press-room/20230524IPR91908/foreign-interference-meps-call-for-urgent-protection-of-2024-european-elections>.

Georgia, Estonia, Lithuania, Ukraine, Netherlands, France, Germany⁴, Scotland and the UK⁵, the United States⁶, and institutions like the European Parliament⁷. Such initiatives, seen through Robert Jervis' theory of the 'four worlds', are the result of a preference for offensive actions, with the objective of altering the balance of power in the international order⁸, leading to a maximisation of power instead of cooperation⁹. Western actors like cybersecurity companies, intelligence agencies, governmental bodies, academics, and investigative journalists have produced abundant evidence that Russia, and affiliated non-state actors, use interference tactics to erode democratic processes in the EU¹⁰. Attacks of this nature are part of a hybrid warfare strategy, including: illegal access to computer networks with collection or alteration of data; dumping of information targeting politicians or political parties; manipulation of voter registration, changing vote counts or casted votes; amplification of dissension with open or covert operations; and production and spreading of disinformation and misinformation. These actions aim to 'sow distrust in national governments, public authorities and the liberal democratic order and have the goal of destabilising European democracy, and therefore constitute a serious threat to EU security and

- 4 Tennis, M. (2020, July 20). Russia Ramps up Global Elections Interference: Lessons for the United States. *Center for Strategic & International Studies*. <https://www.csis.org/blogs/strategic-technologies-blog/russia-ramps-global-elections-interference-lessons-united-states>.
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- 6 Select Committee on Intelligence (2020, November 10). Russian active measures campaigns and interference in the 2016 U.S. Election. *United States Senate*. https://www.intelligence.senate.gov/sites/default/files/documents/Report_Volume2.pdf.
- 7 Birnbaum, M., Timberg, C. (2019, June 14). E.U.: Russians interfered in our elections, too. *Washington Post*. <https://www.washingtonpost.com/technology/2019/06/14/eu-russians-interfered-our-elections-too>.
- 8 Jervis, R. (1978). Cooperation Under the Security Dilemma. *World Politics*, 30(2): 167–214.
- 9 Baylis, J., Smith, S., Owens, P. (2019). *The Globalization of World Politics. An Introduction to International Relations. Eighth Edition*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- 10 European Parliament (2022, March 9).

sovereignty’¹¹, especially when ‘incidence of cyberattacks and cyber-enabled incidents led by hostile state and non-state actors has been increasing in recent years’¹².

The EU and its Member States have the duty to defend its citizens and infrastructure, as well as their democratic systems, from foreign interference attempts. In 2019, the Vice-President of the European Commission stated that ‘[w]e must protect our free and fair elections. This is the cornerstone of our democracy. To secure our democratic processes from manipulation or malicious cyber activities by private interests or third countries’¹³. However, it seems that there’s an insufficient investment to better prevent, detect and counter these actions, adding to the fact that there is a general lack of awareness among many policymakers, and citizens in general, of the reality of these issues.

The European Union Agency for Cybersecurity (ENISA) published a study identifying emerging threats¹⁴. A scenario 2 is presented referencing an increased relevance of (cyber) security in elections. Equally relevant in the study is the growing digitization, and the use of information and communication technology, influencing factors that can affect election ecosystems. As an example, the expanding use of electronic voting or the online transmission of results creates new vulnerabilities to cyberattacks¹⁵. Not only are central electoral systems in danger, but so too are election administrators, political parties, news organisations, social media sites, and email platforms¹⁶.

¹¹ European Parliament (2022, March 9).

¹² European Parliament (2022, March 9).

¹³ European Union Agency for Cybersecurity (2019). EU Member States test their cybersecurity preparedness for fair and free 2019 EU elections. *ENISA*. <https://www.enisa.europa.eu/news/enisa-news/eu-member-states-test-their-cybersecurity-preparedness-for-fair-and-free-2019-eu-elections>.

¹⁴ European Union Agency for Cybersecurity (2023). Identifying Emerging Cyber Security Threats and Challenges for 2030. *ENISA*. <https://www.enisa.europa.eu/publications/enisa-foresight-cybersecurity-threats-for-2030/@/download/fullReport>.

¹⁵ Maurice, E. (2020). European Democracy, a fundamental system to be protected. *Foundation Robert Schuman. European Issues*, n°578. <https://www.robert-schuman.eu/en/doc/questions-d-europe/qe-578-en.pdf>.

¹⁶ European Union Agency for Cybersecurity (2023).

With these scenarios, and the warning that the Russian Federation will continue to interfere in western democracies, and countries at their borders, the EU needs to upgrade their defences of democratic and electoral processes. There is still plenty of work to be done¹⁷ that needs to happen in a comprehensive, structured way — but based in liberal values. This chapter proposes to define, diagnose, and present solutions to attend to this pressing need, as protecting democracy is a permanent project, and a most necessary one.

Definitions

Clarity of definitions is valuable when dealing with a complex term as foreign interference. Important work has been done by EU institutions on this need. A report by the Policy Department, Directorate-General for External Policies, defines foreign interference as ‘illegitimate interference in the politics and democracy of the EU and its Member States by foreign powers’¹⁸. In a similar document, by the European Parliamentary Research Service, ‘foreign interference can be strategic and targeted: a foreign power may deploy multiple methodologies and tactics in order most effectively to interfere with the democratic and political processes of its target state(s)’¹⁹. ENISA and the European External Action Service (EEAS) have also teamed-up to produce a document²⁰ about Foreign Information Manipulation and Interference (FIMI), where

¹⁷ Andriukaitis, L., et al (2021). The misuse of social media platforms and other communication channels by authoritarian regimes: Lessons learned. *European Parliament, Policy Department for External Relations*. [https://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/IDAN/2021/653658/EXPO_IDA\(2021\)653658_EN.pdf](https://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/IDAN/2021/653658/EXPO_IDA(2021)653658_EN.pdf).

¹⁸ Jones, K. (2023). Legal loopholes and the risk of foreign interference. *European Parliament, Policy Department for External Relations*. [https://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/IDAN/2023/702575/EXPO_IDA\(2023\)702575_EN.pdf](https://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/IDAN/2023/702575/EXPO_IDA(2023)702575_EN.pdf).

¹⁹ Bentzen, N. (2020). Foreign interference in democracies. Understanding the threat, and evolving responses. *European Parliament, European Parliamentary Research Service*. [https://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/BRIE/2020/652082/EPRS_BRI\(2020\)652082_EN.pdf](https://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/BRIE/2020/652082/EPRS_BRI(2020)652082_EN.pdf).

²⁰ European Union Agency for Cybersecurity (2022, December 8). Foreign Information Manipulation Interference (FIMI) and Cybersecurity — Threat Landscape. *ENISA*.

FIMI is described as a ‘mostly non-illegal pattern of behaviour that threatens or has the potential to negatively impact values, procedures, and political processes. Such activity is manipulative in character, conducted in an intentional and coordinated manner. Actors of such activity can be state or non-state, including their proxies inside and outside of their own territory’²¹.

Apart from formal definitions, there is a set of secondary concepts commonly used to explain the threat: foreign interference is manipulative in character, where the culprits, and their proxies, can be state or non-state actors, and are frequently assisted in their interference by political accomplices in the Member States, blurring the line between foreign and domestic interference. This kind of interference can take different forms: disinformation; the suppression of information; the manipulation of social media platforms and their algorithms, terms and conditions, and advertising systems; cyberattacks to gain access to voter information, and hack-and-leak operations to interfere with the legitimacy of the electoral process. Concurrent with these direct actions, there are also the abusive exploitation of historical, religious, and cultural narratives, the pressure on educational and cultural institutions and foreign nationals living in the EU, the instrumentalisation of migrants, and the targeting of minorities like women and the LGBTQ+ community²².

The Russian Federation and the policy of active measures

The term active measures was developed in the Soviet Union in the 1950s, to describe secret and subversive operations of political influence that are easily refutable. In 1982, the then leader of the Committee for State Security (КГБ), Yuri Andropov, made active measures one of the

<https://www.enisa.europa.eu/publications/foreign-information-manipulation-interference-fimi-and-cybersecurity-threat-landscape>.

²¹ European Union Agency for Cybersecurity (2022, March 9), p. 4.

²² European Parliament (2022, March 9).

Kremlin's main forms of intervention during the Cold War²³. With the end of the Soviet Union, Russia's loss of influence and the rise to power of Vladimir Putin, Moscow has continued trying to undermine countries and unions of countries that promote liberal and democratic values. In 2007, the Duma (Russia's lower house of the Federal Parliament) spokesperson, Nikolai Kuryanovich, stated that, 'In the very near future many conflicts will not take place on the open field of battle, but rather in spaces on the Internet, fought with the aid of information soldiers, that is hackers. This means that a small force of hackers is stronger than the multi thousand force of the current armed forces'²⁴. In 2013, General Valery Gerasimov, Chief of Staff of the Russian Army, advocated the use of 'indirect and asymmetric methods' (another expression for active measures) to create political influence²⁵. These include changing the balance of power in adversarial countries²⁶, and support of political movements that defend a friendly relation, as observed in Italy and Germany²⁷, France²⁸, and Austria²⁹. Before targeting countries in western Europe, Russia had already applied active measures in countries close to its borders, specifically in Ukraine, Georgia, and

- 23 Andrew, C., Mitrokhin, C. (2006). *The Mitrokhin Archive: The KGB in Europe and the West*. New York: Penguin Press History.
- 24 Cappelletti, F. (2018). Russia, Ucraina, Cyber: il ruolo del dominio del cyber spazio nel confronto russo-ucraino. *Università degli Studi di Firenze. Corso di Laurea Magistrale in Relazioni Internazionali e Studi Europei*. https://www.researchgate.net/publication/331198873_Russia_Ucraina_Cyber_il_ruolo_del_dominio_del_cyber_spazio_nel_confronto_russo-ucraino.
- 25 Gerasimov, V. (2013). Cennosti nauki v predvidenii. *Voенно-промышленный курьер*, 8 (476). https://vpk.name/news/85159_cennost_nauki_v_predvidenii.html.
- 26 Bartles, C. (2016). Getting Gerasimov Right. *Military Review*, 96(1): 30–38.
- 27 Apuzzo, M., Satariano, A. (2019, May 12). Russia Is Targeting Europe's Elections. So Are Far-Right Copycats. *New York Times*. <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/05/12/world/europe/russian-propaganda-influence-campaign-european-elections-far-right.html>.
- 28 Turchi, M. (2017, March 30). Marine Le Pen Signe à Nouveau Pour de l'Argent Russe. *Mediapart*. <https://www.mediapart.fr/journal/international/300317/marine-le-pen-signe-nouveau-pour-de-l-argent-russe>.
- 29 Heinisch, R., Hofmann, D. (2023, March 8). The Case of the Austrian Radical Right and Russia During the War in Ukraine. Impacts of the Russian Invasion of Ukraine on Right-wing Populism in Europe. *European Center for Populism Studies*. <https://www.populismstudies.org/the-case-of-the-austrian-radical-right-and-russia-during-the-war-in-ukraine>.

Moldova³⁰. In fact, Ukraine often serves as a testing ground for Russian hybrid warfare³¹.

A recent addition to active measures are cyber operations that include computer network operations, electronic warfare, targeted propaganda operations, psychological intervention and cyber intelligence operations³². Moscow has been perfecting hack and dump operations, the support of political hackers, and the creation of bots, fake accounts, and troll factories. The fact that there is an ongoing information militarization by Russia should concern governments, political parties, and members of civil society who want decision-making processes about the future of their countries, or the alliances in which they find themselves, to be fair and correctly informed.

It is a well known teaching of Suz Tzu, in the book *Art of War*: ‘If you know your enemy and yourself you need not fear the result of a hundred battles’. It is important to understand the functioning of Russian organisations that generate interference, to better understand the deployment of active measures into democratic processes of western countries. The best-known examples are the Main Directorate of the General Staff of the Armed Forces of the Russian Federation, or GRU; the Federal Security Service of the Russian Federation, or FSB; and the Foreign Intelligence Service of the Russian Federation, or SVR. They are part of an administrative apparatus characterised by being a non-institutionalized system, with a high level of coordination between agencies³³. They report directly to the top of the Kremlin hierarchy and/or the President³⁴.

30 Lutsevych, O. (2016). Agents of the Russian World: Proxy Groups in the Contested Neighborhood. *Chatam House. The Royal Institute of International Affairs*. <https://www.chathamhouse.org/sites/default/files/publications/research/2016-04-14-agents-russian-world-lutsevych.pdf>.

31 Tennis, M. (2020).

32 Connel, M., Vogler, S. (2017). Russia’s Approach to Cyber Warfare. *CAN*. https://www.cna.org/archive/CNA_Files/pdf/dop-2016-u-014231-1rev.pdf.

33 Galeotti, M. (2017, Spetember 1). Controlling Chaos: How Russia Manages its Political War in Europe. *European Council on Foreign Relations*. https://www.ecfr.eu/publications/summary/controlling_chaos_how_russia_manages_its_political_war_in_europe.

34 Director of National Intelligence (2017, January 6). Assessing Russian Activities and Intentions in Recent US Elections. *Intelligence Community Assessment*. https://www.dni.gov/files/documents/ICA_2017_01.pdf.

From there, three forms of interference are known: directed by the state, with actions carried out by operatives in their capacity as representatives of the regime; encouraged by the state, where operatives are not directly responsible for initiating active measures but whoever is responsible does so with the knowledge that it will be welcomed by leadership; and individuals and/or organisations aligned with the state that promote regime policies³⁵. As an extension of governmental agencies there are also private institutions, under the control of oligarchs in the orbit of Putin, that act to advance pro-Russian narratives, creating polarisation in the public opinion of targeted countries. These different fronts create a connective tissue of organisations that work towards the goal of advancing national interests³⁶.

Examples of Russia's interference

United Kingdom

Before the 2016 Brexit referendum, another took place on the independence of Scotland from the United Kingdom. Russian-based operatives were detected intruding in the public consultation via fake accounts on Twitter, Facebook, and YouTube, to spread false allegations of interference, by forces favouring Scotland's remaining in the UK. Despite the absence of a direct link to Moscow, 'pro-Kremlin accounts demonstrably boosted those allegations ... in a manner characteristic of Russian influence operations'³⁷. In the year before the Brexit referendum, the

³⁵ Galante, L., Ee, S. (2018, September). Defining Russian Election Interference: An Analysis of Select 2014 to 2018 Cyber Enabled Incidents. *Atlantic Council*. https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/09/Defining_Russian_Election_Interference_web.pdf.

³⁶ Watts, C. (2018, May 22). Russia's Active Measures Architecture: Task and Purpose. *Alliance for Securing Democracy*. <https://securingdemocracy.gmfus.org/russias-active-measures-architecture-task-and-purpose>.

³⁷ Carrell, S. (2017, December 13). Russian cyber-activists 'tried to discredit Scottish independence vote'. *The Guardian*. <https://www.theguardian.com/politics/2017/dec/13/russian-cyber-activists-tried-to-discredit-scottish-independence-vote-says-analyst>.

UK saw an attempt of interference in the general election to the Lower House of Parliament. The group Fancy Bear, linked to Russia intelligence agencies, tried to access British government servers housed in Whitehall, the centre of the UK Government. However, the attack was discovered in time by the British intelligence service, the Government Communications Headquarters (GCHQ) and countermeasures were applied³⁸.

As for the Brexit referendum, the Intelligence and Security Committee of Parliament published in 2020 a report simply named Russia³⁹. This Commission supervises the activity of intelligence agencies, the Security Services (MI5), the Secret Intelligence Service (MI6), and the GCHQ. In the report, the Commission determined that Her Majesty's Government seriously underestimated the Russian threat, and neglected to apply countermeasures, therefore did not protect the 2016 process⁴⁰. The Association of Election Administrators also expressed concern that voters were in danger of being left out of the referendum, because 'any potential changes to deadlines for voter registration [due to interference by external agents] could introduce considerable risk in the administration of the referendum on the European Union'⁴¹. This led another commission, the Select Commission for Public Administration and Constitutional Affairs of the House of Commons, to issue a report where it is argued that a malfunction of the website for voter registration may have been the result of cyberattacks, due to a denial of service

38 Harper, T., Kerbaj, R. (2016, September 25). GCHQ thwarted Russian cyber-attack on general election. *The Times*. <https://www.thetimes.co.uk/article/gchq-spooks-thwart-russian-cyber-attack-on-general-election-62zdk9mnb>.

39 Intelligence and Security Committee of Parliament (2020).

40 Intelligence and Security Committee of Parliament (2020, October). Press Notice. Intelligence and Security Committee of Parliament publish predecessor's Russia Report. *Intelligence and Security Committee of Parliament*. https://isc.independent.gov.uk/wp-content/uploads/2021/01/20200721_Russia_Press_Notice.pdf.

41 Association of Electoral Administrators (2016, August). Written evidence from the Association of Electoral Administrators (EUR 16). *Association of Electoral Administrators*. <http://data.parliament.uk/WrittenEvidence/CommitteeEvidence.svc/EvidenceDocument/Public%20Administration%20and%20Constitutional%20Affairs%20Committee%20Lessons%20learned%20from%20the%20EU%20Referendum/written/35744.html>.

via bots and malicious software. Also locally, the Electoral Commission responsible for voting during the Brexit referendum detected, in 26 local authorities, that more than half of voter registration requests were duplicates, via bot actions⁴².

The influence of Russia in British politics has been extensively documented elsewhere⁴³, but leading to the Brexit referendum one assumes there were of special importance. The Leave.EU group, one of the most active campaigning for the exit of the UK from the EU, was founded by Arron Banks (also an UKIP founder)⁴⁴. A report from the Culture, Media and Sport Committee in the House of Commons, produced email exchanges showing that Mr. Banks had several meetings with Russian agents, including the Russian Ambassador to the UK, where discussions of gold and diamond acquisitions were tied with the delivery of confidential documents and information on the referendum⁴⁵.

The prospect of Scotland leaving the United Kingdom via a de facto independence by popular choice or with a unilateral declaration, and the divorce between the UK and EU, match the Kremlin's aim to destabilise the western bloc of countries, weakening them both militarily and politically.

USA

In February 2018, then Special Counsel Robert Mueller delivered evidence that resulted in the indictment of 13 Russian individuals and three Russian organisations for interfering in the 2016 American presidential

42 Public Administration and Constitutional Affairs Committee (2017, March 7). Lessons learned from the EU Referendum. Twelfth Report of Session 2016–17. *House of Commons Public Administration and Constitutional Affairs Committee*. <https://publications.parliament.uk/pa/cm201617/cmselect/cmpublicadm/496/496.pdf>.

43 Webber, E. (2022, March 7). Why Britain's Tories are addicted to Russian money. *Politico Europe*. <https://www.politico.eu/article/britain-tories-russian-money-oligarch>.

44 British Broadcast Company (2015, July 30). Nigel Farage to Eurosceptics: Stop bitching and start campaigning. <https://www.bbc.com/news/uk-politics-33715160>.

45 Digital, Culture, Media and Sport Committee (2018, July 29). Russian Influence in Political Campaigns. Disinformation and “fake news”: Interim Report. *UK Parliament*. <https://publications.parliament.uk/pa/cm201719/cmselect/cmcmds/363/36308.htm>.

election⁴⁶. Particularly active was the company Internet Research Agency (IRA) with its troll farms⁴⁷ creating polarisation and disinformation campaigns. The IRA tried to cause disruption and political turmoil by stealing Americans' identities, creating false accounts on social media platforms, and disseminating inflammatory content, both racial and social. The company's operations were not limited to remote actions from Saint Petersburg, but included cooperation with members of the Trump campaign on the ground⁴⁸. Using fake profiles on both Facebook and Twitter, IRA members organised rallies and meetings in the United States via local campaign apparatus and bought online advertisements to promote those rallies and meetings⁴⁹. In the indictment, the GRU was also accused of exploiting social media platforms to spread information obtained illegally. This was done by disseminating Hillary Clinton campaign emails obtained by Units 26165 and 74455 inside GRU. In fact, Special Counsel Mueller charged Colonel Aleksandr Osadchuk, commander of Unit 74455, for assisting 'in the release of stolen documents through the DCLeaks and Guccifer 2.0 personas'⁵⁰. Regarding the use of social media platforms by Russian agents, Facebook confirmed to a House of Representatives Special Committee that they observed activity attributable to the Fancy Bear group, the same seen in the UK (and the Unit 26165 of GRU)⁵¹. On the other social media platform where there is a dynamic political debate, Twitter, between 1 September and 15 November 2016, more than 36,000 tweets about the presidential election were generated

46 United States Department of Justice (2018, July 13). Case 1:18-cr-00032-DLF. *United States District Court for the District of Columbia*. <https://www.justice.gov/file/1080281/download>.

47 A troll farm is group of internet users aiming interfere in the political discussion online with (mostly) nefarious purposes.

48 United States Department of Justice (2018, July 13), p. 4.

49 United States Department of Justice (2018, July 13). p. 21–28.

50 United States Department of Justice (2018). p. 5.

51 Graff, G. (2018, July 13). Indicting 12 Russian Hackers Could Be Mueller's Biggest Move Yet. *Wired*. <https://www.wired.com/story/mueller-indictment-dnc-hack-russia-fancy-bear>.

by bots⁵² linked to Russian accounts. These tweets generated about 228 million interactions⁵³ showing their reach⁵⁴.

In the same year, 18 states were targeted by Russian hackers due to vulnerabilities in the voter registration infrastructure⁵⁵. In six of those states, hackers attempted to access voter registration websites with the injection of malicious code on Structure Query Language for database creation, a known technique for cyberattacks on websites that have an interface with the public. Likewise, ‘in a small number of states, cyber actors [affiliated with Russia] were in a position to, at a minimum, alter or delete voters [from websites]’⁵⁶.

These campaigns were carried out under the direction of the Kremlin, and with the objective of reducing the chances of success of candidate Hillary Clinton in favour of candidate Trump⁵⁷, since the Clinton was seen as more hostile to Russian interests⁵⁸.

European Union

Two days before the 2017 French presidential election, the campaign En Marche (EM) made it known that it had been the target of a massive cyberattack⁵⁹. Part of the information consisted of twenty-one thousand emails from within the EM organisation that were published on

⁵² A bot is an autonomous program that interacts with digital systems and users.

⁵³ Interactions include actions from users like retweets, replies, follows, inclusion of hashtags and tweet expansion.

⁵⁴ House Select Committee on Intelligence (2023). Exposing Russia’s Effort to Sow Discord Online: The Internet Research Agency and Advertisements. <https://democrats-intelligence.house.gov/social-media-content>.

⁵⁵ United States Senate (2018, May 8). Russian Targeting of Election Infrastructure During the 2016 Election: Summary of Initial Findings and Recommendations. *U.S. Senate Select Committee Report*. <https://www.intelligence.senate.gov/publications/russia-inquiry>.

⁵⁶ United States Senate (2018, May 8).

⁵⁷ Select Committee on Intelligence (2020).

⁵⁸ Select Committee on Intelligence (2020), p. 6.

⁵⁹ En Marche (2017, May 5). En Marche a été victime d’une action de piratage massive et coordonnée. Communiqué de presse. <https://en-marche.fr/articles/communiques/communique-presse-piratage>.

the website PasteBin. This was a tactic previously seen with the illegal collection of emails from the director of the Hillary Clinton campaign, which were later turned public via Wikileaks. Responsibility for the cyberattack, and the publication of the emails, was attributed to the Fancy Bear group⁶⁰. In that election, the centrist candidate Macron was facing Marine Le Pen from the Front National (FN). In 2014, FN received two loans for a total of 11 million euros from the First Czech Russian Bank based in Moscow and linked to the Kremlin, and from a company belonging to a former member of the (now defunct) KGB. Then, in 2016, the FN would receive an additional 27 million euros to help prepare for the 2017 presidential elections⁶¹. A normal question to ask, in the face of such substantial financial aid, is whether these loans can be seen as a quid pro quo for a favourable position from FN toward Russian interests, such as the example of the invasion of Crimea⁶². Recently, in 2023, the Rassemblement National, the new name of Le Pen's party, was accused of serving as a 'communication channel' for Russia, according to a French parliamentary commission⁶³.

In 2016, cyberattacks were detected in Germany, like the ones seen on the servers of EM, this time with the Christian Democratic Union, led at the time by Chancellor Angela Merkel. The responsibility for the attacks was attributed again to Fancy Bear⁶⁴. In early 2018, hacking activities were again detected on computers in the German Parliament. The

60 Auchard, E. (2017, April 24). Macron campaign was target of cyber attacks by spy-linked group. *Reuters*. <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-france-election-macron-cyber/macron-campaign-was-target-of-cyber-attacks-by-spy-linked-group-idUSKBN17Q200>.

61 Turchi, M. (2017, March 30).

62 Chazan, D. (2015, April 4). Russia 'bought' Marine Le Pen's support over Crimea. *The Telegraph*. <https://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/worldnews/europe/france/11515835/Russia-bought-Marine-Le-Pens-support-over-Crimea.html>.

63 Le Monde (2023, June 4). Parliamentary report exposes collusion between France's far-right party and Russia. https://www.lemonde.fr/en/france/article/2023/06/01/parliamentary-report-exposes-collusion-between-france-s-far-right-party-and-russia_6028776_7.html.

64 Carrel, P., Shalal, A. (2018, February 25). Germany says its government computers secure after 'isolated' hack'. *Reuters*. <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-germany-cyber-russia/germany-says-its-government-computers-secure-after-isolated-hack-idUSKC-N1GC2HZ>.

Chairman of the Parliamentary Committee, responsible for Intelligence Services, confirmed that a ‘real cybernaut attack’ had taken place and that it was part of ‘an ongoing process, an ongoing attack’⁶⁵. Like in the two European countries presented above, in Germany there are also close ties between its political parties and Russia. The Left party (Die Linke) had a deputy leader of the parliamentary group asking for more ‘humility’ to and a ‘rapprochement with’ Russia⁶⁶. The Alternative for Germany party (Alternative für Deutschland, or AfD) had, in 2016, its party youth leader received in Moscow. For Russian leaders, the AfD was one of the ‘constructive political forces in Europe that support Russia, and that are in favour of the lifting of sanctions ... and we are trying to build relationships with those forces’⁶⁷. This relationship between Russian and friendly EU political parties also extend to the Austrian Freiheitliche Partei Österreichs (FPÖ), and the Italian Lega (Lega Nord at the time), that have signed cooperation agreements with Moscow that include ‘collaboration where suitable on economic, business and political projects (FPÖ)⁶⁸’, and developing ‘ties in the Council of Europe, the Organization for Security and Co-Operation in Europe’ (Lega)⁶⁹. Equally, the Hungarian Fidesz and Jobbik have, reportedly, had contacts with the Kremlin⁷⁰.

In 2014, Russian hackers launched cyberattacks against the Polish electoral commission’s website, which damaged faith in local election results⁷¹.

⁶⁵ BBC (2018, March 1). Cyber-attack on German government IT network “ongoing”. <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-43248201>.

⁶⁶ Azvision (2016, July 8). Linke-Abgeordneter Gehrcke: Russland-Sanktionen aufheben, die Nato auflösen. <https://de.azvision.az/news/17078/news.html>.

⁶⁷ Izvestia (2016, April 22). Rossijskie deputaty nalaživajut svjazi s evropejskimi kollegami. <https://iz.ru/news/611013>.

⁶⁸ Smale, A. (2016, December 19). Austria’s Far Right Signs a Cooperation Pact With Putin’s Party. *New York Times*. <https://www.nytimes.com/2016/12/19/world/europe/austria-far-right-signs-a-cooperation-pact-with-putins-party.html>.

⁶⁹ Seddon, M., Politi, J. (2017, March 6). Putin’s party signs deal with Italy’s far-right Lega Nord. *Financial Times*. <https://www.ft.com/content/0d33d22c-0280-11e7-ace0-1ce02ef0def9>.

⁷⁰ European Parliament (2022, March 9).

⁷¹ PhysOrg (2014, November 19). Polish election commission website hacked. <https://phys.org/news/2014-11-election-commission-website-hacked.html>.

These elections were seen as a test of strength to the then prime minister Ewa Kopacz, that defended an increased military presence of the US in Poland to serve as a deterrent to Russia aggression. Ahead of the 2015 Finnish parliamentary elections, Russian entities created fake social media accounts posing as official parliamentary accounts⁷². Throughout 2017 and 2018, Russian-sponsored disinformation before general elections was extensive in Italy⁷³, the Netherlands, and in Spain, at the time of the Catalonia independence referendum⁷⁴. Czech election-related websites were victims of disruptive cyberattacks in 2017⁷⁵, as were Swedish newspapers during the general election in 2016, with disinformation about the relationship between that country and NATO⁷⁶. The 2016 elections in Bulgaria, saw Russian interference via a constant stream of fake news and disinformation in state and social media to suppress or delegitimize the vote⁷⁷. Equally, Western Balkans countries that expressed interest in joining the European Union, have been targets for foreign interference and disinformation campaigns from Russia, this happened, for example, during the ratification process of the Prespa Agreement in North Macedonia⁷⁸.

- 72 United States Senate (2018, January 10). Putin's Asymmetric Assault on Democracy in Russia and Europe: Implications for U.S. National Security. *US Senate Committee on Foreign Relations*, p. 110/ <https://www.foreign.senate.gov/imo/media/doc/FinalRR.pdf>.
- 73 The Local (2018, March 7). The impact of 'fake news' on the Italian election. <https://www.thelocal.it/20180307/impact-fake-news-social-media-russia-italian-election-result>.
- 74 United States Senate (2018, January 10).
- 75 Cerulus, L. (2019, January 16). Europe's most hackable election. *Politico Europe*. <https://www.politico.eu/article/europe-most-hackable-election-voter-security-catalonia-european-parliament-disinformation>.
- 76 Collier, K., Leopold, J. (2018, August 10). Russian Hackers Targeted Swedish News Sites In 2016, State Department Cable Says. *Buzzfeednews*. <https://www.buzzfeednews.com/article/kevincollier/2016-sweden-ddos-expressen-hack-russia-cables>.
- 77 Way, L., Casey, A. (2018, January 8). Russia has been meddling in foreign elections for decades. Has it made a difference?. *Washington Post*. <https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/monkey-cage/wp/2018/01/05/russia-has-been-meddling-in-foreign-elections-for-decades-has-it-made-a-difference/?variant=bacbca59707f74b0>.
- 78 Trajanoski, Z. (2022, May 4). Russian Propaganda in Macedonia after the Referendum until NATO Membership. *TruthMeter*. <https://truthmeter.mk/russian-propaganda-in-macedonia-after-the-referendum-until-nato-membership>.

It is well known that President Putin stated that the collapse of the Soviet empire was ‘the greatest geopolitical catastrophe of the century’⁷⁹. Since 2008 Putin has been trying to expand Russian influence in a Russkiy mir vision. A successful European Union project, with a coalition of liberal democracies, using their economic, diplomatic, and military prowess is, naturally, an impediment to Moscow expansionists projects, like it has been observed in the case of Ukraine aggression and invasion.

Applying countermeasures based on liberal values

The EU needs to defend itself against Russian active measures, in the form of interference in democratic processes, since it has as one of its objectives the protection of democratic systems in Member States⁸⁰. A set of EU laws and regulations have been established in recent years to bolster the resilience of EU Member States in the information environment. These regulations have fostered a safer cyberspace, where democratic processes are safeguarded and citizens values are upheld, and that include the Action Plan on Disinformation⁸¹, the European Democracy Action Plan⁸², the European Cooperation Network on Elections⁸³, the Compendium on Cyber Security of Election Technology⁸⁴, the EU Cybersecurity Act⁸⁵, the Revised Directive on Security of Network and Information Systems (NIS2)⁸⁶, the Digital Services Act⁸⁷, as well

79 Associated Press (2005, April 25). Putin: Soviet collapse a ‘genuine tragedy’. *NBC News*. <https://www.nbcnews.com/id/wbna7632057>.

80 European Commission (2022, June 29). Tackling online disinformation. *European Commission*. <https://ec.europa.eu/digital-single-market/en/tackling-online-disinformation>.

81 https://ec.europa.eu/info/publications/action-plan-disinformation-commission-contribution-european-council-13-14-december-2018_en.

82 https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/ip_20_2250.

83 https://ec.europa.eu/info/policies/justice-and-fundamental-rights/eu-citizenship/electoral-rights/european-cooperation-network-elections_en.

84 https://www.riaa.ee/sites/default/files/content-editors/kuberturve/cyber_security_of_election_technology.pdf.

85 <https://digital-strategy.ec.europa.eu/en/policies/cybersecurity-act>.

86 <https://digital-strategy.ec.europa.eu/en/library/revised-directive-security-network-and-information-systems-nis2>.

87 <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/PDF/?uri=CELEX:52020PC0825>.

as instruments to combat hybrid threats⁸⁸ and boost cybersecurity⁸⁹. There is also the precedent of acting to protect European elections. In 2019, ENISA organised an exercise to ‘test the EU’s response and crisis plans for potential cybersecurity incidents affecting the EU elections’⁹⁰. This exercise aimed to increase cooperation between national authorities in the areas of cybersecurity, data protection and cybercrime. More recently, ENISA presented the DISARM (DISinformation Analysis & Risk Management) framework for understanding and describing behavioural parts of foreign information manipulation and interference, and disinformation, and the MITRE ATT&CK, that relates to cybersecurity tactics⁹¹.

Societal resilience

The development of societal resilience against foreign interference begins with education on these threats and an awareness raising of the problem in all sections of society and from the young to the older voter. It is also necessary to have cooperation and coordination across administrative levels and sectors, in and among Member States. This, by necessity, must include civil society and the private sector, where situational awareness, robust democratic systems, strong rule of law, a vibrant civil society, early warnings, and threat assessment are the first steps towards countering information manipulation and interference⁹². It is known that societies with a high level of media literacy are more resilient to foreign interference⁹³, and this should be a model to spread in the EU. As examples of good practice, Finland and Sweden pay special attention to voter education, especially at a young age, to enhance democratic resilience. Another good example is media organisations reinforcing their quality standards in protecting against disinformation. This is the

⁸⁸ https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/IP_18_4123.

⁸⁹ https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/IP_17_3193.

⁹⁰ European Union Agency for Cybersecurity (2019).

⁹¹ European Union Agency for Cybersecurity (2022), p. 18.

⁹² European Parliament (2022, March 9).

⁹³ European Parliament (2022, March 9).

case of CrossCheck in France⁹⁴ and Correctiv in Germany⁹⁵. The EU has also promoted the creation of a European hub of independent fact checkers, the European Digital Media Observatory⁹⁶, to create a line of defence on foreign disinformation campaigns and help the citizen to better understand the political ecosystem.

Criminalisation

Foreign interference shares characteristics with crimes already listed in Article 83(1) on the Treaty of the Functioning of the European Union (TFEU). This Article establishes as a criminal offence a ‘particularly serious crime with a cross-border dimension resulting from the nature or impact of such offences or from a special need to combat them on a common basis’⁹⁷ and foreign election interference is, by definition, a cross-border activity. Hence, the European Parliament and the Council can add foreign interference to the list of crimes stated in Article 83(1) with a set of definitions, elements, and penalties for its prosecution. The addition of foreign interference as a crime to the TFEU can have the benefit of decreasing these acts, while at the same time, deterring third parties within the EU from aiding and abetting election interference. Equally, the criminalisation of foreign interference could also force social media companies to devote more resource to detecting and tackling foreign interference on their platforms⁹⁸.

⁹⁴ <https://awards.journalists.org/entries/crosscheck-france/>.

⁹⁵ <https://correctiv.org/en/correctiv-investigations-in-the-public-interest/>.

⁹⁶ European Commission (2022, November 30). Hubs of the European Digital Media Observatory now extend to the whole EU²⁷. *European Commission*. <https://digital-strategy.ec.europa.eu/en/news/hubs-european-digital-media-observatory-now-extend-whole-eu27>.

⁹⁷ European Union (2012, October 26). Consolidated version of the Treaty on the Functioning of the European Union., <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/LexUriServ/LexUriServ.do?uri=CELEX:12012E/TXT:en:PDF>.

⁹⁸ Jones, K. (2023).

Sanctions

The EU, currently, has no mechanism to impose financial penalties to agents responsible for foreign interference. The European Parliament called for this to be corrected by establishing an effective sanctions regime that can extend to trade deals⁹⁹. Similarly, the European Democracy Action Plan raises the possibility of imposing sanctions following repeated foreign interference¹⁰⁰. There is the precedent of sanctions set up by the EU, such as measures against cyberattacks and the EU Magnitsky Act. The utilisation of sanctions to fight foreign interference is not a singular case. It is used by the US government¹⁰¹ as a deterrent, particularly for Russian oligarchs and Kremlin officers. This is of interest to the EU, since some of them have financial interests in EU Member States.

Intelligence agencies

As mentioned previously, the Russian regime uses their government and military information services to interfere with elections and referendums abroad. Therefore, the protection of democracy in democratic and liberal western countries also falls to their intelligence and security agencies. This is a glaring absence in the battlefield of the protection against foreign interference in the west. It seems, to an external observer, the EU is not using this capability to collect information from hostile intelligence agencies, if not in the Member States' internal elections (if possible, with a joint work between local and central agencies), then to protect the elections for the European Parliament. Currently, there is the European Union Intelligence Analysis Centre (EU INTCEN)¹⁰², with

⁹⁹ European Parliament (2022, March 9).

¹⁰⁰ European Commission (2020, December 3). On the European democracy action plan. <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/PDF/?uri=CELEX:52020DC0790>.

¹⁰¹ US Department of the Treasury (2021, April 15). Treasury Escalates Sanctions Against the Russian Government's Attempts to Influence U.S. Elections. *USDT press releases*. <https://home.treasury.gov/news/press-releases/jy0126>.

¹⁰² EU Intelligence Analysis Centre (2015, February 5). Fact Sheet. *EUINTCEN*. <https://www.statewatch.org/media/documents/news/2016/may/eu-intcen-factsheet.pdf>.

the mission of generating early warnings and assessments on threats to the EU institutions and Member States. A wider and integrated European strategy of protection of democracy looks beneficial, since it can serve as a first line of detection of signals, both from open source and human data collection, leading to the creation and activation of countermeasures. This, however, requires a clear definition on how this kind of information and responses are shared with the Member States' intelligence agencies, lawmakers both in the European Parliament and in EU Member States, and with voters, when possible or advisable. It also includes a coordination of supervising overseer institutions, and, if necessary, legislative bodies whenever there is a need to change laws to resolve structural problems.

The Directorate General for External Policies of the Union also defends this coordination, and a centralization of analytical and response actions. The creation of this organisation, capable of centralised investigation and decision-making capacity, would 'facilitate increased understanding of foreign interference threats, a capacity for information-sharing and targeted investigation, as well as implementation of strategic country-specific deterrence and vigilance measures'¹⁰³. Equally, the Special Committee on Foreign Interference in all Democratic Processes in the European Union, including Disinformation (INGE), calls for the European External Action Services and the European Commission to perform regular resilience reviews, and to assess the development of the threats and their impact on current legislation and policies¹⁰⁴. They also ask for the establishment of a well-resourced and independent European Centre for Interference Threats and Information Integrity, which would 'identify, analyse and document information manipulation operations and interference threats against the EU as a whole, increase situational awareness, enhancing the role of the EEAS StratCom'¹⁰⁵. There could be some overlap with the existing EU INTCEN, that bases its work on 'information provided by Member States' security and intelligence

¹⁰³ Jones, K. (2023).

¹⁰⁴ European Parliament (2022, March 9).

¹⁰⁵ European Parliament (2022, March 9).

agencies', with the production of intelligence assessments¹⁰⁶. However, as presented above, a cooperation between organisations, for a larger range of action, can be implemented, this will avoid overlaps while streamline joint work.

In the report Russia from the British government, presented before, there is a warning that should be heeded by the EU institutions and lawmakers. There could be an '... extreme caution amongst the intelligence and security Agencies at the thought that they might have any role in relation to the UK's democratic processes, and particularly one as contentious as the EU referendum. We repeat that this attitude is illogical; this is about the protection of the process and mechanism from hostile state interference, which should fall to our intelligence and security Agencies'¹⁰⁷. There could be legitimate questions about the role of intelligence and security agencies in democratic and election processes, which can affect public opinion and voting intentions with the type of the information collected and shared, and they should be tackled. Alternatively, this perceived extreme caution or, worse, inaction due to fears that it could be affecting democracy processes, could have a devastating effect on the democratic processes that they are trying not to affect¹⁰⁸.

Online safeguards

The online realm has become an important part of modern democracy.

There is now a virtual town square that requires a redefinition of rules, terms, and conditions on how the online space should work and how the political debate should occur there. Digital platforms are easily accessible and are tools to disseminate disinformation, to generate polarisation, and apply democratic interference. This is exacerbated by an appealing digital architecture, use of algorithms, and unclear and

¹⁰⁶ EU Intelligence Analysis Centre (2015).

¹⁰⁷ Intelligence and Security Committee of Parliament (2020).

¹⁰⁸ Silvestre, R. (2021, April 18). Protecting democratic processes in Europe from digital threats: the importance of intelligence agencies. *European Liberal Forum*. <https://liberalforum.eu/2021/04/digitising-europe-protecting-democratic-processes-in-europe-from-digital-threats-the-importance-of-intelligence-agencies/>.

vague terminology¹⁰⁹. Self-regulation systems like the Code of Practice on Disinformation¹¹⁰ have led to improvements. However, counting on the goodwill of private companies that do not have the protection of democracy in their mission statement is not a prudent decision. This was confirmed by the recent development of Twitter wanting to leave the Code since the change in ownership of the company¹¹¹.

Noteworthy progress was achieved with the EU Digital Services Act¹¹², that set rules for the functioning of the political debate online. Good measures include that providers of intermediary services must create transparency reports, define what is illegal content and set a reasonable time for its removal. Also, the legal justification or violation of terms and conditions, which caused the removal need to be produced. Digital platforms must display political advertising that is easily identified with the natural or legal person behind it, and how it got to the user. What are called very large online platforms (45 million monthly active users) also need to provide information about main parameters in recommendation systems. The Act also tries to solve the question of the information quality, to prevent the creation of fake realities that hampers public (constructive) debate. This need connects to another, the existence of ideological bubbles or echo chambers, which tend to extreme positions and wreck consensus due to a steady diet of content that reinforces one's position, even when that position is uninformed and harmful¹¹³. There are also measures to separate trustworthy political actors from others that do not have the correct functioning of a liberal democracy in their agendas. Political candidates can subscribe to initiatives with a commitment to not engage in inappropriate actions of influence. For example,

¹⁰⁹ European Parliament (2022, March 9).

¹¹⁰ <https://digital-strategy.ec.europa.eu/en/policies/code-practice-disinformation>

¹¹¹ Bertuzzi, L. (2023, May 25). Twitter set to exit EU Code of Practice on Disinformation, sources say. *Euractiv*. <https://www.euractiv.com/section/digital/news/twitter-set-to-exit-eu-code-of-practice-on-disinformation-sources-say>.

¹¹² <https://digital-strategy.ec.europa.eu/en/policies/digital-services-act-package>.

¹¹³ Silvestre, R. (2022, January 27). The new Digital Service Act and the protection of freedom and rights in the digital public square. *European Liberal Forum*. <https://liberalforum.eu/2022/01/digitising-europe-the-new-digital-service-act-and-the-protection-of-freedom-and-rights-in-the-digital-public-square/>.

the Pledge for Election Integrity has 357 signatories, with members of or candidates to the European Parliament or lawmakers of Member State parliaments¹¹⁴.

Cybersecurity in political processes

Cybersecurity threats will continue to be a danger to EU institution, since these are ‘attractive targets for potential attackers’¹¹⁵. Worryingly, the number of attacks increased more than tenfold between 2018 and 2021¹¹⁶. The EU Cyber Diplomacy Toolbox has added value as an instrument for EU diplomatic response to malicious cyber activities¹¹⁷, as was the creation of the Cyber Resilience Act¹¹⁸ that complements the European Cyber Defence Policy¹¹⁹. Importantly, where in the political process there have been the most impactful attacks is the daily function of political parties that use digital tools for communication. This was presented above and it has been a constant across Europe and the United States. There is work to do in the EU Member States, like training political parties to develop a better infrastructure to fight election interference, as is the case to prevent the hacking (and dumping) of private information. This spans from simple digital hygiene on access permission, to the hiring of companies that are specialised in this kind of protection. A good example of this kind of work took place in France, where the Agence Nationale de la Sécurité des Systèmes d’Information, the agency responsible for protecting government infrastructures from cyberattacks, organised cybersecurity information sessions for all political parties (although there was a very notable absence)¹²⁰. Another one

¹¹⁴ <https://counteringdisinformation.org/interventions/pledge-election-integrity>.

¹¹⁵ Kabelka, L. (2022, March 30). EU institutions not prepared for increase in cyberattacks. *Euractiv*. <https://www.euractiv.com/section/cybersecurity/news/eu-institutions-not-prepared-for-increase-in-cyberattacks/>.

¹¹⁶ Kabelka, L. (2022, March 30).

¹¹⁷ European Parliament (2022, March 9).

¹¹⁸ <https://digital-strategy.ec.europa.eu/en/library/cyber-resilience-act>.

¹¹⁹ <https://www.european-cyber-defence-policy.com/>.

¹²⁰ Daniels, L. (2017, April 27). How Russia hacked the French election. *Politico Europe*. <https://www.politico.eu/article/france-election-2017-russia-hacked-cyberattacks/>.

was in the United Kingdom, where Britain's National Cyber Security Centre, part of GCHQ, helped strengthening communication networks of political parties¹²¹.

The European Parliament also recommends naming digital election infrastructure as a critical infrastructure and for the European Commission to assess the dependence of election processes on digital platforms, and what is the data infrastructure in the context of elections¹²². This is important due to an increased digitalisation, allowing for electronic voting, something that will be increasingly contemplated. Other lines of work include the European Democracy Action Plan's focus on the need for rules on the financing of European Political parties¹²³ and the importance of a European Cooperation Network on Elections¹²⁴.

Protection of fundamental rights

There is a clear dividing line between setting robust defences and countermeasures against foreign interference in political processes, and overprotecting in a way that infringes on acquired rights. Measures need to be clearly inside the purview of the law, should be foreseeable and temporary, pursue an objective of general interest, and proportionate. The same applies to sanctions that should be compatible with international law. Targeted sanctions against individuals and/or entities (including state entities) could constitute an infringement on their rights, and be challenged before the Court of Justice of the European Union. Therefore, these kinds of sanctions must be consistent with the

¹²¹ Reuters (2017, March 12). UK political parties warned of Russian hacking threat: report. *Reuters*. <https://www.reuters.com/article/cnews-us-britain-russia-cybercrime-id-CAKBN16JoOE-OCATP>.

¹²² European Parliament (2022, March 9).

¹²³ European Commission (2020, December 3). European Democracy Action Plan: making EU democracies stronger. https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/ip_20_2250.

¹²⁴ European Commission (2023). European cooperation network on elections. https://commission.europa.eu/strategy-and-policy/policies/justice-and-fundamental-rights/eu-citizenship/democracy-and-electoral-rights/european-cooperation-network-elections_en.

United Nations Articles on the Responsibility of States for Internationally Wrongful Acts¹²⁵. Another solution, a sanctions regime in the EU for targeting foreign interference can be analogous to the ones against cyberattacks used to impose sanctions against individuals, companies, and state entities¹²⁶.

Regarding the digital realm, once again, control measures need to be consistent with the fundamental rights of expression, to hold opinions without fear of reprisals, and to receive and impart information and ideas without interference, regardless of frontiers¹²⁷. However, allowing for misinformation and disinformation to run unchecked, for dumping of information that should not be on public domain, false and misleading political ads, and generation of malicious and hateful speech, do not contribute for an informed and vibrant democracy that is inclusive, based in liberal percepts and European values, and with a Madisonian logic of participative democracy.

Conclusions

In September of 2022 the President of the European Commission delivered the State of the Union Speech. In it, Mrs. von der Leyen called for a response to foreign interference aiming to destabilise Member States. This should be done by fighting ‘... for our democracy ... we must protect them from the external threats they face’¹²⁸. These threats are a clear

¹²⁵ United Nations (2005). Responsibility of States for Internationally Wrongful Acts. https://legal.un.org/ilc/texts/instruments/english/draft_articles/9_6_2001.pdf.

¹²⁶ Council of the European Union (2022, May 16). Cyber-attacks: Council extends sanctions regime until 18 May 2025. <https://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/press/press-releases/2022/05/16/cyber-attacks-council-extends-sanctions-regime-until-18-may-2025/>.

¹²⁷ European Union (2000, December 18). Charter of Fundamental Rights of the European Union. *European Union*. <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/PDF/?uri=CELEX:12012P/TXT>.

¹²⁸ European Union (2022, September 14). 2022 State of the Union Address by President von der Leyen. *European Union press room*. https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/ov/SPEECH_22_5493.

and present danger, aided by a lack of awareness by most of European society and governmental institutions. In fact, it was gloomy to see in 2016 the United States and the United Kingdom, two established democracies with sophisticated intelligence agencies, a free press, and a vibrant civil society, fail to protect against influence on public political consultations.

The UK report Russia describes that the Russian Federation tends to see foreign policy as a zero-sum scenario, where every action detrimental to the west is favourable to Moscow. This stems from an appreciation ‘fed by paranoia, believing that Western institutions such as NATO and the EU have a far more aggressive posture towards [Russia] than they do in reality’¹²⁹. The US Senate Select Committee on Intelligence warns that Russian active measures, ‘represent the most recent expression of Moscow’s long standing desire to undermine the US-led liberal democratic order’¹³⁰. It isn’t a surprise that Putin and the Kremlin are behind this interference in democratic processes outside (and inside) their borders. One of the most important actions is to detect, as soon as possible, who are the actors doing the attacks, how they start, how they are run, the effects on the way democratic and liberal societies operate, and how to fight them. Agencies like GRU, FSB and SVR will continue to test the western systems and countermeasures. It is advised that a bloc of countries with centralised power like the European Union should use all the instruments available to fight this threat, that not only comes from Russia, but also from other adversaries like Iran, China, or North Korea. There is a need for a coordinated strategy involving all the stakeholders in these lines of defence. This requires adequate financial resources to allow the EU and its Member States to install resilient policies and deterrence tools. There is a need to boost organisations such as think tanks and fact-checkers to increase foresight capacity and interoperability in a way to predict, prevent and mitigate foreign interference in democratic processes. There is also the requirement to strengthen the protection of strategic infrastructure, both related to the functioning of

¹²⁹ Intelligence and Security Committee of Parliament (2020), p. 1.

¹³⁰ Select Committee on Intelligence (2020), p. 11.

the democratic ecosphere and election operations. Mostly, there is an obligation to protect what the EU, and Europeans that believe in that project, fought so hard to achieve. In Putin's Europe, liberal principles and ideas, democratic values and ideologies, basic rights and freedoms, are removed or diminished in a way to create illiberal democracies, or authoritarian governments, or nationalistic populism. The protection starts by defending our political debate, our capability to vote safely, and to have our vote counted in a fair way. While wrongly attributed to Thomas Jefferson, the saying that 'eternal vigilance is the price we pay for liberty'¹³¹ still holds firm. Let's make our motto, liberals and democrats building a European union, that eternal vigilance is the price we pay for our democracies.

¹³¹ Thomas Jefferson Encyclopedia (2023). Eternal vigilance is the price of liberty (Spurious Quotation). *The Jefferson Monticello*. <https://www.monticello.org/site/research-and-collections/eternal-vigilance-price-liberty-spurious-quotation>.

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In Putin's Europe, liberal principles and ideas, democratic values and ideologies, basic rights and freedoms, are removed or diminished in a way to create illiberal democracies, or authoritarian governments, or nationalistic populism. The protection starts by defending our political debate, our capability to vote safely, and to have our vote counted in a fair way.

RICARDO SILVESTRE

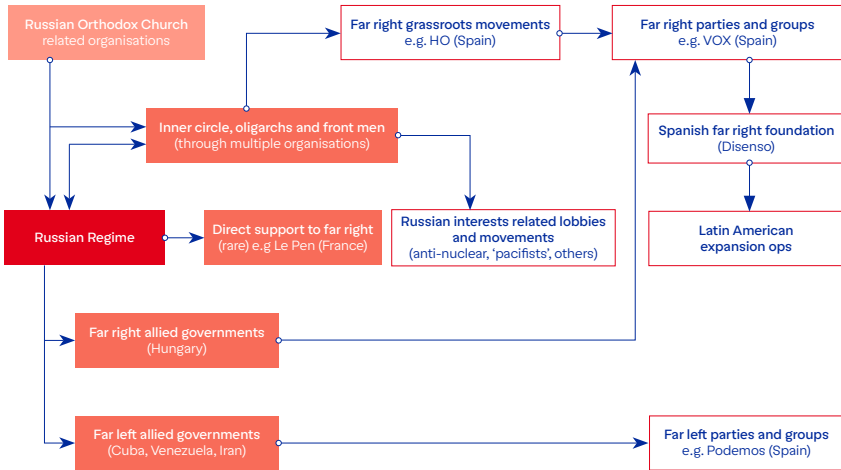
Putin's political influence strategy in Spain and Latin America

JUAN PINA

Introduction

In recent years, the Kremlin's influence in Spain and in Latin America, has been exercised mainly through allegedly independent Russian connections with grassroots organisations and think tanks. Unlike in the past, all of these entities have in recent years shown a strong far right ideological bias, which is broadly in line with the general evolution of the Russian regime's thought and the influence it now exerts abroad. Secondly, there has also been a growing network of individual influencers connected to the Russian regime, always nurtured by fringe, anti-establishment figures. Russian influence has an indirect but not negligible political dimension due to the subsequent effective support of the aforementioned grassroots organisations and think tanks for the radical right Vox party, its powerful Disenso foundation and their strongly proactive Latin American outreach. This chapter aims at grasping the likely influence flow from the Russian regime on Spain and its further ramifications in Latin America, which is visualised on graph 1.

Estimated influence flow map



Source: Author's own design based on the chapter's assumptions and flow estimation.

Recent evolution of Russia's approach to political influence abroad

Since the implosion of the Soviet Union, the successive Russian governments had always wished to exert a strong influence on the policies adopted by Western countries. Such a strategy is conducive to the ultimate (and practically the only) goal of Russian foreign policy: the recovery of a vast geographical area of unquestioned hegemony and potential expansion as a sort of Lebensraum around the country's hinterland, thus remaking the empire accumulated by the czars and Soviets, and reviving the (originally national-socialist) dream of Eurasia as updated by Aleksandr Dugin — and as opposed to Atlanticism¹. However, the final agenda is more ambitious. It aims, of course, to reinstate Russia in its lost role as a geopolitical superpower. Even representatives of the so-called neorealist school of geopolitics recognise that the main concern

¹ Fellows, G. S. (2018). *The Foundations of Aleksandr Dugin's Geopolitics: Montage Fascism and Eurasianism as Blowback*. Denver: University of Denver.

of contemporary Russia is to place itself on an equal footing with the West at any cost², while neither economic prosperity nor the level of civil liberties or democracy, or any other non-military factors justify a particularly high role for Russia in global affairs. At the end of the day, nuclear warheads are the Kremlin's only real argument and its final lever. This yearning for recognition as a mighty world power has become a real obsession over the years and decades, as Professor Faraldo so aptly maintains in his book on the current Russian society³ — as fixated on glory as it is psychologically broken. And it is of the essence to understand that this obsession, which permeates the whole society from the top down, is just normal for most ordinary citizens. Otherwise, it wouldn't be possible to comprehend the invasion of Ukraine or the previous and ongoing intensification and ideologization of Russia's strategies of external influence.

In earlier stages of the current Russian regime, influence abroad was sought by establishing relationships of private interest with mainstream politicians in major countries. Two examples that come to mind are the conservative François Fillon⁴ in France and the social democrat Gerhard Schroeder⁵ in Germany. However, something began to change around 2012 — further to the constitutional stunt period in which Putin had formally swapped roles with Dmitry Medvedev⁶ — and the Russian strategy of external influence underwent a considerable shift. Capelletti (2019) explains this process: 'Since 2010 an ambitious Eurasian integration project has been carried out, manifested by the foundation of the customs unions of Belarus, Kazakhstan, and Russia, where

2 Mearsheimerr, J. J. (2014, September/October). Why the Ukraine Crisis Is the West's Fault. The Liberal Delusions That Provoked Putin. *Foreign Affairs*.

3 Faraldo, J. M. (2022). *Sociedad Z: la Rusia de Vladimir Putin*. Madrid: Báltica.

4 Goujard, Clothilde (2021, July 3). Former French Prime Minister Fillon joins Russian oil company board. *Politico*. <https://www.politico.eu/article/former-french-prime-minister-fillon-joins-russian-oil-company-board/>.

5 Bennhold, K. (2022, April 23). The Former Chancellor Who Became Putin's Man in Germany. *The New York Times*. <https://www.nytimes.com/2022/04/23/world/europe/schroeder-germany-russia-gas-ukraine-war-energy.html/>.

6 Black, J. L. (2019). *The Russian Presidency of Dmitry Medvedev, 2008–12*. Oxon/New York: Routledge.

a common economic space comes into force in 2012. The idea was maybe an attempt to create a Caucasian alternative to the disruptive Western ideology at a time when relations with the West were tense and international ones were stressed by the crisis in the Middle East. Putin himself was very keen on this kind of project internally. During his election campaign in 2011 running for the new presidency, he launched a Eurasian Union project that would incorporate as much as possible the territory of the former Soviet Union into an integrated economic space⁷.

This had an influence on how the regime would thereafter seek to exert its foreign influence. Rather than seducing conventional politicians, the new focus was now put, increasingly, on strengthening groups, movements, parties, and individual politicians that could be disruptive of the general status quo. Various authors have extensively connected the Russian regime with political developments such as Brexit⁸ or the Catalan secessionist process⁹, and also with the widespread, sudden and somehow mysterious blossoming of populist and anti-establishment parties and movements with unjustifiably deep pockets. These new — or newly well-funded — entities initially appeared at both ends of the ideological scale¹⁰, but for the last five to ten years the phenomenon has virtually happened in the new far right niche only.

The three main factors in Russia's change of strategy

What led to this change of strategy? There are three main factors. First, a growing conservatism of Vladimir Putin's speech has been observed

7 Cappelletti, F. (2019). *Russian-Western Relations*. Moscow: MGIMO.

8 Ruy, D. (2020, July 21). Did Russia Influence Brexit? *Center for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS)*. <https://www.csis.org/blogs/brexit-bits-bobs-and-blogs/did-russia-influence-brexit>.

9 Lautmann, O. (2021, September 7). Catalonia: Where There's Trouble There's Russia. *CEPA*. <https://cepa.org/article/catalonia-where-theres-trouble-theres-russia/>.

10 For instance, both Spain and Greece saw the rise of far-left parties (Podemos, Syriza) which many media and commentators linked to Russian connections at the time.

over the past ten years or so, especially on moral issues¹¹. This might be related to his own ageing and/or to practical interest as he's surrounded by ultra-conservative oligarchs such as Vladimir Yakunin and Konstantin Malofeev. Whatever the reason, he has moved towards increasingly nationalist, traditionalist and moralist ideological positions, like several other leaders in that period. It is important to remember that, possibly as a result of this evolution by Putin and his close inner circle, the anti-liberal and national-populist thinker Aleksandr Dugin, proponent of the clearly totalitarian Fourth Political Theory¹², was rehabilitated and admitted again to the Kremlin. And he eventually gained a strong influence on Putin's views¹³.

Even more important is the second factor: the loss of faith in liberal democracy also affected many Western conservatives in those years, between the first and second decade of this century. Much has been written of this and a frequent conclusion is that many conservatives, nationalists, and religious extremists no longer feel able to achieve their goals within the system and see the current evolution of society as a fast track towards civilisational collapse¹⁴. Putin seems to have fallen for this line of thought himself. He has even used the word 'satanism' to describe the West's general stand on moral freedom and ethical issues¹⁵, and he has subsequently vouched to save, not just the Russian society, but also the Western society from moral regression. One of the factors triggering

11 Chotiner, I. (2022, October 19). Vladimir Putin's Place in the Culture Wars. *The New Yorker*. <https://www.newyorker.com/news/q-and-a/vladimir-putins-place-in-the-culture-wars>.

12 Aleksandr Dugin claims that his Fourth Political Theory is an entirely new ideology which integrates and supersedes liberal democracy, Marxism, and fascism. However, he elaborates to construct a political frame consistent with extreme nationalism, an authoritarian state running the country's economy and culture, and little room for individual dissidence or for the independent evolution of values and ideas.

13 Grynszpan, E. (2022, August 26). Dugin, from marginal ideologue to official influencer. *Le Monde* (English edition). https://www.lemonde.fr/en/international/article/2022/08/26/dugin-from-marginal-ideologue-to-official-influencer_5994808_4.html.

14 Pina, J. (2023). *La décima cruzada*. Madrid: Unión Editorial. See also Laruelle, M. (2021, October 22). Disillusioned with Democracy: A Conceptual Introduction to Illiberalism.

15 Reuters (2022, September 30). Putin attacks West as 'satanic', hails Russian "traditional" values. <https://www.reuters.com/article/ukraine-crisis-putin-values-idUSS8N2Z8OG1>.

a divorce from the liberal democracy paradigm by these more extreme factions of conservatism may have been the rapid generalisation of equal marriage laws over the century's first and second decades. The Kremlin's political analysts discovered a window of opportunity in the Western conservatives' disaffection for the path taken by their societies and for the political system as such, and they didn't miss the chance to exploit it. The third factor is that, since 2009, with the accession of Cyril I to the Patriarchate of Moscow and all Rus, the most conservative faction has also taken power in the extremely influential and rich Russian Orthodox Church (ROC), which is also the most influential lobbying force on the regime and has close ties with the aforementioned oligarchs and other key players¹⁶. As Capelletti (2019) sustains, 'Putin began taking measures of power, outlining a tradition-based strategy of consensus — which also meant making peace with the past, while an important role was played by the Orthodox Church. ... The church for its part reacted positively and took the opportunity for a revival. The implicit link with government policies to restore a Slavophilism and Orthodox Russian tradition allowed the church to ensure itself against undue intrusion from other churches.'¹⁷ The intricate network of ROC related and funded associations, foundations, and other entities has stepped in to participate in the international efforts to bring about a colossal cultural change in the West, which entails political ramifications.

The new approach in practice

As a result of these developments, circa 2012, the Russian regime's new approach is to intensify foreign influence operations, but this time re-directing them mainly to fringe — yet viable — politicians in the sphere of the new radical right. Donald Trump, who had already dreamed of

¹⁶ Coyer, P. (2015, May 21). (Un)Holy Alliance: Vladimir Putin, The Russian Orthodox Church And Russian Exceptionalism. *Forbes*. <https://www.forbes.com/sites/paulcoyer/2015/05/21/unholy-alliance-vladimir-putin-and-the-russian-orthodox-church/?sh=2e59473227d5>.

¹⁷ Cappelletti, F. (2019).

the presidency in 2012, wins it in 2016, and the role played by Russia is decisive¹⁸. In 2017 and 2022, Marine Le Pen's presidential campaigns are heavily financed by Russia as she acknowledged in the 2022 electoral debate with incumbent Emmanuel Macron, while, in fact, her party's Russian funding goes back at least to 2014¹⁹. Russian influence is felt in the disruptive British and Catalan political processes, in 2016 and 2017 respectively. Viktor Orbán, moves closer to Russia and Hungary goes increasingly rogue as a EU member state. The convergence of political worldviews between Orbán and Putin proceeds apace. In fact, it is Orbán who in 2014 coins the terms 'illiberal democracy' and 'illiberal state' to refer to the total systemic change he then starts to promote for Hungary and beyond²⁰, thus cancelling out 300 years of political, economic and cultural liberalism: the period of greatest prosperity and development in human history.

Thus, since the early years of the last decade, Russia has thrown its weight behind what can be called an international 'new radical right', which emerges from the combination or alliance between mainstream conservatism disappointed with the march of the modern world and the resurgence and updating of old authoritarian, non-democratic right-wing movements. But the Kremlin regime is pragmatic, and this innovation does not cancel out previous alliances with the far left, many of them inherited from the Soviet Union, including the Cuban regime and its Latin American expansion with Venezuela as its flagship. Putin does not have the slightest problem with this apparent 'ideological schizophrenia', which also has a domestic expression in the political syncretism that unashamedly, and sometimes kitschily, combines monarchist and communist symbolism and epic. Almost a decade ago, this symbolic

18 Mazzetti, M. (2016, December 12). C.I.A. Judgement on Russia Built on Swell of Evidence. *The New York Times*. <https://www.nytimes.com/2016/12/11/us/politics/cia-judgment-intelligence-russia-hacking-evidence.html>.

19 Daley, S. (2014, December 1). French Far Right Gets Helping Hand With Russian Loan. *The New York Times*. <https://www.nytimes.com/2014/12/02/world/europe/french-far-right-gets-helping-hand-with-russian-loan-.html>

20 MacDowall, A. (2014, December 18). Illiberal Democracy: How Hungary's Orbán Is Testing Europe. *World Politics Review*.

mix had already been fully documented by analysts like Sukhankin (2015)²¹. This author considers it an ideological ‘Frankenstein’ driven by the regime’s practical interests in social engineering, and goes on to posit that the far-right has a pivotal role in the shaping of the then-new Russia and obsessively averting the risk of a ‘colour revolution’ taking place in Russia itself.

The Kremlin’s key tool in its strategies to influence Western societies is money. The Putin establishment has managed to amass what is most likely the largest slush fund in human history. Estimates of its size vary widely, but we can take as a minimum the figure offered by financial investor and expert Russia analyst Bill Browder: some 200 billion dollars²².

It should be recalled that for more than two decades Putin and his cronies have carried out an immense process of opaque or questionable privatisations, outside the due process of fair and transparent auctions, stock market placements, or other credible mechanisms. Putin started what he called a process of ‘centralization’, not ‘privatisation’, by offering easy access to auctions for people loyal to the establishment. In other words, a select group of people loyal to the regime have managed by unclear procedures to take over industries, natural resources or licences to operate businesses on an exclusive basis or with high entry barriers for competitors. In a short period of time, several dozen businessmen have become immensely wealthy, and it is an open secret that a considerable part of the money so easily earned goes back into the regime’s dark coffers to ensure its continuity at home and its complex, costly and massive covert operations abroad. All this has been possible in a country of very poor and controlled pseudo-capitalism with low juridical safety, where business success depends much more on political connections than on

21 Sukhankin, S. (2015). Ultrnationalism and xenophobia in Russia: from marginality to state promoted philosophy. *Notes internacionales CIDOB*. https://www.cidob.org/en/publications/publication_series/notes_internacionales/n1_128_russia_for_russians/russia_for_russians_ultranationalism_and_xenophobia_in_russia_from_marginality_to_state_promoted_philosophy.

22 Browder, B. (2022). *Freezing Order: A True Story of Russian Money Laundering, Murder, and Surviving Vladimir Putin’s Wrath*. New York: Simon & Schuster.

talent, tenacity, or innovation. The toll that oligarchs are supposed to pay is to contribute to the slush fund. But Putin has not invented the wheel. This mechanism applies to many other countries, likely including Orbán's Hungary, albeit to a lesser extent.

With a virtually unlimited slush fund, the Russian regime has been able to influence political decisions and public opinion in key countries. Even before the change in strategy, the regime was already suspected to fatten up Western social movements whose causes coincided with its interests. Thus, for example, NATO has expressed concerns on Russian support for Western environmentalists in order to create a climate of opinion unfavourable to nuclear energy, fracking, and other power sources, so as to ensure Europe's energy dependence on Russian fossil fuels²³. Similarly, there has also been talk of support for pacifist movements in order to create a climate of social hostility towards increasing our countries' military expenditure or involvement in foreign security²⁴. In the current war context, Poland has recently warned about this still ongoing Russian operation²⁵. These older ops seem to have been joined, since the change of strategy, by the contribution of huge sums to the conservatisation of societies by strengthening certain grassroots organisations and, subsequently, their political fronts.

This latter course of action has been detected over the last few years, for example, in the case of conservative lobbies against European gender policies. Vladimir Yakunin alone has donated more than 110 million euros over a ten year period, just to promote the hyper-conservative vision in this area, according to a report produced by one of the European

²³ Harvey, F. (2014, June 19). Russia 'secretly working with environmentalists to oppose fracking'. *The Guardian*. <https://www.theguardian.com/environment/2014/jun/19/russia-secretly-working-with-environmentalists-to-oppose-fracking>.

²⁴ This would be a continuation of the long Soviet era support to the World Peace Council and many other self-styled pacifist organisations in the West.

²⁵ Stanisław Żaryn, Poland's Commissioner for Security of Information Space, accused Russian propaganda of utilising false pacifism to advance Moscow's interests in a statement made on Twitter on 11 March 2023, as further reported by the Kyiv Post on March 13th. 'Russia has ramped up its propaganda and media support for European pacifist movements', he went on to say.

Parliament's forums²⁶. Reportedly, Konstantin Malofeev has donated to the same lobby in excess of 77 million euros, over the same period of time. If figures of such a magnitude are estimated for this policy alone, it is impossible not to perceive the total volume attributable to all Russian social influence in the West as nothing short of gigantic.

The Spanish link

The recent history of Spain, a country that made its democratic transition from a fascist regime in the 1970s, had led to an almost non-existent presence of the extreme right in political institutions, and very little in civil society. Spain seemed vaccinated against any form of extreme right. But everything comes to an end, and the vaccine began to weaken in the middle of the last decade. In 2014 the far right Vox party was founded. Among its promoters were numerous people close to religious extremism. Vox is a radically nationalist party, firmly opposed to immigration and anchored in a moralist and traditionalist worldview. Its first significant funding, some 800,000 euros, was obtained that year for the European Parliament elections, and came from the Iranian insurgent organisation Mojahedin e-Khalq (MeK)²⁷, whose name had been removed shortly before from the anti-terrorist blacklists of both the European Union and the United States. Vox head candidate to the EP, Alejo Vidal-Quadras, who was until then a Partido Popular (PPP) MEP, had over the years developed ties with this Iranian insurgent entity. But Vox did not win the expected seat for Mr. Vidal-Quadras (who subsequently left the new party) and, once the MeK's questionable funds were exhausted, the party plunged into a long period of fringe political action, with no presence in any relevant institution (neither the national

²⁶ European Parliament Forum (2021). *Tip of the iceberg. Religious extremist funders*. Brussels: EPF.

²⁷ Janessari, S. (2019, April 27). Spain's Vox Party Hates Muslims—Except the Ones Who Fund It. *Foreign Policy*. <https://foreignpolicy.com/2019/04/27/spains-vox-party-hates-muslims-except-the-ones-who-fund-it-mek-ncrj-maryam-rajavi-pmoi-vidal-quadras-abascal/>.

or regional parliaments nor any middle or large city council). However, during those long years, Vox intensified its relationship with several organisations that are extremely conservative in moral matters, and especially with the *Hazte Oír* (HO) movement, which can be translated as 'make yourself heard'.

Founded in 2001, HO is probably the most financially powerful civil movement in Spain. It has always been linked to the most extremist and conservative organisations within the Catholic Church, and for years it has been particularly associated with the radical Mexican group *El Yunque*, which is known for its secretive and paramilitary nature. Allegedly, *El Yunque* resorts to cultic psychological coercion techniques, popularly known as 'brainwashing'. Victims in Spain first threatened legal action in 2019. Several books on this cult had appeared in Mexico and Spain long before the cult was even involved with any political operations in Spain, including Álvaro Delgado's book in the mid 2000s²⁸.

Around 2017–2018 the relationship between HO and the Vox party is optimal, and this period coincides with the rapid resurgence of Vox in the Spanish political arena. Almost overnight, Vox obviously began to have large economic resources that allowed it to open offices and to carry out membership campaigns. It contested the 2018 elections to the Andalusian Parliament and for the first time obtained representation in a regional parliament, suddenly going from zero to 12 seats. From there, the phenomenon spreads throughout Spain. Vox continues to exhibit a very strong economic muscle and competes in its public exposure and electoral campaigns with the main national parties. In 2019 it reached many more regional parliaments, the European Parliament and the Spanish national parliament, becoming the third largest parliamentary group after the elections were repeated following lack of success in forming a cabinet. In that second 2019 election Vox obtained 52 seats, one in seven seats in the Spanish parliament.

Where did the funding come from for such a success by a party which, just a few years before, was out of all parliaments, thus ineligible for any public funding, and broke? Undoubtedly, some of it must have come

²⁸ Delgado, Á. (2006). *El yunque: La ultraderecha en el poder*. Mexico City; Plaza & Janés.

from its growing mass of members and donors, not least because of its controversial legal actions against Catalan pro-independence politicians before the Supreme Court. Another part may have come from large donors disenchanted with the mainstream centre-right Partido Popular (PP). But several authors and media outlets point out that Vox's impressive economic bonanza cannot be attributed solely to its renewed fundraising capacity and HO is often perceived as the obvious source of funding²⁹.

HO is probably the wealthiest civil movement in Spain, and its contribution to lobbying efforts against gender freedom alone has been estimated at over 30 million euros from 2009 to 2018³⁰. This may provide an idea on the general magnitude of this organisation. Furthermore, back in 2013, HO had started a thriving online petition business, with a structure and service similar to the well-known Change.org platform. The company is called CitizenGo and operates in numerous Latin American and other countries. Prominent among its board members is Russian oligarch Alexey Komov, considered to be a front man for the notorious Konstantin Malofeyev, known in Russia as 'God's oligarch', who has been under heavy sanctions from the West and other countries for years for his illegal activities and especially for his support of coup attempts in the Balkans, and who is currently sanctioned by the US for his involvement in the full scale invasion of Ukraine³¹. Komov, in turn, is particularly linked to the World Congress of Families, which, in addition to promoting a strictly traditional family structure, serves as a meeting point for the most conservative sectors of the ROC, American Protestantism, and Catholicism.

Shortly before Vox's rapid enrichment, HO leader Ignacio Arsuaga boasted to various interlocutors about how easy it will be to channel large amounts of money through CitizenGo's online platform in order to

²⁹ González, M. (2022). Vox, S.A. Madrid: Península.

³⁰ European Parliament Forum (2021).

³¹ Titov, S. (2023, June 24). How Konstantin Malofeyev, Russia's 'Orthodox Oligarch,' Finances His Support Of Moscow's War In Ukraine. *Radio Free Europe*. <https://www.rferl.org/a/malofeyev-russia-oligarch-finances-war-ukraine/32474096.html>.

finally have a strong far right party in parliament³². Indeed, such a platform could be used to fragment substantial amounts which would otherwise be above the legal limit, and make them pass as highly diversified micro-donations, making their common origin untraceable. Or the platform may simply have been used to articulate complex fundraising campaigns. In those years, HO's support also translated into strong pre-electoral campaigns by that movement itself, in which PP, the mainstream centre-right party, together with its individual candidates, were presented as immoral or insufficiently Catholic. In this way, a significant part of the PP's voters were effectively encouraged to vote for Vox instead.

Vox, more than just a Spanish party

Contrary to what is usually expected from the average, rather isolationist political parties on the far right, Vox has displayed a considerable international strategy ever since it became one of the largest parties in Spain. In North America, it has consistently liaised with Steve Bannon and Trump's MAGA ('Make America Great Again') movement, and it has increasingly taken part in the conservative CPAC conferences. Bannon is believed to have assisted the party with top funding introductions and connections.

In Europe, the party's MEPS include Mr. Jorge Buxadé, who is also Vox's Vice President and the main spokesperson. He sets the party line. A former member of Falange, the single party of the Francoist regime, he chose the EP's European Conservatives and Reform (ECR) parliamentary group, probably because of Vox's affinity with Catholic far right parties in Poland (PiS) and Italy (Fratelli d'Italia). But from the very first moment he was the broker of a potential merger between ECR and the unambiguously far right group Identity and Democracy (ID), then led by Marine Le Pen. Vox, mainly through Mr. Buxadé, has developed a close connection with her as well as with Germany's AfD and other ID

³² González, M. (2022).

parties. As the main force pushing for merger, Vox managed to gather all main ECR and ID leaders at a ‘European Patriots Summit’ held in Madrid by the end of January 2022. Prime Ministers Morawiecki (Poland) and Orbán (Hungary) together with Marine Le Pen and other far right leaders attended. Mr. Buxadé’s connections with Russia have not surfaced but the merger he was pushing would have created the EP’s third largest group and displaced Renew Europe to the fourth position. This course of action is likely to be retaken in the near future, maybe in connection with the upcoming European Parliament elections in 2024. The Madrid summit, however, failed to achieve that goal. Russia was about to invade Ukraine and the Polish party, which is by far the largest in the ECR group, didn’t want a PR hazard.

As soon as the 24 February full-scale invasion of Ukraine started, Mr. Buxadé appeared in his weekly press conference and questioned Spain’s decision to send further aircraft to strengthen NATO’s Eastern flank. He even said those fighter planes should rather patrol our coasts to get rid of migrant boats. Everybody was expecting Vox to show a pro-Russian position, and in fact some regional leaders had taken that path already³³. Contrary to Le Pen and others, Vox leader Santiago Abascal had so far avoided a picture with Putin although he had praised the Russian leader in press articles and social media platforms. In the end, Vox decided to follow a pro-West line on the issue, although by no means whole-heartedly. While Vox has so far kept a moderate pro-Ukrainian position, albeit not outspoken or proactive, it is interesting to see that most of Spain’s openly pro-Russian journalists and influencers are in one way or another connected to Vox, HO or both, including former HO senior manager Javier Villamor, who was in the past also connected to Nazi organisation Hogar Social Madrid (HSM).

But the most relevant ramification of Vox’s activity is the Latin American one.

³³ The most openly pro-Russian stand was at the time shown by the regional leader of Vox in the Autonomous City of Ceuta, Juan Sergio Redondo, whose Twitter messages in favour of Putin were later reproduced by local and national media including *El Faro de Ceuta*, 26 February 2022.

Disenso and the Latin American adventure

For reasons probably derived from the close ties Russia has with Cuba and Venezuela, the existence of illiberalism in the Latin American subcontinent had traditionally rested upon the far left, contrary to the ones in Europe and North America. For many years, Russia helped the expansion of the Bolivarian ideology, or '21st century Socialism', as new countries fell in the sphere of influence led by the Havana and Caracas regimes. In fact, the now well documented Venezuelan funding for the Spanish far left in the early 2010s may have actually been backed by Russia and channelled through Venezuela, rather than just being an independent Venezuelan operation. However, this Russian preference for the far left over the far right when it comes to Latin America came to an end with the rise of the new Spanish far right and its own ambitions for that region. While the state-to-state ties between Moscow and several Latin American left wing regimes continue today, the shift in the Kremlin regime's ideological influence ops reached that region as well. The mutual sympathies shown by Putin and Brazil's former far right president and religious extremist Jair Bolsonaro are possibly the clearest expression of that turning point, while his leftist predecessor and successor Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva leans towards Russia as well. As soon as Vox became one of the largest parties in Spain, it immediately created its own political foundation, Disenso. In the few years since it started working, several money scandals have made newspaper front pages. Former top Vox MP and candidate Macarena Olona has denounced the irregular diversion of millions of euros from the party to the Foundation, where party leader Santiago Abascal and other main operatives would have a stronger control of funds³⁴.

The other main political satellites of Vox are ISSEP (a franchise of Marion Maréchal Le Pen's training school for politicians in France), the daily

³⁴ Martí, R. (2023, February 25). Disenso, la fundación de Vox sobre la que sospecha Olona: 4,9 millones para combatir el comunismo. *El Español*. https://www.elespanol.com/reportajes/20230225/disenso-fundacion-vox-sospecha-olona-millones-comunismo/743925804_o.html.

newspaper *Gaceta de la Iberosfera* (which is strongly oriented to both Spain and Latin America alike) and the far right workers union *Solidaridad*. But *Disenso* is especially used for the Latin American operations, which are coordinated by Vox MEP Hermann Tertsch. The connections between the most extreme Catholic and Evangelical movements in several Latin American countries and the emerging parties and grassroots movements cannot be understated. *Disenso* plays a coordinating role from country to country. It launched its ‘Letter of Madrid’ manifesto in October 2020³⁵, and it succeeded in gathering a large number of right-of-centre politicians in the polarised region that Latin America is. *Disenso* has subsequently organised an annual gathering of parties and think tanks, the ‘Foro Madrid’, where a common political agenda is set for the whole region. Through *Disenso*, Vox has successfully replaced the *Partido Popular* as the main Spanish right-of-centre influence on Latin America. A matter of much concern for other European political partnerships in Latin America has been the fact that *Disenso* operatives seem to have very deep pockets and a strong determination to visit each country and tempt all right-of-centre operatives, whether liberal or christian-democrat, or conservative, to leave previous affiliations (e.g. with the well-known German ideological foundations) and work with them instead. Some complain that *Disenso* is ‘buying out’ everyone in the Latin American ideological centre and right: candidates, parties, think tanks, media personalities, and influencers, etc. *Disenso*’s disembarkment in Latin America has been met with concern, and for instance the liberal Friedrich Naumann Foundation sent out a letter to all of its partners in the region warning them that it was not possible to partner with them and with *Disenso* — it was either/or.

The question is, how come the foundation of a relatively new party in Spain has managed to facilitate such large funding across the pond and create such a strong continental network? Again, the connections that immediately arise when discussing this matter with Latin American politicians and experts are Bannon’s operation in the US, and the

³⁵ Link to the ‘Carta de Madrid’ at *Disenso*’s website: <https://fundaciondisenso.org/carta-de-madrid-en-defensa-de-la-libertad-y-la-democracia-en-la-iberosfera/>.

Russia-Hungary connection. Disenso has a close relation with the Matthias Corvinus College (MCC) in Budapest and related think tanks like the Danube Institute. It is necessary to recall that the Orbán government's contribution has even reached 1% of the country's GDP and rivalled the whole German allowance for all ideological foundations — but Germany's GDP is 23 times that of Hungary, and the Hungarian funding has been allocated to the far right only. Spain's Disenso has clearly undertaken the role of leading not just the Spanish but also the Latin American operation for the core centres of far right power in Europe, which is in line with Vox's nationalistic aspiration for the resurgence of an integrated Hispanic bloc.

And yet, while the European path is increasingly easy for the far right — with new governments in Finland and Italy and a surging movement across the continent — the same does not apply to Latin America. Country after country, the radicalisation of the local right wing has been an electoral failure. In a couple of years, several countries including Chile, Argentina, Peru, Colombia, Honduras, and Brazil, have all experienced the poor outcome of the polarisation strategy. The far right has succeeded in taking over the moderate right parties or creating new ones, and it has put forward nationalist, religious, and populist candidates. It has mobilised its crowd, but it has also sparked so much fear among centrists, women, LGBTQ+ people, indigenous communities, and other groups, that a part of its otherwise potential electorate has sided with the left — which in turn has gone more populist and radical as well. This huge polarisation has been particularly visible in Brazil, where both Lula and Bolsonaro represent extremist views, while both politicians are very close to Putin³⁶, and the country has virtually been divided in two halves. As Bolsonaro lost the election in October 2022, he followed the same path of result denial and eventual riots and occupation of parliament that Donald Trump had started in the US. In the meantime, Russia's influence keeps growing in the region, and the

³⁶ Kendrick, M. (2022, May 10). Brazil's Presidential Contenders Both Back Russia, but Brazilians Don't. *Morning Consult Pro*. <https://pro.morningconsult.com/instant-intel/brazil-presidential-election-russia-policy>.

European Union is having a hard time convincing these partners to avoid siding with Russia on the economic conflicts derived from the full scale invasion of Ukraine.

A liberal response

The Russian regime's influence abroad is becoming even more discreet and harder to identify and expose. 'Follow the money' is often not an easy option. The Roman saying 'cui prodest' ('who benefits') is, however, a constant provider of dots which need to be connected. In order to address the now massively spreading far right operations in Spain and Latin America, liberals need to:

- 1 Understand that we, even more than the left, are the main target of the far right's cancel efforts. The far right aims to cancel the whole liberal democracy and the modern world as we know it, which is to a large extent a result of our ideas since the Enlightenment. Their push for an 'illiberal' state, an 'illiberal democracy', or a 'post-liberal' world needs to be met with strength and resolve by liberals because it poses an existential risk to liberalism and its tri-centennial work.
- 2 Stand by our ideas and stay principled. We liberals need to be particularly strong in the defence of both economic freedom and moral/cultural freedom. The successive liberation processes from which numerous groups of formerly repressed individuals have benefitted since the 1950s and 1960s need to prevail. There is no way liberals may accept any steps backwards in terms of women's rights, LGBTQ+ rights, religious minority rights, ethnic and cultural minority rights, migrants' rights, etc.
- 3 Prepare for strong actions if and when necessary to save democracy. While liberals are a beacon of tolerance and open society, we must acknowledge that Popper's paradox on tolerance towards the intolerant is now more applicable than ever since 1945. Strong measures may be necessary at some point, as the ceiling of reasonable tolerance in the face of an existential threat is being strongly challenged. The Kremlin regime's massive operation to have the West move back

to the political tensions of the Cold War and even the 1930s must be derailed at any cost.

- 4 Embrace the 'cordon sanitaire' approach, but wisely. Rather than following the left's name calling and demonization, we need to stay calm, debunk the far right's false premises and crazy policies, and, yes, promote and articulate large social and political cooperation initiatives and coalitions to exclude and corner the far right — and the far left.
- 5 Investigate and expose all indications of Russian regime involvement and attempts to culturally reshape our societies and exert political power over our governments and other political actors. It must be recalled that two far right coup attempts in Germany and one in France have been dismantled in recent years, and the perpetrators were always in line with the Russian regime's views and interests.

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The Kremlin's key tool in its strategies to influence Western societies is money. The Putin establishment has managed to amass what is most likely the largest slush fund in human history.

JUAN PINA

The Moscow Patriarchate as a hybrid threat tool for the Kremlin

The Case of Sweden

PATRIK OKSANEN

‘Sacrifice in the course of carrying out your military duty washes away all sins.’¹ The words from Patriarch Kirill of the Moscow Patriarchate about the Russian war on Ukraine could not be any clearer to describe the role of the Church in relation to the Kremlin, a tool of hybrid threats² to advance the idea of the Russian Empire.

The Moscow Patriarchate, hereafter MP, of the Russian Orthodox Church is, as this chapter will show, interwoven with the Kremlin and the secret services of the Russian Federation and the ideology of the Russian state.³ What binds the MP and the Kremlin together are the common interest of power for the Empire and the vision of Russia as a ‘defender of traditional values’ and this has a long history.

1 RFE/RL (2022, September 26). Russia Patriarch Kirill says dying in Ukraine washes away sin. <https://www.rferl.org/a/russia-patriarch-kirill-dying-ukraine-sins/32052380.html>.

2 According to Hybrid CoE ‘the term hybrid threat refers to an action conducted by state or non-state actors, whose goal is to undermine or harm a target by influencing its decision-making at the local, regional, state or institutional level’. The centre defines it as coordinated and synchronised actions that targets systematic vulnerabilities through a wide range of means. See <https://www.hybridcoe.fi/hybrid-threats-as-a-phenomenon/> for more.

3 Soldatov, A., Borogan, I. (2023, September 14). The Russian Orthodox Church and the Kremlin’s Hidden Influence Campaign in the West. *Foreign Affairs*. <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/ukraine/putins-useful-priests-russia-church-influence-campaign?fbclid=IwAROT2amaoSBUpEeoxOHxNDJb2winxnhAU2X37LqLJsEYGWnSRO-yXMwRscK>.

This concept collides with European ideals as well as constitutional rights about freedom of religion and the separation of Church and State. The mirroring problem in understanding, when viewing a Church like the MP, has been a disadvantage for to the Western societies. This has also been a factor that Russia, and the USSR, has exploited over the years.

Today the MP gives the Putin regime a moral and spiritual framework that goes hand in hand with the ideas of Russkij Mir, the Russian World.⁴ The Church is tying compatriots to the Motherland and is used as a source of influence for the diaspora and beyond. But the power is far more than soft — the war in Ukraine has shown the MP also as a chess piece in the military aggression.

In recent years, in different countries, activities of the MP include corruption, influencing political processes, storing military assets, and subversion. This will be examined later in the chapter, with a deeper look at the case of Sweden. Lastly, conclusions and policy implications are discussed. But first a brief overview of the MP.

The Moscow Patriarchate in the Orthodox World

The MP is one of the independent and self-governing churches in the Eastern Orthodox world. That means that the MP does not answer to any other higher ranking hierarchy. The orthodox term for this is autocephaly and MP is ranked as the sixth after five ancient patriarchates.⁵

The history of the Orthodox Church in the Russian World goes back to the 9th century and the first stages of the Christianisation of Kievan Rus done by Constantinople. During the Mongolian rule, from the 13th century and for three centuries onwards, the Orthodox faith remained in place. The birth of the MP comes after the shift from Kyiv to the rising power of Moscow and the idea of being the true centre of whole

4 Laine, V. (2019). The 'Russian World' and the Orthodox Church in the Post-Soviet Society. In Moshes, A., Racz, A. *What has remained of the USSR — Exploring the erosion of the Post-Soviet space*. Helsinki: FIIA, p 195. https://www.fiaa.fi/wp-content/uploads/2019/02/fiaa_report58_what_has_remained_of_the_ussr_web.pdf.

5 Boguslav.ru. <https://bogoslav.ru/article/192554>.

Christianity, with Moscow as the third Rome, after the fall of Constantinople in 1453. This concept of a unique historic destiny was established in the 16th century, when Moscow emerged as the leading power in the region after the end of the Mongolian rule.

In 1589 Moscow was made an autocephalous and later tsars of Russia incorporated the Church as a tool of imperial power, tied with the Russian idea of state, nationality and heritage. The Church was also instrumental in taking control over Ukraine in the late 17th century. During the 19th century the Orthodox identity became an integral part of imperial Russia's influence work domestically and abroad. When, in the mid-19th century, the poet, diplomat, and secret councillor at the Tsar's Office's Third Department (the Secret police at the time) Fyodor Tyutchev introduced the concept of Russophobia to attack liberals in the Russian Empire and supporters of the Polish uprising abroad, the antithesis to the Russophob was a Russophilian person, an Orthodox patriot and a Slavophile.⁶

During the revolution of 1917 the Church was made enemy of the people by the Bolsheviks and disconnected from the outside diaspora and its churches and clergy. They were organised independently into an archdiocese, under Paris, who was under the Ecumenical Patriarch of Constantinople during the Communist rule.

But Stalin realised he needed religion during the Great Patriotic war and the MP was reestablished in 1943 as a tool to mobilise every part of the society. At the same time the MP could serve as an influence on and control of religious people that had been severely suppressed and persecuted since the revolution. The Patriarchate was allowed to restore several thousands of churches, but was placed under control of the state through a council for religious affairs and the NKVD, precursor to KGB which today is SVR and FSB.⁷ The fact that the Soviet secret service of NKVD and its successor controlled and used the Church

6 Darczewska, J., Zochowski, P. (2015). *Russophobia in the Kremlin's Strategy — A Weapon on Mass Destruction*. Warsaw: Centre for Eastern Studies, pp. 9–10.

7 Andrew, C., Mitrokhin, V. (2000). *The KGB in Europe and the West*. London: Penguin book, p 634.

domestically also opened up opportunities to use it abroad, such as spying on the diaspora and to identify possible agents to recruit. Many high ranking priests of the Church were not just informers but actually KGB officers.⁸

In 1949 the MP joined the Soviet front organisation the World Peace Council. The MP also played a part in the founding of Christian Peace Conference in 1958. That was another front organisation with headquarters in Prague. Three years later it joined the World Council of Churches (wcc).⁹ In the wcc the KGB managed to block criticism against the USSR. In 1969 this meant no mention of the invasion of Czechoslovakia after the Prague Spring and persecution of religious causes in the Soviet sphere.¹⁰

Today the MP is closely linked to the Kremlin, and should be viewed as a de facto state Church, with the political ideology of the Kremlin intertwined with the religious ideology, where ‘the two actors support each other’s aims in providing new meanings for specific Russian “spirituality”’.¹¹ British Russia expert Keir Giles at Chatham House describes the Church’s self image as ‘indistinguishable’ from the State and that it fills a role as a facilitator and support for the state that gives its blessing to state enterprises.¹² This blessing also includes actual ritual blessing of the arms from the military, even nuclear weapons.¹³ After the fall of the USSR the Church established itself with chapels at military bases all over Russia, including the huge Armed Forces Cathedral that was inaugurated in 2020.¹⁴

⁸ Andrew, C., Mitrokhin, V. (2000), p 649.

⁹ Andrew, C., Mitrokhin, V. (2000), p 635.

¹⁰ Andrew, C., Mitrokhin, V. (2000), p 636.

¹¹ Laine, V. (2017). *Spirituality as a political instrument — the Church, the Kremlin and the Creation of the Russian World*. Helsinki: FIIA, p 24. <https://www.fia.fi/julkaisu/spirituality-as-a-political-instrument>.

¹² Giles, K. (2019). *Moscow Rules: What drives Russia to Confront the West*. London: Chatham House, p 103.

¹³ Balmforth, T. (2020, February 4). Russian priests should stop blessing nukes: church proposal. *Reuters*. <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-russia-church-idUSKBN-1ZY2H6>.

¹⁴ Persson, G. (2011). *Det Sovjetiska Arvet*. Stockholm: SNS Förlag, p 185. Walker, S. (2020, October 20). Angels and artillery: a cathedral to Russia's new

Because of the Russian aggression against Ukraine, relations in the Orthodox world were strained. This escalated in 2018 when the Ecumenical Patriarch recognised the independence of the Orthodox Church of Ukraine from Moscow. The MP broke the eucharistic union with Constantinople and the Patriarch in Constantinople in return decided to dissolve the Paris archdiocese. This put heavy pressure on the around 100 parishes in Western Europe to decide where to go in order to uphold communion. The archbishop himself went to MP and with him so did many parishes in France. None of the Nordic parishes decided to follow, however. Some parishes opted for Constantinople directly while others decided to find other ways, such as the one in Stockholm — a story that will be told in more detail later in the chapter.

The Moscow Patriarchate, *Russkij Mir* and Putin's Security Policy

Today, the MP plays a soft power role as a champion of the *Russkij Mir*, the Russian World. Its perception is fluid with no fixed borders and different interpretations, but it is opposite to Western liberal ideas. Russkij Mir combines ideas of Russian culture, history, tradition and language. Patriarch Kirill defined it as based in the Orthodox faith, Russian culture which includes the Russian language, and the common memory of history together with common views on social developments in his speech during the Third Russian World Assembly in 2009.¹⁵ In 2015 Russia named spiritual-moral values as a matter of national security in its security strategy and mentioned it eleven times in the text, compared with only once in 2009.¹⁶

Abroad, the MP cooperates closely with the Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs. This allows 'the Church to defend and deepen "Russia's spiritual

national identity. *The Guardian*. <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2020/oct/20/orthodox-cathedral-of-the-armed-force-russian-national-identity-military-disneyland>.

¹⁵ Patriarchia.ru (2009, November 3). Vystuplenie Svjatejšego Patriarha Kirilla na toržestvennom otkrytii III Assamblei Russkogo mira. <http://www.patriarchia.ru/db/text/928446.html>.

¹⁶ Laine, V. (2017), p 5.

values” abroad’ as the Finnish researcher Vera Laine has pointed out.¹⁷ These values have over time become more important for the Russian state. During a dial in show in April 2014 President Putin stressed that Russians were more spiritually generous, compared to the West, and in Russkij Mir death for friends and the Motherland is beautiful.¹⁸

The message from the MP is also described as ‘nationalistic, partly xenophobic, imperial, promoting conservative values and being patriotic’¹⁹, and it is disseminated through TV channels. The MP has founded SPAS TV, to form a ‘worldview and a system of moral coordinates required for the efficient development of the state on the bases of the indigenous Orthodox values’. These efforts can be seen as a part of the greater information effort from the Russian State to influence the audience at home and abroad.²⁰

Another example of connection is the oligarch Konstantin Malofeev, who founded Tsargrad TV in 2015, a channel promoting orthodox values. Malofeev has been described to be in Putin’s inner circle and is one of the funding sources for the World Congress of Families²¹. Since 2019 he is also the vice director of the MP-organised World Russian People’s Congress, presided by Patriarch Kirill himself. Malofeev is on the US and EU sanction list for his involvement in the Russian aggression against Ukraine.²² However, attempts to put the Patriarch Kirill himself on the EU sanction list has been blocked by Hungary.²³

¹⁷ Laine, V., (2017), p 11.

¹⁸ Oksanen, P. (2018). *Skarpa Skärvor*. Stockholm: Bertil Ohlin förlag, p 92.

¹⁹ Bodin, P.-A. (2009). Ryska ortodoxa kyrkan efter Sovjetunionens upplösning. In Jonsson, A., Vendil Pallin, C. (eds) *Ryssland: Politik, samhälle och ekonomi*. Stockholm: SNS Förlag, p 223.

²⁰ Shekhovtsov, A. (2018). *Russia and the Western far right*. Oxon & NY: Routledge, p 77.

²¹ World Congress of Families is according to the Southern Poverty Law Center ‘an umbrella for a massive network of organizations, all pushing for restrictions on LGBT-rights’. It was founded in Russia and connects conservative American and European groups to Russia.

²² Stoeckl, K. (2020, October). The Rise of Russian Christian Right: the case of World Congress of Families. *Religion, State and Society*, 48. p 230.

²³ Than, K. (2022, June 2). Hungary says Orbán’s stance on sanctioning Patriarch Kirill known for a long time’, *Reuters*. <https://www.reuters.com/world/europe/hungary-says-orbans-stance-sanctioning-patriarch-kirill-known-long-time-2022-06-02/>.

Examples of hybrid influence activities around Europe

The Kremlin use of the Moscow Patriarchate as a platform of influence and as an enabler could be noted in several countries with various activities that could be described as hybrid influence. Some brief examples from a half dozen of countries offer a spectre of the variety:

In Estonia a donation of 1.24 million Euros to build a new church in Tallinn in 2010 drew attention and raised alarm. Most of the money came from a Russian oligarch. The Estonian Secret Police named Vladimir Yakunin, at that time the head of Russian Railways, as responsible for the donation.²⁴

In 2018 the Patriarch Kirill visited Bulgaria and tried to lecture the hosts for not showing Russia enough gratitude. This led deputy PM Valery Simeonov to respond and call the Patriarch a second class KGB agent who enriched himself through trade with cigarettes.²⁵

In Montenegro the Kremlin has used the religion in attempts to stop both the independence in 2006 and the accession to NATO in 2016. Russia describes itself traditionally as the defender of its Slavic brethren and appeals to common identity, culture, and Orthodox religion. These attempts to interfere in Montenegrin politics have been done partly through the closely allied Serbian Orthodox Church, but also more openly by Patriarch Kirill.²⁶ These actions cannot be fully understood without pointing out another part of the Russian campaign — the plot to assassinate then-Prime Minister Milo Djukanovic in order to stop membership of NATO.²⁷

24 Winnerstig, M. (2014). Tools of Destabilization — Russian soft power and non military influence in the Baltic States. *FOI*, p 51. <https://www.foi.se/rapportsammanfattning?repo rtNo=FOI-R--3990--SE>.

25 Belsat (2018, March 9). Bulgarian Deputy PM about Patriarch Kirill of Moscow: KGB agent dares to teach us. <https://naviny.belsat.eu/en/news/bulgarian-deputy-pm-about-patriarch-kirill-of-moscow-kgb-agent-dares-to-teach-us/>.

26 Conley, H., Melino, M. (2018, May 14). Russian Malign Influence in Montenegro: The Weaponization and Exploitation of History, Religion and Economics. *Center for Strategic & International Studies*. <https://www.csis.org/analysis/russian-malign-influence-montenegro-weaponization-and-exploitation-history-religion-and>.

27 BBC (2019, May 9). Montenegro jails Russian coup plot leaders. <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-48212435>.

Another example is how conservative values have been used by the MP to influence legislative processes in Georgia, Latvia, and Ukraine concerning LGBT rights. ²⁸ From Norway there have been media reports about a church establishment with a perfect view over Norway's most important naval base ²⁹ and an attempt to get a chapel close to an important radar facility, operated by Norwegian intelligence, in the far north of Norway. ³⁰

Priests of the Moscow Patriarchate have been active in supporting the Russian war of aggression in Ukraine, according to a Chatham House report that includes storing ammunition in church buildings and religious community centres. ³¹ Estonian intelligence pointed out in its annual report of 2019 that the MP conducted subversions in Ukraine years before the invasion in 2014. The MP was used as a front for Russian special forces where clergymen participated in operations, rallied support for Moscow, and staged provocations as a part of the operations to destabilise Ukraine. ³²

In their annual report of 2023 Estonian intelligence noted that army chaplains of Ukraine, belonging to the MP, had broken the seal of confession and reported health and morale to Russian intelligence. The facilities of the Church were also used for preparing accommodations for Russian soldiers and storing propaganda beside weapons cache. The report also points out the Church supports the occupation forces and that, on

²⁸ Laine, V. (2017), p 19.

²⁹ Andersland, K. (2022, October 17). Russere kjøpte eiendom ved marinebase. *Dagbladet*. <https://bergen.dagbladet.no/nyheter/russere-kjopte-eiendom-ved-marinebase/77313186>.

³⁰ Nilsen, T. (2022, November 10). With local support bishop has a desire to build chapel next to Vardo radar. *The Barents Observer*. <https://thebarentsobserver.com/en/security/2022/11/local-support-bishop-russias-nuclear-missile-cosmodrome-wants-build-orthodox-chapel>.

³¹ Lutsevych, O. (2016). Agents of the Russian World — proxy groups in the Contested Neighbourhood. *Chatham House*. <https://www.chathamhouse.org/sites/default/files/publications/research/2016-04-14-agents-russian-world-lutsevych.pdf>.

³² Estonian Foreign Intelligence Service (2019). International Security and Estonia 2019. <https://www.valisluureamet.ee/doc/raport/2019-en.pdf>.

Ukraine-controlled soil, the clergy often engaged in ‘silent resistance’.³³ The MP has now been thrown out from Ukraine.

Context: Sweden and Russia

As a strategically located country in the Baltic-Arctic area, with a foot in the Arctic as well as a long seacoast in the Baltic Sea, Sweden is a country of interest for the Russian Federation. A key interest here is to influence the Swedish NATO debate and to keep Sweden outside of the bloc. According to the annual Swedish Security Police (SÄPO) report from March 2021, Russia has the intention and ability to weaken Swedish security and Swedish determination to act, and this intention and ability is reflected in continuous threatening Russian security activities against Swedish society. The use of proxies and the interest in the Russian speaking diaspora is also mentioned.³⁴

During the presentation in 2019 of its annual report the senior analyst at SÄPO’s counterintelligence, Kennet Alexandersson, stressed the use of different tools. Mr. Alexandersson stated that Russia is establishing different platforms and footholds, both physical platforms on the ground as well as footholds that are ideological and social, which could be used now, but also in the future. It can also be noted that SÄPO pointed out intelligence gathering platforms close to Swedish military facilities.³⁵

³³ Estonian Foreign Intelligence Service (2023). International Security and Estonia 2023. <https://raport.valisluureamet.ee/2023/en/>.

³⁴ Säkerhetspolisen (2020). Säkerhetspolisens årsbok. https://www.sakerhetspolisen.se/download/18.310a187117da376c6601ddd/1637581090097/sakerhetspolisens_arsbok_2020.pdf.

³⁵ Laggar, M., Lundblad, M., Nordström, D. (2019, March 20). Moskvapatriarkatet ett av Kremls verktyg — pekas ut som ett påverkansvapen. *VLT*. <https://www.vlt.se/2019-03-20/moskvapatriarkatet-ett-av-kremls-verktyg--pekas-ut-som-paverkansvapen>.

The Moscow Patriarchate in Sweden

In Sweden, the MP was established in the 1990s. It should not be confused with the already existing congregation³⁶ of the Russian Orthodox Church in Sweden, hereafter referred to as ROCs, that traces its history in Stockholm back to 1617 and was disconnected after 1917.³⁷

The MP is organised into eight local parishes and has approximately 2,000 members according to latest numbers from Swedish Agency for Support for Faith Communities.³⁸ The potential is larger, however, since it's trying to recruit followers from the around 20,000 Russians of Orthodox faith that live in Sweden. To that number can also be added people from other countries in Russia's vicinity and, more recently, also Ukrainian refugees.

The MP receives a smaller state funding from the Swedish government through Swedish Agency for Support to Faith Communities at a total amount of nearly 1.4 million SEK (somewhere between 120,000 — 130,000 Euros³⁹) in Swedish state grants aggregated since 2016. The Swedish system of state grants to faith communities aims to enable congregations to work actively with a long-term focus on worship, education and spiritual and pastoral care.⁴⁰

1 Hostile takeover attempts in Stockholm

Holy Sergey (Helige Sergeij) in Stockholm is the largest parish, led by the protopriest Vitaly Babushkin who is the highest ranking clergyman of the MP in Sweden. But in Stockholm there is also a competition about the souls from ROCs. Under Babushkin's leadership the relationship

³⁶ The congregation's name is The Orthodox Church of the Annunciation of Christ in Russian tradition, or in Swedish 'Kristi förklarings ortodoxa kyrka i rysk tradition'.

³⁷ Kristi förklarings ortodoxa kyrka. <https://www.ryskaortodoxakyrkan.se/>.

³⁸ Myndigheten för stöd till trossamfund. <https://www.myndighetenst.se/engelska/myndigheten-for-stod-till-trossamfund.html>.

³⁹ Approximation due to fluctuation in SEK vs EUR.

⁴⁰ Myndigheten för stöd till trossamfund website. <https://www.myndighetenst.se/bidrag/bidragsberattigade-trossamfund.html>.

to ROCS has deteriorated. This accelerated, with attempts to infiltrate and assimilate ROCS into MP, after the formal schism in 2018 between Moscow and Constantinople over Ukraine. The rivalry in the Orthodox world between Moscow and Constantinople had been ongoing since the end of the Cold War but has been escalating since 2014 because of the Russian Federation's war against Ukraine. For the MP it was important and prestigious to assimilate 'the lost sheep', the parishes under the Paris archdiocese, and return them home to Moscow. Attempts to accomplish this in Stockholm became more and more tense during the autumn 2018 and it culminated in May 2019 during a baptising service when a large group entered the ROCS church in central Stockholm. Some had earlier left ROCS for MP. The group demanded both immediate membership and that the church should join the MP.⁴¹

Because of the turmoil police were summoned to the place. It was described by the ROCS homepage that the ones who disturbed the baptism were 'spiritually nourished by other congregations that have been conducting aggressive propaganda against our parish and the vicar personally'.⁴²

In an interview with Swedish Radio in 2020 about the incident the proto-priest Babushkin stated that the MP is an important part of the state (Russian Federation) and denied attempts of hostile takeover but admitted attempts to change the jurisdiction of the ROCS — 'because they had stopped to love Russia and lost their Russian identity.'⁴³ Here loyalty to the Kremlin is equalled with love to the motherland and having a Russian identity.

After the failed attempt to swallow ROCS and due to problems with facilities for worship, the MP in Stockholm turned their attention to the church

41 For ROCS the religious situation was critical during the period, because the need to be aligned somewhere to uphold the communion. Since Constantinople (due to the local head of the Greek Orthodox Church who is involved in money scandals as well as being pro-Kremlin) was not an option the solution was to come under the spiritual guidance and protection of the Bulgarian metropolite for US, Canada, and Australia.

42 Oksanen, P. (2020, July 9). Rysk ortodoxa går Putins ärenden när de försöker ta över svensk kyrka. *Dagen*. <https://www.dagen.se/debatt/2020/07/09/rysk-ortodoxa-gar-putins-arenden-nar-de-forsoker-ta-over-svensk-kyrka/>.

43 Georgieva, M. (2020, July 17). När rysk utrikespolitik tar sig in i kyrkorumen. *Godmorgon Världen in the Sveriges Radio*. <https://sverigesradio.se/artikel/7517269>.

building of Saint Sigfrid, and the governing independent non-profit association ‘Sankt Sigfrids kyrkas vänner’ (Friends of the Church of Saint Sigfrid), which works in the tradition of the Lutheran Swedish Church. This is not a church itself, but the association gathers individuals with a more conservative Lutheran view and the building is rented out for baptisms and services.

Friends of the Church of Saint Sigfrid, in need of financial support, had a faction arguing for allowing the MP to be a tenant, despite its Lutheran affiliation. A lease of the church building for Easter celebration in 2020 led to a conflict between those who wanted to allow the lease to MP on a long term contract in the name of ecumenical spirit and the need of money and those who were opposing the lease. Both sides mobilised and the association saw a heavy increase of members of Russian origin who entered the association to support the lease. An extra annual meeting was interrupted by turmoil and police were summoned.⁴⁴ This led to the board of Saint Sigfrid being split into two. The auditors (supporting the pro-Moscow faction) called another extra annual meeting, boycotted by the faction opposing the deal with MP, which led to two separate boards claiming control of the Church.⁴⁵

During the summer of 2023 this conflict was not yet resolved. The physical control of the building is still in the hands of the pro-Moscow faction and the MP are still tenants, despite losing the first rounds of the court battle. The legal conflict on how to interpret the statutes of the association is complicated. But the pro-Moscow chairman was found by the court to be illegitimate and the appeal to the next level of court was denied. There is still a chance to appeal to the highest court, but the likelihood they would overrule the lower court’s denial to test the appeal are slim. Instead the pro-Moscow board is trying to argue that the verdict was only about the chairman and not the board itself, and

44 Zetterman, J. (2020, July 7). Missionsprovinsen anklagas för kupp försök mot Stockholmskyrka. *Dagen*. <https://www.dagen.se/nyheter/2020/07/07/missionsprovinsen-anklagas-for-kuppforsok-mot-stockholmskyrka/>.

45 Zetterman, J. (2020, September 6). Fortsatt bråk om Sankt Sigfridskyrka — indelad i två läger. *Dagen*. <https://www.dagen.se/nyheter/2020/09/06/fortsatt-brak-om-st-sigfridskyrkan-indelad-i-tva-lager/>.

it is unclear at the time this chapter is written if it means a new round of legal battles or if there will be a settlement — and what that means to the Moscow Patriarchate's access to the church.

Beside infiltration and hostile takeover attempts one could note from a hybrid influence perspective where future scenarios with military violence could not be ruled out as Saint Sigfrid is located just next to the strategically important main road E4/E20 (Essingeleden) through Stockholm and nearby the waterworks. In the vicinity there is a small harbour from it is just a short boat trip to both central Stockholm, with government quarters and parliament, and to the island of Drottningholm where the signal intelligence of FRA, National Defence Radio Establishment, and His Majesty the King resides.

2 Money laundering and the church at the airport

In Västerås, a newly built wooden Orthodox church Holy Godmother of Kazan (Heliga Gudsmoan till Kazan) is located only 600 metres from the Västerås airport, close proximity to a strategic airport with Sweden's third longest runway. Västerås is strategically located west of Stockholm with some important bridges over Lake Mälaren in its vicinity. In the nearby Enköping there is a military base with sensitive communication resources that also contains the Swedish Army HQ.⁴⁶

The story behind the construction of the church involves economical, political and criminal implications⁴⁷. It centres around the priest of the

⁴⁶ Svanberg, N. (2019, March 19). Kritik mot nya kyrkan: Kan vara rysk strategi. *Expressen*. <https://www.expressen.se/nyheter/kritiken-mot-nya-kyrkan-kan-vara-rysk-strategi/>.

⁴⁷ Beside what is described in the text, some more could be pointed out around the Church. The decision of building permit was taken in a very unusual manner. After several postponements by the building board of the municipality the decision was taken by the Chair alone. It was implied that a decision was needed in a hurry, but why this was so is still to this day unclear. In addition, the Estonian developer of the Church project had a criminal background with a jail sentence for seven years for drug smuggling and reportedly has connections to Russian organised crime that is linked to FSB. Source: Laggarr, M., Lundblad, M., Nordström, D. (2019, March, 19). Ryska kyrka byggs nära Västerås flygplats pekars ut som säkerhetshot — chockerande. *VLT*. <https://www.vlt.se/2019-03-19/rysk-kyrka-byggs-nara-vasteras-flygplats--pekars-ut-som-sakerhetshot-chockerande>.

Västerås parish, who was formerly active in ROCs before he shifted to the Moscow Patriarchate and was ordained.

The plan to build a church in Västerås at the location dates back to 2012, but it was not until 2017 that the permission to build the church was granted. The construction consists, beside the church itself, also of annexes for meetings with facilities such as kitchen and overnight stays. The building project was at the time of its construction estimated to cost around 3.5 million Euros and the official explanation that a parish with only 100 members could build such a church was because of generous donations from believers in Sweden and Russia. Exactly how the church is financed has not been publicly disclosed in detail.

However, investigative journalism by the local newspaper *VLT* points out that the priest was also a CEO of a Russian owned company in Sweden. The company is buying and selling products without its own productions, logistics, or storage. The address is a business hotel in Stockholm and the revenue of the firm was around 42–43 million SEK in 2015–2016. By 2019 it had sunk to a quarter of that. The owner and the chairman of the company is Pavel Gerasimov, the head of the Gerda Group which is a supplier to oil and gas industries.⁴⁸

An audit conducted by the Swedish tax authorities (Skatteverket) found in 2016 that the company had not complied with Swedish tax rules. Among other infractions, the audit found that some bills belonging to the Västerås parish and the construction of the church were actually paid by this company. Skatteverket pointed out that during the fiscal year 2014–2015 around 18 million SEK was wrongly deducted in a scheme that is best described as money laundering.⁴⁹

In the autumn of 2020 the priest was prosecuted for accounting violations in his role as CEO⁵⁰, and in April 2021 the court found him guilty of

48 Laggar, M., Lundblad, M., Nordström, D. (2019, March 19). Bygget betalades med fuskfaktura på uppdrag av prästen Makerenko: pekar i en riktning att dölja pengar. *VLT*. <https://www.vlt.se/2019-03-19/bygget-betalades-med-fuskfaktura--pa-uppdrag-av-prasten-makarenko-pekar-i-en-riktning-att-dolja-pengar>.

49 Laggar, M., Lundblad, M., Nordström, D. (2019, March 19).

50 Lundblad, M. (2020, September 26). Omstridda kyrkobygget — nu misstänks prästen för grovt brott. *VLT*. <https://www.vlt.se/2020-09-26/omstridda-kyrkobygget-nu-misstanks-prasten-for-grovt-brott>.

serious accounting violations. He was sentenced with probation and 160 hours of community service. The court gave a milder punishment than the eight months in prison as was originally in the sentence, because the crimes were committed several years ago. The priest was also banned from engaging in commercial activities for three years and the company was fined 0.5 million SEK.⁵¹ When the building permit of the Church was granted in 2017 the priest left the role as CEO but the relationship between the company and the parish continued. His successor as CEO was the parish's own auditor and later the priest's daughter was appointed to the company board.

During the process to acquire building permits two of the substitutes in the local permit board were involved with the parish. A Christian Democratic politician, who had been assisting the priest in his attempt to build the church, is married to a member of the parish and a Moderate party politician, with roots in the USSR, appeared as a translator in a meeting with the neighbouring airport during the ongoing dealings with the board. None of the politicians had registered themselves as unruly due to their connections.

3 Renting close to a military shooting range

The MP parish the Dormition of the Mother of God (Guds Moders insomnandes församling) in Gävle is renting the church in Marma from the Church of Sweden (Lutheran), some 30 kilometres south of the city, to conduct services. The church is situated just beside a military shooting range and camp that is administered by the Royal Life Guards regiment in Stockholm. It is also close to several important road and railroad bridges over the river Dalälven. Gävle Harbour has been pointed out as a strategic harbour for NATO by the Russian chief of staff Gerasimov.⁵² Despite the fact that the responsible priest is the same the one as in

⁵¹ Lundblad, M. (2021, April 10). Prästen i rysk-ortodoxa församlingen dömdes för grovt brott. *VLT*. <https://www.vlt.se/2021-04-10/prasten-i-rysk-ortodoxa-forsamlingen-domd-for-grovt-brott>.

⁵² Oksanen, P. (2017, May 24). Ryske generalen som sätter oss på kartan. *Gefle Dagblad*. <https://www.gd.se/2017-05-24/oksanen-ryske-generalen-som-satter-oss-pa-kartan>.

Västerås, who was convicted, and that the parish on its homepage displays the Russian propaganda symbol of Saint George (black and orange ribbon) the lease still continues after the MP parish has stated, despite the above mentioned factors, that they are not engaged in politics.

4 Denying being a part of the Patriarchate

In Malmö the local parish has rented the church of Lockarp since 2020, which lies close to important roads and railroads. The Moscow Patriarchate had discussed buying the church but an agreement was never reached. Despite the full invasion of Ukraine in 2022, the contract with the Church of Sweden (Lutheran) was prolonged another year at a symbolic rent of 2000 SEK per month. The reason for the prolongation was the claim from the parish priest that they had ‘no connections with the Moscow patriarchate’, a blatant lie — and the landlord, the Swedish Church in Malmö, decided to believe it. In 2023 the Swedish Church announced that the contract would not be renewed due to the Moscow Patriarchates support of the war.⁵³

5 Celebrating Victory Day and refugee outreach

Beside the local examples from Stockholm, Västerås, Marma, and Malmö there are some other hybrid activities from the Moscow Patriarchate to note in the Swedish context. Cooperation with the Russian Embassy, the Sweden-Russia Friendship Association, and the Russian Expat Federation of Sweden in arranging Victory Day parades with the immortal regiment is one such activity. In 2017 the chairman of the Russian expats group, Lioudmila Siegel, described the parade in Stockholm with 500 participants for the propaganda channel Sputnik as ‘people were happy, we marched with music, sang partisan songs and we had Soviet flags,

⁵³ Westerberg, O. (2023, June 17). Putinkopplad församling sparkas ut från Malmökyrka. *Sydsvenskan*. <https://www.sydsvenskan.se/2023-06-17/putinkopplad-forsamling-sparkas-ut-fran-malmokyrka>.

which made people around us frozen in surprise'.⁵⁴ The parade has been held, on a minor scale, in other Swedish towns as well.

Ukrainian government sources claim, directly to the author, that the Moscow Patriarchate has done outreach work to Ukrainian refugees in Sweden and in those contacts tried to label Russia's imperialist aggression as a civil war and a US proxy war. There is also a suspicion about refugee espionage through these contacts.

Conclusions on the hybrid activities

Looking at the de facto or potential methods related to hybrid threat activity conducted by the Moscow Patriarchate in Sweden, we see the following:

- Money laundering and accounting crime (Västerås);
- Hidden influence in other organisations (Västerås and Stockholm);
- Slander against individuals and organisations (Stockholm);
- Hostile takeover (Stockholm);
 - Connections with organised crime (Västerås);
 - Establishing platforms close to Swedish strategic assets (Stockholm, Västerås, Malmö and Marma);
 - Refugee influence activities; and
 - Arranging public manifestations for Russia (Stockholm, and other places).

And if we add the media reports from Norway the pattern on how the Moscow Patriarchate tries to establish a physical foothold on strategic locations becomes even clearer (view infographic).

On a tactical operational level one can note that eavesdropping against churches is prohibited in Swedish legislation, which makes it possible to use them as secure meeting places for Russian intelligence. The church buildings could also be used as a field mailbox.

⁵⁴ Oksanen, P. (2020, May 8). Kremls historievapen. *Frivärld (Stockholm Free World Forum)*, p 10. <https://frivarld.se/wp-content/uploads/2020/05/Kremls-historievapen-1.pdf>.

In a shorter perspective, based on the examples in this chapter and on SÄPO's statements, the main purpose of the activities of MP in Sweden can be seen as a possibility of building a more solid platform to expand the member base and influence. With only five percent of Russians of Orthodox faith among its members the MP has a much larger potential in Sweden. Since it is important for the Kremlin to tie the diaspora closer to the Motherland through its compatriot policies, the Moscow Patriarchate is an important tool to foster the Kremlin's view of 'love for Russia'. The Russian full scale invasion of Ukraine has also made Ukrainian refugees a target for Russian influence work.

By increasing the size of the congregation in Sweden further opportunities to recruit and use believers in Sweden for intelligence gathering as well as subversion will arise — just as the KGB facilitated during Soviet time. But a larger community is also useful as an instrument of outreach to gain influence, by marketing 'traditional values' attractive to other conservative groups, such as the faction active on the Russian side in the conflict of the Church of Saint Sigfrid in Stockholm

Even if these cases are local and limited in scope to a small number of people, or have been held only on a local political level, they should not be underestimated. The activities are small bits of a Russian mosaic of activities that all contribute to eroding trust in society.

With full understanding of the ties to the Putin regime it is likely that both the situation in Västerås and around Saint Sigfrid church in Stockholm could have been avoided or at least been dealt with in a way which would have resulted in a different outcome. The lack of communication between different branches of the Swedish Government is also notable, if the municipality, tax authorities, and security police would have been coordinated it is unlikely that the decision on the building in Västerås would have been taken as it was.

The greatest risk lies in the longer perspective as platforms could be used in the future, noted Mr. Alexandersson from the SÄPO counterintelligence in 2019. Events in Ukraine give us an idea of what role the MP could play for Russian special forces if a conflict between the Russian Federation and NATO occurs.

Here the cases from both Sweden and Norway fit very well, with a similar pattern of Russian-owned properties in the vicinity of strategic places also occurring in countries such as Finland. These places could be used, in a scenario of a conflict close to war or on the eve to war, as bases for staged provocations, sabotage, or special forces attacks.

The role of the Church and implications for western societies

The MP is closely tied with the Russian state. The objectives of the Russian State and the Church are overlapping and intertwined so they are hard to separate, even if the Church has its own interests, objectives, and institutional logic. In the light of the evidence gathered from several countries and cases, it is hard to overlook that the Church does serve as a proxy for the Russian Federation and this must be taken into account when we evaluate the risk of hybrid threat from activities that are derived from the MP and the possible effect of it.

It is also in the evaluation of risks that clashes of values and perception exist. This is a dilemma where laws, ethics, and security concerns are meeting and challenging each other with principles that do not naturally cohabit. The conflict of aims are real. If the Moscow Patriarchate is only viewed with a perspective of ecumenical Christian spirit it is inevitable that the malign use of the Church as a hybrid tool will be overlooked and ignored. It will be invisible and not understood in the general public debate and it will lead to unnecessary security risks.

The opposite is also true, if the Church is only viewed as a hybrid threat tool from the Kremlin it will be undermining Western principles of freedom of religion and not cater for the individual believers' rights and could lead to the West destroying itself and the values we are trying to defend. The level of awareness about this is varied between different countries and within a country between different communities. The difference of perception will also lead to different conclusions on which aims should be valued higher, which in itself could lead to polarisation and conflicts as we have seen also in this chapter with some of the cases in Sweden. To operate in the interfaces of perceptions as well as legality

is characterization of hybrid action that blurs traditional borders of political and judicial matters.

The dilemma is not new but has through the Russian war against Ukraine escalated. Here Ukraine, fighting for its own existence, is now taking actions that could be understood due to the war but would not be acceptable in peace time. In the beginning of October the Rada, the Parliament of Ukraine, took the first step to register a draft law that would allow a ban on activities of the Moscow Patriarchate and its proxy church of Ukraine.⁵⁵

For EU countries, not in a war, the balance must be struck delicately. Of course all our Western principles of democracy, good governance, and rule of law apply to the Russian Orthodox community belonging to the MP in the West and the individual churchgoing believers. But we must also draw a line against malign activities from state proxies that are harmful to democracy and the open society. This means balancing, on one hand all the rights, privileges and obligations the faithful have and that must be preserved in our jurisdiction, with the fact that the MP makes itself a subject to rules and actions we apply to ensure our common security.

Western societies must become aware of the religious tool of the Kremlin's influence work. Information turned into knowledge and then made available to a broader public is a key resilient component in a democratic society. Educated citizens and decision makers are better suited to make informed decisions. But knowledge and existing laws and rules might not be enough to counter or deter from hybrid threat activities.

Policy recommendations

If the knowledge and already existing laws and measures are enough, what could then be addressed? One of the most obvious from the Swedish

⁵⁵ Dusa, Y. (2023, October 9). Ukraine's parliament registers bill that could lead to ban on Moscow-linked church. *Reuters*. <https://www.reuters.com/world/europe/ukraines-parliament-registers-bill-that-could-lead-ban-moscow-linked-church-2023-10-09/>.

case is to make the financing of religious organisations transparent. Another point is to review the funding from tax money. Sweden is currently subsidising the MP. One could ask why an EU state should fund a church with state ties outside the European Union that is actively trying to undermine democracy, stability, and security within the Union? A counter argument is that funding from abroad is more problematic and should be limited or even prohibited, and that funding for religious communities from within the EU is more transparent.

The funding question shows us that there are no easy answers on how to deal with this kind of hybrid influence. But ending public finance could be a strong signal to the rest of the society that the Moscow Patriarchate is not just another Christian congregation but rather a proxy of the Russian state and that one should be more aware and cautious in dealing with it, especially if the Church is trying to establish a physical foothold close to strategic infrastructure.

And besides principle, when European Union taxpayers' money goes to organisations, closely tied to states who actively undermine European security, this could undermine public trust in society's will and ability to build resilience against hybrid threat activities and the trust in the common European project.

A way forward for the EU would be to list organisations like Moscow Patriarchate as de facto state organisations and leave it up to member states to fund or not to fund them with public money. This could be complemented with an annual report from the European Commission, in cooperation with Hybrid COE in Helsinki and member states, about hybrid threats and actors in the EU and their activities. The lessons from more outspoken national intelligence reports are that they are very valuable in building public awareness and are also important for municipalities, state agencies, and companies to orient themselves in a changing and much more challenging world. The EU and its member states should also make an extra effort in order to protect the interest of the Ukrainian refugees so their spiritual needs are not exploited by the Kremlin.

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New Europeans in the Making?

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Thursday, 24 February 2022, the day Russia began its full scale invasion of Ukraine, marked a new era on the European continent and some may even say in the whole world. The brutal and criminal war Putin has been waging against Ukraine has further reaching goals — it is a war against European-ness as such. This war is multi-dimensional and one of the dimensions that gets somewhat overlooked is a Russian fight for the minds and identities of the so-called Russian-speaking minorities in Europe.

The Russian-speaking minorities differ greatly across Europe — in size, in origins and history, and in levels of integration and participation in the civil societies of respective countries. It is hard to advocate for Russian-speaking minorities and their rights against the backdrop of war atrocities and crimes perpetrated by the barbaric Russian troops. Nevertheless, after Ukraine wins the war, societies will need to focus on healing and bridge-building in order to build a truly resilient and strong European family. Smart and strategic minority policies will be an important part of this process.

In this article we will view different processes targeting and involving the Russian-speaking minority of Latvia. We will primarily focus on matters of language, media, and identities, evaluate government's policies (or the lack thereof) and their consequences.

After February 2022 many citizens of the Russian Federation left their homes and migrated to other countries, including those in the EU, in protest to their government's actions and out of wish not to be involved in these crimes. In May 2023 the UK Ministry of Defence estimated

1.3 million¹ people left Russia in 2022. Other sources and surveys give different but comparable numbers. This new wave of immigrants constitutes new and often sizable communities, however in this article we will focus on the Russian-speakers that have been living in different corners of Europe for decades or even centuries. Out of all EU member states, Latvia has the largest proportional Russian-speaking minority — 36% of its population are Russian-speakers or 25% ethnic Russians.² For a country bordering Russia and with a population of 1.8 million, the ethnic question has always been present in its political and socio-economic discourse.

Besides ethnic composition it is important to understand the complex and tragic history of Latvia. It has always been multicultural with its population comprising Latvians, Baltic Germans, Jews, Poles, Russians, and other minorities. All changed drastically with the Soviet occupation in 1940 and mass deportations of Latvians to Siberia³. With the beginning of the Second World War, Latvia was occupied by the Nazi forces and experienced a new wave of mass deportations and killings, this time primarily targeting the Jewish population. By the end of the Second World War, Latvia was again occupied by the Soviet Union. After this occupation and annexation, the country experienced new deportations of ethnic Latvians and massive immigration flows of various peoples from the Soviet Union⁴ — Russians, Belarusians, Ukrainians, etc. This tragic and painful past led to a massive change of the ethnic, sociological, and cultural canvas of the society and started the bomb-ticking mechanism that would explode in 1991 after Latvia re-gained its independence and in 2022 after the beginning of the full-scale invasion of Ukraine broke out.

1 The UK Ministry for Defence, statement from May 7, 2023. <https://twitter.com/DefenceHQ/status/1655086881342730240>.

2 Central Statistical Bureau of the Republic of Latvia, dataset 'Nationalities'. https://data.stat.gov.lv/pxweb/lv/OSP_PUB/START__POP__IR__IRE/IRE020/table/tableView-Layout1/.

3 Soviet repression and deportations in Baltic states, Gulag Online. <https://gulag.online/articles/soviet-repression-and-deportations-in-the-baltic-states?locale=en>.

4 Soviet repression and deportations in Baltic states, Gulag Online. <https://gulag.online/articles/soviet-repression-and-deportations-in-the-baltic-states?locale=en>.

One may say that Latvia is quite an extreme example and that other European countries do not have such problems. As already mentioned, out of European countries, Latvia has proportionally the biggest Russian-speaking minority⁵ which means it cannot postpone dealing with emerging problems of Russian propaganda, integration, and polarisation. It has become a question of security and resilience. What some countries may start thinking about in a year, Latvia had to deal with during the first months of the full scale invasion of Ukraine. Therefore, it is a great case study. A year and a half after the beginning of the full scale invasion of Ukraine we can already evaluate various processes, policies, and measures taken or untaken.

Shifting identities

Europe, and perhaps the whole world, woke up in a different reality on 24 February 2022. Shocked, angered, frightened, stressed, outraged — we can probably find many words to describe the primal and visceral feelings of people. But there was one very clear-cut line: whether or not one supported Ukraine which fell victim to the Russian invasion. This was a turning point for many things, including for shifting identities for many Latvian Russian-speakers.

Before we examine any possible changes in the identities of Latvia's Russian speakers, it is important to take a note on how European and Russian identities are perceived. This is not a scientific definition but rather a broader perception that the European identity or European-ness is a cultural and/or political identity based on shared values such as democracy, human rights, equality, rule of law, and freedom of expression. The Russian identity or Russian-ness is based on cultural and/or political identity with conservative values of religion, 'traditional'

⁵ Disclaimer: The author of this article is herself a representative of the Russian-speaking minority of Latvia, a Russian-speaking Armenian to be precise. This gives her an advantage of better insights into various socio-cultural processes and the disadvantage of being emotionally involved. This being said, the article is based on data and observation, not mere emotions.

family, grand history, and strong leadership (in contrast to the democratic process). Of course, these are very approximate constructs, but it is important to keep in mind that Russia is waging a second war — one of propaganda — against the Western culture and identities which are portrayed as decadent and immoral. Latvian society made a clear choice to join the European family and develop itself embracing the European identity. And to understand changes in the identities of Latvia's Russian-speakers we need a deeper look.

During the first months of the full-scale invasion of Ukraine, Riga saw many protests and manifestations in support of Ukraine. In all of them there were many posters in Russian urging to stop killings of Ukrainians, stating their support and outrage at Russian actions. Latvian social media was full of various statements by local Russian-speakers. One could spot the complicated psychological process of many locals questioning their identities and willing to invest more in creating new ones. These are mere observations and in the beginning of the full-scale invasion they could not be properly tested or researched.

The first proper showcase of shifting identities took place on 9 May 2022. Unlike Europeans, Russians — and, alas, many Russian-speakers — mark the end of the Second World War or the Victory Day on 9 May⁶. Before the beginning of the full-scale invasion this date was not just a memorial day, but a symbolic weapon used by many opposition and pro-Russian parties to rally their supporters in public protest to the Latvian government (and many may say to protest Latvian-ness, generally). Normally several thousand people gather around the Soviet Monument of Victory to lay flowers and sing songs. Some political parties, for example long-time opposition and pro-Russian party Harmony, whose representative was Riga city mayor for ten years, used to organise public concerts and fireworks for their supporters. This used to be hugely controversial behaviour since the end of Second World War meant occupation by the Soviet Union and mass deportations for Latvia,

⁶ Reuters Factbox (2023, May 9). Why does Russian celebrate Victory Day on May 9, and What does it mean for Putin? <https://www.reuters.com/world/europe/why-does-russia-celebrate-victory-day-may-9-what-does-it-mean-putin-2023-05-09/>.

therefore Latvians often accused Latvian Russian-speakers of really celebrating the occupation of Latvia (which many Russian-speakers deny) and Russian imperial discourse. In 2022 this changed dramatically with all politicians and public figures, including the politicians from Harmony party, publicly expressing their condemnation of Russian actions and inviting locals not to celebrate the Victory Day aggressor and its actions. The government forbade public gatherings around the monument and actively communicated that this year's public gatherings on 9 May would be seen as a demonstration of support for Russia in its current aggression against Ukraine⁷. Prominent Russian-speakers publicly expressed their positions of solidarity with the Ukrainian people and invitations not to celebrate 9 May. It was a huge shift of the narrative for the local Russian-speaking community. On 9 May 2022 few people showed up to the Soviet Monument of Victory — this was a clear success and indicator that Russian-speakers became unified with Latvians in their views on the current situation. One could say it was a success and the society could breathe a sigh of relief — until the next morning of 10 May, when local municipal services cleared the flowers brought to the monument with a truck, which many saw as a sign of provocation or a manifestation of power by Latvians. As a consequence, by the evening of 10 May many more people gathered around the monument. This time local marginal pro-Russian parties used the opportunity to instigate social unrest. As a result, a few people were arrested⁸ and the Minister of the Internal Affairs was sacked⁹.

7 LSM.LV (2022, March 24). Police: May 9 gathering will mean supporting Russia in war. <https://eng.lsm.lv/article/society/society/police-may-9-gathering-will-mean-supporting-russia-in-war.a449337/>.

8 Meduza (2022, May 11). Russia supporters in Riga staged a protest after officials bulldozed flowers left at a WWII monument. <https://meduza.io/en/feature/2022/05/11/after-declaring-may-9-a-day-of-commemoration-of-the-victims-in-ukraine-latvian-officials-removed-flowers-from-a-soviet-era-wwii-memorial-outraged-pro-russian-residents-staged-a-protest-in-response>.

9 LSM.LV (2022, May 16). Latvian Interior Minister resigns over Victory Monument controversy. <https://eng.lsm.lv/article/politics/politics/latvian-interior-minister-resigns-over-victory-monument-controversy.a456985/>.

This episode showed just how emotional and sensitive many things are in a society with a huge ethnic minority and non-existent integration policies. Instead of celebrating the fact that the absolute majority of the minority stayed at home and perhaps for the first time listened to the public narrative, statesmen sunk into nationalistic rhetoric that further instigated actions of minor groups within the minority. In 2023, following the experience of 2022, the Latvian Parliament — *Saeima* — passed a new law prohibiting any 9 May celebrations glorifying military aggression or falsely reflecting historical events¹⁰.

As previously mentioned, the Soviet Monument of Victory was a place for celebration for a small group, but for the majority of the society it was a symbol of oppression and occupation. The full-scale invasion of Ukraine started many important processes in tackling Latvia's own historic trauma. On 25 August 2022 the monument was demolished¹¹ in a symbolic act of public Latvian liberation from Soviet and Russian imperial culture, thinking, and narrative. The demolition was broadcast live and surprisingly did not meet broad — or almost any — demonstration from the Russian-speaking minorities.

These two episodes are extremely important from psychological and socio-cultural aspects of creating new identities but let us turn to data now. Do we see any change in identities and opinions of the Russian-speaking minority? In fact, we do. For the first time in the history of public research in Latvia, the Russian-speaking population favoured Western focus for the country's foreign affairs over Russia: 41% of Russian-speaking respondents of the SKDS centre research¹² preferred deeper integration within the EU framework (the figure nearly doubled from only 23% back in 2019) and 33% of Russian-speaking respondents preferred deeper ties with Russia (this result shrank from 55% back in

¹⁰ LSM.LV (2023, April 20). No fireworks on May 9 in Latvia. <https://eng.lsm.lv/article/society/society/20.04.2023-no-fireworks-on-may-9-in-latvia.a505647/#:~:text=The%20Law%20stipulates%20that%20on,the%20purpose%20of%20the%20Law.>

¹¹ LSM.LV (2022, August 25). Demolition of the Soviet Victory monument in Riga. <https://eng.lsm.lv/article/society/environment/demolition-of-soviet-victory-monument-in-riga.a470869/>.

¹² Kaktiņš, A. (2023). Survey of Latvian residents from March 2023. SKDS.

2019)¹³. These changes are extremely important and even historic. We can see how war shaped the opinions and aspirations of many Russian-speakers. At the same time we are not talking about absolute majority — there is still a sizable group of people who clearly fell victim to Russian propaganda and that is quite disturbing. Nonetheless, this clear historic shift of opinions gives potential for optimism.

Another historic shift for the Russian-speaking minority in Latvia is their changed perception of Russia. ‘Half of the Russian-speaking minority believes that Russia poses a military threat to the rest of Europe. That is an increase of almost 15% in comparison to 2022. Still, that is not even close to the 79% of the Latvian majority that views Russia as a threat. Interestingly enough, when asked about the threat coming from Russian disinformation or propaganda, only 40% of the Russian-speaking minority feel threatened, which is still an increase of 10% when compared to the survey a year ago.’¹⁴ We see that there are parts of the Russian-speaking minority that are changing their views on Russia and the West — they are evaluating their own identities and cultural ties. It is extremely important to use this momentum and address this group within the minority, otherwise, if we keep noticing only the part that supports the Putin regime, we risk turning the positive tide backwards. A different survey¹⁵ from June 2023 shows that, when asked directly about stating that Russia committed an act of aggression against an independent state, 85% of Latvians agree, 6% think that Russia was forced to defend its interest, and 9% admitted that it is difficult to say. Among the Russian-speaking respondents only 34% agreed to this statement, 38% believed that Russia was defending its interests, and 28% admitted that it is difficult to say. If in the previous opinion poll respondents

¹³ Kaktiņš, A. (2023).

¹⁴ Krumm, R., Šukevičs, K., Zariņš, T. (2023). *Under Pressure. An analysis of the Russian-speaking minority in Latvia*. Rīga: Friedrich Ebert Stiftung, p. 19.

¹⁵ Lisenkov, A., Kugel, M. (2023, June 20). “Poverty trap” or whether Latvian residents are ready to take risks. A survey by Spektr. Press and SKDS shows how income level affects social and economic activity of the population — in particular the Russian-speaking community. *Spektr Press*. <https://spektr.press/poverty-trap-or-whether-latvian-residents-are-ready-to-take-risks-a-survey-by-spektr-press-and-skds-shows-how-income-level-affects-social-and-economic-activity-of-the-population-in-particular/>.

were asked to reflect on the destiny and development path of their own country and clearly the preferred vector was the EU and the West in general, then talking about the war in Ukraine we see a different picture — Russian-speakers repeating main points of Russian propaganda's narrative, stating that Russia was forced to defend itself in relation to NATO. What this actually means, in their opinion, is that NATO provoked the war. There is another important signal in these answers — 28% of Russian-speakers refused to answer the question, instead diverting to 'difficult to say option', which could very plausibly mean that they support the position of Russia but are afraid to speak about it out loud.

It is important to note that Russian-speakers in Latvia are not a homogeneous group or community, it is extremely diverse and represents views of the broad political, social, and economic spectrum. For example, if we look at the results of the same questions divided by age groups, we see a stark difference — 48% of Russian-speakers in the age group 18–30 years support the statement that Russia committed an act of aggression against Ukraine compared to only 29% in the age group 51–75 years. The younger generation of Russian-speakers are better integrated in Latvian society — their identities are still mixed, but they definitely have fewer emotional ties to Russia, its culture, and its narrative. Although Latvia did not have a coherent integration policy during the last decades, the younger generation is closer linked to a broader European identity through popular culture (movies, music, social media), as well as various educational and exchange programs. A newer study from July 2023 found that the younger generations of the Russian-speaking minority in Latvia are indeed more eager to see the EU as an opportunity, do not regard NATO as a threat either to themselves or to Russia, and view the current Russian state as a destructive force that might at one point pose a threat to Latvia. They seem to understand that having a Russian background does not mean eternal loyalty to Russia but is rather simply a cultural bond that does not prevent them from being Latvian.¹⁶

Since the beginning of the full-scale invasion of Ukraine, we can see new and important changes happening among the Russian-speakers of

¹⁶ Krumm, R., Šukevičs, K., Zariņš, T. (2023), p. 22.

Latvia. The war shock forced many to reevaluate their views on the East/West dichotomy, on the kind of future they want for themselves and their country, on their understanding and acceptance of Latvia's difficult past. We are still not talking about the majority of the Russian-speakers, but it is important to see the new trend and grasp this momentum. For strategic and long-term security of both Latvia and the EU (Latvia being on its Eastern border) it is important to seize the moment and address Russian-speakers with strategic communication to help them break ties with the so called 'Russian world' — informational and cultural bubble created by Russian propaganda. It is important to spot that potential provocateurs, Russian agents and even traitors, act according to law provisions and procedures. These could be individual cases but not a common guilt of an ethnic group that often has absolutely no connection to Russia besides the language. It is important to stress that those who share the values of the Latvian constitution and European values are our people despite their ethnicity. Not many Latvian statesmen have made such statements. Instead, we see a chain of restrictive policies that further polarise society.

The language question

Language is an important part of the culture, they are mutually intertwined. It helps you to better understand the people, history, and broader socio-political context of a place. In Latvia the language is not just a part of culture, it is a cornerstone of the nation. The Constitution of Latvia — *Satversme* — clearly states in its preamble and article 4 that the Latvian language is the official language in the Republic of Latvia and that the State of Latvia has been established in order to guarantee the existence and development of the Latvian nation, its language, and its culture. This language is one of the formational values of the state and society and all residents should understand and respect this — nonetheless, not everybody does so.

Thirty years after the restoration of independence there are still people who do not speak or understand Latvian, moreover in 2012 there was

even a state referendum called about having Russian as the second official language with 85% of voting against. Since then the organiser of the referendum, the party Harmony, has earned a bad reputation among the broader public yet secured a marginal but loyal supporter base. Since the language referendum, Latvian- and Russian- speaking parts of society formed their own bubbles and there was no strategy or overarching policy to truly unify them.

Since the outbreak of the full-scale invasion of Ukraine many Russian-speakers in Latvia started using Latvian instead of Russian in public places like cafes and shops, a process widely discussed on Latvian segments of social media. So far, we do not really know whether this is done out of identity questions and values or out of fear of being punished. The latter is not unsubstantiated. Since February 2022, Latvia has waged its own war on Russian imperial culture within its borders — and the first battlefield was the language. The Parliament has since approved in the first reading¹⁷ several amendments to different laws essentially banning the use of Russian language in the public — in public institutions, both online and offline, and passed amendments prohibiting the use of Russian language political campaigns, both in digital and print materials — meaning no leaflets, magazines, newspapers can have political information from political parties in Russian, the language can only be used in the oral conversations¹⁸. As found in a July 2023 survey¹⁹: ‘In the course of the ongoing war in Ukraine there is a general perception among respondents that discrimination against people who do not know or have only a poor command of Latvian has grown in the last year. A majority of Russian-speaking (71%) and Latvian-Russian speaking families (55%) think this, and even a growing number of Latvians (24%) agree, though to a far lesser extent.’

17 LSM.LV (2022, September 22). Saeimā virza likumu krievu valodas ierobežošanai patērētāju informēšanā. <https://www.lsm.lv/raksts/zinas/latvija/saeima-virza-likumu-krievu-valodas-ierobezosanai-pateretaju-informesana.a474806/>.

18 Saeima (2023, June 22). Paid pre-election campaigns must be in the official language, Saeima press release. <https://www.saeima.lv/en/news/saeima-news/32432-paid-pre-election-campaigns-must-be-in-the-official-language>.

19 Krumm, R., Šukevičs, K., Zariņš, T. (2023), p. 8.

Another important amendment to the immigration law was passed, requiring Russian citizens with residency permits in Latvia to pass the Language proficiency test by 1 September 2023. According to the data by Latvian Central Statistics Bureau there are 53,000 aliens currently living in Latvia, out of which around 80% are Russian citizens.²⁰ The new requirements for the language proficiency grant exceptions for persons over 75 years old and persons who received their education in Latvia. So, the language proficiency tests have to be passed by around 17,000 people. There is no bureaucratic infrastructure to organise and manage so many tests in such a short period of time, let alone to offer language courses for those who need them. Therefore, these legislative actions are perceived more as punitive than out of a care for the state language proficiency. Ruling coalition politicians argue that it is individuals' responsibility to learn the language, which is true on the one hand. On the other hand, the state should provide services and facilities for individuals to learn, especially when it gives such sudden and short notice of important changes. In the report by a journalist Linda Spundina a representative from the Ministry of Culture, which is responsible for integration policies as such and language aspect in particular, stated that 'Any funding is limited, and there is always someone who has not got into the group of state-funded language courses. The study groups are always full. Demand is high.'²¹

Besides the availability of the language courses and then state language tests, another important aspect is the psychological one. Do such policies help to facilitate integration processes or might they cause other emotions, like resentment? Mārtiņš Kaprāns, researcher of the University of Latvia's Institute of Philosophy and Sociology, in the same report by Linda Spundina, stated that 'they [Russian citizens with residency permits] take the tests through clenched teeth, I suppose it creates more anger, dislike for Latvia. Most don't have anywhere to go. The policy is

²⁰ Spundina, L. (2023, April 4). Two linguistic bubbles: has Latvia's Russian-integration policy worked? *LSM.LV*. <https://eng.lsm.lv/article/society/society/04.04.2023-two-linguistic-bubbles-has-latvias-russian-integration-policy-worked.a503608/>.

²¹ Spundina, L. (2023, April 4).

strict enough in this case. In my view, it is irresponsible that something was adopted in the last Saeima without any practical implementation mechanism, and without thinking about the consequences, including international ones.’²²

Another question that many human rights activists raise is what happens when a retired person who is younger than 75 years old and who did not manage to enrol into small language classes will not be able to pass the exam — will Latvian state deport these people? Ingmārs Līdaka, chairman of the Parliamentary Committee on Citizenship, Migration and Social Cohesion, stated in an interview in the beginning of August 2023 that around 1,000 people will receive first notification about the need to leave Latvia in September.²³ These are the people who did not pass or did not apply to pass the state language proficiency exam. They will have three months to leave the country. Although the Minister of Internal Affairs promised that the Latvian state will not start a hunt for those who do not comply with the policies, it is yet unclear how the policy will be implemented since as the minister stated himself, the new law does not specify anything²⁴. Besides legal uncertainty these new amendments most likely will create resentment not only among those who will need to pass the language exam, but among Latvian citizens who are Russian-speakers, therefore causing even more polarisation based on ethnicity and language. It is important to understand the difference between fighting against Russia and fighting against Russian-speakers. The former is necessary to support Ukraine in its fight for safety, freedom, and victory, while the latter leads to further societal polarisation and instability.

One of the most controversial actions connected to the language question in Latvia is a public campaign called ‘Derussify Latvia!’ (*‘Atkrievisko Latviju!’*) led by some conservative politicians and Twitter activist Liana

²² Spundina, L. (2023, April 4).

²³ LETA (2023, August 4). Latvija lūgs tūkstošiem Krievijas pilsoņu atstāt valsti. <https://nra.lv/latvija/423906-latvija-lugs-tukstosiem-krievijas-pilsonu-atstat-valsti.htm>.

²⁴ LSM.LV (2023, February 13). Kučinskis: Latvia should not ‘push’ Russian citizens across the border. <https://eng.lsm.lv/article/politics/politics/kucinskis-latvia-should-not-push-russian-citizens-across-the-border.a496086/>.

Langa. The campaign not only demands private businesses to stop using Russian language, but often spreads hate speech about Russian-speakers as a group. While to some extent this campaign has been marginal (though tracking a lot of publicity), on 29 June 2023, outgoing President Egils Levits, who leans towards nationalistic parties, presented Lange with a special state award for her efforts in support of the state language. This outraged many other prominent activists who took to Latvian Twitter to discuss how Lange's rhetoric and actions lacking respect and empathy are aimed at ethnic conflict and not at promotion of the Latvian language.

To summarise, the Latvian language is an essential cornerstone of Latvian statehood and each inhabitant must be able to understand and speak it. The state needs to improve its efforts of providing access to learning Latvian and passing language exams. Current public and political discourse is aimed at restrictive initiatives and does not provide real solutions to problems — moreover it creates the impression of collective punishment of a specific ethnic minority.

Media and access to information

The language question in a broader sense has one specific component which is worth evaluating separately — media and access to information. Since the outbreak of the full-scale invasion of Ukraine, the National Electronic Mass Media Council of Latvia (NEPLP) has banned the retransmission and broadcasting of Russian TV channels to fight the spread of Russian propaganda. Though the purpose is wise and needed, a mere ban on some TV channels does not mean that the propaganda has been stopped. Many people use VPN services and other illegal streaming platforms that NEPLP is still unable to regulate.

If we look at data²⁵ about sources of information on current events in Latvia and in the world, we see that 9% of respondents admitted that they get their news from Russian federal media, which clearly states that

²⁵ Lisenkov, A., Kugel, M. (2023, June 20).

the ban on Russian TV channels is not working. A majority of Russian-speaking respondents — 60% — mainly get their news from Latvian state and commercial media in Russian, for example *RUS.DELFI.LV*, *Latvijas Radio 4*, and some newspapers. This is a sizable group and it is important to ensure that this number not only remains so high but continues to grow. In order to provide true, quality information and to grow its reach, local media outlets operating in the Russian language need more resources including state funding (at least for public media). This move must be seen as a measure of the hybrid and information war to actively fight against Russian propaganda.

Estonia is another Baltic country with similar minority and integration issues. Facing similar problems and patterns, its government decided to allocate an additional EUR 1,768,330²⁶ for creating original content in the Russian language for Estonian commercial media — ‘*Postimees Grupp*’, ‘*Delfi Meedia*’, ‘*Aripaev*’ and ‘*Pohjaranniku Kirjastus*’. The idea behind this strategic decision was to support Estonian Russian-language media channels and to provide an alternative, high-quality Russian-language journalism free of Putin’s propaganda. This is a great example of strategic thinking and minority policies aimed at forming a united political nation.

Unlike its northern neighbours, the government of Latvia has not boosted extra support for local media outlets; instead, coalition partners constantly doubt the need to invest public money in Russian-language journalism, publicly referring to the fact that despite local content in Russian, there are still those in the population who support Putin. There is an ongoing discussion and a working group under the auspices of the Ministry of Culture to identify whether or not local journalism in Russian is needed and, if so, in what form. Meanwhile, no real solutions are put in place. Paired with the ban on using Russian language in paid political campaign materials (political newspapers, leaflets and handouts), access to quality local information in Russian language becomes

²⁶ ERR.EE (2022, February 27). Estonian Russian-language private media receive EUR 1 million from state. <https://news.err.ee/1608898790/estonian-russian-language-private-media-receive-1-million-from-state>.

difficult for Russian-speakers, especially for the elderly generation that uses far fewer internet portals as sources of information. While the goal of each inhabitant being able to consume and use information in the state language is noble, it clearly takes time and, in the transitional period especially with a war in the neighbouring country, it is extremely important to reach out to all groups and communities of the society. Besides having access to information, another challenge is media literacy. When asked to evaluate their ability to distinguish real news from fake news, 61% percent of Latvian respondents and only 53% of Russian-speaking respondents believed they are capable of making such distinction²⁷. Essentially half of the population admits it has problems identifying fake news. In the reality of hybrid wars and the Russian regime funnelling millions into its propaganda, it is important to improve media literacy and awareness of society in general, but especially among the Russian-speakers for people not to fall victim to propaganda. This is even more important in countries like Latvia that border an aggressive state and have clear cultural disjuncture due to language (and hence have different sources of information and perception of events) and where many topics and issues are so sensitive that they can cause a public uproar. It will always be a balancing act between censorship and freedom of speech; however, there needs to be a constant effort.

Participation and political representation

When talking about political representation of Russian-speakers of Latvia prior to 2022, Russian-speaking voters could be divided into three electoral groups: the majority of voted for the party Harmony, the second largest group did not participate in elections at all (either out of protest or because they have a non-citizen status, an anachronism inherited from the collapse of the Soviet Union²⁸), and a third group voted for

²⁷ Latvijas fakti (2022). Public opinion survey, p. 40.

²⁸ Ministry of Foreign Affairs (2023). Basic facts about citizenship and language policy of Latvia and some sensitive history-related issues. <https://www2.mfa.gov.lv/en/georgia/basic-facts-about-latvia>.

various so-called Latvian parties according to their political views — more conservative or more liberal.

The political status quo was that the so-called Latvian parties always created coalitions and ensured that Harmony stayed in opposition. Before 2022 this was rather beneficial for both sides. Harmony never needed to take any responsibility for state policies and it created a comfortable niche of voters either angry at the government or the Latvian state in a broader sense. Latvian parties showed their voters a patriotic stance, that a party with affiliate agreement²⁹ with the Kremlin's leading party having no place in the Latvian government. Mathematically this created easy circumstances for organising coalitions and ensuring votes, since they needed to count not from 100 MP seats, but roughly 80, as Harmony was expelled from the coalition process but could still be relied on for one or two extra votes if needed. All worked perfectly well until the full scale invasion of Ukraine began.

The Latvian state quickly condemned the war on the official level. Harmony, wanting to remain in the national politics, had to make a statement and their leader Mr. Jānis Urbanovičs did, condemning the war and Russian invasion. The Latvian-speaking population was pleasantly surprised. However, a large part of the Harmony's Russian-speaking supporters and voters were outraged. For at least ten years they were told by the Harmony to feel oppressed by the state and to never support the government. Now it backfired with supporters leaving Harmony to the extent that for the first time it did not pass the threshold to enter into the Parliament, leaving room for new, more populist and outspoken party Stability. The Latvian parties on their part now discovered that leaving a sizable part of the population in the hands of one party is simply dangerous. Some Latvian statesmen made remarks about the importance of a unified and integrated society³⁰. Some surveys and research were commissioned, but so far, the state issued legislative

29 The Baltic Times (2015). Latvia's Harmony party: no plans to end agreement with Putin's United Russia. https://www.baltictimes.com/latvia_s_harmony_party__no_plans_to_end_agreement_with_putin_s_united_russia/.

30 <https://twitter.com/Pabriks/status/1511000241448833030>.

initiatives aimed at securing the state language as discussed above and has not formulated a clear new integration policy.

If in terms of political representation, we can see that Russian and Latvian speakers live in different bubbles that do not really interact, then in terms of participation these societal groups follow similar patterns. New research on civil activism and participation of Russian-speakers in Latvia illustrates an interesting picture. In general Latvians and Russian-speakers have the same level of apathy and disbelief in being able to influence decision-making processes on the municipal or state levels. There are, however, two interesting differences.³¹ First, residents of Daugavpils (second largest city of Latvia close to the border with Belarus, mostly inhabited by Russian-speakers), both Latvian and Russian speakers, are the most sceptical and cynical about their abilities to influence national processes. The study does not give an explanation about it, but taking into consideration that the city government for decades was shaping the narrative of the national government wanting to harm the ‘Russian city’, not giving it funds and/or programs the city deserved, might have done the trick.

A second interesting and simultaneously sad finding of this study is that Russian-speakers participate substantially less in different interest clubs and NGOs, often not knowing that such entities exist in their respective neighbourhoods or cities. Representatives of NGOs that were invited to comment on the results of the study mentioned that it is hard for them to target Russian-speakers as an audience often citing language barrier and difference of mentality. Horizontal connections are especially important in forming inclusion and participation. We now know that Russian-speakers are absent from such connections and ties and though this aspect needs further study, we may see a correlation between this fact and polarisation of the society along ethnic lines.

³¹ Kažoka, I., Tarasova, S., Pelse, D. (2023). Study ‘Is the civic apathy of Latvia’s Russian-speaking population a myth or a reality. *Providus*. pp. 36–37. <https://providus.lv/en/raksti/study-is-the-civic-apaty-of-latvias-russian-speaking-population-a-myth-or-a-reality/>.

Political nation vs demonization

A majority 59% of Latvian and 62% of Russian-speaking respondents³² agreed that the war in Ukraine increases tensions between Latvians and Russian-speakers. This is a reality check for politicians and opinion leaders. As previously mentioned, it is emotionally hard to advocate for Russian-speaking minorities and their rights against the backdrop of war atrocities and crimes perpetrated by the Russian troops. Nonetheless, it is important to do so to ensure the unity and resilience of societies with sizable Russian-speaking minorities, as well as to ensure that human rights of the innocent are secured and that these minorities do not fall victim to Russian propaganda.

Different politicians have been claiming for the past decades that Latvia needs to establish and develop a political nation, where different minorities share the same values rooted in European democratic values. It is a very wise and important position but unfortunately very few real actions to attain this goal have been undertaken so far. While neighbouring Estonia allocated extra funding to create its own local and unique media content for Russian-speakers, Latvian officials created working groups to discuss whether or not the state needs to engage in such practices at all. It is important for Latvian society to work through its tragic historic trauma and relieve itself from the Soviet burden. The Latvian language is the cornerstone of the state and culture, it must be protected and spread. This means more resources must be allocated into teaching Latvian, for both adults and children. Only recently Latvia started the process of transforming its two-school (Latvian and Russian) system into a united school system³³ — an important step to stop artificial segregation and ensure quality education for all children in the country. This should have occurred ages ago, but even now school authorities complain about the lack of teachers, methodology, materials,

³² *Latvijas fakti* (2022), p. 18.

³³ Saeima (2022, September 29). Saeima supports transition to Latvian as the only language of instruction. Saeima press release. <https://www.saeima.lv/en/news/saeima-news/31457-saeima-supports-transition-to-latvian-as-the-only-language-of-instruction>.

and planning. These are the real problems the state must solve. Instead, centre politicians often get carried away by their nationalistic and conservative coalition partners into demonising Russian-speakers and waging collective punishment practices based on ethnicity. As a response to this, Russian-speaking minorities polarise even more and start supporting marginal and truly pro-Kremlin political forces which in the end can cause real danger to state security. This can become a vicious circle. There is an urgent need for active and clear state communication, either by respected institutions or politicians, about common values and goals of society, pragmatic and well-articulated integration policy, as well as additional funding for accessible information about the aforementioned topics in Russian language. While the goal for everyone to speak Latvian is legitimate, in times of war strategic exemptions should be made as part of hybrid and information war. The latest survey on opinions of the Russian-speaking minority found that there is a lack of commitment to Latvia from the majority of the Russian-speaking minority: ‘The reluctance of the Russian-speaking minority to firmly condemn Russia may be seen as evidence of a lack of commitment to Latvia, as when, for example, the Russian-speaking respondents are unwilling to pick a side when asked if they sympathise either with Russia or with Ukraine. Russian speakers would argue that they see both sides as responsible for the escalation whereas the Latvian majority sees only one side as guilty: Russia. The Russian-speaking minority, so it seems, is not ready to take such a clear stance.’³⁴ The Latvian government should address these still undecided groups and not with only restrictions and punitive measures, but also with motivational policies.

At the same time the state must act decisively in cases when individuals clearly perpetrate crimes against other individuals based on their ethnicity or language spoken, or even the state itself. Latvian citizen Marats Kasems was fined EUR 15,500 for helping Russia in an action directed against Latvia. He had admitted his guilt and paid the fine and there

³⁴ Krumm, R., Šukevičs, K., Zariņš, T. (2023), p. 13.

were no restrictions on him leaving the country³⁵. The disproportionate penalty against the crime outraged society and social media users. It also gives a mixed signal — an individual committing a serious crime has an easy way out, whereas a large minority group is perceived guilty by association and this realisation can only lead to further frustration and isolation.

At the end of May 2023 Latvian Parliament elected a new President³⁶. After the vote President-elect Mr. Edgars Rinkēvičs held a press conference where he addressed the issue and mentioned that it is far more important than just ‘derussifying Latvia’ and ‘latvifying it’. This was seen as a modest signal that the new President, contrary to positions of the previous one, will focus on building bridges and working on an inclusive political nation. Though Latvia is a Parliamentary Republic and the President has symbolic duties and responsibilities — and symbols are significant. An inclusive and respectful tone of voice, narrative, and position can change perception of people.

Different data and studies show that with the beginning of the full-scale invasion of Ukraine many Russian-speakers in Latvia started reflecting on the role of Russia and Europe, on their cultural identities and ties and shifting them. For the first time they favoured a European vector of development for the country, became more critical of the Putin regime, conscious about usage of Latvian language, and about the force of Russian propaganda. Identity building is a complicated process and certainly a ‘two-way street’. It is extremely important to seize this moment and acknowledge and welcome these changes that will create bigger and more resilient European societies based on common values and aspirations. Data shows that we are still not talking about the majority of a minority (pun intended). It is important to remember that Latvia’s Russian-speakers are not a monolithic group. There are those who

³⁵ LSM.LV (2023, July 26). Kremlin propagandist has reportedly left Latvia. <https://eng.lsm.lv/article/society/crime/26.07.2023-kremlin-propagandist-has-reportedly-left-latvia.a517899/>.

³⁶ LSM.LV (2023, May 31). Edgars Rinkēvičs elected next President of Latvia. <https://eng.lsm.lv/article/politics/president/31.05.2023-edgars-rinkevics-elected-next-president-of-latvia.a510815/>.

support Russia, with some going as far as committing treason against Latvia in Russia's interest, there are those who already shifted their identities towards European one, and then there is a large group that is undecided — this is the one the Latvian state should fight for its own security and prosperity.

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Spundina, L. (2023, April 4). Two linguistic bubbles: has Latvia's Russian-integration policy worked? *LSM.LV*. <https://eng.lsm.lv/article/society/society/04.04.2023-two-linguistic-bubbles-has-latvias-russian-integration-policy-worked.a503608/>.

For strategic and long-term security of both Latvia and the EU (Latvia being on its Eastern border) it is important to seize the moment and address Russian-speakers with strategic communication to help them break ties with the so called 'Russian world'.

JELENA JESAJANA

European Economic Dependence on Russia from the Perspective of Young Europeans

DEJAN RAVŠELJ | ALEKSANDER ARISTOVNIK

The Russian invasion of Ukraine on 24 February 2022 triggered a massive shock to the global economy. Compared with other economic regions, Europe has been particularly vulnerable to the economic consequences¹. This is primarily due to the strong economic dependence of Europe on energy imports, which accounted for more than half of its energy use before the war, suggesting that Russia was a key energy supplier to Europe². Moreover, Russia and also Ukraine played a substantial role in the supply of food and fertilisers in Europe³. Since Europe is characterised as a highly open economy, it is vulnerable to disruptions in global markets, thereby impacting multiple sectors of its economy.⁴ Namely, the war between two countries that are important in the supply of energy and food to Europe has notably exacerbated not only European but also global energy and food security concerns.⁵. Therefore, the ongoing

- 1 Arce, O., Koester, G., Nickel, C. (2023). One year since Russia's invasion of Ukraine—the effects on euro area inflation. *European Central Bank*.
- 2 Adolfsen, J. F., et al (2022). The impact of the war in Ukraine on euro area energy markets. *Economic Bulletin Boxes*.
- 3 Bodnár, K., Schuler, T. (2022). The surge in euro area food inflation and the impact of the Russia-Ukraine war. *Economic Bulletin Boxes*.
- 4 Arce, O., Koester, G., Nickel, C. (2023).
- 5 Mbah, R. E., Wasum, D. F. (2022). Russian-Ukraine 2022 War: A review of the economic impact of Russian-Ukraine crisis on the USA, UK, Canada, and Europe. *Advances in Social Sciences Research Journal*, 9(3), 144–153. <https://doi.org/10.14738/assrj.93.12005>.

Russian aggression towards Ukraine highlights the dependence of the European economy on Russia, presenting a pressing global concern which has become a great interest among policymakers⁶.

In response to the Russian invasion of Ukraine in 2022, most of Europe and its allies have announced punishing economic and diplomatic sanctions against Russia⁷, including financial, trade, business, travel, and other sanctions, such as freezing the assets of selected individuals from Russia and banning Russian sports⁸. Economic dependence was already in the spotlight before the Russian invasion of Ukraine due to the unprecedented shock to international trade caused by the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020. This raised several concerns about the economic dependence of the European economy, including resilience of supply chains and their capacity to manage vulnerabilities and absorb shocks⁹. The ongoing Russia-Ukraine war thus significantly affected the European economy, which citizens felt mainly through the higher prices of goods and services. This has particularly affected young people as they are typically more vulnerable and sensitive to changes in pricing¹⁰.

Accordingly, this chapter aims to discuss European economic dependence on Russia from the perspective of young Europeans through the presentation of survey data collected in ten European countries during the first and the second month of the 2022 Russia-Ukraine war, when most European countries were experiencing increasing socioeconomic and geopolitical uncertainties. The chapter is structured as follows. The second section presents Russian influence and European response through

6 Perdana, S., Vielle, M., Schenckery, M. (2022). European Economic impacts of cutting energy imports from Russia: A computable general equilibrium analysis. *Energy Strategy Reviews*, 44, 101006.

7 Chepeliev, M., Hertel, T., van der Mensbrugghe, D. (2022). Cutting Russia's fossil fuel exports: Short-term economic pain for long-term environmental gain. *The World Economy*, 45(11), 3314–3343.

8 Funakoshi, M., Lawson, H., Deka, K. (2022). Tracking sanctions against Russia. *Reuters Graphics*.

9 Hellegers, P. (2022). Food security vulnerability due to trade dependencies on Russia and Ukraine. *Food Security*, 14(6), 1503–1510.

10 Pettinger, T. (2017). Student discounts — charity or good business? <https://www.economicshelp.org/blog/133459/business/student-discounts-charity-or-good-business/>.

the lenses of young people with a specific focus on Russian strategy to influence politics in Europe, the response of Europe to Russian energy coercion and the perspective of young Europeans. The third section provides some liberal solutions to mitigate European economic dependence on Russia. Finally, the last section concludes the chapter by providing general comments on the European economic dependence on Russia.

Russian strategy to influence politics in Europe

In the context of international trade, the issue of economic dependence arises when a country assumes the dominant role as the main supplier of specific goods or services and uses this power to impose its market conditions or achieve its political goals¹¹. In light of the international relations between Russia and Europe, which have been strained during the recent Russian invasion of Ukraine, it is becoming increasingly evident that Russia, as an energy-rich authoritarian country, strategically employs its energy wealth as a tool of foreign policy leverage to protect and promote its interests and assert its geopolitical influence across Europe.¹²

Russia was the leading supplier of natural gas, oil and coal to the EU before it invaded Ukraine. Many EU countries were historically dependent on fossil fuel supplies from Russia, controlling a lot of the oil and gas pipeline infrastructure serving EU markets. Russia thus held a dominant position as the largest energy supplier to the EU, accounting for 45% of all coal imports, 36% of all natural gas imports, and 25% of all petroleum oil imports in 2021¹³. Europe is particularly vulnerable to natural

11 Guinea, O., Sharma, V. (2022). Comment: Trade dependency and geopolitics. *Encompasse Europe* <https://encompass-europe.com/comment/trade-dependency-and-geopolitics#:~:text=In%20international%20trade%2C%20the%20issue,or%20achieve%20its%20political%20goals>.

12 Korteweg, R. (2018). Energy as a tool of foreign policy of authoritarian states, in particular Russia. *European Parliament*. [https://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/STUD/2018/603868/EXPO_STU\(2018\)603868_EN.pdf](https://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/STUD/2018/603868/EXPO_STU(2018)603868_EN.pdf).

13 Eurostat (2023). EU trade with Russia — latest developments. Luxembourg: Eurostat. <https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/statistics-explained/index>.

gas supply since replacing Russian natural gas is much more difficult than replacing coal and petroleum oil due to differences in supply infrastructure, transportation, and storage. Since most of the EU pipeline infrastructure is organised to import Russian natural gas, alternative supplies will mostly have to come by sea in the form of liquefied natural gas. However, liquefied natural gas terminals are currently operating at their maximum capacity and are unevenly spread across the EU, which makes natural gas supplies a better tool for geopolitical coercion than coal or crude oil supplies¹⁴. While not all aspects of Russian energy policy are driven by geopolitical motives, when they are, dependencies are used to exert political influence through the following methods: 1) manipulating the pricing policy of energy supplies to third countries; 2) controlling energy assets, such as pipelines and gas operations in key countries; 3) cutting, or disrupting, gas supplies; 4) agreeing restrictive supply contracts; and 5) developing alternative supply routes to divert gas flows¹⁵.

In the period before the Russian invasion of Ukraine, the main strategy of Russia was to use energy blackmail to remove Ukraine as a critical transit state for Russian energy exports and force it back into the Russian sphere of influence as well as to influence European politics. Russia halted its gas exports to Ukraine in 2006 and 2009 due to disagreements over prices and outstanding debts, with the latter cut off particularly alarming the EU, as it resulted in Bulgaria implementing rationing measures¹⁶. This period was also characterised by the internal political

php?title=Russia-EU_-_international_trade_of_main_product_groups&oldid=558089#Key_product_groups_imported_by_the_EU_from_Russia.

- ¹⁴ Korteweg, R. (2018). Lasse, B., Wilson, A. (2023). EU energy security and the war in Ukraine: From sprint to marathon. *European Parliament*. [https://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/BRIE/2023/739362/EPRS_BRI\(2023\)739362_EN.pdf](https://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/BRIE/2023/739362/EPRS_BRI(2023)739362_EN.pdf). Lasse, B., Wilson, A. (2022). EU gas storage and LNG capacity as responses to the war in Ukraine. *European Parliament*. [https://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/BRIE/2022/729401/EPRS_BRI\(2022\)729401_EN.pdf](https://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/BRIE/2022/729401/EPRS_BRI(2022)729401_EN.pdf).
- ¹⁵ Korteweg, R. (2018).
- ¹⁶ Mitchell, O. (2023). Putin the Green? The Unintended Consequences of Russia's Energy War on Europe. *FPRI*. <https://www.fpri.org/article/2023/02/putin-the-green-the-unintended-consequences-of-russias-energy-war-on-europe/>.

instability of Ukraine (following the elections of 2006), which Russia took advantage of to deepen Ukrainian dependence¹⁷. At the same time, during this period, the EU adopted a firmer stance in addressing the tensions regarding energy supply disagreements between Russia and Ukraine¹⁸. Accordingly, in 2009, the Foreign Ministers of the EU sided with the US-European pipeline project Nabucco (from Turkmenistan to Europe, across the bottom of the Caspian Sea, through Azerbaijan and Turkey), which aimed to lessen European dependence on Russian imports. However, in 2013, the EU abandoned its support for the Nabucco pipeline project, which has thus far proven to be more of an anti-Russian political statement that the EU withdrew from as a diplomatic tool rather than a technically and financially viable endeavour¹⁹. Following that, Russia also initiated the construction of several pipelines to deliver its products to Western countries while bypassing Ukraine. Among these were the Nord Stream 1 and Nord Stream 2 pipelines established in 2012 and 2021, respectively, and South Stream, which morphed into Turkish Stream (completed in 2020) after the EU blocked its initially planned route under the Black Sea to Bulgaria. Central and Eastern European countries warned that the construction of these pipelines would provide Russia with the ability to assert control over Ukraine and create divisions between Western and Eastern Europe, as it would allow Russia to maintain its energy supply to Western European countries while exerting dominance over Eastern European countries²⁰.

The present conflict between Russia and Ukraine has shown that the warnings from Central and East European countries were startlingly

17 Freire, M. R. (2009). Ukraine's multi-vectorial foreign policy: Looking west while not overlooking its eastern neighbor. *Revista UNISCI*, (20), 232–249.

18 Stern, J., Pirani, S., Yafimava, K. (2009). The Russo-Ukrainian gas dispute of January 2009: a comprehensive assessment. *Oxford Institute for Energy Studies*. <https://www.oxfordenergy.org/wpcms/wp-content/uploads/2010/11/NG27-TheRussoUkrainian-GasDisputeofJanuary2009AcomprehensiveAssessment-JonathanSternSimonPirani-KatjaYafimava-2009.pdf>.

19 Raszewski, S. (2022). When one door closes, another opens: How the failure of the Turkey-Austria natural gas pipeline project has led to recovery, resilience and scalability of successor projects. *Energy Policy*, 167, 112978.

20 Mitchell, O. (2023).

accurate. During the summer of 2022, Russia claimed technical problems and progressively decreased gas supplies to Europe through the Nord Stream pipelines, ultimately ceasing them entirely in August 2022. The ‘scheduled work’ that was initiated at the time resulted in the sabotage of the Nord Stream pipelines in September 2022, which closed the Baltic route for gas to Europe, most likely forever. Looking back, it appears evident that Russia had intended to limit the ability of the European countries to store gas for the winter, thereby increasing their vulnerability to energy manipulation and coercion. According to this strategy, Russia hoped to pose a stark trade-off for Europe: either support Ukraine and freeze or tolerate Russian invasion and remain warm. However, this strategy proved unsuccessful, causing speculations that Russia could have achieved greater success had it not revealed its intention of using energy coercion so early but instead launched a surprise attack just before the winter season. Despite the dynamic situation, it appears evident that Russia has lost its energy war on Europe since it has substantially reduced its dependency on Russian fossil fuels, while prices which quadrupled at the start of the war, have returned to pre-war levels²¹.

Response of Europe to Russian energy coercion

The EU had made diligent preparations for potential energy supply disruptions from Russia since 2009, when the Russian gas cutoff to Ukraine resulted in Bulgaria having to halt gas supplies to industrial consumers. Due to increasing fear of a potential loss of gas supplies to the entire EU, European policymakers commenced the preparations to counter energy coercion, leading to the development of a sequence of energy plans, strategies, and unions. The main elements encompassed the interconnection of energy grids and pipeline networks across the EU to avoid individual countries being isolated by a single supplier, establishing

²¹ Inozemtsev, V. (2022). Putin’s tactical mistake. *Ridl.no*. <https://ridl.io/putin-s-tactical-mistake/>. Mitchell, O. (2023).

regional markets to limit price pressure from suppliers and promoting alternative sources of energy supply. The technical nature of most of these measures kept them largely unnoticed by the public, and although some criticised Europe for not going far enough in implementing these policies, prioritising affordable Russian gas over energy security, they have proven essential in the current crisis²².

Linking the energy grids of different EU countries represented an important strategic decision after the 2022 Russian invasion of Ukraine. One of the last EU pipeline interconnections was opened in October 2022 between Greece and Bulgaria, enabling a boost of non-Russian gas flows to Europe²³. Moreover, countries such as Poland, Lithuania, and Germany (although later) built liquified natural gas terminals that provided Europe with the capacity to import significant volumes of liquified natural gas from the United States and other countries. Before 2022, the EU tried to find the balance between reduced vulnerability to energy coercion and increased reliance on affordable Russian gas. Like other EU policies, this approach revealed a division between countries such as Poland, prioritising the reduction of energy dependence on Russia and countries like Germany, believing that it could manage Russian geopolitical aspirations while transitioning from coal-fired and nuclear power plants to cleaner-burning gas. The Russian invasion of Ukraine in 2022 quickly convinced EU policymakers to reconsider basing its energy policy on affordable Russian gas²⁴.

Despite the uncertainty surrounding its energy supply, the EU adopted a strong position against Russia's aggressive war. The European Parliament advocated for a substantial reduction in the dependence of Europe on Russian energy in March 2022, while in April 2022, it demanded an immediate and complete embargo on imports of oil, coal, nuclear

22 Åslund, A. (2022). The Failure of European Energy Policy. *Project Syndicate* <https://www.project-syndicate.org/commentary/european-energy-mess-past-policy-failures-centered-in-germany-by-anders-aslund-2022-09?barrier=accesspaylog>. Mitchell, O. (2023).

23 Reuters (2022). Greece-Bulgaria pipeline starts operations to boost non-Russian gas flows. <https://www.reuters.com/business/energy/greece-bulgaria-pipeline-starts-operations-boost-non-russian-gas-flows-2022-10-01/>.

24 Mitchell, O. (2023).

fuel, and gas from Russia. As a part of the extensive sanctions imposed on Russia (including financial, trade, business, travel and other sanctions), the EU reached an agreement to prohibit the import of Russian coal and oil, with certain limited exceptions, and implemented a price limit on Russian crude oil and petroleum products. While natural gas remains unaffected by sanctions, Russia has significantly reduced its gas exports to EU markets²⁵. According to recent data, since September 2022, Russian gas accounts for only 8% of all pipeline gas imported into the EU, compared to 41% of EU imports from Russia in August 2021²⁶. To protect consumers from rising prices, the EU has introduced a temporary market correction mechanism that could impose a price limit on gas prices²⁷.

Despite small amounts of fossil fuels still being imported from Russia, the EU is determined to fully phase out its dependence on Russian energy²⁸. In response to the energy market disruption caused by the Russian invasion of Ukraine, the European Commission launched the *REPowerEU Plan* in May 2022. This plan was implemented to rapidly reduce dependence on Russian fossil fuels and accelerate the green transition by helping the EU to save energy, produce clean energy, and diversify its energy supplies. Therefore, this plan aims to safeguard EU citizens and businesses from energy shortages, support Ukraine by weakening the Russian war chest, and accelerate the transition to clean energy²⁹.

²⁵ Lasse, B., Wilson, A. (2023).

²⁶ European Commission (2022). REPowerEU: Affordable, secure and sustainable energy for Europe. https://commission.europa.eu/strategy-and-policy/priorities-2019-2024/european-green-deal/repower-eu-affordable-secure-and-sustainable-energy-europe_en.

²⁷ Lasse, B., Wilson, A. (2023).

²⁸ Lasse, B., Wilson, A. (2023).

²⁹ European Commission (2022).

The perspective of young Europeans

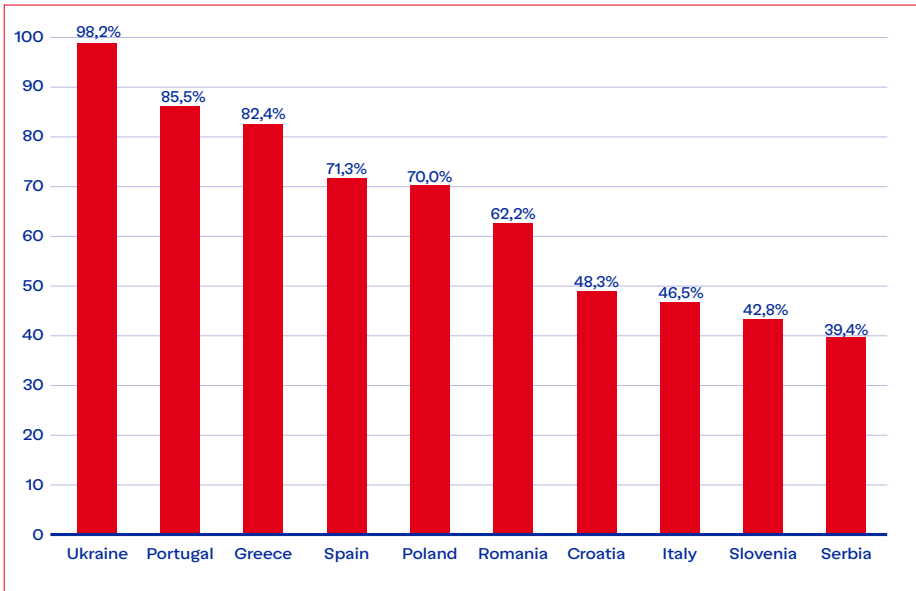
The current Russia-Ukraine war, including the consequent socioeconomic and geopolitical uncertainties, significantly affected the European economy, which citizens felt mainly as a threat to their living standard, especially through the perspective of higher prices of goods and services. This has particularly affected young people as they are typically more vulnerable and sensitive to changes in pricing³⁰. Therefore, the perspective of young Europeans seems to be relevant in this context. Young Europeans are represented by the higher education students enrolled in the field of social sciences, students who are inclined to advocate liberal values³¹. Accordingly, the presented perspectives of young Europeans are grounded on a sample of 2,356 students from ten European countries who shared their perceptions on the Russia-Ukraine war, including perceptions about European economic dependence on Russia. The anonymous online survey was conducted between 22 March and 22 May 2022 (the first and the second month of the war) when most European countries were experiencing increasing socioeconomic and geopolitical uncertainties due to the war. Following some general guidelines for assuring the reliability of the results, the presented perspectives include European countries having at least 50 responses. More specifically, Italy (517), Slovenia (411), and Romania (307) had the highest number of participants in the survey, closely followed by Ukraine (228), Serbia (213), Croatia (212), and Portugal (201), while Poland (135), Spain (81), and Greece (51) had the fewest participants.

The results reveal that 58.7% of young Europeans, who participated in the survey, are worried about the war, especially participants from Ukraine (98.2%), followed by Portugal (85.5%) and Greece (82.4%). Relatively large extents of worries can also be observed in Spain, Poland, and Romania. Contrary, the least worried about the war are participants from Croatia, Italy, Slovenia, and especially Serbia (39.4%) (Figure 1).

³⁰ Pettinger, T. (2017).

³¹ Scott, R. (2022). Does university make you more liberal? Estimating the within-individual effects of higher education on political values. *Electoral Studies*, 77, 102471.

Figure 1: The extent of worries about the war.



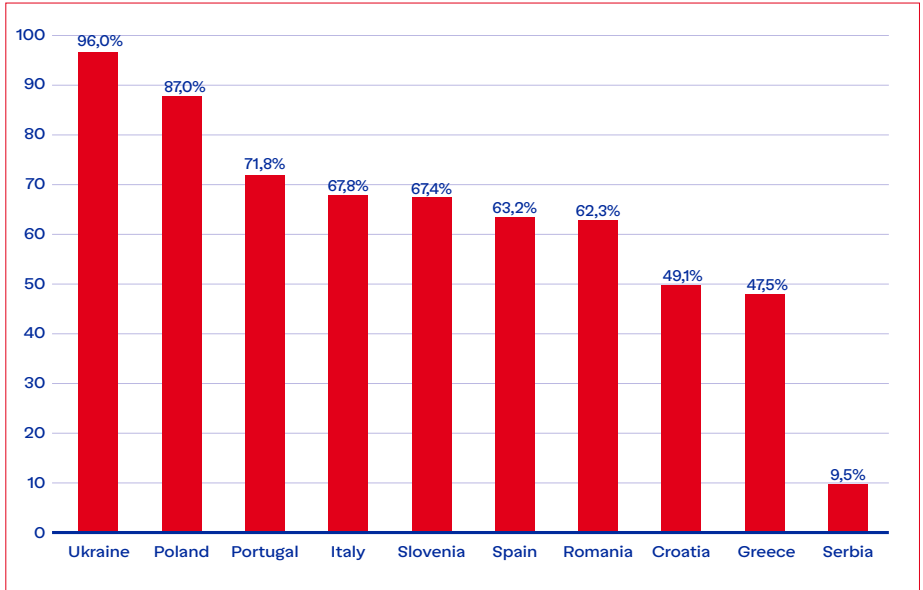
Note: The percentage of young Europeans who are moderately and extremely worried about the 2022 Russia-Ukraine war.

Source: Authors' elaboration based on the survey data.

Moreover, 63.8% of young Europeans agree that their country started reducing its dependence on Russian imports such as oil, gas, metals, etc. Notably, Ukraine leads with a significant percentage of 96.0%, followed by Poland at 87.0%. Meanwhile, Portugal, Italy, Slovenia, Spain, and Romania demonstrate moderate progress in this regard. Croatia and Greece show lower proportions of participants who agree that their country is making progress in reducing dependence on Russian imports. Conversely, Serbia has the lowest share of 9.5%, indicating minimal progress in reducing dependence on Russian imports (Figure 2).

Further, regarding Western sanctions, most young Europeans support freezing foreign-held assets for Russian politicians (76.3%) and oligarchs (73.5%). The highest support for these two political sanctions is observed in Ukraine (for both 98.1%) and Poland (92.8% and 96.3%, respectively),

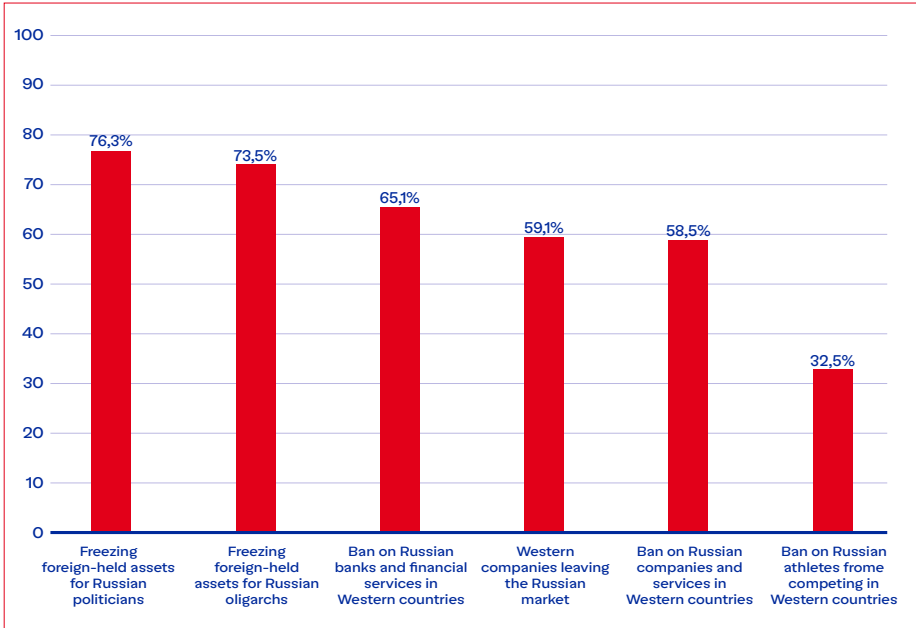
Figure 2: Progress in reducing dependence on Russian imports.



Note: The percentage of young Europeans who agree or strongly agree with their country has started to reduce its dependence on Russian imports due to the 2022 Russia-Ukraine war. Source: Authors' elaboration based on the survey data.

followed by Portugal (89.8% and 86.6%, respectively), Italy (82.8% and 79.1%, respectively) and Spain (for both 82.5%). A similar level of support is observed for economic sanctions, such as the ban on Russian banks and financial services in Western countries, Western companies leaving the Russian market and the ban on Russian companies and services in Western countries, with Romania showing a similar level of support as Italy and Spain. Finally, the least support is observed for the ban on Russian athletes from competing in Western countries (32.5%) (Figure 3). Notably, participants from Serbia are least in favour of Western sanctions against Russia, regardless of the specific sanction in question. Finally, the immediate response of the EU and its allies, through the introduction of several economic and political sanctions against Russia aimed at reducing its economic dependence, caused disruptions in the

Figure 3: Supporting Western sanctions against Russia.



Note: The percentage of young Europeans who somewhat support or strongly support Western sanctions on Russia during the 2022 Russia-Ukraine war.

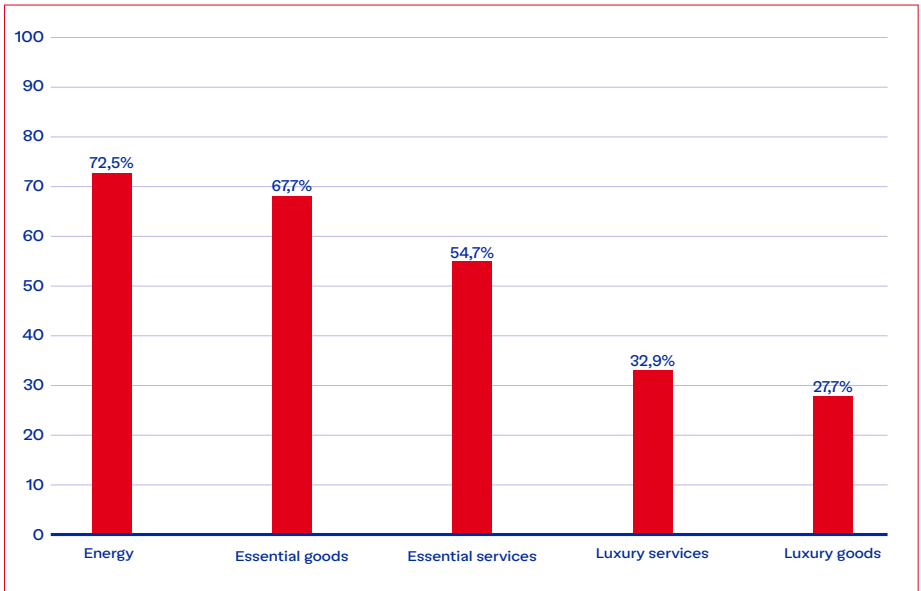
Source: Authors' elaboration based on the survey data.

supply of commodities, leading to a sharp increase in energy and food prices, as well as prices of other goods and services³². Young people are particularly affected by the price surge, as they are typically more vulnerable and sensitive to changes in pricing. This is because they have lower disposable income, and even a small increase in price can render a good or service unaffordable to them³³. In their opinion, most young Europeans are worried about higher prices of energy (oil, gasoline, gas, electricity, etc.), followed by essential goods (food, clothing, housing,

³² OECD (2023). Assessing the Impact of Russia's War against Ukraine on Eastern Partner Countries. <https://www.oecd-ilibrary.org/sites/g46a936c-en/index.html?itemId=/content/publication/g46a936c-en>.

³³ Pettinger, T. (2017).

Figure 4: Extent of worries about the prices of goods and services.



Note: The percentage of young Europeans who are moderately and extremely worried about higher prices of goods and services during the 2022 Russia-Ukraine war.

Source: Authors' elaboration based on the survey data.

etc.) and essential services (health, transportation, communication, etc.). The most concerned about the prices of essential goods and services are participants from Greece and Portugal. Contrary, participants are the least worried about higher prices of luxury services (computers, smartphones, tablets, etc.) and luxury goods (tourism, restaurants, bars, etc.) (Figure 4). It seems that increases in energy prices significantly affect real disposable income, which consequently dictates or limits the consumption of other goods and services³⁴, especially the consumption patterns of essential goods and services³⁵.

³⁴ Bobasu, A., Gareis, J. (2022) The impact of higher energy prices on services and goods consumption in the euro area. *ECB*. https://www.ecb.europa.eu/pub/economic-bulletin/focus/2023/html/ecb.ebbox202208_03~2ca54e2b1b.en.html.

³⁵ Arndt, C., et al (2023). The Ukraine war and rising commodity prices: Implications for developing countries. *Global Food Security*, 36, 100680.

Liberal answers to mitigate European economic dependence on Russia

To mitigate the consequences of the 2022 Russian invasion of Ukraine, it is imperative for European countries, including the EU member countries, to promptly consider several policy measures. These should include strengthening European energy policy, maintaining open European markets and promoting diversification, and protecting European citizens and businesses from the economic impact of the war. Namely, ensuring a stable macroeconomic framework should be a top priority for European countries, as inadequate policy responses would exacerbate the impacts of war shocks, harming well-being in the short-term and undermining prospects for future resilience and recovery³⁶.

The first measure is the strengthening of European energy policy. Some European countries (especially those not part of the EU, such as Serbia and Belarus, with a traditionally close relationship with Russia) face complex incentives related to balancing the advantages of affordable energy imports with the need to ensure energy security, economic stability and environmental sustainability. More specifically, on the one hand, these countries might benefit from relatively affordable energy imports, which could result in reduced motivation to conserve energy or invest in renewable energy sources. On the other hand, price volatility and political uncertainty in their relations with Russia underscore the risks associated with depending solely on a single supplier for fossil fuel imports, thus creating a considerable economic vulnerability. This situation gives rise to a 'new energy security paradigm', where countries that import energy might find it advantageous to substitute fossil fuel imports with domestic energy production derived from renewable sources. Namely, the new energy security paradigm, along with high long-term fossil fuel prices and increased price uncertainty, is expected to accelerate the expansion of renewable energy sources in the medium- to long-term. While these countries may not have official

³⁶ OECD (2023).

policies focused on reducing dependence on Russian fossil fuels, they are still actively pursuing energy independence through measures such as enhancing energy efficiency and increasing domestic production of renewable energy sources³⁷. Moreover, the EU, consisting of its 27 member countries, should continue advancing the *REPowerEU Plan*, launched in May 2022, to achieve energy independence from Russian fossil fuels well before 2030³⁸.

The next measure entails the maintenance of open European markets and the promotion of diversification. European countries should avoid implementing successive export restrictions and instead prioritise trade openness and diversification. Namely, while attempting to protect domestic consumers from price surges, policymakers may be tempted to impose trade restrictions and limit exports. Nevertheless, efforts to mitigate the impact of international food price shocks on domestic markets through protectionist measures run the risk of exacerbating global price volatility and have previously proven to be ineffective³⁹. Indeed, although export restrictions may temporarily mitigate pressures on domestic food markets, they divert supplies away from the global market, thereby causing a subsequent increase in world prices and setting off a multiplier effect⁴⁰. To enhance food security, not only in Europe but globally, facilitating trade is essential. Accordingly, European countries may consider reducing or eliminating import duties for countries without a free trade agreement to diversify import sources. More advanced economies can also enhance food security by providing

37 OECD (2022). Effects of the Russian invasion of Ukraine on climate and energy policies in the European Union's Eastern Partnership and Central Asian countries. [https://www.oecd.org/environment/outreach/ENV-EPOC-EAP\(2022\)6.pdf?_ga=2.235173313.1992222334.1688139771-1993454040.1680969239](https://www.oecd.org/environment/outreach/ENV-EPOC-EAP(2022)6.pdf?_ga=2.235173313.1992222334.1688139771-1993454040.1680969239). OECD (2023).

38 European Commission (2022).

39 World Bank (2022). Commodity Markets Outlook. The impact of the War in Ukraine on Commodity. <https://openknowledge.worldbank.org/server/api/core/bitstreams/da0196b9-6f9c-5d28-b77c-31a936d5098f/content>.

40 Espitia, A., Rocha, N., Ruta, M. (2020) Covid-19 and food protectionism: the impact of the pandemic and export restrictions on world food markets. *World Bank Policy Research Working Paper*. 9253. <https://documents1.worldbank.org/curated/en/417171589912076742/pdf/Covid-19-and-Food-Protectionism-The-Impact-of-the-Pandemic-and-Export-Restrictions-on-World-Food-Markets.pdf>.

the necessary support to facilitate the cultivation of new crops, including in Ukraine, and to promptly address the logistical barriers limiting food supply⁴¹.

The final measure is the protection of European citizens and businesses from the economic impact of the war. Accordingly, European countries must adopt policies protecting their citizens from rising inflation, particularly for energy and food. This can be achieved by providing timely and targeted support measures, especially to the most vulnerable groups of citizens (e.g. young people) and low-income households, who spend a considerable share of their disposable income on essential needs such as electricity and food, making them the most affected by the impacts of price increases⁴². To ensure the protection of vulnerable households, it may be necessary to employ targeting criteria that extend beyond conventional means-testing, encompassing factors like housing location and quality, household composition, and access to public transportation⁴³. Feasible policy options encompass the implementation of targeted safety net interventions, including cash and food in-kind transfers as well as tax reductions. Moreover, timely, targeted, and means-tested measures are also needed to support businesses, especially small and medium-sized enterprises, which often possess fewer resources and capabilities to withstand the crisis and face economic depression. Besides small and medium-sized enterprises in Ukraine, which were the most adversely affected by the war, these measures are also applicable to businesses in other European countries operating in sectors that have experienced significant losses in export revenues and disruptions to supply chains. Potential initiatives could include the implementation of business retention programs, serving as the building blocks for a swift

41 OECD (2023).

42 OECD (2022). OECD Economic Outlook, Interim Report: Economic and Social Impacts and Policy Implications of the War in Ukraine. <https://www.oecd.org/economy/Interim-economic-outlook-report-march-2022.pdf>.

43 OECD (2022). Why Governments Should Target Support Amidst High Energy Prices. https://www.oecd.org/ukraine-hub/policy-responses/why-governments-should-target-support-amidst-high-energy-prices-40f44f78?_ga=2.233150814.1992222334.1688139771-1993454040.1680969239.

post-war economic recovery. Other and more conventional measures could include temporary tax reductions along with loan and mortgage repayment freezes. Therefore, European countries should consider the integration of business policies across various areas of policy action (e.g. tax reforms, credit guarantees) within their new policy proposals⁴⁴.

Conclusion

Most likely, before the invasion of Ukraine on 24 February 2022, Russia did not expect the colossal support of European countries and their allies for Ukraine. That is why Russia has resorted to direct economic coercion, attempting to divert attention from the invasion and domestic problems. To halt support for Ukraine, Russia has created several so-called instruments of war, revealing the vulnerability of the European economy, particularly in terms of its economic dependence on Russian imports⁴⁵. The first instrument of war is related to fossil fuels, especially natural gas. Once again in its history, Russia has been employing gas blackmail as a tactic, issuing threats to reduce or entirely halt gas supplies to European countries. Additionally, during the second half of 2022, Russian media infiltrated the European information space, disseminating daily reports of an impending harsh and deadly winter approaching Europe. In this way, Russia aimed to create anxiety among European citizens, leading them to worry about their safety and subsequently exert pressure on their governments and participate in protests. The second instrument of war is related to food security. Specifically, Russia seized control of vital agricultural lands in Ukraine. In addition to causing irreparable damage to Ukrainian fields, Russian aggression also

⁴⁴ OECD (2022). Recommendation of the Council on SME and Entrepreneurship Policy. https://legalinstruments.oecd.org/en/instruments/OECD-LEGAL-0473?_ga=2.200193518.1992222334.1688139771-1993454040.1680969239. OECD (2023).

⁴⁵ Centre for Strategic Communication (2022). Nuclear and gas blackmail: How Russia Tries to Destabilize the Situation in the EU and US. *Spravdi*. <https://spravdi.gov.ua/en/nuclear-and-gas-blackmail-how-russia-tries-to-destabilize-the-situation-in-the-eu-and-us/>.

encompassed blockading ports and redirecting Ukrainian grain to Russia. This strategy was employed to coerce international allies of Ukraine into easing sanctions against Russia and reducing their military support for Ukraine. Additionally, following its usual pattern, Russia attributed the slowdown in food exports to Western sanctions⁴⁶.

Young Europeans are generally worried about the war, especially those from Ukraine, Portugal and Greece and they believe their country started reducing their dependence on Russian imports, especially from Ukraine and Poland. Most young Europeans also support Western political sanctions, such as freezing foreign-held assets for Russian politicians and oligarchs, with Ukraine and Poland exhibiting the highest support, followed by Portugal, Italy and Spain. Similar levels of support are observed for economic sanctions, including the ban on Russian banks and financial services in Western countries, Western companies leaving the Russian market and the ban on Russian companies and services in Western countries, where also Romania, along with Italy and Spain, demonstrate comparable levels of support. Moreover, most young Europeans are worried about the prices of essential goods and services, especially in Greece and Portugal. Finally, participants from Serbia exhibit the lowest levels of worries regarding war and prices, agreement on reducing dependence on Russia, and support for Western sanctions. With some exceptions, such as Serbia which has a traditionally close relationship with Russia, young Europeans generally support the European response to prevent Russian energy coercion and reduce European economic dependence on Russia, regardless of their worries about the war and price that these responses may cause.

Fortunately, the European countries are aware of the Russian strategy and immediately started implementing measures to reduce their economic dependence on Russia. To further mitigate the consequences of the recent Russian invasion of Ukraine, it is imperative for European countries to promptly consider several policy measures, including strengthening of European energy policy (including supply and diversification of energy mix while also meeting the sustainable goals), maintenance

⁴⁶ Centre for Strategic Communication (2022).

of open European markets and the promotion of diversification, and protection of European citizens and businesses from the economic impact of the war⁴⁷. Especially in the long term, Europe is well-positioned to win the energy war with Russia⁴⁸. As a result of demonstrating the reliance of Europe on fossil fuels, Russia has unintentionally managed to accelerate the green transition in Europe, which will be beneficial for future European resilience and recovery.

⁴⁷ OECD (2023).

⁴⁸ Mitchell, O. (2023).

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Hungary, the Russian Trojan

Lessons on How to Defend Liberal Democracies in an Interconnected World

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The paper aims to propose lessons to defend against insidious Russian influence in Europe by studying the arsenal used in Hungary. The tools used against the European Community have a degree of universality and forms of them can be seen deployed in various stages in almost every European country. It is also an aim to show that the interconnected nature of the European Union, and ultimately the world, means that Russian influence can operate through third European countries — thus defending from the Russian (or other autocracies’) influence takes a wider approach than focussing exclusively on the original source.

The paper will take a look at how corruption and influence-buying are transformed into talks of national or European interests in the public sphere to mask the ultimate goals and private business interests, how various stages of elite capture steer countries in directions that the public might not have otherwise accepted, how institutions can be hollowed out to serve as weaker brakes on both power and Russian influence. How this goes parallel to the gradual change of narratives from real problems into talks about sovereignty, then gradual anti-Americanism and anti-NATO-ism, and finally to culminate into Kremlin outright narratives in the span of just a few years. A look is taken at how the private deals that Hungary initially signed seeking its own profits gave Russia the possibility to have a foot in the door in Europe and expand its influence in neighbouring countries.

Hungary is an ideal study as it provides a wide range of cases: from mega-projects such as the Russian backed Paks 2 atomic power plant or the planned Chinese backed Budapest-Belgrade rail line, through the ‘Southern and Eastern opening’ policy of funnelling money through African and Central Asian nations in the name of free trade (despite usually being government subsidised trade), through ‘Russia’s spy bank’ officially known as the International Investment Bank, to pro-Russia Facebook groups and government controlled media, and ending in murky gas deals that give influence to Moscow through Budapest all the way into Western Europe. There is an endless trove of cases to study. The paper will look at four of the larger business cases to present the outlines, the problems, and challenges they present to both the Hungarian people and to Europe and the West. The specific deals that will be analysed are: a planned nuclear power plant; an international investment bank; a shareholder in a train manufacturer company with unexpected connections; and a mostly domestic gas trader with a key advantage — now turned into a clean Western European company.

By studying these connected cases in Hungary the authors’ aim is to show that seemingly innocent international business deals and business connections with bad faith actors can serve as points of intrusion for influence, that end up steering the political class that was attracted to the projects’ financial side. This is done with the hope that knowledge will increase the immunity of decision makers and free societies and will help to see further ahead on the chessboard than the short term interests at which we so often stop. Understanding the full spectrum of the Hungarian narratives (that often seem to mimic the Russian ones) will also help to detect the narrative elements and world views that serve as gateways into more and more anti-European and anti-Western perspectives. These often start small and unrecognisably, anchored in interest and economics, but grow step by step to resemble more what looks like the Kremlin’s world view — such as claiming the West is holding ‘us’ down economically, various conspiracy theories, not only distrust in one’s own state institutions but sympathy towards Russia, anti-Americanism, anti-NATO opinions, and so on. By setting up the diagnosis, we also look at policies that could be deployed

to fight these concerted efforts against the EU that will increase in the future.

Talks of sovereignty as masks of corruption and covert influence

After 2010, the former Hungarian foreign policy and foreign economic strategy which ensured the country's position as a solid transatlantic ally since the end of the communist regime in 1989–1990 and whose essential points were not subjects of debate in the otherwise polarised Hungarian public life, were fundamentally transformed. Think tanks close to the Orbán government and government officials¹ have continuously published their unorthodox assessments on the changes they have identified in the world of politics and the specific Hungarian strategy with which the country benefits from rights enjoyed by being in the EU and NATO. According to them, the West is in crisis and the future belongs to the rising eastern and southern powers, the 'BRICS' that will economically defeat the United States and Europe very soon.² The 2008–2009 economic crisis and, from 2015, the EU's handling of the increasing migration pressure were many repeated points of reference.³ Although prominent members of the Hungarian government usually emphasise that the country's place is in the EU and NATO, in the current world situation, they argue that a 'sovereign' Hungarian foreign policy is needed, one that reserves the right to make decisions without consultation with allies, and, where needed, against Western interests.⁴

1 Such as Alapjogokert Kozpont, Szazadveg, Nezapont Intezet, and increasingly the international network of Mathias Corvinus Collegium, often abbreviated as MCC.

2 Mészáros, R. T. (2023, May 6). A kormány megénekelte a fejlődő világ hatalomátvételét, kár, hogy nagyrészt nem fejlődnek. *Telex*. <https://telex.hu/kulfold/2023/05/26/Orban-viktor-ukrajna-oroszorszag-feltorekvo-gazdasagok-fejlodo-oroszagok-novekedes-uj-vilagrend-egyedul-allamok-kina>.

3 Government of Hungary (2023, July 15). A magyar rendszer működik. <https://kormany.hu/hirek/a-magyar-rendszer-mukodik>.

4 Mandiner (2023, August 14). Szijjártó: Magyarorszáé a legszuverénebb külpolitika Európában. <https://mandiner.hu/belfold/2023/08/kovesse-velunk-szijjarto-peter-eloadasat-a-2023-as-tranzit-politikai-fesztivalon>. Euronews (2023, July 14). Az

This fishy concept of so-called interest-based decision-making and well composed slogans about the need to protect Hungary's national interest and sovereignty are the theoretical pillars of what we see now as the country's foreign policy: seeking closer ties to countries with bad human rights records⁵, vetoing European and UN initiatives that it claims are against its economic interests⁶, and a generally transactional approach to foreign policy (e.g. trying to use vetoing in unrelated issues to force the EU to release blocked funds). Seemingly, it lacks loyalty towards the Euro-Atlantic institutions and organisations in exchange for economic benefits. But the real picture is more complicated.

The Hungarian government and, more importantly, the prime minister, once a well known liberal, now personally believes that the West is in general decline morally, politically, and economically. That is not an outlier so far, most of Europe's right-wing populists tend to voice similar views. What is more specific about Hungary is how the government carries out policies, diplomacy, and business agreements that clearly favour Russian interests and at the same time — if needed — pretends to be a good NATO member. Examples abound: the delay to ratify the Finnish accession to NATO and the (at the time of writing, still ongoing) series of objections against the Swedish accession; Hungarian claims in domestic politics that the EU is subservient to George Soros or that it wants to replace the Christians of Europe with immigrants while raising the picture of Russia as a bastion of Christendom and, implied, of whiteness; a consistent series of trying to block, delay, and dilute sanctions

Unió ereje a sokféleségében rejlik, írja Orbán Balázs, a miniszterelnök politikai igazgatója. <https://hu.euronews.com/2023/07/14/europai-unio-sokszinuseg-velemeny-minositett-szavazas-Orban-viktor-Orban-balazs-eu>. Magyarország Kormánya (2023, August 21). Tuzson Bence: az uniós választások legfőbb tétje, hogy merre fog elindulni Európa. <https://kormany.hu/hirek/tuzson-bence-az-unios-valasztasok-legfobb-tetje-hogy-merre-fog-elindulni-europa>.

- 5 E.g. trying to maintain close ties to Russia since 2022, courting Erdogan personally, including trailing Turkey in the blocking of Finnish and Swedish NATO accession, receiving the sanctioned Chinese politician Erkin Tuniyaz involved in the oppression of the Uyghurs, the release in 2012 of an Azeri national who murdered an Armenian soldier.
- 6 Such as condemning atrocities against the Uyghurs or the Russian activist Vladimir Kara-Murza, in 2023 vetoing the EU-wide condemnation of Azerbaijan's actions in Nagorno-Karabakh.

against Russia since 2014; blocking gas transmission to Ukraine in 2014; blocking NATO-Ukraine talks; and consistently ignoring the role of Russia in the invasion of Ukraine but criticising Ukraine on every issue possible.⁷ As shown by a 2021 study from the Hungarian think tank Political Capital entitled *'Battering Ram Against the EU? Hungary in the Eyes of Russian Propagandists'*, these actions of Hungary are followed and echoed by the Russian propagandists to prove that the EU is weak and divided, and there is support for Russia in the EU and in NATO.⁸ But whenever it is pressed, Hungary frames this alignment to Russia's talking points as merely an economic and realpolitik necessity. It also points to how it often ends up voting for what the international community presses for, to prove its loyalty, but it omits to mention that the vote is given after Hungary is successful in at least delaying decisions if not outright diluting them.⁹ It also omits mentioning that it often ends up voting for what the international community desired only after overwhelming international pressure — again, not a sign of aligned and shared values. This dynamic ends up looking like a back and forth movement between the Western alliances and Russia (but the same increasingly happens in relation to China). This 'peacock dance', as is often called in Hungary, is probably the most important and most deceptive characteristic of Orbán's behaviour on the international stage. Practice and theory go hand in hand: the leaders' personal beliefs and the tools used to maintain the system, to feed the growing appetite of Hungarian oligarchs perfectly match. If one is the beneficiary or aims to be of an

7 Political Capital (2018, March 14). Orosz befolyás Magyarországon (3. rész): Nyugat-ellenes külpolitika — PC. Átlátszó. <https://pcblog.atlatszo.hu/2018/03/14/orosz-befolyas-magyarorszagon-3-resz-nyugat-ellenes-kulpolitika/>.

8 Istrate, D., Takácsy, D., Krekó, P. (2021). Faltörő kos az EU ellen? — Magyarország az orosz propagandisták szemével. *Political Capital*. https://politicalcapital.hu/pc-admin/source/documents/faltoro_kos_az_eu_ellen_2021_12.pdf.

9 E.g., when in June 2022 Russian Patriarch Kirill was removed from sanctions due to Hungarian pressure — citing the less frequent but recurring *religious freedom* as its reason Liboreiro, J., Koutsokosta, E., Murray, S. (2022, June 22). Patriarch Kirill excluded from EU sanctions after Hungary's objection. *Euronews*. <https://www.euronews.com/my-europe/2022/06/02/patriarch-kirill-excluded-from-eu-sanctions-after-hungarys-objection>.

equally corrupt, autocratic regime, they also become more willing to seek business partners among the Russian (as mentioned in the article; and recently increasingly Chinese) elites, as they are happy to provide opportunities and do not ask questions, as described in the chapters below. However, there are still strings attached — the local elite sells influence in its own country.

‘Looking to the east’ (catchphrase)

The change in foreign policy and economic direction was announced by the government in 2010 with the resounding slogan of opening ‘up to the East’ (*keleti nyitás* in Hungarian). The main focus of this initiative was to open offices in new countries that promote Hungarian export. The goal was to strengthen or even kickstart Hungarian exports to business partners that are not part of what is usually thought of as an export market for the country. The list of target countries also included those that the *Fidesz* government considers to this day to be politically important for various reasons, such as China and countries of the Western Balkans, but even the us. However the economics-focused initiative also had a role to prepare Hungary for a supposedly emerging multipolar world — a staple of the Russian (and Chinese) government’s world view. The whole underlying need to promote Hungarian business interests in far away and hard to access markets was based on this great changing of the world order¹⁰ that the *Fidesz* government still expects.

Public opinion linked to this strategy the opening of a network of so-called National Trading Houses, the most visible and perhaps costly part of the initiative. These aimed to boost trade relations, with the backing of the state, between Hungary and mainly post-Communist and Far Eastern countries, but also some in South America and Africa.¹¹ The exact way to achieve its goals was never clear and the operation of the

¹⁰ Bernek, Á. (2018). Hazánk keleti nyitás politikája és a 21. századi geopolitikai stratégiák összefüggései. *KKI.hu*. https://kki.hu/assets/upload/06_Berneke_Agnes.pdf.

¹¹ Index (2016, August 11). Ilyen, amikor focisták irányítják a külkereskedelmet. https://index.hu/gazdasag/2016/07/11/mnkh_kereskedohaz_szijjarto_futsal_export_botswana/.

managing company was plagued by nepotism, financial irregularities, and poor transparency.¹²

After ten years, the failure of this programme has become clear: the National Trading Houses were trying to gain market share in countries where the possibilities were very limited, instead of gaining a better understanding of what real opportunities and challenges are present.¹³ Instead of trade promotion, a method used in Western Europe, their system was based on giving preferential treatment to certain companies and concluding semi-legal deals. By 2016 the lack of results of the programme was clear: compared to 2011 the volume of export to the targeted countries, after the removal of distorting countries (such as the large United States and China, the sanctioned Russia, and the neighbouring Serbia), export to the remaining countries was lower: from 6.2% to 3.5% and from 5.1 billion euro to 3.8 billion euro. The government decided to close the costly project in 2019.¹⁴

The strategy of Eastern Opening also involved building increasingly close relations with Russia and China and framing these relations in deterministic and utilitarian terms. The need to form these relationships was described as inevitable and necessary either because of geographic realities or economic ones.

Fidesz argues that it is irrelevant to address the Russian and Chinese regimes' dictatorial, political, and business relations' manipulative and non-transparent nature, as this would be empty moralising and not a factor that could cause Hungary any harm or exposure.¹⁵

It is merely a matter of mutually beneficial business contracts and securing the inevitable, unavoidable energy dependence, is the explanation

12 Kovács-Angel, M. (2019, May 16). Ész nélkül öntötték a pénzt a kereskedőházba, 9,3 milliárdos bukásra volt elég. *24.hu*. <https://24.hu/fn/gazdasag/2019/05/16/mnkh-merleg-szijjarto-tarsoly-quaestor/>.

13 Kovács-Angel, M. (2019, May 16).

14 Szedlacsek, E. (2018, July 28). Hungarian trading house system coming to an end. *Daily News Hungary*. <https://dailynewshungary.com/hungarian-trading-house-system-coming-to-an-end/>.

15 Világgazdaság (2023, June 27). Szijjártó: öngyilkossággal érne fel szétteépni az Európa és Kína közti gazdasági hálót. <https://www.vg.hu/vilaggazdasag-magyar-gazdasag/2023/06/szijjarto-ongyilkossaggal-erne-fel-szettepni-az-europa-es-kina-koztigazdasagi-halot>.

given to this day when the Foreign Minister travels to Moscow unusually frequently. The latter is increasingly hard to sustain outwardly, as other regional countries managed to reduce this allegedly unavoidable dependence, an option that Hungary has avoided consciously, as understood by the Polish partners, but domestically it is an argument that still works very well. The resulting lack of alternatives and vulnerability are not topics that arise domestically.

In the remainder of our study we will attempt to demonstrate, by means of examples, how false, unsupported by concrete economic results, and dangerous to European security this policy is.

The deals

Below we take a look at some of the biggest deals which Hungary initiated with Russia, despite the risks or better alternatives. As seen below, it is often the case that the Hungarian government clings to some of these projects even after a change in conditions results in making these too expensive both in economic and political terms. This suggests that the actual reason to sign them was not simply financial in nature or that the original economic deals have grown to have political clout over the domestic decision makers. These ultimately serve as Russian economic weapons, as seen in other countries — and as now China starts to do in Hungary as well.

1 Paks 2

Hungary's sole nuclear reactor is in the town of Paks, near the Danube. Built between 1967 and 1982, it used the Soviet VVER (water-water energy reactor) design. In 2021, 14% of all the Hungarian energy consumption was produced by nuclear power¹⁶, and of all the electric energy

¹⁶ Ritchie, H., Roser, M., Rosado, P. (2022). Energy. *OurWorldInData.org*. <https://our-worldindata.org/energy-mix>.

around 45%.¹⁷ The need to extend the nuclear capacity arose earlier, with the first Parliamentary consent given in March 2009¹⁸ for two new reactors and in January 2014¹⁹ the *International Agreement Between the Government of Hungary and the Government of the Russian Federation for Cooperation in the Peaceful Uses of Nuclear Energy* was signed by both parties. In February the *Act II of 2014 on the Proclamation of the Convention between the Government of Hungary and the Government of the Russian Federation for Cooperation in the Peaceful Uses of Nuclear Energy* was approved in the parliament and signed by the president. The deal involved significant Russian credit — the initial agreement on 1 April 2014 allowed for a loan of up to 10 billion euro, forming 80% of the initial budget, with the rest coming from the Hungarian budget; the loan would be paid in 30 years with a rate of initially 3.95%, which incrementally increases to 4.95% after the reactors start production. We should note that at that time this was considered a good rate by the Orbán government — Orbán himself called it ‘the deal of the century’ in 2016.²⁰ However between 2015 and 2022 the government found it could access loans at 2%. Conditions changed again and since 2023 funding is limited again for Hungary, mainly due to an impasse in negotiating with the EU. Independent voices signalled already at the beginning that the real budget for the power plant was likely to end up much higher.²¹

17 6.1.1.9. Gross electricity production [gigawatt hours], https://www.ksh.hu/stadat_files/ene/en/ene0009.html.

18 Official Site of MVM Paks II. Nuclear Reactor Development Closed Joint-Stock Company (2014, September 12). Contracts signed on implementation of new reactor units at the Paks Nuclear Power Plant. <https://paks2.hu/web/paks2-en/w/contracts-signed-on-implementation-of-new-reactor-units-at-the-paks-nuclear-power-plant>

19 Act II of 2014 on the Proclamation of the Convention between the Government of Hungary and the Government of the Russian Federation for Cooperation in the Peaceful Uses of Nuclear Energy <https://net.jogtar.hu/jogszabaly?docid=A1400002.TV&searchUrl=/gyorskereso?keyword%3Dpaks>.

20 Miniszterelnok.hu (2016, February 17). A paksi bővítés az évszázad üzlete. <https://2015-2022.miniszterelnok.hu/a-paksi-bovites-az-evszazad-uzlete/>.

21 Index (2017, September 25). Paks 2: tényleg nincs visszaút? https://index.hu/gazdasag/2017/09/25/paks2_innen_nincs_visszaút/. Zoli (2017, December 19). Paks II. egy mérnök szemével. *Egy mérnök szemével*. https://mernokblog.blog.hu/2017/12/19/paks_ii_egy_mernok_szemevel_757.

No public consultation took place and, even worse, much of the information was classified for 30 years beginning in March 2015.^{22 23}

The deal is visibly important to *Fidesz* far beyond the energy needs, especially if we look at how Hungary developed the renewables sector. *Fidesz* decided to halt the development of the potentially lucrative wind energy sector²⁴ in 2016, while the solar energy was over subsidised without any long-term plan for the development of the transmission and distribution grid. One shall note that enlargement of the existing nuclear power plant in Paks is a rational aspiration from an energy standpoint as the government aims to balance the unpredictable nature of renewables, but nevertheless the selected technology seems outdated. Initially in 2012 it seemed like the government was open to looking for alternatives, as it was reported that the Ministry for National Development contacted South Korea²⁵ who was also interested in the nuclear project, however in 2014 the government failed to publish a tender and proceeded to commission the Russian party.²⁶ According to Russian sources Putin sold a package deal to Orbán as the Hungarian government agreed not only to cut a deal with Rosatom but also consented to support the construction of the Southern Stream.²⁷

22 Act of 2015 on the maintaining the capacity and investments of the Paks Nuclear Power Plant and modifications made in the legislation. <https://www.parlament.hu/irom40/02250/02250-0020.pdf>. Erdélyi, K., (2021, January 25). Az Alkotmánybíróság szerint rendben van, hogy a kormány 30 évre titkosította a Paks2-projektet. *Atlatso.hu*. <https://atlatso.hu/kozugy/2021/01/25/az-alkotmanybirasag-szerint-rendben-van-hogy-a-kormany-30-evre-titikositotta-a-paks2-projektet/>.

23 The Constitutional Court upheld the classified status in 2021, after it was attacked in court by five NGOs — meaning the decision was contemplated for 6 years.

24 Ballai, V. (2023, February 13). Itt a várva várt fordulat a szélenergiában Magyarországon, de így is lehetnek még buktatók. *Hvg.hu*. https://hvg.hu/gazdasag/20230213-szelenergia_energiaklub_konferencia_megujulo_energiatermeles_klimavaltozas.

25 Agrárszektor (2012, June 20). Dél-koreai cég lehet a paksi erőműbővítés beszállítója. <https://www.agrarszektor.hu/agrarpenezek/20120620/del-koreai-ceg-lehet-a-paksi-eromubovites-beszallitoja-1987>.

26 Botos, T., (2014, January 14). Orbán aláírta Putyinnal Paks bővítését: 2 új blokkot atenek. *444.hu*. <https://444.hu/2014/01/14/Orban-alairta-putyinnal/>.

27 Magyarai, P., (2014, January 16). Mégis lehet gázos vonal az atompaktumban. *444.hu*. <https://444.hu/2014/01/16/brusszel-ellen-kellenek-a-magyarok-az-oroszoknak/>.

Despite the early aspirations and promises of *Fidesz* in 2010, the government failed to ease its dependence on Russia in terms of energy. Currently and in the medium term there are now no real alternatives to Russian natural gas and oil — despite the country having the required potential, which suggests a purely political preference.²⁸ Even from a purely economical standpoint, the diversification of sources would be needed. One shall note that from time to time there are aspirations for diversification but these tend to fail. In 2014–2015, for example, the largest partly state-owned oil giant MOL Nyrt. already launched a programme aimed specifically at independence from Russian oil, however later the necessary funds were allocated elsewhere.²⁹ Experts still say that Hungarian dependence on Russian oil is a question of technicality as the development of refining capacity does not require a large investment or much innovation.

In terms of natural gas the war in Ukraine brought light to the one-sided and excessive commitment of *Fidesz* towards Russia. Due to the sanctions and the unique nature of Russian energy politics the import of Russian gas to the EU including Hungary gradually but steadily started to drop. As a result the Hungarian government did not have any other choice but to utilise its other sources of import such as Austria, Slovakia, Ukraine, Romania, and Serbia for which the infrastructure was already built but was not used until the start of the full-scale war.³⁰

The importance of alternatives, even if they are just potential and not used, would have led to a different approach if the narrative about the interests of the nation were the priority. This has become visible from the outside as well. A source in the Polish ruling party *PiS*, a former long-term ally of Viktor Orbán, has noted in 2023 that Hungary's dependence

28 6.1.1.9. Gross electricity production [gigawatt hours], https://www.ksh.hu/stadat_files/ene/en/ene0009.html.

29 Torontáli, Z. (2022, May 2). Jobban is akarhatnánk a leválást az orosz olajról, mert nem lehetetlen. *G7*. <https://g7.hu/vallalat/20220502/jobban-is-akarhatnank-levalni-az-orosz-olajrol/>.

30 Jandó, Z. (2023). Miközben a kormány szerint nincs alternatívája az orosz gáznak, szép csendben megindult a kiváltása. *G7*. <https://g7.hu/adat/20230324/mikozben-a-kormany-szerint-nincs-alternativaja-az-orosz-gaznak-szep-csendben-megindult-a-kivaltasa/>.

on Russian energy was not based on technical necessities but rather a political preference.³¹ Even more baffling is that the price of gas, while classified, is estimated by energy experts to be largely the same as the Dutch TTF, but with a two month delay — meaning that Hungary does not, in fact, get any reduction in the price of gas.³²

Actors with a stake in renewable energy sources have theorised that the severe lack of development in their sector (except for photovoltaic cells) and in alternative sources of energy could have been due to *Fidesz* trying to ‘prove’ that Paks 2 is an existential necessity to ensure that the project is finalised.³³

Were the Paks 2 project to go on as initially planned, the Hungarian energy needs would virtually still completely depend on a single country — a very vulnerable position to be in even if this country was an ally. Instead Prime Minister Viktor Orbán has deeply linked his name to the Paks 2 project. On 12 January 2014 he personally travelled to Moscow, with most Hungarians merely guessing that Paks could be a topic. The next day the contract was already signed to build two reactors with Russian loans and a day after that the campaign to promote the decision was launched — but not earlier, suggesting that there was haste in the decision.³⁴ Perhaps unsurprisingly, in 2010 many in *Fidesz* were still

³¹ E.g. 85% of the Hungarian natural gas consumption is imported, virtually entirely from Russia, oil import is similarly Russia-focused). Portfolio (2023, May 15). Magyarország ki tudná váltani az orosz energiát, csak éppen nem akarja — vélték a lengyel kormányfő környezetében. <https://www.portfolio.hu/gazdasag/20230515/magyarorszag-ki-tudna-valtani-az-orosz-energiat-csak-eppen-nem-akarja-veltek-a-lengyel-kormanyfo-kornyezeteben-615162>.

³² Sipos, G. (2022, October 31). Outrageous: Hungary is buying Russian gas for a five-fold price. *Daily News Hungary*. <https://dailynewshungary.com/hungary-buying-russian-gas-for-a-five-fold-price/>.

³³ Ember, Z. (2015, May 3). Így hűz el Magyarország mellett a napelemes forradalom. *24.hu*. <https://24.hu/fn/gazdasag/2015/05/03/igy-huz-el-a-magyarok-mellett-a-napelemes-forradalom/>.

³⁴ Journalists dug up quotes from Orbán and *Fidesz* politicians from 2008 where they criticised the former PM Ferenc Gyurcsány for signing classified and long term (10 years in that case) deals with Russia, and demanded referenda in questions of energy and nuclear energy specifically. Perhaps unsurprisingly, in 2010 many in *Fidesz* were still against Russian energy, including Janos Lazar, who himself spoke against Russian nuclear energy in 2010 but who was already preparing this deal from August 2013 in

against Russian energy, including Janos Lazar, who himself spoke out against Russian nuclear energy. Further, the Russian *Kommersant* has divulged that South Stream was also involved in the Paks 2 contract³⁵, despite the fact that by that time it already was considered against European law (a fact that the European Commission specifically transmitted in December 2013 to Moscow and Budapest). This further suggests that the Paks deal was about more than just nuclear energy — it also involved further increasing energy dependence on Russia and trying to undermine European law. Moreover, on the last day of January, us Senator John McCain met with Orbán and conveyed American worries about the project. On 2 February and on subsequent days thousands protested against the plan, but still nothing changed.

In February 2014 Russia attacked Ukraine and annexed the Crimean peninsula, but this also did not change the Hungarian government's attitude toward Russia. Instead, Orbán began his stance opposing sanctions on Russia at this time, as a response to the lacklustre Western sanctions. Meanwhile a referendum on the topic is forbidden by Hungary's Basic Law (i.e. constitution), with the High Court also backing the decision, quoting that international conventions cannot be subjected to referenda, preventing even the theoretical opportunity for the opposition to organise voters around the issue.

In October Fidesz started talking again about building South Stream, citing its sovereignty; an NGO called Corruption Research Center Budapest meanwhile published a study, warning that Paks 2 severely lacks brakes to stop corruption and has high risks of becoming riddled with it.³⁶

secret. Horváth, B. (2014, January 17). Videón is látható, ahogy Orbán puccsról beszél az orosz energetikai szerződés miatt. *444.hu*. <https://444.hu/2014/01/17/videon-is-lathato-ahogy-Orban-puccsrol-beszeli-az-orosz-energetikai-szerzodes-miatt/>. Herczeg, M. (2015, January 14). Egy éve írta alá Orbán titokban a paksi szerződést — ami miatt aztán a teljes kormány bohócot csinált magából. *444.hu*. <https://444.hu/2015/01/14/paks-evforulo-2014-2015-Orban-putyin-moszkva-kreml-atomeromu-energetika>.

³⁵ Magyari, P. (2014, January 16). Mégis lehet gázos vonal az atompaktumban. *444.hu*. <https://444.hu/2014/01/16/brusszel-ellen-kellenek-a-magyarok-az-oroszoknak/>.

³⁶ The study of Fazekas, M., Főző, Z., Tóth, I. J. (2014). Az Energiaklub megbízásából Az atomerőmű-beruházások korrupciós kockázatai: mire számíthatunk Paks II esetében? *Energiaklub*. https://energiaklub.hu/files/study/korrupcios_kockazatok_paks.pdf.

Some issues named are the lack of transparency and public tenders, the lack of measures to prevent corruption, the incentives for the Russian party hidden in the project to build slowly — especially as corruption is most prominent when delays and unforeseen costs appear.

In February 2015 Putin also visited Orbán personally in Budapest, already after the introduction of some Western sanctions. The visit is considered not to have actually produced anything on the topic of energy, despite that being the justification used by the Hungarian government for the visit's importance in this sensitive time. The visit felt more like a tour de force of Putin to prove he can still move in NATO territory unimpeded.³⁷ Hungarian independent news portal 444.hu reported, based on an 'unofficial source' that it seemed to the Russian leadership that it will have to rely on Hungary to stop sanctions against Russia.³⁸

Paks 2 went on without major criticism from the West and soon started experiencing delays, until the 2022 full scale invasion of Ukraine has changed the West's views on Russia. While Russia was the main partner in the project, Siemens was to have an important role in developing the control system. However the Hungarian and German governments got into a conflict over this and other deals and, in June 2023, it was announced that the French company Framatome will replace Siemens.³⁹ Even now the issue of completely replacing the Russian partner with Western companies is not settled. On 22 September 2023 Rosatom claimed that all hurdles in the way of construction have been removed.⁴⁰ Despite the many Western sanctions, nuclear energy is still mostly spared for now and the Hungarian government signalled that the

³⁷ Magyari, P. (2015, February 16). Putyin idejön, hogy mutassa: idejöhet. *444.hu*. <https://444.hu/2015/02/16/idejon-putyin-hogy-mutassa-johet/>.

³⁸ Though later the decision on sanctions was delayed and Greek elections provided him with a new pro-Russian government even more willing to support him publicly.

³⁹ HVG.hu (2023, June 7). Szijjártó: Paks II. német helyett francia irányítástechnikát kaphat. https://hvg.hu/gazdasag/20230607_Nemet_helyett_francia_iranyitastechnikat_kap_Paks_II_Szijjarto_szerint.

⁴⁰ HVG.hu (2023). Roszatom: minden akadály elhárult a Paks II. beruházás elől. https://hvg.hu/gazdasag/20230922_paksi_bovites_paksi_atomeromu_Paks_II_Alekszej_Lihacsov_Roszatom_Magyar_Levente_Kulgaszdasagi_es_Kulugyminiszterium_Szjarto_Peter.

project will go on without removing the Russian partner⁴¹ (the Finnish Olkiluoto plant did remove their Russian partner in 2022, proving that it is not impossible). The Hungarian government keeps choosing this path despite Western sanctions that are highly unlikely to be loosened for years; instead there is a risk that they will be even more strict and could delay the project by years if major changes become necessary later. Currently *Fidesz* maintains that it will veto anything that would sanction Russian nuclear energy export.

2 The ‘Spy Bank’ in the heart of Budapest

The International Investment Bank, originally founded by the Soviet Union in 1970, is also a highly prominent case of Russian ‘investment’ pouring into Hungary and a case of building a vehicle for regional and international influence. As a remnant of Soviet times, not too long ago it would have been unimaginable for *Fidesz* voters that their party would be the one to invite the Bank to move its headquarters to Budapest in 2019, into a culturally important building for Hungarians bought with support from Hungarian taxpayers’ money. Hungary, along with Poland, left the Bank in 2000, under the first Orbán government — unlike other members, who only left or announced their imminent exit after the full-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022⁴² (Romania, Bulgaria, the Czech Republic, Slovakia).⁴³ Hungary started the procedure to regain its membership in 2012, ratified it in 2015, and started the procedure to host the new headquarters, signalling that a forceful turn toward Russia was already starting in 2012.

41 Infostart.hu (2023, June 5). Egyeztettek az oroszokkal, itt a bejelentés Paks 2 ügyében. <https://infostart.hu/gazdasag/2023/06/05/egyeztettek-az-oroszokkal-itt-a-bejelentes-paks-2-ugyeben#>.

42 Atlatszo.hu (2019, July 15). A visegrádi országok közül csak Magyarország fogadta be az orosz háttérű befektetési bankot. <https://atlatszo.hu/kozpenz/2019/07/15/a-visegrad-orosz-kozul-csak-mi-fogadtuk-tart-karokkal-az-orosz-hatteru-befektetesi-bankot/>.

43 Emerging Europe (2023, April 13). The end of emerging Europe’s involvement in Russia’s ‘opaque’ development bank. *Emerging Europe*. <https://emerging-europe.com/news/the-end-of-emerging-europes-involvement-in-russias-opaque-development-bank/>.

Eventually, at the end in 2023 Hungary, as the Bank's last EU member, also announced that it will leave. It is clear that the only reason for it is that the Bank is unable to function anymore due to US pressure. Foreign Minister Peter Szijjarto initially even said⁴⁴ that Hungarian share would grow with the exit of other states — but the sanctions made Bank operations no longer viable.⁴⁵

The Bank is not nicknamed the 'Spy Bank' merely for being a remnant of more oppressive times. The fact that its employees had diplomatic immunity, together with visas for their families and guests ensured access to the Schengen zone for a large number of people, while the Russian Embassy in Budapest is already hosting a suspiciously large number of diplomats — in fact while European countries sent home at least 400 Russian diplomats since 2021, in Hungary their number increased by a third⁴⁶ in 2022; it decreased somewhat in 2023.

To make matters worse, it is already known that Hungarian diplomatic cover was used by at least two GRU officers to orchestrate an explosion in Vrbotice, Czech Republic, in 2014, as uncovered by *Bellingcat*.⁴⁷ And yet the drastic expansion in the number of Russian state employees in a NATO and EU state could have continued almost unimpeded were it not for the bloody war started in 2014 in the neighbouring country, showing that elite capture and the open nature of EU countries is currently open to even clandestine operations with barely any consequences. In the end it took US pressure to slow down the expansion of the Bank's employee numbers before the invasion, as Washington was

44 RTL.hu (2022, March 7). Szijjártó Péter: Magyarország nem lép ki a Nemzetközi Beruházási Bankból, tag marad egyetlen EU-tagként. <https://rtl.hu/gazdasag/2022/03/07/szijjarto-nemzetkozi-beruhazasi-bank>.

45 The official site of the Government of Hungary (2023). Magyarország kilép a Nemzetközi Beruházási Bankból. <https://kormany.hu/hirek/magyarorszag-kilep-a-nemzetkozi-beruhazasi-bankbol>.

46 Szalai, B. (2023, April 19). Furcsán változik a budapesti orosz nagykövetség létszáma. *Szabad Európa*. <https://www.szabadeuropa.hu/a/orosz-nagykovetseg-letszam/32366851.html>.

47 Bellingcat Investigation Team (2021, April 20). Senior GRU Leader Directly Involved With Czech Arms Depot Explosion. <https://www.bellingcat.com/news/2021/04/20/senior-gru-leader-directly-involved-with-czech-arms-depot-explosion/>.

worried about Russian influence after Crimea. However, even American persuasiveness was not enough to completely drive the Bank out of Hungary at the time.⁴⁸ In fact, the US was so concerned with the state of Hungarian democracy and position of Russia and China within the state that it decided in 2019 to relaunch⁴⁹ Radio Free Europe in Hungary, a Cold War era project intended to penetrate the Iron Curtain with information. This is symbolic not just as the failure of Hungary to maintain basic standards of the Western world, but also because it shows a great failure on the part of the EU to be a force that is able to keep its members on the bare minimum path of rule of law and democracy.

To go further in studying the Bank, an institution that the Hungarian government likes to claim is just interested in business and the Bank itself used to claim that it was not Russian, but an international initiative. Researchers such as Andras Racz have pointed out that the founding documents clearly outline that the institute's Russian president is the one who can in practice make decisions, and the Board of Governors and the Board of Directors need four-fifths of the votes. This in practice ensures that any decision taken is agreed to by Russia, the largest shareholder (46.3% in 2019⁵⁰). President Nikolay Kosov claimed that there was no political influence in the Bank but it was clearly important for the Hungarian government to show strong political support, and Prime Minister Viktor Orbán personally hosted a delegation in his office in January 2019.⁵¹

48 Panyi, S. (2019, October 30). Viktor Orbán promised something to Vladimir Putin, but the U.S. intervened. *Direkt36.hu*. <https://www.direkt36.hu/en/Orban-igert-valamit-putyinnak-de-amerika-kozbeszolt/>.

49 Novak, B. (2019, September 6). Radio Free Europe Is Poised to Return to a Less Free Hungary — The New York Times. *The New York Times*. <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/09/06/world/europe/radio-free-europe-hungary-Orban.html>.

50 Atlatszo.hu (2019, July 15). A visegrádi országok közül csak Magyarország fogadta be az orosz háttérű befektetési bankot. <https://atlatszo.hu/kozpenz/2019/07/15/a-visegrad-orszagok-kozul-csak-mi-fogadtuk-tart-karokkal-az-orosz-hatteru-befektetesi-bankot/>

51 HVG.hu (2023, April 12). Amit az orosz "kémbankról" röviden tudni kell. https://hvg.hu/itthon/20230412_A_budapest-orosz_kembank_vezetoi_is_felkerultek_az_amerikai_szankcios_listara.

The Bank had already financed investments in tourism, agriculture, and healthcare. The Hungarian government treats agriculture as an important strategic sector where it wants to reduce foreign shares, yet Russian influence does not seem to be treated as challenging Hungarian control. In Slovakia the Bank was more interested in an even more strategic sector: energy⁵², a well-known pathway of Russian influence in the region. Hungarian energy investment was also on the rise, but cut short by sanctions, ending with MOL and MET getting some loans.

3 Transmashholding and links to Russian weapons manufacturing

Before Kristóf Szalay-Bobrovniczky became the Hungarian Minister of Defence in May 2022 and while being the Hungarian ambassador to the UK (2016–2020) his name began appearing in business ventures where both the Russian and Hungarian states had interest. His name even appeared in March 2022 as a person whose business ventures continued with sanctioned Russians⁵³ through the rail equipment manufacturer Transmashholding, yet this still was not reason enough for Fidesz to avoid naming him as Minister of Defence in a NATO state. The company has interests in the Russian weapons manufacturing industry as well, through its subsidiaries — perhaps not too surprising, given the special role of rail in Russia’s warfighting doctrine.

In 2019 the Russian giant, together with the Hungarian Magyar Vagon Zrt. founded the Hungarian based companies ТМН Hungary Invest Zrt. and Transmashholding Hungary Kft., each with 50/50 Hungarian and Russian participation. In the Hungarian branch of controlling companies chief was Magyar Vagon Zrt., in which Szalay-Bobrovniczky was the sole owner, meaning he controlled the Hungarian participation in the joint ventures. Transmashholding was mentioned earlier in Hungarian news already in an unflattering light: in 2015 the Russian company won

⁵² Atlaszo.hu (2019, July 15).

⁵³ Fülöp, I. (2022, March 25). Pénz beszél: a NER-lovag, aki tovább üzletel a szankciós listán szereplő oroszokkal. *HVG.hu*. https://hvg.hu/360/202212__szalaybobrovniczky__egyiptomi_biznisz__orosz_kapcsolatok__nyilt_palya.

the modernisation tender for the M3 metroline after the original terms were modified to favour it and disqualify a better offer.⁵⁴ Sources in the media say that a strong political lobbying activity was going on, suggesting that the initial win was at least partially based on old contacts with Russian figures.⁵⁵ Despite the tender leaving unsatisfactory results for the metroline operators and travellers, producing high costs and unsatisfactory quality, Metrovagonmash, a subsidiary of Transmashholding, together with its parent company kept growing in Hungary. Metrovagonmash has likely kept up business (including providing spare parts) with Budapest until January 2023 despite growing sanctions on Russian exports, and it was hit with US sanctions for being involved in Russian weapons manufacturing, though only in May 2023.⁵⁶

In 2018 a tender for local rails was launched to modernise cars and rail lines, with Alstom and Stadler reportedly submitting strong offers.⁵⁷ Stadler at this time had good work relations with the Hungarian state rail company MAV as a supplier. Transmashholding, according to media sources⁵⁸, also wanted to take part, but it did not even manage to comply with the basic requirements. Transmashholding did not accept that it could not take part and attacked the decision at the court but as it was lacking experience with European track gauges, a sensible requirement, it soon lost the appeals. This however did not prove to be fatal, and the political lobby of the Russians and businessmen connected to Szalay-Bobrovniczky in the end still managed to achieve the cancellation of the initial tender (the official reasoning said the prices were too high) and it was relaunched in 2021.⁵⁹ The business has stalled since, but it is

54 Atlaszo.hu (2016, February 10).

55 Atlaszo.hu (2016, February 10).

56 Office of the US Spokesperson (2023, May 19). United States Imposes Additional Sanctions and Export Controls on Russia. <https://www.state.gov/united-states-imposes-additional-sanctions-and-export-controls-on-russia/>.

57 Dömötör, B. (2021, March 18). Az oroszok kedvéért indíthatják újra a HÉV-tendert. *Telex*. <https://telex.hu/belfold/2021/03/18/belfold-budapest-hev-tender-oroszorszag>.

58 Szabó, A., Panyi, S. (2021, March 18). Russia missed the HUF 200 billion HÉV-tender, but they got a new chance. *444.hu*. <https://444.hu/2021/03/18/lemaradtak-a-200-milliardos-hev-tenderrol-az-oroszok-de-most-uj-eselyt-kapnak>.

59 Szabó, A., Panyi, S. (2021, March 18).

clear that this manoeuvre was made to appease the Russians, regardless of an inferior offer.

In 2018 Transmashholding also got a huge boost from the Hungarian state — at the expense of a Hungarian company. In 2016 Egypt needed 700 railcars and the old and well known Hungarian company Ganz Group came close to winning the bid — but it never got to sign, as it needed the support of the state-owned Eximbank Hungary which withdrew and redirected its support to Transmashholding's Hungarian subsidiary.⁶⁰ Ganz thus suffered a loss of 1.6 billion euro⁶¹ in a country where it had long standing good relations and where it sold railway equipment since the Communist regime. Little is factually known of the reasons, but it is clear that the Hungarian government has undermined a well working international business deal of a Hungarian company to help a Russian state owned business. It also seems that the highest levels were involved, as Putin and Orbán have likely discussed the issue personally.⁶² After 2022 the Russians sold their shares⁶³ in these companies; but it seems to be a safe bet to say that were it not for the crackdown on Russian business after the full scale invasion of Ukraine, it is likely that this Russian-influenced network would have kept growing.

Signs of this network are not merely domestic or present in faraway Arab states. Kristóf Szalay-Bobrovniczky's name also appeared in the acquisition of shares in the Czech Aero Vodochody, a producer of military and training jet aircraft, again with the involvement of Eximbank Hungary.⁶⁴ This should have provoked bigger waves in the region, as it is not

⁶⁰ Szabó, A., Panyi, S. (2021, March 18).

⁶¹ Szabó, A. (2018, April 24). How Viktor Orbán's government is favoring the Russians over a Hungarian company in a big business deal. *Direkt36*. <https://www.direkt36.hu/en/egy-magyar-ceg-majdnem-elnyert-egy-nagy-uzletet-aztan-az-Orban-kormany-inkabb-allt-az-orosz-rivalis-moge/>.

⁶² Szabó, A. (2018, April 24).

⁶³ Domokos, E., (2022, June 29). Az oroszok ki, Hernádi és Tombor beszálltak a magyar vagongyártásba. *Economx.hu*. <https://www.economx.hu/magyar-vallalatok/hernadi-szalay-bobrovniczky-tombor-dunakeszi-jarmujaviro-transmashholding-orosz.755167.html>

⁶⁴ The New Voice of Ukraine (2023, February 25). Kremlin pulls economic strings to influence Viktor Orbán's regime in Hungary. <https://news.yahoo.com/kremlin-pulls-economic-strings-influence-123000911.html>.

a Hungarian domestic issue if a businessman well connected to Russia becomes an owner in a company connected to NATO technology, yet both the Czech and Slovak authorities remained publicly quite silent on the topic.⁶⁵ The fact that the same businessman has become the Hungarian Minister of Defence should also be a worrying sign. Szalay-Bobrovniczky also started firing officers after his appointment, and it has been suspected by opposition members such as *Demokratikus Koalíció* vice president Agnes Vadai that officers who had more extensive work relationship with the NATO headquarters might have been targeted⁶⁶ — though this claim is debated by experts. Gaining ownership in Aero Vodochody is problematic as it is said that Hungary is already recognised as an untrustworthy NATO member and there are intelligence operations and data not shared with the country (from before 2017).⁶⁷ The successful acquisition of Aero Vodochody is a reminder that malicious actors can easily use the open nature of the EU to penetrate a weakly defended country, shroud the activities in complicated ownership networks and spread undisturbed, using political connections that otherwise would not be available in the target.⁶⁸

4 MET — the alleged piggy bank

Russia is interested in a wide range of ‘business’ opportunities with willing actors, even if it loses money or its contracts are practically breached. MET Group, initially a subsidiary of MOL, but now a Swiss company

⁶⁵ Hudec, M., Makszimov, V. (2022, June 13). Czechia, Slovakia keep mum on Hungarian defence minister’s Russia ties. *Euractiv.com*. https://www.euractiv.com/section/politics/short_news/czechia-slovakia-keep-mum-on-hungarian-defence-ministers-russia-ties/.

⁶⁶ Bozzay, B. (2023, January 27). Sok katonatisztet eltávolítanak, egyesek NATO-mentesítést, mások észszerű reformot látnak. *Telex*. <https://telex.hu/belfold/2023/01/27/hadsereg-katonasag-honvedseg-tiszt-ezredes-tabornok-leepites-elbocsatas>.

⁶⁷ Panyi, S. (2017, March 21). Egy magyar titkosszolga részletesen felfedi, mennyire súlyos az orosz fenyegetés. *Index.hu*. <https://index.hu/belfold/2017/03/21/titkosszolga-orosz-fenyegetes-romagyilkosság-interju/>.

⁶⁸ Bőtös, B. (2021, September 29). „Legrosszabb a Covidban, legjobb a gyűlöletben” — Orbán ellen tüntettek Prágában. *Átlátszó*. <https://dotoho.atlatszo.hu/2021/09/29/legrosszabb-a-covidban-legjobb-a-gyuloletben-Orban-ellen-tuntettek-pragaban/>.

with a reinvented and cleaned-up image, started out as a beneficiary of the Hungarian state abusing its Russian gas contract. As one could suspect, this also likely involved corruption, as shown by the Corruption Research Center Budapest's study.⁶⁹ They show that there are traits of state capture in how the deal was conducted. The contract involved an opportunity for a company named MVMP to use a large share of the Hungarian-Austrian gas pipelines between 2011–2015 for free.⁷⁰ Using the Hungarian government's utility cost reduction programme (which also fixed gas prices) to avoid going through a tender, the company bought gas from MET (a then Hungarian-Russian owned company) on the Austrian side of the border, pumped it for free over the border and sold it back to MET with a small profit. At this time, fixed Hungarian gas prices led to Western gas being cheaper than the Hungarian average price, so MET made a higher profit, but the state and the consumers all lost on the deal. According to experts in the energy sector the chart of people who probably benefited includes Megdet Rahimkulov, who was MET owner at the time and whose family is still the richest in Hungary, mainly by holding shares in OTP and MOL; Ilya Trubnikov, a secretive Canadian-Russian businessman; and Prime Minister Orbán and President Vladimir Putin.⁷¹ In fact, it is rumoured that MET is to this day ultimately Orbán Viktor's personal piggy bank⁷². While there is no definitive data, a notable event mentioned was when, in 2014, Orbán appeared suddenly at a Swiss event of a Hungarian Transylvanian choir. It is rumoured that the true goal was not to enjoy some music but for

69 Energiaklub (2016, October 26). Járadekvadászat és a haveri kapitalizmus modelljei a magyar energiapiacra (2011–2015). <https://energiaklub.hu/tanulmany/jaradekvadaszat-es-a-haveri-kapitalizmus-modelljei-a-magyar-energiapiacra-2011-2015-4431>.

70 The Budapest Beacon (2015, January 14). Billions diverted from Hungary state coffers to natural gas broker. <https://budapestbeacon.com/billions-diverted-from-hungary-state-coffers-to-natural-gas-broker/>.

71 Alliance For Securing Democracy (2019, April 25). Illicit Influence — Part Two — The Energy Weapon. <https://securingdemocracy.gmfus.org/illlicit-influence-part-two-energy-weapon/>.

72 Magyarai, P. (2014, November 12). Svájci gázüzlethez kapcsolják Orbán családi utazásait. <https://444.hu/2014/11/12/svajci-gazuzlethez-kapcsoljak-Orban-csaladi-utazasait/>.

Orbán to meet bankers and MET representatives. Later it also turned out that the choir, invited by the Hungarian ambassador in Switzerland, was sponsored by MET itself.⁷³

From business narratives to geopolitics

Looking back at how deals with Russia, their presentation to the public, and the general language of *Fidesz* have changed throughout the years, a pattern emerges. What was initially just a ‘good deal’ (like Russian nuclear energy) or ‘simply an unavoidable necessity’ (like Russian gas) has grown to become imbued with further meaning, if not a complete worldview. A ‘healthy balance’ between East and West trade deals has morphed to an opposition to Western values with Eastern connections supposedly giving a counterbalance to Western influence; anti-American rhetorics is today far more prevalent than just a few years ago, while Putin appears in an almost positive light, but at the very least as not bearing responsibility and not being a war criminal.⁷⁴

As Hungary started out traumatised from the Cold War, the crushing of the 1956 revolution and the economic challenges after the Communist regime’s end, a general ‘Russophobic’ attitude was widely present, especially among *Fidesz* voters. Orbán himself gained nation-wide fame for the first time when he called for Soviet troops to leave the country. Yet the old Russian contacts and presumably operatives made by former governments, and new money and shady deals managed to capture the elite so much that currently even the voters show anti-Western and pro-Russian attitudes, despite their history and despite Hungary lacking either Slavic nationalist or Orthodox elements, which play important role in regional countries where there is a pro-Russian minority. This

⁷³ Magyari, P. (2015, June 19). A MET fizette a székely kórus szállását, amikor Svájcban Orbán Viktor meghallgatta őket. *444.hu*. <https://444.hu/2015/06/19/a-met-fizette-a-szekely-korus-szallasat-amikor-svajcban-Orban-viktor-meghallgatta-oket>.

⁷⁴ Coakley, A. (2022, August 3). Putin’s Trojan Horse Inside the European Union. *Foreign Policy*. <https://foreignpolicy.com/2022/08/03/hungary-Orban-russia-conservative-politics/>.

shows that Russian (and increasingly Chinese) influence can take hold, grow, and finally influence voters almost anywhere, even if the environment initially does not seem conducive to it.

The influence of the remnants of the Soviet intelligence network is outside the scope of this paper, but it should be mentioned that Janos Szeky's excellent book *Sheep-blindness: How did Hungary become like this?* enumerates it among the three main factors behind the current state of the Hungarian political system.⁷⁵

Solution

So what is to be done from a liberal standpoint? As a general Europe-wide measure, reducing dependence in sectors where a few dictatorships rule should be an aim. In the energy sector the war has helped leapfrog energy source diversification. Progress on more renewable energy deployment will increase our national security and reduce the potential for potentially corrupt deals as well. While more limited, this would also help in captured states by reducing the already existing influence. The future holds other similar cases, especially in relation to China (e.g. Hungary in the last year has signed for a large amount of Chinese battery factories). Europe needs to learn from the mistakes committed in relation to Russia, such as trusting that economic development and trade automatically brings more liberalism to autocracies and allowing state sponsored distortions in the global market. This should not imply though that trade (including with China) is not highly beneficial in terms of economic growth and reductions in global poverty. What we should be more sceptical of is the kind of 'managed trade' encouraged by Hungary's current Eastern policy.

On the local level more transparency and accountability should also be promoted — people should know if there are deals made by the elites of their countries with risky countries; if these deals involve corrupt or

⁷⁵ Szeky, J. (2015). *Bárányvakság — Hogyan lett ilyen Magyarország?* Budapest: Kalligram.

criminal elements; if the deals are constructed in a way to allow for corruption and relatedly blackmailing later (as it was in the case of Paks 2). This takes time and effort, and the current financially struggling media is not able to take it on alone, as used to be the case, especially in the eastern part of Europe where ownership of publications is a further problem. Liberals should also expand their horizons — corruption is increasingly not about illicit money changing hands at the time of a deal, but often it takes the form of ‘revolving doors’ — well paying jobs and positions offered later. Legislation also needs to constrain the possibility for such methods, preferably both nationally and on the European scale. We should also raise awareness early on that there are rarely truly pure business deals between governments and political parties — we need to be mindful of what one party gains and offers beyond merely the financial aspects when such a deal is planned. As we have seen in the EU, cheap energy is initially a good economic offer — but the threat of price hikes suddenly turns a good economic proposition into weapons of political influence. Investment can also work with an initial offer of investment from state owned companies that can be seen as a purely economic and good offer that creates jobs. However, once the investment is in place it also opens up the threat of destroying these jobs — suddenly creating a pressure point on the domestic voters. Many other examples could be made, but the point is that liberal forces should scrutinise the business partners. Does politics have control over the other side? What are their incentives? To what type of new dependence might the host become subject? People in charge of lucrative deals also become dependent on the income; they can also be groomed for increasingly more important positions. Their lobbying activities should be scrutinised for irregularities. In short, liberals should strongly oppose ‘crony capitalism’ in all its forms, as the root of many problems highlighted in the paper.

The hardest problem that remains is that of countries that are already deep in state capture, such as Hungary. In countries where there is still a significant opposition and a relatively strong media presence, the scrutiny has to focus more on the existing vulnerabilities and the existing foreign narrative elements, and should be vociferously criticised.

Populist governments are usually talking about strengthening national sovereignty while selling out to unpleasant foreign actors — this hypocrisy should not be left without criticism. The reduction in national sovereignty can find a broader audience than often expected or that is usually open to liberal voices. There are also often other sides to such deals that the public would be interested in, such as higher prices due to market inefficiency, worse quality of service or a disadvantageous economic outcome for the host country — all of them often coming with suspicious transfers of wealth to groups close to the decision makers. These are also good ways to generate wide interest, wider than what foreign influence in itself would elicit.

There is however a level, such as Hungary finds itself, where the media and the public space is so formidably dominated by the ruling party, and the opposition is so fractured that it is near impossible to raise such issues. Any significant topics are rapidly crowded out by artificially generated noise or just a barrage of negating. People raising issues become targets of character assassinations and the narratives around investments are so well entrenched and so developed that dismantling them could mean having to change the whole worldview of large swaths of voters, while other large groups were pushed into apathy earlier and are practically impossible to reach. At this stage the problem is not a local one anymore. Europe has to realise that it is deeply vulnerable to foreign influence in ways that nation states are not. The example of the US involvement in stopping the 'Spy Bank' shows clearly that there are issues where only international pressure can stop a captured elite in its way. Liberals have to think about Europe as a whole, not just separate countries, as open borders mean not just trade but open access for malign influence as well. Today Hungary is already in the stage where its leaders have bought in the Russian and Chinese narratives of the world, but enough applied pressure makes them follow the European path. The proposed measures above are very hard for individual media companies or NGOs to pursue, but nothing is stopping media, NGOs, or governments in other countries to take on the role. The first step is to recognise, as the US did with the reintroduction of *Radio Free Europe*, that outside help has become a necessity. Liberals thus should be in favour of Europe-wide measures

to combat corruption, foreign intelligence operations, defence, energy security and security in general, improvements in justice, promoting media freedom and so on. Our immunity to malign influence is much like our immunity to a pandemic: ‘no one is safe until everyone is safe’.

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Europe needs to learn from the mistakes committed in relation to Russia, such as trusting that economic development and trade automatically brings more liberalism to autocracies and allowing state sponsored distortions in the global market.

ZSÓFIA NASZÁDOS | ERNŐ BUZÁS

Shaping Bulgarian Politics — With Love From Russia

Context and complexity of the problem

MILA MOSHELOVA

Although at the heart of geopolitics due to their geography, the countries of Central and Eastern Europe (CEE) for a long time did not themselves have much heart for foreign policy matters, especially after their NATO and European Union accessions. The Russian invasion of Ukraine left CEE countries with no alternative, however — after over 30 years of relative geopolitical restraint, the war put them in the spotlight.

It ended long-established mental constructs of a division that Western and Eastern Europe had both for themselves and each other along the lines of economic, political, and social development. Poland and Hungary, Bulgaria and Romania, North Macedonia and Serbia were often paired on a number of indicators in various studies. Their stance on the Russian aggression showed that their elites and societies are much more dissimilar including when assessing Russian penetration over the years. This choice also meant that Europeans on both sides of the new-old divide regarding the role of Russia in Europe had to come to terms with not only how they and their neighbours perceive reality but also how they shape their own role in it.

While the cases of Russian meddling in us elections, the campaign behind Brexit, and the mechanisms of Cambridge Analytica invoked shock and amazement in Western democracies, the mechanics of political manipulation via cyber warfare, disinformation on social media, and political discourse have been at play in post-socialist countries for at

least two decades. The CEE counties ‘represent one of the most vulnerable regions in Europe to foreign malign influence.’¹ Bulgaria is a telling example of a fruitful testing ground for Russia’s disinformation campaigns and Kremlin strategies since at least 2013 and it paints a picture which is applicable beyond the specific case itself.

The main processes that contextualise why the country is particularly susceptible to Russian narratives include:

- The transformation of Russian political influence into economic influence following democratic transitions post-1989;
- Core socio-political beliefs and perception of cultural proximity with Russia based on historical interpretations in some of the CEE countries; and
- Popular democratic disillusionment, strong distrust of institutions, and persistent governance deficits.

This paper offers an overview of the type and stream of Kremlin narratives, their main features and their main channels of dissemination — from social media to speakers at the highest institutional level.

From past to present

Historically, the relationship between Bulgaria and Russia is quite diverse.

It is manifested in trade relations, dependency in the energy sector, strong ties between large businesses and economic circles, all the way to loyalties infiltrated to subvert and influence political institutions and the social fabric from within. Thus, channels of Russian influence stretch from informal and covert to openly unapologetic.

A throwback to the 1990s shows how Russian influence over the political system in the country is well crafted and warmly accommodated by local elites. The country’s path also resembles the post-1991 transformation of Russia itself: economic power concentration, capture and in some

¹ CSD (2021). *Tackling Kremlin’s Media Capture in Southeast Europe*. Sofia: CSD, 11, 17. In the original, this quote refers to the counties in Southeast Europe as Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Bulgaria, Croatia, Kosovo, Montenegro, North Macedonia, and Serbia.

cases demise of independent media outlets, facade judicial system, few individuals and circles holding significant control over key sectors, rise of hostile nationalism under the guise of pro-democratic patriotism. In particular, a significant portion of Russian influence is channelled via one of the critical sectors which have remained almost ‘hermetically’ closed to competition: the (traditional and state-owned part of the) energy sector which provides a steady cash flow for the pro-Russian actors in the country.² Some highlights that show the depth of financial dealings with Russia and raise questions about Bulgarian energy security are:

- 1 Strong dependency on energy imports from Russia — around 70% in 2020³ — and, as a result, high trade deficit with Russia since 1989 in a country highly dependent on oil and gas prices. This is a key instrument in maintaining financial and structural vulnerability of a whole economic sector.
- 2 Little effort has been made to diversify energy sources or develop domestic reserves while construction of strategic energy connector projects are either delayed or framed in the interests of Russia. The building of the ‘Turkish Stream’ in favour of Russian interests (with a Saudi contractor but built by Russian companies) with little to no added value for Bulgaria in terms of easing dependency⁴ is a key example. The only real alternative for diversification — a connector with Greece — was promised and delayed for years while domination of Gazprom and Lukoil (only oil refinery in the country) continued.

2 Prof. Evgeniy Kanev cited in *Capital*, 23 August, 2022 https://www.capital.bg/politika_i_ikonomika/redakcionni_komentari/2022/08/23/4382825_v_efira_techegaz/?fbclid=IwAR05GDsh2Iz3SRc_SJuRCmlisuEr2nUDH9rWEkUIFOaTwSATYuhkl-30PUwM. Prof Kanev also makes the argument that the other key sector is the Security sector (first the State Security and now the military) which protects the political interests of this establishment.

3 Kirchev, K. (2022, January 28). What is traded between Bulgaria and Russia. *Capital Weekly*. https://www.capital.bg/politika_i_ikonomika/ikonomika/2022/01/28/4306595_kakvo_se_turguva_mejdu_bulgariia_i_rusiia/.

4 Stanchev, E. (2020, December 28). Don't call it “Turkish Stream”. It is entirely Russian. *Capital*. https://kingsights.capital.bg/energy/2020/10/15/4153553_dont_call_it_turkish_stream_it_is_entirely_russian/.

3 The construction of the Belene nuclear power plant has never been finalised and, since 1981, it has cost 2.5 billion euro in investment on top of purchased reactors and equipment, fines of 601 million euro to Rosatom for unused reactors, and numerous studies to justify its existence.⁵

Surely, a society with robust democratic values would likely respond with scepticism and scrutiny if another country's economic interests were imposed on it by its own elected representatives. The reason for fact and perception to miss each other by miles is very much rooted in the core beliefs and socio-political attitudes in the country. Despite the pro-European path, mixed emotions on overall East-West divide have persisted in Bulgaria. For example, to the GLOBSEC 2021 report question 'There has recently been much discussion in our society about the geopolitical and civilisational positioning of your country. Would you like your country to be a part of the West, a part of the East or somewhere in between?', 25% of Bulgarians responded with 'West' and 9% with 'East' (understood mainly as pro-Russia) in 2020⁶ compared to 46% and 7% respectively in North Macedonia, for example. Bulgaria has the second lowest pro-West score after Serbia among Hungary, Poland, Czechia, Slovakia, Montenegro, Romania. At the same time only 3% of people perceived Russia as a danger to the country in 2020, the lowest percentage out of all examined countries, compared to 68% in Poland, the highest. Factors like Poland's history and proximity to Ukraine, of course need to be taken into account, but the huge gap does indicate how uncritical the Bulgarian population is of Russia, its role, and its intentions in the region.

⁵ Ahmadzay, E., Stanchev, E. (2023, July 5). The Happy End for the corruption black hole Belene power plant. *Capital*. https://www.capital.bg/biznes/energetika/2023/07/05/4503988_shtastliviiaat_krai_na_aec_belene/. Mediapool (2016, December). Bulgaria paid Russia 1.2 billion lev for Belene. <https://www.mediapool.bg/bulgaria-plati-narusiya-12-mlrd-lv-za-aets-belene-news257574.html>.

⁶ GLOBSEC (2021). The image of Russia in Central & Eastern Europe and the Western Balkans Russia: mighty Slavic brother or hungry bear next-door? <https://www.globsec.org/sites/default/files/2021-04/Image-of-Russia-Mighty-Slavic-Brother-or-Hungry-Bear-Nextdoor.pdf>.

While Bulgarians are overall favourable of EU membership (70% in favour), the support for NATO membership has declined — the country is an ‘outlier’ in support for leaving NATO which increased between 2021 and 2022 of 13%.⁷ Yet, the Russian invasion of Ukraine in 2022 saw a significant shift towards greater support for EU and NATO membership — in 2023 it increased to 58% from 50% in 2022. However, even with this rise, Bulgarians still remain among the countries surveyed with the lowest level of support for Alliance membership.⁸ On the one hand, Russia is not perceived as much of a threat as elsewhere in the region. In addition, despite the majority Bulgarians being pro-democratic and pro-EU membership, the degrees of institutional trust remain low.⁹ Further, in the last few years attacks on liberal democratic values increased: especially in the cultural identity realm. During the third government (2017–2021) of centre-right GERB (in power since 2009 with small interruptions) in coalition with nationalist mini-coalition ‘United Patriots’ the anti-gender, anti-LGBTQI+ and strong socially-conservative narratives, opposition to North Macedonia joining the EU and anti-EU sentiments intensified. They were propagated by the nationalists and socialists and offered little to no alternative by the centre- and liberal-right. The EU and NATO have become more associated as a source of pressure for Bulgarian society to tolerate the above at the expense of the narrative for the benefits and opportunities from membership. This is mimicked in social and traditional media, by a number of public figures and a general anti-Western, anti-EU, and anti-NATO mood became stronger in this period. In opposition to these stands the image of the more traditional family and Orthodox Christian values, the unifying carrier of which Russia is often the best example.

7 GLOBSEC (2022). GLOBSEC Trends 2022. Bulgaria. <https://www.globsec.org/sites/default/files/2022-12/GLOBSEC%20Trends%202022%20Bulgaria%20%281%29.pdf>.

8 GLOBSEC (2023). GLOBSEC Trends 2023. ‘United (we still) stand’. <https://www.globsec.org/sites/default/files/2023-05/GLOBSEC%20Trends%202023.pdf>.

9 Open Society Institute — Sofia and the Centre for Liberal Strategies (2022). Bългарite vjarvat v demokracijata, no njamat doverie na instituciite i zakona. <https://osis.bg/?p=4224>.

This is in the context of a predominantly positive, submissive, and ‘big brother’ narrative of Russia in public discourse for decades despite the existence of dissident and strongly pro-democratic voices in the country. The historical narrative of ‘saviour’ and liberator from Ottoman rule, was dominant for most of the 20th century and remains largely unchallenged in public imagination even decades after Bulgaria’s Soviet satellite state status formally came to an end. Although there is no single image of Russia, the concepts of a common cultural heritage and Slavic unity are strongly situated in a framework of victimhood at the hands of the bad West and Russia’s military superiority is a strong one in Bulgaria. Political instability is another contributing factor to these processes. The country has had five rounds of parliamentary elections between April 2021 and April 2023¹⁰ and a series of caretaker governments appointed by pro-Kremlin president Rumen Radev (2017-present). From the outside it is easy to conclude that with such an electoral cycle Bulgaria is dysfunctional, chaotic, indecisive, or has voters who are too picky or even lazy to take their future in their own hands. Politicians in turn may seem non-consensual, stubborn, immature for grand coalitions, and lacking a bigger vision worth sacrificing smaller differences. But far from mere party disputes and a simply apathetic electorate, a closer look shows that its economic ties with Russia and subsequent political interests supported by a captured media landscape, heavily propagandised online space, and pro-Russian mainstream political voices underpin the inability of the country to form a stable government and to continue its Euro-Atlantic path with the certainty of a democratic country.

This dependency is not unavoidable yet the lack of political will to find alternatives to it was long missed before the start of the war in Ukraine and it has seen a strong fight put up by pro-Kremlin voices in the country. When at the end of April 2021 Gazprom halted deliveries insisting payments are made in rubles, the coalition government of Prime Minister Kiril Petkov (of the ‘We Continue the Change’ progressive pro-EU

¹⁰ Regular Parliamentary elections were held on 4 April 2021 followed by four rounds of early Parliamentary Elections were held on 11 July 2021; 14 November 2021; 2 October 2022; 4 April 2023.

liberal party) made history by ending this cycle despite doomsday predictions by all pro-Russian voices and the President and his associated public speakers. But to contextualise it better an overview of the predominant pro-Russian narratives in Bulgaria and their development over time is needed.

Core messages and online discourse: bottom-up

In a comprehensive study of media content in the period 2013–2016¹¹, the Human and Social Studies Foundation-Sofia shows that anti-democratic propaganda was disseminated by a wide circle of public actors within a wider national-populist framework.

In a later study of Russian propaganda in Bulgarian online media 2017–2022 the Human and Social Studies Foundation-Sofia¹² show that a ‘conspiratorial logic’ dominates in propaganda narratives where the US and NATO, as an ‘antagonist’ and ‘villain-puppeteer’, are manipulating and controlling their ‘puppets’ to exploit and dismantle their ‘victim’ — values, historical relations with Russia. Often the victim transforms into an active protagonist in the face of injustice and, depending on the context, changes its roles; while the ‘good’ Russia with its Christian Orthodox and traditional values and might is there to help save Bulgarians from the ‘evil’ liberal West. The change they observe though, is that the ‘Brussels puppets’ are added to this collective image of the West, yet the mode of articulation in the public space remains consistent.

The war in Ukraine brought a shock to this — while it has toned down, the open and direct propaganda in Bulgarian media became obvious at that point, the authors observe. So, the overall scope of the propaganda

11 Human and Social Studies Foundation — Sofia (2017). Anti-democratic propaganda in Bulgaria 2013 — 2016. Part one: Online information sites and pint media. https://hssfoundation.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/02/REPORT_PART1_BGN.pdf. Summary in English: https://hssfoundation.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/04/SUMMARY_REPORT_PART1_EN.pdf.

12 Human and Social Studies Foundation — Sofia (2022). The Russian Propaganda in Bulgarian Media 2017 — 2022. <https://hssfoundation.org/3970/>.

diminished, although the number and reach of it in online media expanded while the pool of its public speakers shrank. The end of dependency on Russian gas gave rise to one of the strongest pro-Russian narratives in public discourse in that period: that Bulgaria will be left with no gas at all during the winter, that cutting these ties is vehemently against its national interests and security, and that those opposing the purchase of Russian gas due to the war in Ukraine are essentially traitors. A further narrative development in the post-23 February 2022 context concerns weapons deliveries to Ukraine and the opposition to them. One is the necessity of Bulgaria to preserve its military arsenal for its own defence; two is the official policy of neutrality for the country, along with calls for negotiations and peace as core arguments against supporting Ukraine.

By the end of 2022, Russian propaganda in the online space in Bulgaria rose almost 20 times, compared to 2021.¹³ The two peaks were observed at the beginning and the end of the year. While at the start of 2022 the spread of the Russian viewpoint was only a matter of a limited number of so-called online media aggregators, by the end of 2022 it multiplied into 370 websites which in turn multiplied the spread of each message by 400 times. Throughout the course of the year these aggregators displaced genuine websites in their spread. In addition, the study¹⁴ reports significant Facebook activity in 2022 — it identified 25,692 posts in groups and 19,987 in pages, generating over 7.6 million interactions. The majority of such pages which spread propaganda to a larger audience are entertaining rather than informative thus targeting the audience indirectly to begin with.

Not all false information resonates though — for instance, belief in the effectiveness of Russian weapons declined, and approval of Russian President Vladimir Putin dropped threefold.¹⁵ Yet, there are narratives that strongly affect public opinion — such as that Bulgaria supports Ukraine due to its domination by Euro-Atlantic partners, not because

¹³ Human and Social Studies Foundation — Sofia (2022).

¹⁴ Human and Social Studies Foundation — Sofia (2022).

¹⁵ Human and Social Studies Foundation — Sofia (2022).

Ukraine is under attack. There is also the assertion that the West provoked Russia into the conflict and that military aid to Ukraine drags Bulgaria into the war.

In order to follow-up on the main tendencies in the spread of narratives recognised in existing research an up-to-date overview of Facebook groups and online media is presented below. Table 1 shows the four frames examined upon authors' own elaboration after an analysis of written and spoken discourse with respective relevant keywords.

Russia is not an aggressor — It is a victim of the West but it is strong and it will succeed. Bulgaria needs to protect its national interest by keeping good relations with Russia.

External pressure — Foreign (American and sometimes EU) embassies and actors are meddling in Bulgaria's politics and sovereignty, imposing NATO policies while NATO is the real danger for Bulgaria.

Elites — Traitors — Bulgarian political elites are traitors as they put foreign (American and EU) interests before the Bulgarian interests.

President, EURO, NATO, EU — All calls for referendums on changing the political system to a presidential republic, referendum on joining the Eurozone, leaving NATO and the EU propagated by a multitude of public figures and strongly by the far-right Vazrazhdane (Revival) party.

Table 1: Narrative frames and keywords

RUSSIA IS NOT AN AGGRESSOR	EXTERNAL PRESSURE (Foreign)
sanctions Russia harmful	foreign embassies, the embassies
special military operation	foreign, external pressure
normalise/not normalise relations with Russia	American puppeteers
normalisation of relations with Russia	collective West
Russia will win (the war)	NATO threat to national security
weapons to Ukraine	NATO aggressor
Bulgarian interest	EU aggressor
national interest	

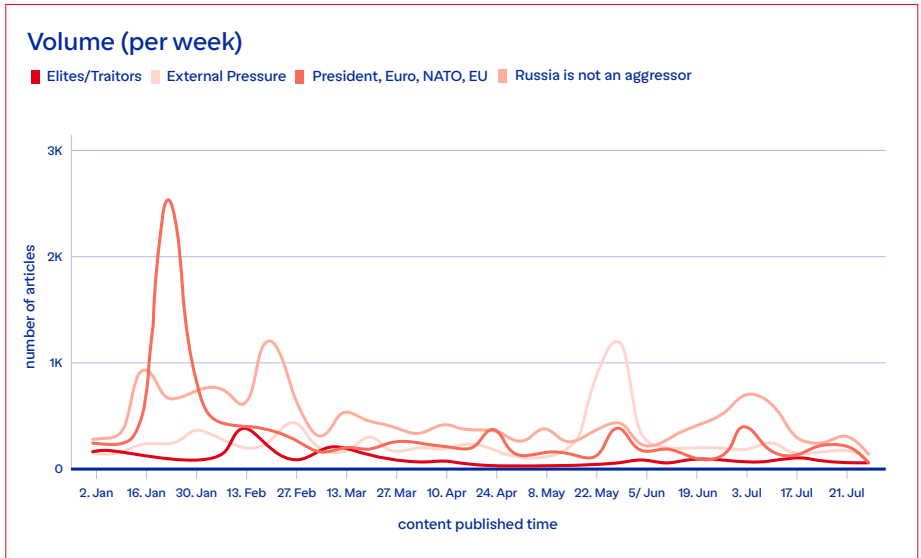
ELITES — TRAITORS	PRESIDENT, EURO, NATO, EU
the parties of war	presidential republic
War Lovers	referendum on the euro
peace (and neutrality)	leave NATO
going to war	leave the EU / leave the EU
participation in conflict	
engaging in conflict	

A simple look at their circulation in online media in the last six to eight months and following the period covered in other research, the time from 1 January 2023 to 6 August 2023 shows certain peaks which reflect domestic political developments related to processes of breakdown of parliament as a result of inability to form a government in January when the narrative of ‘President, Euro, NATO, EU’ was particularly strong. Referendums were heavily topical in media and political discourse as two political parties, including far-right Vazrazhdane, were active in collecting signatures for such and the topics were circulated in public space with debates on whether these referendums are viable, legal etc.

The peak of the ‘Russia is not an aggressor’ frame coincides with the anniversary of the start of Russia’s war in Ukraine in the second half of February where a drastic rise of pieces exposing the narrative circulated. This was following a steady presence until then and a relative decline for the next few months. Additionally, around the visit of President Zelenskyy in early July, it also increased.

Social media groups replicating those four narratives were examined via CrowdTangle, a content discovery and social monitoring platform. The tool helps to follow, analyse, and report on what’s happening across social media and particularly Facebook in this case. A small selection of the groups in which these narratives are most prevalent as well as where they are most active in posting and sharing content related to them, is presented below to showcase the level of activity and technical

Table 2: Scale of presence of four main pro-Russian narratives in Bulgarian online media
1 January 2023 to 6 August 2023



Source: SENSIKA Technologies: tool for media monitoring and analysis in Bulgaria, available at <https://app.sensika.com/>

details of their administration and time of creation. Their content is exclusively centred around the key messages described above in Table 2. As the table shows, a number of these groups are administered by the same accounts — what appear as individual/personal accounts and other pages. An example of such a page is ‘The News you don’t want to know’ which has three posts of its own activity since its creation and 66 members. Almost all such admin pages fall under the category ‘website and news media’ according to the purpose they have chosen to be created for on Facebook. None of them corresponds to actual news outlets or have websites etc.

Another example is ‘Resistance to Globalists’ with 197 followers and admin of the page ‘Let’s show that 1 million people support Russia’ since 11 June 2023 . It does not administer any other pages. It is managed by one personal account whose profile is inaccessible. In the public reviews

Table 3: A selection of pro-Russia Facebook groups with posts, members and admins

FB Group	Members	Posts 6 July – 8 Aug 2023	Created	Admin Pages and Followers/Members
Let's Show That 1 Million People Support Russia	11.2 K	613	5 Oct 2022	Information agency 'Heat' (67), Resistance to Glo- balists (197), Ifnews (83)
Free And Peaceful Bulgaria	30.1 K	122	25 Mar 2022	Bulgaria above all (198), Click 'Like' if you love Rus- sia (147), Accuracy (2)
We Do Not Support A Government Of Pp-Db And Gerb	33.5 K	845	23 May 2022	Information agency 'Heat' (67), 'The News BG' (100)
Support For Putin Against USA	54.1 K	240	23 Feb 2022	Bulgaria above all (198), Click 'Like' if you love Rus- sia (147), Accuracy (2)
Referendum Against The Euro. To Preserve The Bulgarian Lev	83.4 K	498	29 Oct 2022	Information agency 'Heat' (67), 'The News BG' (100), Resistance to Globalists (197), 'The News you don't want to know' (2), Ifnews (83)

* Admin pages list is not exhaustive, personal accounts are not included here.

* Data in the table is accurate to 8 August 2023.

* 'Referendum group' name changed on 7 June 2023 but it is not possible to see the previous name of the group.

section there is a commentary that the group disseminates fake news. No other details are available about this page like creation date or number of posts per month.

The case with ifnews.eu is very similar — the page has 83 followers. It frequently likes its own posts and these are the only likes some of them have. On 12 July 2023 it shared a post 'Russia army and Wagner attack the outskirts of Kiev! See video link in comments!' in caps lock with

a picture of a tank marked with ‘Z’ carrying some soldiers. There is no link in the comments but the post has 211 shares. The ‘link in comments’ technique is a very common feature on the pages examined and these links always lead to dubious online media outlets. Some of the content of the posts included Ukraine’s failure in the war, NATO invading the Black Sea, Russia’s military strength and friendly pro-President Radev posts among a multitude of shares of articles regarding a high-profile domestic violence case that garnered a lot of public attention in late July and early August 2023, making it very ‘clickable’ by a wide range of users. The page is a group member of ‘Let’s show that 1 million people support Russia’, ‘We don’t want war with Russia’, ‘Support for Russia’, ‘I will not wear a mask’.

A number of the posts are cross-shared between the pages in question — post or content from one of the administering accounts — users or pages — are shared on another page or group which increases the visibility and reach of the shared content. It is beyond the scope of this research to gauge the actual reach of these posts and groups in absolute numbers as the used tool shows the content side of the matter rather than aggregates of the volumes of shares and reach. Yet, drawing from the numbers quoted above and given the membership of these groups, it can be inferred that is quite high. Even if we allow for the hypothesis that despite the reach and visibility of such narratives the level of resonance of social media users may be low, the volume of the disinformation campaigns and the breadth of false information raises questions. Thus, even if a single article or comment may not be so effective, the accumulation of false facts makes it look like it is well known and shared by many. Meanwhile, behind it are only a small circle of pages and essentially — people.

So, unsurprisingly, misinformation originates from a limited set of sources and it tends to focus on niche and a limited amount of subjects that can be easily misinterpreted if one lacks enough and specific expertise. Lastly, the ‘About’ page for ‘Free and peaceful Bulgaria’ summarises those key messages well:

“Hello! Despite clear signals from the majority of the people, our rulers deliberately want to drag us into war. It is becoming clear that the reason

for their frantic push in this direction is not personal convictions, but outside pressure. Bulgaria is being prepared as a buffer zone on which to wage wars that serve foreign interests. Our national catastrophes are always at a moment when we take sides and never once at a moment when we are neutral. It is time to put the government back in the hands of the people and whoever we elect should be clear that they are following the interests of the country and not their personal interests. Let each of you invite people into this group who are prepared to act and show that we are not sheep to sacrifice for someone else's interest. [...]"

This combines well a number of narrative features discussed previously and is a good example of the storytelling and logical connections within and between pro-Russian narratives widely circulated in Bulgarian online space.

Core messages and political discourse: top-down

It is important to assess the impact of these narratives on public opinion and anticipate potential policy actions or decisions, as well as to reflect on the official state-level policies and to better understand the political context. Looking closely into the discursive categories, what they promote and how they resonate can reveal much about political intentions.

In Bulgaria, Kremlin propaganda spokesmen occupy the highest political ranks. The slow and steady campaign to discredit the stance that Russia is waging an illegal war on the people of Ukraine comes from the top, in stark contrast with almost all other EU member states. After the start of the war, in Bulgaria a number of them tried to paint the country as somewhat of a 'Switzerland of the Balkans', yet the tightrope it has been walking with regard to its strong ties to Russia and its Euro-Atlantic pretence proved much shorter than its policy makers expected. As mentioned, it quickly became obvious what the direct pro-Kremlin strategies of political actors were. President Rumen Radev is the most prominent example. He openly recycles Kremlin talking points and stands firmly on the position that Bulgaria should remain neutral in the conflict in order to protect its economic well-being.

A military general with NATO training, Radev won his second term in 2021, he was twice supported by the left-wing party and largely forged an image of a non-partisan figure. Since his rise on the political scene in 2017 when he won his first mandate, he has been the most popular politician in the country albeit with some fluctuations. He has practically governed the country via caretaker governments for longer than any regular government in the last two-and-a-half years. He has long been an apologist for the Russian state, however, his language is consistent in connecting the economy and the war, as to stir the pot further at a time of high inflation. Bulgaria being the poorest EU member state gives such statements more credence and social cache. Furthermore, the leverage he has dilutes the stance of Bulgaria's support of Ukraine, breeds division and fragments civil society. Globally and on the dwindling pro-EU side his comments caused outrage, but on a local level the language is deliberately used to muddle the waters and provide shelter for Russia apologists across the political spectrum.

A striking example is when on 8 September 2022 Rumen Radev met with Lukoil's president Vadim Vorobyov when he visited Bulgaria. Radev described Lukoil as 'an important part of the Bulgarian economy and one of the main employers' in the country.¹⁶ The formal reason for the talks with 'representatives of the management of the energy company Lukoil' was 'the opportunities to curb inflation and develop a predictable economic environment in the country'.¹⁷ The talks were announced by the Presidency less than an hour before they started, without any names mentioned. Interestingly, Vorobyov revealed that Russian executives had undisclosed talks with Radev's appointed cabinet ministers 'defining measures to support the domestic market and working out some solutions'. None of this has been made public by the caretaker government. The concept of 'neutrality' became the new 'moral'. The concept of categories of moral action is particularly informative here as 'one of the

¹⁶ Boulevard Bulgaria (2022, September 8). Prezidentät na ruskija "Lukoil". https://boulevardbulgaria.bg/articles/prezidentat-na-ruskiya-lukoil-e-v-balgariya-za-sreshta-s-rumen-radev?fbclid=IwAR2XJjMkOVK57I5wWpQ34M81URJ-tURI3_kTxFY6nlyTFqjcM8vEIP7rSIY.

¹⁷ Boulevard Bulgaria (2022, September 8).

major ways in which a moral system characterises worldview is through categorization. Each moral system creates a number of fixed major categories for moral action'.¹⁸ These main categories enable easy differentiation between actions right or wrong, often without needing much nuance. Ultimately, they promote superiority by going beyond the fact and interpreting its meaning. So, it is 'moral' to be 'neutral'. In the face of an electoral advance of progressive liberal forces in 2022 and 2023¹⁹ in the country, the battle for interpretation intensified. Those forces Radev coined as 'War Lovers' who tried to 'drag the country into war' with their actions to express support for Ukraine, for sanctions against Russia and their efforts to supply Ukraine with weapons.

Thus, while lending legitimacy to economic concerns regarding aid, Radev also moved from frames of 'Russia and Ukraine equally "at fault" for the conflict' and 'Bulgaria has a duty to remain neutral' to 'It's Ukraine's fault' in terms of the core messages sent in his speech.

Upon Volodymyr Zelenskyy's visit to Bulgaria in early July 2023 President Rumen Radev declared that:

'Ukraine insists on fighting this war. The bill is being paid by the whole of Europe. This war has many dimensions, not only military, but also economic, social, and political. It is a threat and a risk for the whole of Europe.'²⁰

Other spokespersons can also be found among representatives of the Bulgarian Socialist Party (former Bulgarian Communist Party) and for long one of the biggest parties in the country and main opposition to

¹⁸ Lakoff, G. (2016). *Moral politics: How liberals and conservatives think*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

¹⁹ Newly established progressive liberal 'We continue the change', centre-right and liberal-right coalition Democratic Bulgaria, Bulgarian Socialist Party and ITN 'There is such a people, new populist party' formed a complex coalition in Autumn 2021 following wide-spread anti-corruption protests and governed for seven months during which the war in Ukraine, gas crisis, and inflation rise took place.

²⁰ Nikolov, K. (2023, July 17). Bulgarian president accuses Ukraine of not wanting to stop Russian war. *Euroactiv*. <https://www.euractiv.com/section/politics/news/bulgarian-president-accuses-ukraine-of-not-wanting-to-stop-russian-war/>.

centre-right forces since 1989. In the last couple of years its support has declined to around and even below 10% of the vote. A prominent political figure lending their voice to the pro-Russian side, albeit more insidiously is the leader of the Bulgarian socialist party Kornelia Ninova. Her party's historical ties to Russia aside, Ninova has personally played a role in spreading misinformation and inciting anti-Western views amongst the wider population. Auspiciously, her statement that she would 'rather resign or break the fragile coalition currently in power than sign a piece of paper authorising the dispatch of a "single bullet to Ukraine"' espouses these values.²¹

She is among the leaders who vouch for the end of sanctions against Russia since for her 'Russia is a friendly state'; she is also propagating that the war must stop as it is the root of all problems and that it does not matter who wins and who loses.²² BSP is also one of the two parties that did not file a declaration in support of Ukraine joining NATO along with the far-right 'Revival' Party in June 2023. The Socialist party leader was a major opponent to the Istanbul Convention and LGBTQI+ rights which are the main lines through which she expresses anti-Western and anti-EU sentiments overall and pro-Russian attitudes.

The campaign to sever ties with the West and slide back into old political alliances is illustrated by narratives put forth by other prominent figures across the political spectrum too. The figurehead of the ultra-nationalist Vazrazhdane, Kostadin Kostadinov, long serves as the mouthpiece for support of Russian efforts to diminish liberal values. His rhetoric is deliberately inflammatory, consistently anti-West, xenophobic and, by default, in support of Russia and in denial of the global outrage the war has caused. Vazrazhdane's vote share rose from 4.9% in November 2021, to 10% in October 2022 and to 14% in April 2023 with their rhetoric objectively growing in popularity.

21 Georgieff, A. (2022, April 28). Why do so many Bulgarians support Putin? *Vagabond*. <https://www.vagabond.bg/why-do-so-many-bulgarians-support-putin-3394>.

22 BTV (2022, September 25). Mobilization in Russia is escalating the conflict. Kornelia Ninova interview. <https://btvnovinite.bg/predavania/120-minuti/kornelija-ninova-mobilizacijata-v-rusija-eskalira-konfliktka.html>.

There are also a number of opinion leaders, journalists and heads of institutions going unsanctioned in public space, for example expressing opinions that the Bucha massacre is propaganda, as the Chairwoman of the Council for Electronic Media²³ indicated that it's Ukraine's fault for the war, that the war is 'deserved'. Similar positions can be heard on Bulgarian National Radio's programme led by controversial journalist Peter Volgin who is consistently disseminating disinformation and pro-Kremlin theses.²⁴ In April 2022, he did not challenge the leader of Vazrazhdane statement that NATO 'poses a threat to the national and territorial defence, integrity and security of Bulgaria'²⁵ and quoted Russia agency TASS as a source confirming 'Azov' has captured a Bulgarian ship in Black Sea — later confirmed by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs as fake news. Bulgaria has for a long time been seen as particularly susceptible to Russian influence and hybrid warfare — through influence in the energy sector Russia aims to gain political control in order to enhance its geopolitical influence. This is asserted as a main channel of influence in CEE as asserted in the 'The Kremlin Playbook'.²⁶ Politicians and economic circles have consistently worked in those interests since the early 1990s while vehemently paying allegiance to Euro-Atlantic values in their discourse after the country's EU accession in 2007. But while in public discourse allegiance to pro-Russian narratives cannot go unseen, in the field of

23 In an interview for a you-tube format on 19 June 2023, Sonya Momchilova's exact words were: 'Just as there is Russian propaganda, we cannot deny that there is propaganda in the opposite direction. You know about Putin's illness, being replaced, being dead, Butcha, and so on'. It created a public outcry including positions by the Regulator itself, journalists, US and Ukrainian embassies. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=E_Fr11p06Mk.

24 With the guests and topics chosen, Volgin has become a synonym of Russian propaganda on state media with openly pro-Putin, anti-EU, anti-NATO content. Numerous calls by journalists and public figures have been made to end the spread of disinformation but to no effect. There have been resignations for the Public Council of the National Radio in protest as reported by Angelov, G. (2022, April 11). Volgin, BNR and disinformation: this must stop immediately. Deutsche Welle Bulgaria. <https://www.dw.com/bg/волгин-бнр-и-дезинформацията-защо-това-трябва-да-спре-веднага/a-61436094>.

25 Angelov, G. (2022, April 11).

26 Conley, H.A., et al (2016, October 13). Kremlin Playbook. CSIS. <https://www.csis.org/analysis/kremlin-playbook>.

social media, these go largely unnoticed, unaddressed, and essentially offer validation and resonance to what is spoken on the highest institutional level.

Battlefield or battleground?

This paper offers only examples of the nature and significance of Russian influence in countries like Bulgaria and surely more in-depth research is needed. Yet, given the three strands of influence touched upon here — political economy, rhetorical and online media — the following general conclusions of the main aims and risks of pro-Kremlin influence can be summarised:

- *Feeding propaganda both top-down and bottom-up through moral and ethical templates for peace, stability, and neutrality nurtures high polarisation.* The underlying tensions are coded in the different amounts of space the main political actors — both parties and leaders — devote to the issue of Ukraine and the role of Russia. Amount, coherence, substance all matter.
- *In the face of deadlock on societal consensus strong figures shine.* The war in Ukraine can potentially destabilise main political camps in a volatile electoral market — be it left and right or liberal and conservative, which has implications for the stability of the entire party system.
- *Strengthening internal brakes to limit EU power in the region in the long run.* Propaganda is feeding a populism that no longer offers quick fixes but a new moral compass. This is enforced at first loudly but it is slowly legitimised key veto-players who as such take an upper hand over the reform process and effectively block it: whether it is anti-corruption, EU accession, weapons provisions.
- A decisive commitment to nurture ‘dirty snowballs’ within the EU system where the mechanisms, channels, and tactics of Russian influence boil down to a *consistent anti-party campaign in the case of Bulgaria manifested in the President’s discourse against parties abilities to form a government, far-right nationalist calls to referendums on EU-related issues, NATO membership and presidential republic.* It aims

to weaken political parties and parliaments to the advantage of strengthening presidents and individual political leaders.

The data that no policymaker wants to see

The Russian misinformation campaign is a de-centralised and global phenomenon, but few governments have an open-door policy for accepting its supporters into their parliaments. The mechanics are not much different from elsewhere but in Bulgaria things are at a late stage and the alternative is not strong enough. The conditions of state capture, uncritical and captured media further exacerbate the context. The necessary measure to counteract these processes include:

- A vast body of research on Russian influence in Bulgaria keeps growing but it is still scattered. Integrating policymakers, social and data scientists, and journalists and analysts in an open conversation about the issue is key to building a solid civic coalition.
- A follow-up or a pre-condition for the above can be the creation of a research centre to the National Assembly which centralises such research and navigates the conversation with the research community and policy-makers. With little to no oversight over the dissemination and scope of reach of fake news on social media the society remains vulnerable to conspiracies which only stage their subject. Such examples are COVID-19 and the war in Ukraine.
- Democratic leadership goes beyond politics. Support, training, and capacity building for liberal public figures and prominent civil society members even if they are not political leaders themselves in order to expand the liberal democratic presence in the public space.
- Proactive cooperation and exchange opportunities by European liberals with liberal parties beyond established ALDE memberships in order to expand the reach and integration of Bulgarian liberal voices within Europe.
- Reform of the national security and intelligence services so that they are more proactive in detecting, deterring and effectively counteracting subversive the pro-Russian, anti-European agenda of single individuals, groups of individuals, and channels of influence.

- Expansion of civic education initiatives and work with the educational sector to integrate tools for the recognition of and resilience to fake news, propaganda narratives from early levels of the education cycle.

Although Bulgaria supported sanctions against Russia, sent weapons and aid to Ukraine, accepted and hosted refugees, the opposition against these decisions came from the highest ranks of political authority and constantly diminish the building blocks of parliamentary democracy via the destructive pro-Russia narratives of neutrality, cheap gas prices, the image of NATO as a villain and the EU as imposing its own political course to the detriment of the country's interests and sovereignty. Political discourse is particularly important because it shows that when an external threat finds a fertile ground internally and feeds into local grievances the question becomes how much of the threat is internal in the absence of an electorally strong enough democratic leadership. The significance of Bulgaria's example lies in the (in)ability of liberal thinkers and politicians to effectively confront the rising tide of anti-democratic and authoritarian movements both domestically and internationally. These seek to curtail essential human rights and stability of an entire region. Yet, in Bulgaria, such efforts come from the highest ranks of public and opinion authority, no serious measures are taken to curtail propaganda, fake news and hate speech in media go totally unsanctioned and are legitimated by claims for 'pluralism' of point of views and, most importantly, even if debunked, disinformation and anti-liberal democratic narratives remain in circulation. And it is these processes — top-down and bottom-up — that shape public opinion at a scale unmatched by the alternative voices. And this case is a concern with a European-level dimension.

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Unveiling the Shadow

Russian Influence in the Western Balkans via Informal Networks and Civil Society Organizations

ALEN GUDALO

The article analyses how the Russian influence in the Western Balkans — in particular in Serbia, Bosnia and Herzegovina and Montenegro — has its contours within the influence of the Russian-sponsored organisations (including informal organisations or groups and legally established civil society organisations) and how the enlargement fatigue helps Russia in spreading its political and economic interests in the region. This article also questions the potential impact of enlargement fatigue on the influence of Russia in the Western Balkans and Eastern Europe, i.e. how potential exclusion of these regions from enlargement actually helps Russia in spreading its influence. One of the key indicators of this is a declining support among citizens for joining the EU, particularly in Serbia, where the Russian influence has been the most visible. In this context a declining support of citizens to join the EU is another geo-strategic tool for Russia to expand its influence. The question that arises and that will be analysed further in this research is, what liberals across Europe and particularly in the Western Balkans region and South-East Europe, can do to minimise the effects of the Russian influence and how to fight against it.

The Russian invasion of Ukraine in February 2022 was a turning point for the European Union to realise the impact of the Russian influence

in the Western Balkans and implications it bears on this area and its fragmented region. In addition to their established economic presence, Russia expanded its malignant influence through the growing number of Russian-based and Russian-sponsored informal groups and NGOs operating under the image of humanitarian aid or cultural activities. These organisations have been instrumental in establishing political connections across the region, notably in Serbia, Montenegro, and the Serb-dominated federal unit Republic of Srpska, in Bosnia and Herzegovina. Based on findings from the Balkan Investigative Reporting Network (BIRN), there has been a noticeable rise in the presence of Russian-backed organisations in recent years, indicating their extensive network and involvement in the Ukrainian invasion as well as activities within Serbia and Bosnia and Herzegovina¹. Russian sponsored organisations in this context have become a geopolitical tool through which Russian influence in the Western Balkans grows without being as visible as some other, traditional methods of influence. It is also possible to witness how the concept of NGOs is taken from liberal democracies and adjusted into Russian political norms and interests and then applied across the Western Balkans and Eastern Europe. This allows Russia to exert influence while maintaining a lower profile, subtly advancing its geopolitical agenda in the region.

The Western Balkans: Struggling on the EU path, but drifting towards the East?

The Western Balkans is the region that includes countries that were part of the former Yugoslavia (Bosnia and Herzegovina, Kosovo, Montenegro, North Macedonia and Serbia) and Albania. Croatia was also seen as a part of the region until it joined the European Union in 2013 and shifted towards more EU-centred policies.

¹ Mujkić, S. (2019, May 22). Srpsko-ruski “zavet” dobrovoljaca Višegrada i Donbasa. *Detektor*. <https://detektor.ba/2019/05/22/srpsko-ruski-zavet-dobrovoljaca-visegrada-i-donbasa/>.

All six Western Balkans nations have aspirations to join the European Union although they are at different stages within the accession processes and still far from full membership. Montenegro and Serbia seem furthest along with the negotiations — Montenegro started them in 2012 and Serbia in 2013. After multiple blockades and political issues with its neighbours, North Macedonia and Albania started negotiations in 2022². Bosnia and Herzegovina was granted candidacy status in late 2022 and it is seen as a geo-strategic decision made due to the ongoing Russian invasion of Ukraine and fear of a growing Russian influence in the region. However, this was not just based on fear, but also on the narratives of the political garniture in the country and the region of the Western Balkans that pushed Bosnia and Herzegovina onto the EU agenda once again. Its fragmentation and vulnerability to dangerous consequences were additional reasons. The EU's increasingly aggressive geopolitical competitors, namely China and Russia, seek to promote alternative external agendas that challenge the spread of liberal values on the European continent³. For example, involvement of construction companies in infrastructure projects in Montenegro, Serbia and Bosnia and Herzegovina are deepening the Chinese influence in the Western Balkans. This can potentially lead to the fatal consequences seen in China's debt diplomacy trap, where Montenegro has already somehow failed⁴. Finally, Kosovo, which is still not recognized by five EU member states, is a potential candidate. However, there hasn't been any progress, and the EU perspective for Kosovo has actually worsened due to the increasing political tensions with Belgrade in the first part of 2023.

2 Alesina, M. (2022, November). *[Policy Paper 20] Staged Integration for Future EU Enlargement*. Brussels: European Liberal Forum. <https://liberalforum.eu/publication/policy-paper-20-staged-integration-for-future-eu-enlargement/>.

3 Buyuk, H. F. (2022, October 6). China Index: Beijing's Influence Expands in Southeast Europe. *Balkan Insight*. <https://balkaninsight.com/2022/10/06/china-index-beijings-influence-expands-in-southeast-europe/>.

4 Schmitz, R. (2021, June 29). How A Chinese-Built Highway Drove Montenegro Deep Into Debt. *NPR*. <https://www.npr.org/2021/06/28/1010832606/road-deal-with-china-is-blamed-for-catapulting-montenegro-into-historic-debt>.

Russia's influence in the Western Balkans: Beyond the economy

Finding data or general information about Russian sponsored civil society organisations and activities in the Western Balkans, funded or supported in different ways by the Russian Federation, turned out to be difficult due to lack of transparency and inability to track money flow and activities. This lack of transparency is one of the major differences between the European Union and the Russian Federation.

The second major difference between the involvement of the European Union and the Russian Federation is sponsorship of organisations that are not officially regulated by state institutions. Russia has a track record of backing unofficial groups in the region, with examples of such support encompassing self-declared humanitarian activists, especially within smaller communities.

Lack of awareness about the role of Russian-supported civil society organisations and informal pro-Russian organisations and groups in the region can be seen through chronic lack of research and information about those organisations across the Western Balkans. Among a few organisations that have been involved in raising the awareness about the malign influence of pro-Russian non-state groups, particularly in Bosnia and Herzegovina and Serbia, is the Balkan Investigative Reporting Network (BIRN) that contributes to this article by providing an interview.

The role of Russia in the region's economy (focusing heavily on agreements on economic cooperation, energy, and gas) has been well documented and, specifically, how such agreements influence decision-makers and general population⁵. But the lack of information about the influence in other fields is a worrying sign for the EU. Economic poverty across the region, isolation of the Western Balkans countries from the European Union, and a never-ending path toward the EU accession are all contributing factors that help Russia in spreading its influence across the region acting silently and connecting with local communities through

⁵ Fokus.Ba. (2023). Rusi preko svojih pijuna uslovljavaju BiH da kupuje njihovo gorivo iz Srbije. <https://www.fokus.ba/vijesti/bih/rusi-preko-svojih-pijuna-uslovljavaju-bih-da-kupuje-njihovo-gorivo-iz-srbije/2634278/>.

non-transparent activities implemented mostly by informal military-style groups of local pro-Russia activists.

The role of web portals and false information in spreading pro-Russian propaganda in Montenegro

An additional realm of Russian influence in the region is evident in Montenegro. Predominantly pro-Serbian and pro-Russian online media has been on the rise in Montenegro in recent years. Although there is no direct Russian media ownership, the pertinence and efficiency of pro-Kremlin propaganda has not diminished, as media like IN4S and Borba openly spread pro-Kremlin narratives⁶. Illustratively, IN4S dedicates an entire segment of its online platform to news concerning Russia specifically focusing on the ongoing war in Ukraine while promoting pro-Russian perspectives and portraying Russia as a stabilising force in this conflict. For instance, dating back to 2017, this platform started campaigns opposing Montenegro's accession into NATO, orchestrating these calls in collaboration with a network of civil society organisations⁷. Upon initial examination, this website's approach to covering the ongoing war in Ukraine bears a striking resemblance to another contentious and pro-Russian portal known as Sputnik, which also maintains a Serbian-language version.

Based on the GLOBSEC survey from late 2020⁸, there is a significant backing for Russia within Montenegro. For instance, among respondents from Montenegro, 38% consider Russia to be the country's primary strategic partner, surpassing the regional average. Furthermore, the

6 Velimirović, T., et al (2021). *GLOBSEC Vulnerability Index 2021*. Bratislava: GLOBSEC. http://www.vulnerabilityindex.org/src/files/Globsec_VI_Montenegro-Report_online.pdf.

7 Tomović, P. (2017, October 30). Ruski i proruski za Crnu Goru. *Radio Slobodna Evropa*. <https://www.slobodnaevropa.org/a/ruski-i-proruski-mediji-crna-gora/28824216.html>.

8 Milo, D. (2021). *The image of Russia in Central & Eastern Europe and the Western Balkans Russia: mighty Slavic brother or hungry bear next-door?* Bratislava: GLOBSEC. <https://www.globsec.org/sites/default/files/2021-04/Image-of-Russia-Mighty-Slavic-Brother-or-Hungry-Bear-Nextdoor.pdf>.

survey indicates that 65% of those polled do not view Russia as a threat to Montenegro, while 60% believe that NATO intentionally antagonises Russia by establishing military bases in its vicinity. These figures rank among the highest percentages observed among the surveyed nations in the Balkans and central Europe. In addition to strong cultural, historical, and religious ties between the two nations, which could contribute to this heightened support, it is worthwhile to further investigate the role of propaganda in shaping such significant backing for Russia in Montenegro.

One example of the misuse of information technology in Montenegro is the website ‘Crna Gora News Agency’, which was created by the Russian Internet Research Agency, founded by Yevgeny Prigozhin, the late commander of the Wagner mercenary army. The ‘Crna Gora News Agency’ portal aimed to discredit perceived political entities and NATO in front of the Montenegrin public, as stated in the DFC study *The Struggle for Democracy in the Era of Digital Authoritarianism*⁹.

An initial examination uncovers an extensive network of internet portals disseminating Russian viewpoints, particularly regarding the ongoing war in Ukraine. Interestingly, accession to NATO has not prevented the spread of such news within Montenegro. The results of the survey, mentioned above, affirm a notable level of support for Russia in this country.

When humanitarian work becomes political tool — the case of the Serbian-Russian Humanitarian Centre in Niš

Political, cultural, and economic ties between Russia and Serbia have a long history. Based on this historical legacy it was not surprising to see Serbian political leaders decided to opt for, as proclaimed, ‘neutral status’ when asked to condemn Russian aggression on Ukraine, trying to balance between its EU path and chronic dependency on Russia with

⁹ Janković, S. (2023, June 28). Prigožinova Agencija operisala lažnim informacijama i u Crnoj Gori, navodi DFC. *Radio Slobodna Evropa*. <https://www.slobodnaevropa.org/a/prigo%C5%BEin-crna-gora-lazne-informacije/32480856.html>.

its energy policies and economic agreements. Serbian ‘neutral’ status is defined by the *Resolution on Protection of Sovereignty, Territorial Integrity and Constitutional Order* in the Republic of Serbia. But the presence of the Serbian–Russian Humanitarian Centre in Niš is defined by Igor Novaković in an article *Military Neutrality, War and Security: Is it possible to be outside military associations in the 21st century?* as a military base, hence it could be concluded Serbia is not a neutral country since one of the preconditions of neutrality defined by this Serbian-created document is the absence of foreign military troops in the country¹⁰.

The Russian-Serbian Humanitarian Center in Niš started to get more attention from local media after the Russian full-scale invasion of Ukraine in February 2022¹¹. As stated on Centre’s official website, it was established in 2012¹² under another bilateral agreement between the Russian Federation and the Republic of Serbia signed in 2009¹³. The framework of this agreement included cooperation in the field of humanitarian work, particularly during emergency situations. Following this time frame, it is easy to track long-term geo-political aims of the Russian Federation in the Western Balkans, particularly targeting Serbia due to long history of cooperation and significant support for the Russian Federation among ordinary citizens of Serbia.

Serbian portal danas.rs was among the first, after the full-scale invasion started in Ukraine, to question the role of this Centre¹⁴. Although it was established with an ambition to cover the region of the Balkans, the

10 Vukadinović, D. (2022, May 11). Može li se biti van vojnih saveza u 21. veku — BBC News na srpskom. *BBC News Na Srpskom*. <https://www.bbc.com/serbian/lat/balkan-61208067>.

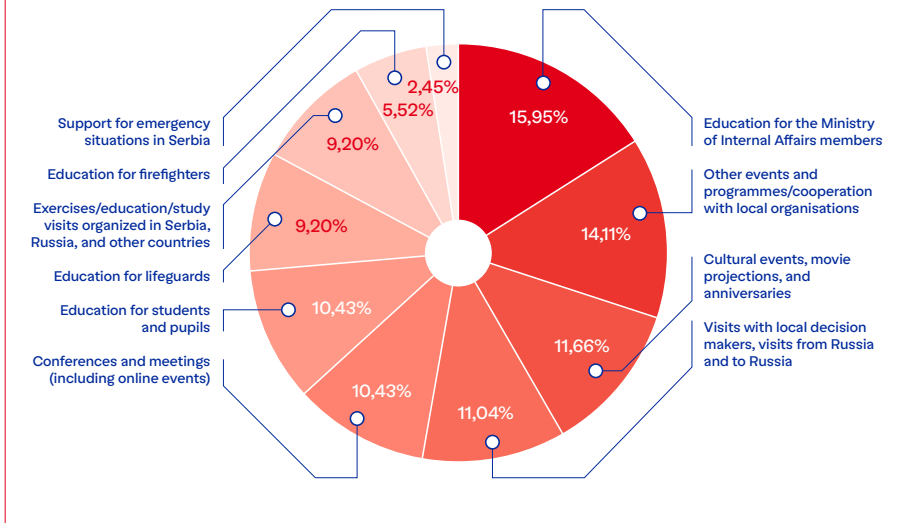
11 Đurđević, M. (2022, May 6). Pozivi za zatvaranje simbola bliskosti Srbije i Rusije u Nišu. *Radio Slobodna Evropa*. <https://www.slobodnaevropa.org/a/srbija-rusija-centar-nis-zatvaranje/31837543.html>.

12 Zakon o potvrđivanju sporazuma između Vlade Republike Srbije i Vlade Ruske Federacije o osnivanju Srpskoruskog humanitarnog centra (2012).

13 Zakon o potvrđivanju Sporazuma između Vlade Republike Srbije i Vlade Ruske Federacije o saradnji u oblasti humanitarnog reagovanja u vanrednim situacijama, sprečavanja elementarnih nepogoda i tehnogenih havarija i uklanjanja njihovih posledica (2009).

14 Miladinović, Z. (2022, May 24). Čime se bavi Rusko-srpski humanitarni centar u Nišu? *Dnevni List Danas*. <https://www.danas.rs/vesti/politika/cime-se-bavi-rusko-srpski-humanitarni-centar-u-nisu/>.

Analysis of activities implemented by the Ruisan-Serbian Humanitarian Centre in Niš (2019–2023)



Attachment 1: Overall list of activities implemented directly or indirectly by the Russo-Serbian Humanitarian Centre in Niš. Analysis was based on available news and articles listed on the official web page from the establishment of the Centre until today.

Centre has never managed to become influential outside Serbia. The questions about the real role of the Centre became more prominent after it did not take part in an emergency situation (ecologic incident) in close proximity to Niš itself¹⁵.

As mentioned above, with a lack of transparency, data, and information on funding/money flow available to the general public, the impact of the Serbian-Russian Humanitarian Centre and analysis of their role is based solely on available information on the website and activities implemented by the organisation.

¹⁵ Zirojević, H. (2022, November 27). Ruski centar za vanredne situacije nije učestvovao u vanrednoj situaciji u Pirotu. *Južne Vesti*. <https://www.juznevesti.com/Politika/Ruski-centar-za-vanredne-situacije-nije-ucestvovao-u-vanrednoj-situaciji-u-Pirotu.sr.html>.

According to this scarce news and data, it has had a very limited impact in Serbia covering emergency activities and saving operations although the official reasoning for the opening was exactly that. There have been only four situations when the Centre was involved directly in emergency situations: two included fire fighting missions and two included COVID-19 related activities, particularly with providing information on how to deal with the disease. Overall, direct work on the ground represents 2.45% of all activities listed on their website. As reported by local media in December 2022, the Centre was involved in emergency situations in Serbia, but not even close to the aim of the ‘largest emergency centre in the Balkans’¹⁶. Additionally, the questions about the role of the Centre were raised by various organisations and decision-making bodies, including the European Parliament whose main concern was transparency¹⁷.

As the invasion of Ukraine was becoming more brutal the calls, from Serbian opposition and some members of the governing party, for closure of the Centre have become louder although with no comment from decision-makers in Serbia¹⁸. Amidst Russian aggression, the Serbian Minister of Interior Aleksandar Vulin visited the Centre claiming this organisation has justified its purpose in Serbia although many have been attacking it and wanted to abuse and use the centre in political battle against Russia and Serbia¹⁹.

Vulin was a regular guest in Niš so it was not surprising the organisation had the highest percentage of activities with and for members and employees of the Ministry of Interior of Serbia.

¹⁶ Zirojević, H. (2022, November 27).

¹⁷ Latković, N. (2022, May 23). Evroparlamentarci predlažu ukidanje Srpsko – ruskog humanitarnog centra u Nišu. *Nova RS*. <https://nova.rs/vesti/politika/evroparlamentarci--predlazu-ukidanje-srpsko-ruskog-humanitarnog-centra-u-nisu/>.

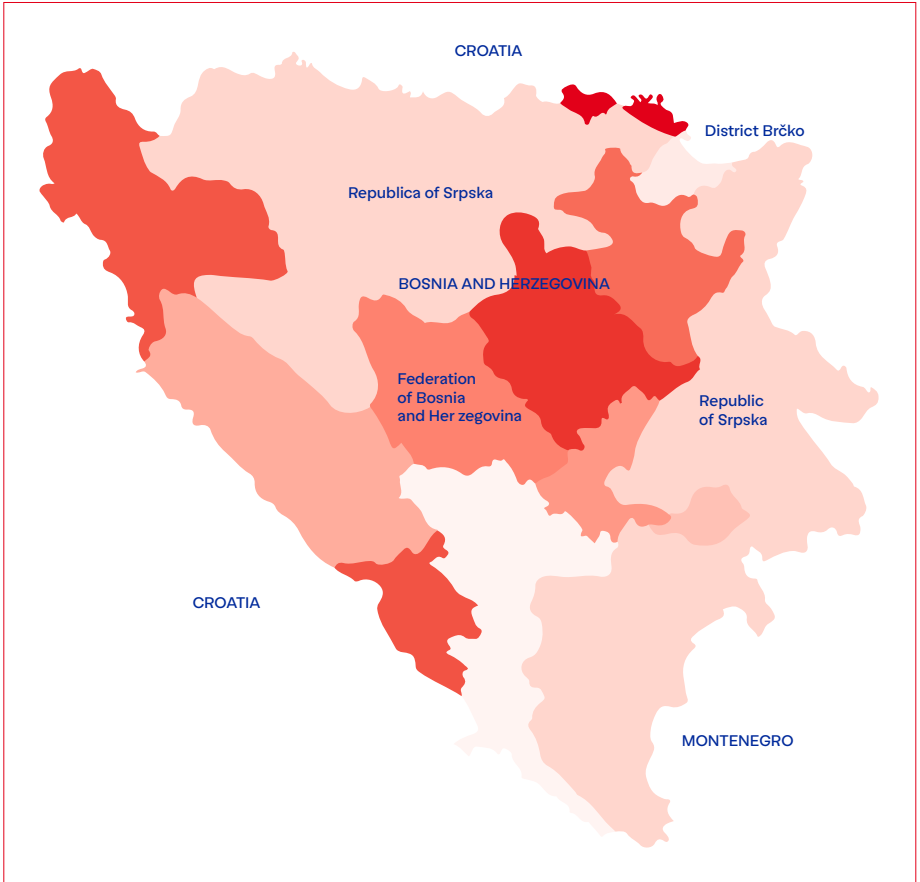
¹⁸ Petronijević Terzić, I. (2022, June 20). Srbija menja status Srpsko-ruskog humanitarnog centra u Nišu — puzajuće ukidanje. *Demostat*. <http://demostat.rs/sr/vesti/ekskluziva/srbija-menja-status-srpsko-ruskog-humanitarnog-centra-u-nisu-puzajuce-ukidanje/1497>.

¹⁹ Politika Online (2022, April 29). Vulin: Srpsko-ruski humanitarni centar opravdao svrhu “iako su mnogi hteli da ga zloupotrebe”. <https://www.politika.rs/sr/clanak/506116/Vulin-Srpsko-ruski-humanitarni-centar-opravdao-svrhu-iako-su-mnogi-hteli-da-ga-zloupotrebe>.

The role of 'Night Wolves' and other Russian sponsored organisations in Bosnia-Herzegovina

Bosnia and Herzegovina has a complex political system characterised by power-sharing arrangements designed to accommodate the country's ethnically diverse population. The political system is based on the *Dayton Agreement*, which ended the Bosnian War in 1995. It established a federal structure comprising two entities: the Federation of Bosnia and Herzegovina (inhabited mostly by Bosniaks/Muslims and Croats/Roman Catholics) and Republika Srpska (inhabited mostly by Serbs/Orthodox Christians), each with its own government and president. The Office of the High Representative (OHR) is responsible for monitoring the fulfilment of the *Dayton Agreement* and has the ability to exercise veto if the High Representative determines that the stability of it is threatened.

The country also has a weak central government with a rotating presidency, where each member of the presidency represents one of the three main ethnic groups: Bosniaks, Croats, and Serbs. An ethnically-based system secures participation of all three ethnic groups in decision-making, but also forces pro-Bosnian and pro-EU parties to form governments with political parties that openly advocate disintegration of the country, in particular a pro-Russian and populist political party, the Union of Independent Social-Democrats (SNSD) led by Milorad Dodik in Republic of Srpska. This compromise-oriented system leads to a constant state of deadlock within the country and enables the emergence of divergent geopolitical paths. Some factions advocate for the country's integration into the European Union and NATO while others, particularly within Republic of Srpska, oppose NATO and hold strong pro-Russian stances — including the aforementioned SNSD, which is one of the largest political parties in the country and among key players in almost all levels of governing. As it was mentioned, finding data about Russian-sponsored or Russian-established non-governmental organisations in the Western Balkans is a tricky and complex task in part because of the Russian approach, that in order to spread its influence, connects with actors in local communities. However, already in 2016 it was stated in opinion



The map shows Bosnia and Herzegovina's complex political setup with two main parts: the Republic of Srpska and the Federation of Bosnia and Herzegovina, which includes ten cantons. The District of Brčko in northern Bosnia also has its own local government.

article written by Muhamed Jusić that ‘Russian strategy is to spread its influence in the region, including here energy sector, business interests of big players, financing pro-Russia media and journalists, civil society organisations and religious communities, but also support to sport fans who make problems on the streets of Paris, motorbike bands

and various Kozakh extreme groups under the umbrella of cultural activities'²⁰.

The attention towards Russia's substantial influence in the Bosnian-Herzegovinian entity of the Republic of Srpska started to grow significantly after February 2022. For example the president of the Republic of Srpska visited Moscow and awarded Putin with the entity's highest award²¹. This political move had at least two reasons. Following the invasion, Putin's access to key centres in Europe has been severely restricted. Cooperation with pro-Russian forces or decision-makers in any European country is an emergency strategic move aiming to keep at least some level of influence outside Russia. Finally, in the context of Bosnia and Herzegovina, such events create discontent and political tensions between entities and ethno-political parties which is exactly the interest of pro-Russian decision-makers in the Republic of Srpska because it allows them to exercise the power and use political extortions to secure their survival and maintain at least some level of geo-political relevance. The Night Wolves are the biggest bike group in Russia and now operate as a far-right group in support of the Kremlin. They state that their goal is to take back the Russian lands that were separated²². In 2023, although banned from enter the country by the Intelligence-Security Agency of Bosnia and Herzegovina, the Night Wolves managed to get into the country and take part in anti-constitutional parade organised in the Republic of Srpska on 9 January as a celebration of the Republic of Srpska day in East Sarajevo, a part of Sarajevo urban zone under administrative control of this entity²³. The Constitutional Court of Bosnia and Herzegovina officially banned the celebration due to its violation

20 Jusić, M. (2016, July 30). Nova ruska strategija i na Balkanu. *Al Jazeera*. <https://balkans.aljazeera.net/opinions/2016/7/30/nova-ruska-strategija-i-na-balkanu>.

21 Gajić, I. (2023, April 11). Građani Srbije politički okrenuti Rusiji, ekonomski prema EU. *Radio Slobodna Evropa*. <https://www.slobodnaevropa.org/a/srbija-gradjani-rusija-eu-politika-ekonomija/32357459.html>.

22 Duggan, E. (2023, April 23). The Night Wolves: Russia's Far-Right Biker Gang. *Grey Dynamics*. <https://greodynamics.com/the-night-wolves-russias-far-right-biker-gang/>.

23 Durmišević, F. (2023, January 9). Kako je izgledao defile u Istočnom Sarajevu, prisustvovali i ozloglašeni "Noćni vukovi." *N1*. <https://n1info.ba/foto/kako-je-izgledao-defile-u-istocnom-sarajevu-prisustvovali-i-nocni-vukovi/>.

of the *Dayton Peace Agreement*²⁴. The reality was, the Night Wolves managed to bypass the state decision and enter the country from Serbia into eastern Bosnia (under effective control by the Republic of Srpska). However, this opened a question on connections between non-state actors and state institutions in Bosnia and Herzegovina (including here Bosnian border police) and their pro-Russian elements.

The Night Wolves continued working on establishing connections with decision-makers in the Republic of Srpska and soon after participating in an illegal military-style parade in January one of the members of the entity assembly, Darko Banjac, met with the leader of the Wolves, during the entity's visit to Moscow²⁵. This made Bosnia and Herzegovina among the few European countries from which decision-makers had an official visit to Moscow after 22 February 2022. The power of non-state actors to bypass state institutions and decisions in ethnically divided societies opens a space for testing Russian influence in the region and in the context of limited access to other countries, this may serve as a motivation for Putin to engage even further in the Western Balkans. In this sense, non-state actors, including Night Wolves, are an effective geo-political tool serving the Kremlin's interests in the region.

Humanitarian and cultural activities often serve as a convenient means for Russian-sponsored organisations to disseminate Russian propaganda within local communities. This phenomenon can be attributed to several complex factors. First, small local organisations operating in rural and semi-rural environments are able to easily establish connections with the local population due to strong community ties. Second, the members of these organisations are familiar faces within the community, fostering a high level of trust among local citizens. While acquiring data on the members is nearly impossible, certain individuals among them have even participated as candidates in local elections, confirming their

²⁴ Službeni List (2019, March 28). Pregled Dokumenta. <http://sluzbenilist.ba/page/akt/1MAMGOJk5Ss=>.

²⁵ Klix (2023, February 22). Poslanici NSRS-a na "ruskom terenu": U Dumi dočekani snažnim aplauzom, uzvratili s tri prsta. <https://www.klix.ba/vijesti/bih/poslanici-nsrs-a-na-ruskom-terenu-u-dumi-docekani-snaznim-aplauzom-uzvratili-s-tri-prsta/230222082>.

residency or significant affiliations with the communities in which they were engaged²⁶. Third, in economically disadvantaged areas of Bosnia and Herzegovina, such as regions depopulated following the Bosnian war, where access to services is limited and economic development is low even basic necessities may be lacking. In such circumstances, the role of humanitarian civil society organisations is perceived as that of a saviour, further enhancing their influence and the area's susceptibility to Russian propaganda. Even if the local population is not interested in their activities, these groups rely on fear, violence, and project a 'tough guy' image that the community is unwilling and sometimes unable to confront. Finally, in such a setting, with limited access to news and media other than Republic of Srpska-controlled media services, Russia creates an environment where its work is seen as moral while pro-Russian media send signals that 'political West', including the European Union, have abandoned their people.

One good example of this is a small community called Lončari with an organisation called 'Saint Georgije', which is not registered at the state level at the Ministry of Justice (though this is required for all civil society organisations). With more than 70 humanitarian activities targeting all ethnic communities living there, wearing military style clothes with Russian symbols, 'Saint Georgije' has been doing humanitarian work to 'fix' their image among citizens²⁷.

Also, direct support from Russia for their work could be seen through the fact that the Russian embassy in Bosnia and Herzegovina donated two off-road vehicles for their work²⁸. Confirmed by Arlinda Rustemi, security expert at the University of Leiden, Russia applies similar tactics across Eastern Europe, working with organisations that may cause

26 Glas Amerike (2023, April 5). BIRN BiH istražuje: Proruska uniformisana grupa kod Brčkog pod okriljem humanitarne organizacije. <https://ba.voanews.com/a/brcko-proruska-grupa-okrilje-humanitarna-organizacija/5840942.html>.

27 Pekmez, I. (2021, April 9). Humanitarni rad kao sredstvo za promociju desničarskih grupa. *Atlantska Inicijativa*. <https://atlantskainicijativa.org/humanitarni-rad-kao-sredstvo-za-promociju-desnicarskih-grupa/>.

28 Pekmez, I. (2022, May 25). Leader of Pro-Russian Group in Brcko Commuted Prison Sentence for Fine. *Balkan Insight*. <https://balkaninsight.com/2022/05/25/leader-of-pro-russian-group-in-brcko-commuted-prison-sentence-for-fine/>.

discomfort among local ethnic minorities. Curiously, following the outbreak of the war in Ukraine, this organisation vanished from the public eye and all social media platforms, despite having amassed a substantial number of followers.

There are at least two more examples of similar organisations and their un-transparent activities. For example, the association of the Serb-Russian friendship, in a small rural community of Donji Dubovik²⁹, bordering two entities in Bosnia and Herzegovina, does not show activities but it is interesting the official seat of the organisation is at the same address of the Municipality Krupa na Uni which is led by pro-Russian SNSD-DNS coalition. Although specific activities and financial transactions of this organisation could not be identified, it is possible to track the intention and trend: a small rural community with strong local connections may be a way for Russia to spread its influence silently. The fact that the organisation is officially based in the Municipal building, at least on paper, suggests a certain level of established connections and trust with decision-makers within these communities.

Russia managed to establish connections with another small community called Ritešić in the rural part of the City of Doboj where the Serb-Russian Centre was opened. There it focuses on, among other things, cultural and spiritual activities in the newly built monastery³⁰. In disconnected and economically disadvantaged areas like these, the presence of such soft diplomacy activities becomes crucial as it provides local citizens with access to social activities that may otherwise be limited. Consequently, it is not surprising to observe a significant level of support for Russia among the local population.

Further investigation may uncover an extensive network of civil society organisations spanning across Serbia and Bosnia and Herzegovina, primarily located in smaller communities. The Embassy of the Russian

²⁹ Akta.ba. (2021). Udruženje srpsko-ruskog prijateljstva "Gora" Donji Dubovik. <https://www.akta.ba/registar/419048/udruzenje-srpsko-ruskog-prijateljstva-gora-donji-dubovik>.

³⁰ Televizija Republike Srpske (2021, March 10). Kalabuhov: Srpsko-ruski centar u Ritešiću — simbol prijateljstva dva naroda. <http://www.rtrs.tv/vijesti/vijest.php?id=447843>.

Federation in Bosnia and Herzegovina, prior to the invasion of Ukraine, was intensively supporting establishment of associations that promote networking with Russia, regardless of size of membership in such organisations³¹.

There have been numerous instances of special visits from Russia to Bosnia and Herzegovina, along with celebrations and anniversaries that have included visits to eastern Bosnia (in the Republic of Srpska) by Putin's All-Russia People's Front — an organisation that has been subject to EU sanctions since February 2023. The fact that Bosnia and Herzegovina is not a member of the European Union does impact the extent of Russian involvement in the region. According to Duško Vukotić, a former president and current member of the association of Republic of Srpska war veterans, 'Bosnia and Herzegovina's non-membership in the European Union, as well as the absence of local legislation and institutions prohibiting cooperation, means that there are no barriers to collaboration with non-governmental organisations, including the All-Russia People's Front'³².

In the Federation of Bosnia and Herzegovina, another example emerges that could have served as a basis for increased involvement of Russian organisations in this entity. In 2021, the Faculty of Philosophy at Sarajevo University signed a memorandum of cooperation with the Russian Humanitarian Mission. However, following the outbreak of the war in Ukraine, further information regarding the nature of this cooperation or its future plans could not be found.

The comment provided by the Balkan Investigative Reporting Network (BIRN) further enhances the validity of our findings as presented in this interview:

³¹ Gutić, A. (2020, September 29). Panslavenska misija Rusije: "Meki" uticaj uz pomoć djece, crkve, motorista i lažnih humanitaraca. Žurnal. <https://zurnal.info/clanak/meki-uticaj-uz-pomoc-djece-crkve-motorista-i-laznih-humanitaraca/23420>.

³² Pekmez, I. (2023, May 8). Mayor of Bosnian's Visegrad Hosts EU-Sanctioned Russian Organisation. Detektor. <https://detektor.ba/2023/05/08/ruskoj-organizaciji-pod-sankcijama-eu-upriligen-prijem-u-visegradu/?lang=en>.

How do you comment on the inability to trace or gain insight into the financial flows of organisations directly or indirectly supported by the Russian Federation in their efforts to expand influence in the Western Balkans?

BIRN: Russian support of organisations in Bosnia and Herzegovina is nontransparent and in some cases nonfinancial. Sveti Georgije Lončari are, in one case, supported by donation of vehicles. This was claimed by the SGL and never denied by the Russian Embassy in Sarajevo. There is a wall of silence when it comes to official information about the relationship between these organisations and Russian representatives in Bosnia and Herzegovina, except in the case of *Noćni Vukovi* which is a part of the Russian Night Wolves organisation. Russian influence is often played down or even negated.

Do pro-Russian organisations employ the tactic of engaging with smaller local communities to spread Russian influence in areas that are not economic or transportation centres, considering the difficulty in finding activities of certain organisations in Bosnia and Herzegovina that have clear communication with the Embassy of the Russian Federation or pro-Russian organisations outside the country?

BIRN: Some pro-Russian organisations concentrate in local communities, but others like *Noćni Vukovi* make sure that their presence is noticed all around Republika Srpska. Those who concentrate in local communities often play on the vulnerabilities of the poor population by presenting themselves as humanitarians.

Are there adequate control mechanisms in place for organisations spreading anti-democratic propaganda without infringing upon the fundamental freedoms and rights of the non-governmental sector? In other words, do demands for greater control over non-state actors contradict the foundations of liberal democracy, in which the civil sector is one of the pillars?

BIRN: Controlling them like undemocratic countries do is a no-go zone, but we know police agencies monitor some of them based on their connections to crime. Only call for larger control of NGOs comes from the Republika Srpska government and it goes against democratic values.

It is also designed to be pointed at NGOs with support from democratic countries.

What challenges have you encountered during your work, research, and field-work, and how would you assess the communication with local decision-makers in the areas that are the focus of your research? Several officials in the Republic of Srpska have stated that Russian influence in the region is overestimated and that the topic receives excessive media coverage.

BIRN: Challenges that we face are in the lack of information that can be given by the authorities, or by the fact that some of these organisations are not registered. When talking to some of the government representatives or members of inteligencia, we hear downplaying of the problem, or comparing the Russian influence to American influence, for example. We often communicate or at least try to communicate with members of such organisations directly, and that may also be problematic and without success.

European response to Russian influence in the civil sector of the Western Balkans?

BIRN: Greater journalist interest and interest of civil society in this phenomenon would put a larger light on their work and often baseless claims, problematic behaviour and potentially bad consequences. Exposing bad ideas for what they are is the best way to fight them in liberal and democratic society. Also, greater political awareness of this problem would not be of bad use.

Can a link be established between the process of EU enlargement (specifically, enlargement fatigue and the prolonged process of accession of Western Balkan countries to the EU) and the expansion of Russian influence? In other words, is there a correlation between the delay in the entry of Western Balkan countries into the EU and the growth of Russian influence in these countries?

BIRN: The purest example of correlation of Russian politics and the state's wish to align itself with democratic values is the invasion of Ukraine. In Bosnia and Herzegovina Russian politics goes along the lines of Serbia and Republika Srpska politics — somewhat eurosceptic

and full anti-NATO position. Russian malign influence is colarated with the created perception of ‘Decadent European values’ and everything that goes along with it. Having in mind the experience of the last three decades with the Western countries, these perceptions are easy to manifest in the Serbian population. Slow European path helps this narrative.

Western Balkans has an alternative

The image of the European Union in the region is changing. For the first time in 20 years, the number of citizens of Serbia who do not support Serbian accession into the EU is larger than those who support it.³³ Following the latest stage of the Russian invasion of Ukraine, there has been an increase in the prevalence of extreme views among the public. Individuals who were previously neutral, uncertain, or held moderate positions regarding EU membership have become significantly more extreme in their stances. Additionally, the number of citizens who are unequivocally in favour or against EU integration has also risen. It is important to note that approximately only 25% of those surveyed express full support for EU integration, while over 40% are fully opposed to joining the EU³⁴.

Although strongly supported in Bosnia and Herzegovina, the gap between support to joining the EU between two entities is growing. While support is almost 90% in a Bosniak/Croatian- majority entity, it hardly reaches 55% in a Serb-majority entity³⁵. Although support is still high across the country, the survey has found decline for support compared to the previous survey from 2021. Also, a significant number of citizens

³³ Rakić, N. (2022, April 26). Dramatičan pad podrške građana Srbije članstvu u EU. *RTS*. <https://www.rts.rs/lat/vesti/drustvo/4792732/dramatican-pad-podrske-gradjana-srbije-clanstvu-u-eu.html>.

³⁴ Gajić, I. (2023, April 11). Građani Srbije politički okrenuti Rusiji, ekonomski prema EU. *Radio Slobodna Evropa*. <https://www.slobodnaevropa.org/a/srbija-gradjani-rusija-eu-politika-ekonomija/32357459.html>.

³⁵ Direkcija za evropske integracije (2022). Stavovi građana o članstvu u Evropskoj uniji i procesu integracija u EU. https://www.dei.gov.ba/uploads/documents/ijm-2022_1664197423.pdf.

of the Republic of Srpska believe the European Union will not expand (a little over quarter of surveyed believe in expansion of the EU) while this number exceeds 60% in the Bosniak/Croatian-majority entity of Bosnia and Herzegovina³⁶. The situation in Montenegro could be another worrying signal for liberal forces in Europe. Although a NATO member and a country that has gone furthest on its EU path, according to the GLOBSEC 2021 survey Montenegro is the most pro-Russian nation in the Balkans³⁷.

A combination of silent, but a long-lasting involvement of Russia in the region, complex and exhausting enlargement process, often blocked by internal EU issues, and finally sentiment toward Russia and EU in the region, are all worrying factors for liberal forces in the region and in Brussels' strategy of exercising soft power in the region.

Liberal answer to the Russian influence in the region

This article highlights the substantial Russian influence present in parts of the Western Balkans, which gained greater attention only after the cumulative phase of the conflict in Ukraine began. In this region of Europe, where citizens are often isolated from European initiatives and reside in small, economically disadvantaged communities that receive inadequate attention from local and national governments, Russia has found an opportunity to exert its influence. It has successfully forged strong connections with local decision-makers who hold pro-Russian inclinations, including mayors and members of local assemblies. Liberal forces in Europe must support the region, specifically Serbia, Bosnia and Herzegovina, and Montenegro, since these three nations have been exposed to a high degree of Russian propaganda and influence. In order to do it, liberal forces should:

³⁶ Direkcija za europske integracije (2022).

³⁷ Al Jazeera (2021, May 6). GLOBSEC: Crna Gora najviše prorуска od svih članica NATO-a. <https://balkans.aljazeera.net/news/balkan/2021/5/6/izvjestaj-crna-gora-najvise-proruska-od-svih-clanica-nato-a>.

- *Request for transparency from pro-Russian organisations in the region and stronger support for pro-European actors in the region:* European liberals should provide assistance to the Balkan nations while safeguarding the importance and autonomy of the civil society sector in the region. It is crucial to uphold the strong independence of civil society organisations, which serve as vital cornerstones of liberal democracies across Europe. To aid Balkan nations, European liberals should facilitate the sharing of experiences from other European regions that have faced Russian anti-liberal propaganda and its impact on civil society organisations.
- *Promote higher involvement of the European Union with its projects and support to disadvantaged communities:* The European Union needs to increase its involvement and support for disadvantaged rural communities to counter the influence of Russian-backed activists. By addressing the specific needs and aspirations of these communities, the EU can provide alternative narratives and reinforce the benefits of future European integration, fostering a sense of belonging and shared identity. Also, the EU has tough times promoting its importance and relevance for the region.
- *Spotlight the topic of the Serbian-Russian Humanitarian Centre again:* It is crucial for the European Union to provide a definitive statement regarding its expectations from Serbia regarding the existence of this Centre.
- *Resume urgently negotiations between Serbia and the European Union. This is crucial for the stability and pro-European trajectory of Serbia, which in turn contributes to the overall stability of the Balkans:* A stable, pro-European Serbia means a stable Western Balkans. As the most influential nation in the Western Balkans, Serbia's strong economic, political, and cultural ties with Russia have led to a certain level of dependency, necessitating immediate support from the European Union. Despite the pro-Russian stance of some Serbian decision-makers and the relative euroscepticism among Serbian citizens, these factors should not further distance Serbia from the European perspective. Failure on the part of the European Union to embrace Serbia will result in long-lasting instability in the region and provide

an opportunity for Russia to fill the political void in Serbia and subsequently extend its influence throughout the region.

- *Open immediately negotiations with Bosnia and Herzegovina. This is of utmost importance, as it is crucial for the country's survival to be integrated into the collective economic and security framework of Europe:* Bosnia and Herzegovina's heavy reliance on geopolitical developments means that any significant changes have the potential to fuel discontent and deepen internal ethno-political divisions. Therefore, it is vital to swiftly initiate talks and bring Bosnia and Herzegovina into the EU family, ensuring stability and fostering unity for the country's prosperous future.
- *Pay special attention to fake media news in Montenegro:* Russian disinformation campaigns in the Western Balkans languages nurture political and ethnic divides, fanning distrust and instability. To this end, there should be coordinated efforts between private technology companies, social media platforms and government agencies in Western Balkans. Of significant value would be increased training programs for Balkan journalists to raise their awareness of and capacity to address disinformation and fake news³⁸.

³⁸ Karčić, H., Mandaville, P. (2023, June 1). Dislodging Putin's Foothold in the Balkans. *United States Institute of Peace*. <https://www.usip.org/publications/2023/06/dislodging-putins-foothold-balkans>.

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The power of non-state actors to bypass state institutions and decisions in ethnically divided societies opens a space for testing Russian influence in the region and in the context of limited access to other countries, this may serve as a motivation for Putin to engage even further in the Western Balkans.

ALEN GUDALO

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European Liberal Forum (ELF)

is the official political foundation of the European Liberal Party, the ALDE Party. Together with 57 member organisations, we work all over Europe to bring new ideas into the political debate, to provide a platform for discussion, and to empower citizens to make their voices heard. ELF was founded in 2007 to strengthen the liberal and democrat movement in Europe. Our work is guided by liberal ideals and a belief in the principle of freedom. We stand for a future-oriented Europe that offers opportunities for every citizen. ELF is engaged on all political levels, from the local to the European. We bring together a diverse network of national

foundations, think tanks and other experts. At the same time, we are also close to, but independent from, the ALDE Party and other Liberal actors in Europe. In this role, our forum serves as a space for an open and informed exchange of views between a wide range of different actors.
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COLOPHON

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This is quite close to the mafia mentality when one must show no weakness, and give disproportionate retribution to scare less resolute opponents away. Bomb civic infrastructure; torture civilian population; create an ecocide by blasting a dam; threaten with global hunger through quitting the grain deal; set grain storages on fire. Promise to continue the warfare but resume grain supplies if all the sanctions are lifted. If that does not work, threaten to blast a nuclear power plant.

VALERIA KORABLYOVA

The European Liberal Forum, with the support of the Projekt: Polska Foundation, undertook the task of outlining what Putin's Europe is. We invited twenty experts and editors from across the continent to show how the Russian dictator influences the lives of Europeans. We describe universal phenomena and trends. When the starting point for describing a problem is a single country or a group of countries, it does not at all mean that this problem is limited to this particular geographical area. On the contrary, it should be assumed that it is or will be present in one form or another in other countries as well. The question is: when and with what intensity? There are no places in Europe in which Putin would not be interested. Destabilising or subjugating every patch, even small or remote from Moscow, brings the dictator closer to his goal: reconstructing the empire, building Putin's Europe.

MIŁOSZ HODUN

Putin's Europe is a unique volume, a sort of compendium of reflections about this new world order and testimonies from Eastern Europe and the Balkans to Latin America, on how Russia has invested over time in the realm of information warfare, disinformation, and external interference. The volume outlines how this strategy has been executed with extreme meticulousness — and a certain know-how accumulated during the years of the Cold War — to manipulate opinions, politics, and politicians, and to seek consensus among different crowds in the European Union and beyond.

FRANCESCO CAPPELLETTI

