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Ukraine's Support Coalition and the Long (Info) War

Mitigating the Disinformation Threat to Democratic Collaboration

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In February 2022, when Russia mounted its full-scale invasion of Ukraine, Western democracies came together in a remarkable show of unity in support of Ukraine and of democratic principles. They referred to Ukraine's fight as a fight for democracy and a global rules-based order. They imposed sanctions on the aggressor, undertook massive shifts in energy independence and military spending, welcomed large numbers of Ukrainian refugees, and collaborated to provide the beleaguered country with financial assistance, intelligence and strategic support, and military aid – all critical to its survival in its David versus Goliath struggle with its larger, and more powerful, neighbor. As of this writing, two years into the fighting, the situation looks bleaker. In late 2023, Ukraine's then top general publicly lamented the state of fighting as reaching a "stalemate" in which no major breakthrough was immediately likely. While the two armies stand bogged down in an attritional phase of war where lines move little, Ukraine's military now runs low on munitions. In the absence of some course correction, observers increasingly point to a long-term Russian advantage. At the same time, discussions of continued aid on both sides of the Atlantic have faced intensified political challenges.

The fight on the battlefield will be crucial to Ukraine's future – as well as to transatlantic security and democracy, and global order. But this fight itself hinges on the continued unity and collaboration across Western democratic partners that have provided critical aid and assistance to enable Ukraine's remarkable show of resistance until this point. This coalition is premised on trust and shared values across Ukraine and its democratic partners. It depends upon electoral outcomes, domestic politics, and multinational organization processes across Europe, the United States, and beyond. As such, it has many seams of vulnerability – even without deliberate adversarial action. It has also been targeted persistently by Russian information and influence campaigns throughout the war and before, seeking to undermine unified

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support for Ukraine's war effort across Western democracies. In so doing, Moscow seeks also to undermine future confidence in one of the West's greatest strengths – its strength in numbers of allies and partners willing to collaborate around a shared vision.

In recent years, democracies have faced fundamental challenges in addressing the threat of adversarial disinformation aimed at undermining trust in and functioning of key democratic institutions and processes. These challenges are sufficiently daunting at the national level. They have led to significant, if nascent, innovations to mitigate impacts, foster trust and resilience, and simultaneously protect core democratic values. But the challenge does not stop at national borders. Nondemocratic competitors frequently use coordinated cyber-enabled disinformation and influence campaigns strategically at a regional or international level. They aim to undermine cooperation between democracies, break alliance cohesion, and otherwise use interference in the democratic politics of individual countries to foster broader geopolitical and strategic gains. No event in the past decade better illustrates this challenge than the war in Ukraine and Russia's multipronged efforts to influence transatlantic cooperation in support of Ukraine. But the war has also fostered new forms of strategic awareness and adaptation.

This chapter examines the role of cyber-enabled information and influence in relation to transatlantic support for Ukraine as a case study of the challenge of addressing transnational coordinated strategic disinformation campaigns. Specifically, the chapter examines Russia's uses of multipronged disinformation and influence campaigns in attempts to influence transatlantic support for Ukraine by democratic partners and allies, scrutinizing how the Kremlin has targeted within- and cross-national vulnerabilities as part of broader strategic goals. Investigating what has been done by democratic target countries, individually *and collaboratively*, to mitigate the worst outcomes and potential strategic impacts, this chapter in turn examines existing mechanisms of coordination and cooperation by which democracies have sought to address this strategically motivated threat, their current adequacy to the task, as well as ongoing learning and adaptation in this area.

The remainder of the chapter is divided into three sections. The first section, "Democracies and the Transnational Disinformation Challenge," examines the nature of today's strategic, transnational, cyber-enabled information and influence campaigns as a challenge to democracy writ large, and as a particularly complex challenge to international unity and collaboration across democratic partners and allies. The Ukraine war has made this threat more obvious than ever before, demonstrating how such campaigns can seek to undermine critical strategic collaboration between democratic countries. The second section, "Support for Ukraine and Russian Strategic Information Campaigns," considers the role of a broad coalition of democratic partners in support for Ukraine's quest for self-determination and democracy, examining how Russian efforts to thwart Ukraine's defense have extended well beyond the battlefield through extensive orchestrated information and

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influence campaigns across countries and audiences. These campaigns have targeted not only specific actors or countries but also relationships, institutions, and mechanisms of cooperation across democracies that enable the collaborative support effort. The final section, "Conclusion: Defensive Progress and Challenges," considers the challenge of democratic defenses and resilience to such strategic disinformation campaigns. While democracies have indeed made some progress, the challenge of addressing complex, transnationally orchestrated campaigns remains particularly daunting. The chapter concludes with a call for more robust and strategically aligned collaboration across democracies and in defense of collaborative institutions.

DEMOCRACIES AND THE TRANSNATIONAL DISINFORMATION CHALLENGE

Since revelations of Russian efforts to influence the 2016 United States presidential election, democratic countries have been increasingly aware of the threat posed to their domestic political systems from adversarial cyber-enabled information and influence operations and campaigns. Such operations involve the deliberate use of information and narrative to target individuals, groups, or large segments of society, influence perceptions and decision-making processes, and ultimately gain desired strategic outcomes – often utilized during peacetime or gray zone confrontation without resorting to direct military conflict, but also used to complement above-threshold clashes, both within and outside of the theater of armed conflict (Lin & Kerr, 2019).

By no means entirely new, this form of competition bears deep commonalities with forms of information competition and deception common during earlier historical periods, with Russian use of these techniques particularly bearing similarity to the Soviet "active measures" of the Cold War period (Rid, 2020). But the renewed use of such aggressive information confrontation was nonetheless novel in the post–Cold War environment, and the possibilities were also transformed by the fundamentally different twenty-first-century information environment, including the rise of the global internet, online media and social media ecosystems, and ubiquitous data, digital tools, and algorithms. The new forms of operations drew not only on earlier operational techniques but also on rapidly developing cyber domain capabilities, covert manipulations of online media and social media systems, and the multi-vector spread of false, misleading, or manipulative information and narratives. The variety of techniques demonstrated a degree of flexibility, low cost, and scalability that could potentially be much more widely utilized and emulated – particularly by nondemocratic states.

Adversarial disinformation poses particularly salient challenges for democracies. Efforts to sway and polarize public opinion, spread uncertainty and confusion about factual events, influence or undermine faith in the outcomes of elections, and

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otherwise weaken trust in key institutions and public figures all constitute challenges to core elements of democratic systems. These states share deep commitments to freedoms of expression, association, and information. They support a free and open internet. And they base their governments' legitimacy on the sanctity of free and fair elections. The online platforms, digital tools, and media outlets utilized in disinformation campaigns often fall under private ownership, cut across multiple jurisdictions, and have their own interests, rules of service, and technical challenges. Foreign hostile disinformation campaigns frequently interact with existing echo chambers, social cleavages, polarized media, fringe politics, divisive conspiracy theories, home-grown mis- and disinformation currents, and other domestic societal dynamics that are vulnerable to further exploitation and manipulation. The problem, therefore, has not been prone to an easy and immediate solution, despite serious efforts by democracies on both sides of the Atlantic.

While a variety of approaches have been attempted to address these challenges at governmental, whole of society, and even intergovernmental levels, the examination of the *long-term strategic goals* of adversarial campaigns has often been somewhat underdeveloped. Given the types of granular forensic data necessary to track and attribute disinformation operations, the focus has sometimes necessarily dwelt on specific adversarial behaviors or content forms such as the targeting of particular platforms, audiences, or events, the use of particular techniques of manipulation, or the spread of specific false, biased or misleading narratives, pictures, or other content forms. This is critical and challenging analytical work. But its focus is often necessarily at an operational or a tactical level rather than on strategic analysis. Insofar as specific campaign objectives are identified, these often have focused on local and chronologically proximate events, communities, and institutions. Adversarial uses of disinformation might be tied to efforts to generate an in-person protest event, exacerbate local animus between social groups, or undermine support for a political candidate. But the longer term follow-on effects of these coordinated actions and their impacts beyond the given country's political system are often not the primary focus of inquiry.

The goals of uncovered operations are often broadly characterized in relation to efforts to undermine elections, sow distrust or confusion, and otherwise weaken democracy. While these broad high-level objectives are likely frequently correct, the focus on domestic politics sometimes has obfuscated attention to likely regional, transnational, or global strategic dimensions of adversarial efforts. By interpreting operations in terms of the local political context, issues, and threats to domestic democratic institutions, there has sometimes been inadequate attention to the wider orchestration of campaigns across multiple national political jurisdictions. In some cases, such campaigns might amount simply to efforts to achieve similar outcomes at scale across larger regions or sets of countries. But, in other cases, the attempt to influence dynamics between countries or regions is also critical – whether aimed at affecting foreign policies toward third parties,

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bi- or multilateral relations between states, the cohesion or policies of alliances or of regional or international organizations, or some other specific system-level interaction or outcome.

We can discern various examples of such higher level strategic logic at work in Russian uses of disinformation campaigns over more than a decade. While often characterized as efforts to create chaos and uncertainty, impart a sense of nihilism, and stand against something rather than for anything, there is also ample evidence that Russian information and influence campaigns have sought specific regional and international outcomes, including to secure influence across the historic region of the Russian Empire and Soviet Union, undermine European Union (EU) and transatlantic unity and North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) alliance cohesion, diminish international accountability for chemical weapons use, limit uptake of Western COVID-19 vaccines, counter Western security roles in Africa and the Middle East, diminish trust in Western countries across the Global South, win broad support for positions in the United Nations (UN) Global Assembly, and bolster global pro-Russia "conservative" movements and organizational networks.

Russia's multidimensional use of cyber-enabled information and influence campaigns in relation to efforts to undermine Ukrainian independence stands out as a particularly longstanding and egregious example of such coordinated and long-term efforts across many national jurisdictions. Russia has persistently used a mix of information operations to target Ukraine in support of its own strategic goals since at least the 2013–2014 Euromaidan demonstrations and 2014 Crimea annexation and instigation of conflicts in the Donbas and other regions of Ukraine. This has included direct operations against specific Ukrainian targets and populations such as the 2014 hacking of the Central Election Commission of Ukraine and the attempt to spread doubt and undermine legitimacy of electoral results, the use of non-demarcated military personnel to reduce certainty and speed of attribution processes, and the use of propaganda to sow ethnic tensions and stoke conflict. Efforts have frequently focused on shifting narratives concerning specific events in or pertaining to the conflict with Ukraine, such as the rapid online spread of numerous alternative explanations following the July 2014 downing of the Malaysian Airlines flight MH17 over Ukraine.

Even these efforts focused directly on the Ukraine conflict have utilized a variety of operations and techniques to pursue interrelated goals. A number of digitally enabled techniques have been used, including, for example, the use of spear phishing to gain unauthorized access, hack-and-leak operations – as well as the release of forged documents – to influence public understanding of the conflict, distributed denial of service (DDoS) attacks to block access to information at key moments, and the release of wiper malware and cyberattacks destroying data, damaging the economy, and shutting down parts of the power grid. These technical operations have had informational and psychological elements, aiming to affect public opinion or decision-making dynamics – within Ukraine and Russia, but also

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sometimes beyond. Narratives have also explicitly been weaponized to exacerbate conflict and undermine support for Kyiv, including discussion of "being 'brother nations' with a shared history, religion, and culture; mistreatment of Russian-speaking communities in Ukraine and fear of supposed Ukrainian Naziism, portraying the elected government in Kyiv as illegitimate and violent 'Banderites' [or fascists]; and nostalgia for and possibility of reclaiming the former Soviet greatness" (Kerr, 2023). A variety of platforms and channels have been utilized to disseminate these messages, ranging from social media to television to official public statements and involving everything from fake online personas to supposedly independent expert speakers and official state sources and outlets.

The Kremlin's use of information and influence campaigns in its efforts to subjugate Ukraine has also long involved international components. Operations targeting US and European elections, public opinion, or political decisions have often been examined mostly as threats to domestic political systems, potentially damaging to the targeted country's national security and democracy. But collectively, many of these efforts have also aimed to support Moscow's broader objectives in Ukraine, clearly supporting politicians, parties, or agendas viewed as most commensurate with these goals. Even the 2016 election interference, often seen as the origin point of Western concern about democratic vulnerability to disinformation, can also be understood as related closely to Moscow's efforts to achieve desired outcomes in Ukraine, with the former Republican campaign chief Paul Manafort having specifically served as an advisor to Ukraine's pro-Russia former president Viktor Yanukovych, and the source of the Robert Mueller investigation and first impeachment trial of former US president Donald Trump relating to his handling of relations with Russia and military aid to Ukraine.

Since Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine in February 2022, the global and multifaceted scope of these efforts has only increased, utilizing coordinated, multi-front, often transnational and cyber-enabled disinformation and influence campaigns to achieve its desired objectives in the conflict. This has become all the more important given the complexity and criticality of coordinated Western support for Kyiv's war effort.

SUPPORT FOR UKRAINE AND RUSSIAN STRATEGIC DISINFORMATION CAMPAIGNS

In the opening days of Russia's war against Ukraine, a broad coalition of democratic countries – including the United States, members of the EU and NATO, and other partners and allies – came together to condemn the invasion and to offer military and economic aid and other forms of assistance. This support has been critical to Ukraine's ability to defend itself and withstand further Russian conquest during two years of full-scale war. It has involved major contributions by many countries of the transatlantic region and beyond. It has also involved efforts to reinforce and expand

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European and transatlantic institutions, embrace nonaligned, like-minded countries, and provide pathways toward greater security and integration into the community of democratic states for Ukraine and other non-EU and non-NATO member countries vulnerable to Russian coercion and aggression. All of this has been undertaken against a backdrop of concerns about potential escalation risks, economic and energy interdependencies, and differing levels of military stockpiles, defense industry readiness, and existing policies and cultural attitudes. These efforts have been remarkable, but they also have exposed additional vulnerabilities to Russian disinformation and influence campaigns – which the Kremlin has diligently sought to exploit.

A *Transformative Coalition*

In the first two years of the war, over forty-one countries have contributed to the support of Ukraine – whether through the sending of arms and ammunition, support for military training, financial assistance, logistic support, acceptance and support of refugees, or other means. These efforts have involved significant financial and economic burdens, changes in policy, and overcoming a panoply of domestic, regional, intraorganizational, and transatlantic obstacles and tensions. Some countries have pledged large percentages of their national heavy weapons and ammunition stockpiles or committed to rapidly producing more as part of their support for Ukraine. Others have accepted large numbers of refugees, served as major logistics and supply hubs, or fundamentally changed aspects of their domestic economies or foreign policies. In addition to the United States and EU and NATO members, this has included G7 countries and others from across Europe and beyond – including contributions, for example, by Japan, South Korea, Australia, New Zealand, and Taiwan (Bomprezzi et al., n.d.).

As of January 15, 2024, partners have committed some $278 billion in aid since the beginning of the war, including $141.06 billion in financial assistance, $19.01 billion in humanitarian assistance, and $117.99 billion in military commitments (Antezza et al., 2024). While the United States has committed $75.4 billion ($46.33 billion of it military aid), Europe (through the EU and bilateral commitments by individual countries) has collectively committed $183.43 billion ($102.499 billion of it financial and $67.68 billion military aid) (O'Hanlon, Stelzenmüller, & Wessel, 2024). According to the Kiel Institute's "Ukraine Support Tracker" statistics, thirty European countries as well as Canada have actually committed higher percentages of gross domestic product (GDP) than the United States (0.32 percent), though these come as proportions of smaller overall economies. A total of fifteen countries have committed more than 1 percent of their total GDP to the aid effort, led by Estonia (4.09 percent), Denmark (3.06 percent), Lithuania (2.04 percent), Norway (1.72 percent), and Latvia (1.67 percent) (Bomprezzi et al., n.d.). Eastern European countries formerly dominated by Russia have made particularly large proportionate

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commitments. Of the top fifteen contributors by GDP percentage, seven were former communist states.[1] European countries have also provided significant support in the form of accepting and assisting Ukrainian refugees – led by Germany, Poland, and the Czech Republic, but with fourteen countries accepting refugee numbers greater than 1 percent of their prewar populations.[2] These countries have also spent substantial amounts on support for the refugees they have taken in, led by Poland spending 3.35 percent of its GDP on this support, followed by the Czech Republic and Bulgaria (each 2.08 percent), Slovakia (1.68 percent), Latvia (1.51 percent), Lithuania (0.98 percent), and Estonia (0.94 percent) (Antezza et al., 2024).

These efforts have involved particularly significant undertakings or dramatic changes in policy by a number of countries critical to the support collaboration. For example, Germany – which has committed the second-most total ($24.2 billion) and military ($19.42 billion) aid of any individual country behind the United States, and a total worth 1.06 percent of its GDP – had to dramatically alter its approach to defense and military production, as well as overturning its trade and energy dependence relations with Russia (Antezza et al., 2024). In his February 27, 2022 speech to the Bundestag, German Chancellor Olaf Scholz called the Russian attack on Ukraine a "*Zeitenwende*," or "historic turning point," and announced significant changes in German defense policy and military spending. While gaps remain between commitments and what has actually been delivered to date, this represents a generationally important change in German defense policy. France has also made some substantial changes to its foreign policy as a result of the war effort. Some observers ridiculed French President Emmanuel Macron's prewar shuttle diplomacy charm offensive and open line to Putin during the first year of the war, seeing these efforts as potentially placating Russia or pressuring Ukraine into negotiation. But, by December 2022, Macron had declared France's support for Ukraine "all the way to victory" and France had begun heavy arms deliveries to Ukraine. Subsequent changes suggest an increasing support for inclusive European defensive hardening, including a 40 percent increase in France's defense budget announced in January 2023. Perhaps more significantly, there is also evidence of a changing French approach to European security – including a more positive stance toward further enlargement of the EU and NATO.[3]

[1] In addition to the three Baltic states, this includes Slovakia, Croatia, Bulgaria, and the Czech Republic (see Bomprezzi et al., n.d.).

[2] As of January 15, 2024, Germany had accepted over 1.1 million refugees or 1.35 percent of its population, followed by Poland with over 956,000, the Czech Republic with over 375,000, and the United Kingdom with 250,000. In total, nine – mostly East European – countries have accepted larger proportions than Germany relative to their national populations, including: Montenegro (7.84 percent), Moldova (4.46 percent), the Czech Republic (3.51 percent), Poland (2.52 percent), Latvia (2.30 percent), Slovakia (2.09 percent), Ireland (2.05 percent), Lithuania (1.87 percent), and Cyprus (1.51 percent) (see Antezza et al., 2024).

[3] Not only did France support the Ukrainian and Moldovan moves to EU candidate status but it also lifted prior vetoes on membership talks for Albania and North Macedonia, with Macron

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Former Soviet Bloc and nonaligned countries on Europe's Eastern flank have also undertaken dramatic changes in policy and critical supportive efforts. In addition to the substantial aid contributions and refugee support relative to their GDPs and populations, Baltic and East European states have loudly pressured partners for greater supportive efforts. Poland has played a particularly essential role, serving as a hub for logistics – including the transfer of military and humanitarian aid – with its city Rzeszow providing the closest airport to the Ukrainian border. It has also taken in one of the largest total refugee populations with many more transiting through the country to further destinations. Ukraine's closest European neighbors have also become conduits for shipment of its agricultural products, while Turkey has played an intermittent role in pressuring Russia to allow their Black Sea export.

In addition to specific efforts to provide immediate aid and support for Ukraine, another significant element of the response by democratic partners has involved efforts to consolidate and reinforce structures of cooperation and security across Europe and the transatlantic region. In the first months of the war, Sweden and Finland – which had long maintained a neutral status in relation to NATO – declared their desire to join the alliance and were formally invited at the Madrid Summit in July 2022. Despite intra-alliance tensions that held up the actual accessions, most NATO members rapidly embraced the further integration of these two partner countries, seen as capable of quickly becoming important contributors to the alliance's defense posture. Western democracies have also come together in an effort to provide pathways forward to secure democratic futures for Ukraine and other non-NATO and non-EU member countries vulnerable to Russian aggression. At NATO's Vilnius summit in July 2023, the alliance affirmed language that "Ukraine's future is in NATO" and agreed that, after the war, Ukraine would not be required to go through the formal process of a "membership action plan," or MAP.[4] On December 14, 2023, the EU's current members voted to begin membership accession negotiations with Ukraine and Moldova, also advancing Georgia to candidate status.[5]

suggesting that EU expansion should occur "as fast as possible" and calling for a Ukrainian "path to NATO membership" in 2023 (*The Economist*, 2023a; *The Economist*, 2023b).

[4] Though this did not provide Ukraine with as strong a guarantee of rapid accession as the country desired, with some friction between members, it was accompanied by discussion of additional assistance in training and interoperability and an additional pledge of "enduring" support from the G7 countries – the United States, UK, Canada, France, Germany, Italy, and Japan – promising that each state would offer "specific, bilateral, long-term security commitments and arrangements" (*The Economist*, 2023c).

[5] Ukraine, Georgia, and Moldova had each submitted applications for EU membership in the opening weeks of the war in February and March 2022. In June 2022, the European Council conferred Ukraine and Moldova with candidate status and named Georgia as a potential candidate. During this same period, the EU has also reinvigorated engagement around the path to membership with six Western Balkan countries that had long seemed bogged down in

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Vulnerabilities and Targeting of Ukraine's Support

The outpouring of support for Ukraine in the face of Russian hostility has marked an impressive, coordinated response, but it has also demonstrated new seams of vulnerability to Russian information and influence campaigns. While some relate to core democratic institutions and protections and processes across democracies, others are due to the historic, cultural, or political specificities of particular states critical to the support efforts – or capable of playing spoilers in those efforts, such as through the EU or NATO. While the individual support of key states is vital in and of itself, some vulnerabilities are explicitly inter- or transnational, related to alliance or regional institutions, bi- or multilateral dynamics, coordination, trust, and cohesion. Russia has made extensive strategic use of cyber-enabled information and influence campaigns during the first two years of the war, including targeting these vulnerabilities in Ukraine's support coalition. Coordinated campaigns across different national and regional audiences have targeted not only specific countries key to the support effort but also the very relationships, organizations, and mechanisms that have been most critical in enabling a collective unified response.

A review of several known instances of Russian disinformation and influence operations since the start of the full-scale war with Ukraine readily demonstrates this strategic sophistication, both in target selection and often also in coordination of tactics and narratives across jurisdictions. We see this first, for example, in operations targeting countries that are leading providers of military, financial, or humanitarian support. Operations across these countries use similar but tailored tactics, aiming to bolster challenges to support for Ukraine and increase conciliatory positions toward Russia across the right and left extremes of the political spectrum, and spread narratives undermining public support for Ukraine or emphasizing associated risks and harms to national well-being. These efforts began long before the full-scale invasion, cultivating networks of relationships with extreme political parties and movements, fringe media outlets, organizations, politicians, journalists, activists, influencers, and other public figures. They also long involved cultivating digital ecosystems for the laundering and spread of interrelated but tailored disinformation across many platforms.

Since the invasion, not only has the intensity of these efforts increased but they have also focused much more explicitly on the goal of undermining support for Ukraine. Russian cyber-enabled information and influence campaigns seeking to affect the course of the war have targeted numerous audiences, including within Ukraine itself, the Russian public, the Global South, and the West. Building on the relationships, audiences, and techniques cultivated through earlier campaigns and operations, they have sought to "amplify divisive local issues and voices," "tailor[ing] disinformation and narratives for specific audiences." They have used a

different stages of the membership process. In December 2023, it was announced that negotiations might begin in 2024 with Bosnia and Herzegovina (*The Economist*, 2023d).

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combination of official channels, "state-backed media outlets," "Russia-linked actors," and organizations, and "coordinated inauthentic activity on social media platforms." They have leveraged techniques such as "hack-and-leak operations," "falsified imagery," fake copies of trusted websites, and automated systems for the dissemination, laundering, and amplification of fake stories across multiple media ecosystems (Atlantic Council Digital Forensic Research Lab (DFRLab), 2023; Huntley, 2023; Insikt Group, 2022; Kerr, 2023, p. 17). Through a mix of narratives and covert influence campaigns across numerous countries, they have aimed to discredit the legitimacy or capability of the Ukrainian government and military, spread doubt and fear concerning pro-Ukraine policies, encourage conciliatory approaches to Russia, and foment grievances and division between Ukraine's supporters (Bronk, Collins, & Wallach, 2022; Kerr, 2023). Narratives of particular prevalence have included those seeking to stoke hostility, fear, and resentment toward Ukrainian refugees; blame Russian sanctions and aid to Ukraine for local economic and social hardships; legitimize Russian actions and blame Ukraine, NATO, or the United States for the war; raise the specter of military escalation to involve supporting countries, nuclear, or other catastrophic threats; and sow distrust in mainstream parties and media of Western democracies as "biased or untruthful" (Aleksejeva, 2023; Kerr, 2023).

Studies both prior to and during the full-scale war show Russia building vast networks for the distribution of targeted disinformation and cultivation and manipulation of supportive actors and publics across Europe and the United States, often appearing to particularly emphasize those countries most critical to the Ukraine support effort. For example, the EUvsDisinfo Database – a project of the European External Action Service (EEAS) East StratCom Taskforce – found that Germany was the European country most targeted by disinformation campaigns recorded in their data for the 2015–2021 period leading up to the war, with 700 cases collected. During this same period, their data showed France as the second-most targeted, with 300 cases. Comparative studies by the EU DisinfoLab since the full-scale invasion likewise point to Germany as the most-targeted EU member state during the conflict, while major leaks of Kremlin correspondence and investigative studies have demonstrated explicitly planned efforts to target both French and German public opinion and politics to undermine support for Ukraine.

Operations in both Germany and France have sought to instrumentalize fringe political parties and movements to spread narratives undercutting support for Ukraine across receptive audiences and promote policies serving Russia's strategic goals. In Germany, for example, leaks and traced online campaigns show Moscow attempting to utilize pro-Russian media and social media as well as networks of collaborative relationships and clandestine operatives to mobilize both left- and right-wing activists, political parties, and sympathetic segments of the population around opposition to support for Ukraine – in some cases specifically seeking to bring together both ends of the political spectrum around common narratives and

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grievances. Some of these operations have long roots going back well before the 2022 invasion. Prior to the full-scale war, German-language Russian state-backed media had an established presence in the German media system, including outlets such as RT Deutsch and Sputnik, which focused their coverage on polarizing issues such as immigration and EU skepticism, producing content that was often picked up by – and frequently supportive of – extreme populist political parties and campaigns (Hadeed & Sus, 2023; Spahn, 2020). By mid-decade, Russian disinformation often targeted Angela Merkel and her policies, including her stance on migration. In the infamous 2016 "Lisa F." case, a hoax about a thirteen-year-old Russian–German girl having allegedly been kidnapped and assaulted by men of Arab origin was amplified by Russian media leading to anti-migrant demonstrations and an attack on a refugee reception center by German neo-Nazis.

Since Germany's blocking of RT shortly prior to the Russian invasion of Ukraine in February 2022, a number of pro-Russian German blogs and independent media sources on platforms such as Telegram have achieved wide audiences spreading Kremlin narratives (DW, 2022; Kastner & Hewson, 2023). Analysis by Reuters has identified twenty-seven Telegram channels that "reshare and boost pro-Kremlin messages to a combined audience of about 1.5 million subscribers," including flattering images of Putin and warnings about the risk of nuclear escalation (Nikolskaya et al., 2023). German researchers have also shown the Russian government is more often using official channels of communication such as Foreign Ministry and Embassy websites, social media, and press releases to spread disinformation (Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD), 2022). In one prominent August 2022 example of the use of these mechanisms to spread inflammatory disinformation against support for Ukraine, an out-of-context video clip of German Foreign Minister Annalena Baerbock portrayed her as declaring her intention to continue support for Ukraine even against the will and interests of German voters. The clip was picked up first on pro-Russian Telegram accounts and then propagated further across mainstream social media platforms, spread by accounts connected with extremists and fringe political party members, and leading to a trending hashtag on German-language Twitter (now X) calling for Baerbock's resignation (Delcker, 2022).

The Kremlin has long sought to build closer relations with German fringe politicians and activists. The hard-right Alternative für Deutschland (AfD) party has been a particularly pronounced beneficiary of Moscow's largess. Prior to and since the beginning of the full-scale war, several AfD members have been invited on trips to meet with Kremlin or Kremlin-aligned figures in Moscow, Belarus, Kyiv, and Russian-occupied regions of Ukraine. At the same time, Kremlin efforts also have aimed to stoke support for left-wing activism such as peace and anti-NATO movements. Investigations have traced Kremlin efforts to encourage alliance between the AfD and the far-left party, Die Linke, specifically appearing to target Die Linke parliamentarian Sahra Wagenknecht, who has led protests opposed to supplying

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arms to Ukraine.[6] Reuters investigations have also indicated that the Russian agency *Rossotrudnichestvo* is also directly coordinating a "network of agents" – some under false German identities – involved in promoting Kremlin narratives in protests and civil society events within Germany (Nikolskaya et al., 2023). After the beginning of the war, the AfD's popularity has soared nationally, doubling between fall 2022 and 2023 an average of 22 percent, with much higher numbers in some Eastern regions.[7] Berlin's Center for Monitoring, Analysis, and Strategy (CeMAS) research also showed a significant increase in "approval of pro-Russian propaganda narratives" between spring and fall of 2022 (Kastner & Hewson, 2023). The exact impact of Russian information and influence campaigns on such shifts in polling and public opinion is difficult to establish, as these efforts often target already vulnerable populations and seek to exacerbate preexisting grievances and dynamics. But these trends could prove concerning in relation to long-term support for Ukraine.

In France, Russian disinformation and influence operations have also sought to leverage fringe parties, organizations, and public opinion to influence policy. Campaigns targeting France since the start of the full-scale war, similarly to those in Germany, have built on longstanding efforts. Russia has, for example, long cultivated a relationship with Marie Le Pen's far-right party, the National Rally (formerly National Front), with past loan interactions suggesting financial support from Russia, Le Pen's rhetoric emphasizing negative impacts of sanctions on the French economy, and the party voting against or abstaining from support for Ukraine and advocating better relations with Russia. National Rally member and European parliamentarian, Thierry Mariani, also leads the Association for Franco-Russian Dialogue, an organization which promotes pro-Russian positions in Paris. Mariani has made frequent trips to Russia, served as an election observer in the Donbas in 2018, and led National Rally delegations to Crimea. He pushes against Western support for Ukraine and sanctions of Russia, promoting negative views of

[6] The Kremlin has invited Wagenknecht's ex-husband, Ralph Niemeyer, on trips to Moscow, for example, and encouraged him to help bridge the left and right coalitions. Leaked Kremlin emails show numerous, sometimes lavish, all-expenses-paid trips to Moscow by AfD members since at least 2017, with some paid for through the "Russian Peace Foundation," which is run by the head of the Duma's Foreign Affairs Committee, Leonid Slutsky (Belton, Mekhennet, & Harris, 2023; DW, 2021; Kastner & Hewson, 2023).

[7] Parts of the former East Germany appear to be particularly vulnerable to Russian disinformation due to long-simmering residual resentments of the West, greater economic difficulties, and shared communist history. An October 2022 survey showed 40 percent of Germans "fully or partially" agreeing with the argument "that NATO provoked Russia into invading Ukraine" – an already alarming number – but 59 percent agreed in former East German provinces. Extremist and separatist groups have had more sway in this region, including the "Free Saxons" movement who aim for their own "Säxit" – an idea of "far-reaching autonomy or secession" based on the British "Brexit." Saxony was also home to a planned coup attempt – led by the far-right group *Reichsbürger* and Prince Heinrich XIII Reuss, a member of the regional aristocracy – conspirators involved in which were arrested by German authorities in December 2022 (Kastner & Hewson, 2023; Morris, Mekhennet, & Bisset, 2022).

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the Ukrainian government and the United States. Jean-Luc Schaffhauser, a former member of the European Parliament for Le Pen's party, has sought to "[launch] a foundation with Moscow's backing that would advocate for a cease-fire in Ukraine, with the Kremlin maintaining its grip on the country's eastern regions" (Belton, 2023). Schaffhauser, who arranged the loans to support Le Pen's prior presidential bid, also plans to back a slate of far-right candidates to the 2024 EU Parliament who seek closer relations with Russia.[8]

Russian efforts in France appear to have been tailored to emphasize particular narratives thought to be most resonant and play off of existing divisions and vulnerabilities in French society. In 2023, a French parliamentary inquiry issued a report noting Russia's "long-term disinformation campaign" and efforts to "defend and promote Russian interests" and "polarize [France's] democratic society" (Belton, 2023). A December 2023 *The Washington Post* investigative report examined how leaked Kremlin documents demonstrate explicit plans in this regard led by First Deputy Chief of Staff to the Putin Administration, Sergei Kiriyenko. The documents show an effort to utilize social media, politicians, activists, and other public figures to heighten domestic political tension, challenge NATO cohesion, and weaken support for Ukraine. Leaked 2022 Kremlin presentations give a window into the strategic thinking, expressing a belief that France would be "vulnerable to political turmoil." They cited polling numbers showing the French public – at 30 percent – had the second-highest positive view of Russia[9] of any country in Western Europe (behind Italy), with "[40 percent] inclined not to believe reporting on Ukraine by France's own mass media." Kiriyenko's team encouraged promoting narratives about the negative impacts of the sanctions on Russia leading to "social and economic crisis," the inappropriateness of "paying for another country's war," suggesting nefarious US use of the war "as an instrument to weaken Russia's position in Europe," the risk of European embroilment in a "World War III," and the need for "dialogue with Russia" to develop a "common European security architecture" (Belton, 2023). Other investigations suggest ongoing Russian efforts to exacerbate tensions around immigrants and ethno-religious difference in French society.[10]

[8] According to a December 2023 *The Washington Post* report, this was a topic Schaffhauser planned to discuss directly with Sergei Naryshkin, the head of Russian foreign intelligence, during a January 2024 meeting in Moscow. His activities, furthermore, are supported by renting a floor of his home to Russia's second-highest ranked diplomat in Paris, Ilya Subbotin (Belton, 2023).

[9] French society's connections with Russia go back many years, potentially helping to explain some reservoir of positive sentiment. Among other connections was the large influx of "White Russian" immigrants settling in France in the 1920s (Nabozhniak et al., 2023).

[10] Russian interference has also been tied to efforts to exacerbate tensions in French society between Muslim and Jewish communities. In June 2023, pro-Russian social media accounts played an outsized role in commentary around riots in response to the killing of an Arab French teenager by Paris police, and in November 2023, in the wake of onset of the Israel–Gaza war, an antisemitic campaign to paint Stars of David around Paris and amplify pictures on

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Use of digital platforms and tools has been critical in Russia's efforts to spread disinformation and influence in France, as it has been in Germany and elsewhere. The leaked Kremlin documents showed direct instructions for the use of troll farms and false French personas in targeting French society (Belton, 2023). In June 2023, French authorities announced the discovery of a broad Russian disinformation campaign, dubbed "Doppelgänger," involving the production of fake duplicates of official government and media websites – including those of the French Foreign Ministry and the newspaper *Le Monde* – then using these impersonations to disseminate false content supportive of Russia and critical of Ukraine and its support. The French Foreign Ministry attributed the operation to Russia, pointing to "numerous elements revealing the involvement of Russian or Russian-speaking individuals and many Russian companies … [and] many state [or state-affiliated] entities." The Russian companies Struktura and Social Design Agency were identified as "running [the] operation," while an anonymous news agency, Recent Reliable News (RRN), provided a repository of propaganda content for its use (EU Disinfo Lab, n.d.). The operation similarly targeted Germany, Italy, Ukraine, and the United Kingdom (Reynaud & Leloup, 2023).

In early February 2024, in another major revelation concerning Russia's at-scale use of digital tools to spread disinformation, the French government revealed a vast network of Russian sites that were "structured and coordinated" to spread Kremlin propaganda across multiple countries supporting Ukraine, including France, Germany, Poland, and the United States.[11] The network, dubbed "Portal Kombat" had been discovered by Viginum, the French government organization tasked with confronting foreign disinformation. The network included 193 sites set up to disseminate materials in multiple languages and jurisdictions. A sub-portion of the network had spread over 150,000 articles during a three-month period of June–September 2023, tracked by researchers. The materials disseminated primarily focused on justifying Russia's war against Ukraine and spreading false or misleading information and narratives to do so (Le Temps, 2024; Willsher & O'Carroll, 2024).

Russian campaigns to undermine support for Ukraine have also targeted Poland, one of Ukraine's most invaluable supporters and closest neighbors. As with other cases, the prehistory of the recent disinformation and influence efforts stretches back well before the full-scale invasion. While a significant wariness of Russia and potential Kremlin interference or aggression has long been a hallmark of Polish domestic politics – including on the far-right[12] –evidence suggests that Russia has

social media was traced to Russia-connected individuals and bot social media accounts (Belton, 2023; Caulcutt, 2023).

[11] Spain, Austria, Switzerland, and the United Kingdom were also targeted (Le Temps, 2024).

[12] In July 2023, Poland's then-ruling conservative Law and Justice party (PiS) passed a law creating a commission (appointed in August 2023) to investigate alleged Russian influence (particularly targeting political opposition), in a move which critics lamented as unconstitutional, "McCarthyist" and a threat to democracy. Conspiratorial theories about Russian involvement

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attempted a similar cultivation of fringe political party connections and exploitation of local grievances as it has in the other countries it has targeted. Leaked emails have shown Russian cultivation of relationships with some fringe Polish politicians at least as far back as 2015, utilizing connections with the *Zmiana* ("Change") party, for example, to prompt demonstrations of support for Russia's annexation of Crimea (Agence France-Presse in Warsaw, 2016; Foy, 2015; Glos Koszalinski, 2023; Morozova & Szczygieł, 2023; Pacula, 2015). In 2019, only three months after its formation, *Konfederacja* ("Confederation") – "an openly pro-Russia party" – won 4.6 percent of the vote for Polish representation in the European Parliament. While this meant it did not reach the 5 percent threshold to win seats, it finished as the fourth strongest party and its fortunes have continued to grow.[13]

Pre-2022 Russian information and influence campaigns in Poland leveraged both overt state-backed sources and covert networks – often involving social media.[14] They also used illicit cyber campaigns involving phishing and hack-and-leak operations.[15] Particularly prominent themes, which have had continuing relevance during the war, included Polish loss of sovereignty to the EU, US, or other foreign actors; Polish "'Russophobia' and anti-Russian actions"; "Polish aggressiveness and imperialist intentions," including desires to turn Belarus and Ukraine into "vassals"; "economic difficulties" resulting from this subservience, hatred, and aggression; and

in the April 2010 plane crash in Smolensk, Russia, that killed then-President Lech Kaczynski and over ninety leading members of the Polish government and political elite have been credited with contributing to a consolidation of power under PiS between 2015 and 2023 that was seen by many analysts as contributing to democratic decline in the country (Applebaum, 2020; Franz, 2023; NFP, 2023; Schmitz, 2023; Shotter & Foy, 2020).

[13] Prominent members and associates of these and other fringe Polish parties have traveled to Crimea (in 2014), Grozny, and Moscow (including in late 2022), worked with the outlet Sputnik Polska, and published a book by Russian nationalist philosopher Alexander Dugin. Since the start of the full-scale Russia–Ukraine war, some members of the Confederation have called for not opening Polish borders to Ukrainian refugees, refused to support NATO accession for Finland and Sweden, promoted the slogan "Stop Ukrainization of Poland," and invoked narratives suggesting that the massacre in Bucha, Ukraine, was staged and that Polish support for Ukraine might prompt a Russian nuclear retaliation against Warsaw (Alan-Lee, 2013; Mierzyńska, 2023; Zaborowski, 2019).

[14] Until Russia's state-sponsored Sputnik and RT outlets were blocked across the EU in 2022, these outlets openly promoted Polish-language news with Kremlin narratives. These sites themselves were not so popular with Polish audiences, but other Polish websites copied their content without attribution, putting it into broader circulation (Kozłowski, 2022).

[15] A major 2021 hack-and-leak incident targeted the private email of the then-head of the office of the Polish Prime Minister, Michał Dworczyk, with emails later being posted to Telegram. The broader "Ghostwriter" cyber espionage campaign targeted thousands of additional Polish email accounts, including those of 100 public officials. These phishing attacks were later publicly attributed to Russia, with the Polish government noting that they had targeted both the ruling party and opposition as well as Polish civil society, and that they were "part of the disinformation operation that the Russian side is conducting against Poland, but also against other countries on NATO's eastern flank." As disinformation investigator Anna Gielewska pointed out in June 2023, much of the data obtained through the Ghostwriter campaign appeared to have been held for future use (Gielewska, 2023; NFP, 2021).

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amplifying historical grievances and false or misleading "history-related claims," including about Polish responsibility for World War II, and inadequate Polish gratitude for the Soviet liberation of Poland (Nemečkayová, 2023). Other prominent narratives of Russian pre-2022 disinformation in Poland included those about the COVID-19 pandemic[16] and migration and refugees.[17]

Since February 2022, Russian information and influence operations in Poland have built on these earlier efforts. In a rapid shift following the start of the full-scale war, many of the social media accounts and group pages that had been most active in promoting COVID-19 disinformation (or other themes such as conspiracies around 5G) rapidly switched to align against Ukraine and the war support effort. Hundreds of new anonymous accounts also appeared suddenly and began to comment on content related to Russia and Ukraine.[18] Disinformation about the war has focused with particular intensity on undermining Polish relations with Ukraine and attitudes toward Ukrainian immigrants, but also justifying Russian actions, questioning economic and social consequences of support for Ukraine, promoting pacifism and anti-war sentiment, and amplifying tensions between East and West European allies. Narratives about Ukrainian refugees have suggested that the refugees are usurping privileges of Polish citizens such as access to jobs, housing, hospitals or schools, stirring resentment. They also have sought to induce fear and anger by falsely suggesting that the refugees are mostly young men rather than women and children, and that they are dangerous, engaging in criminal activities.[19] Some propaganda narratives play up historical grievances and ethnic tensions (Insikt Group, 2022, p. 5) – such as recalling unresolved animosities around the World War II Volhynian massacre, or even suggesting Polish imperialist ambitions in Ukraine.[20] Other content seeks to amplify

[16] During the COVID-19 pandemic, Poland was bombarded by – as well as fairly vulnerable to – COVID-19- and vaccine-related disinformation. Much of this was disseminated by a network of pro-Russian online portals that targeted Western and pro-Western countries. The content was further picked up by networks inclined to believe and spread conspiracy theories. The EUvsDisinfo database tracked 800 "fake news" items related to the subject "distributed by Russian and pro-Russian portals" (EUvsDisInfo, n.d.; Pawela, 2021; Zadroga, 2022).

[17] During the 2021 refugee crisis provocation on the Polish–Belarusian border, Russian state media outlets as well as social networks (particularly Telegram) sought to portray Poland and the European Union as not respecting the human rights of migrants, using this coverage in multiple languages to seek to damage perceptions of Poland (as well as Lithuania and Latvia), but also seeking to fan the flames of divisive internal tensions around migration and immigration policies within EU countries – and Poland itself. In Poland in 2015, this issue had been an important element in the rise of the Law and Justice (PiS) party (Gönczi, 2023; Legucka & Bryjka, 2021).

[18] Research showed some social media group pages changed their names, in one example going from "We don't believe in COVID-19 Pandemic" to "STOP Ukrainization of Poland" (Kozłowski, 2022).

[19] In one infamous case, Russian disinformation claimed that a murder committed in Warsaw was perpetrated by Ukrainian refugees – whereas the perpetrators charged were in fact Polish nationals (Rogalewicz, 2023; Texty, 2022; Tyburski, 2023; Zadroga, 2023).

[20] In late November 2022, following shortly after the incident of a Ukrainian air defense missile accidentally landing in Poland and killing two civilians, Russian media outlets began running

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broader anti-Ukrainian sentiments – whether through suggesting that Ukrainians are all "Banderites," Nazis, fascists, nationalists, or extremists, seeking to discredit the Ukrainian government, or blaming Ukraine and NATO for inciting the conflict (Tymińska, Korpal, & Sek, 2023; Zadroga, 2023). Research on Ukrainian social media since the start of the war shows some of the anti-Ukrainian rhetoric to be taking off – including the popularization of the hashtag #StopUkrainizacjiPolski ("#Stop UkrainizationPoland"), driven in part by the at-scale deployment of inauthentic, automated, Russian disinformation-spreading accounts.[21]

Recent shifts in public opinion polling, political rhetoric, and protest dynamics within Poland suggest that – though support for Ukraine is still relatively strong – the audience for some of these Kremlin messages may be growing. Public opinion studies conducted in the fall of 2022 and early 2023 already found Poles – particularly in poorer regions of the country – growing more critical of the economic effects of support for Ukrainian refugees, with approximately a third of the population believing that "the war in Ukraine was the result of [the same] global liberal conspiracy [. . .] that caused the COVID-19 pandemic," and that "Ukrainians residing in Poland were not refugees but economic migrants." Approximately two-thirds of respondents thought that Poland "'cannot afford' the presence of war exiles" (Mazzini, 2024). In 2022–2023, polling showed the right-wing party Confederation's popularity rising rapidly, polling third with 10 percent support by April 2023, and reaching 16.9 percent by July, prompting much speculation that they would prove "kingmakers" in Poland's October 15, 2023, parliamentary elections, potentially helping then-ruling Law and Justice party (PiS) form a coalition government. While this did not occur,[22] the

stories suggesting a Polish plan to annex part of Ukraine's territory. In an interview, Russia's Director of Foreign Intelligence, Sergey Naryshin, stated that the Polish government was planning annexation followed by referendums in three western regions of Ukraine with the goal of preventing a NATO–Russia agreement over Ukraine's future (Salvo, 2022).

[21] The April 2023 "Anti-Ukrainian Hate Speech on Polish Twitter" report by the Helsinki Foundation for Human Rights in collaboration with Polish civil society organizations the Gremek Foundation and Securlex, highlighted an uptick in hate speech targeting Ukrainian migrants on Polish Twitter. Examining the period from February 23, 2022, to January 1, 2023, the study found that "far-right politicians," "leaders and activists of radical political movements," "extremist publicists," and "some internet creators" played prominent roles in spreading xenophobic narratives. The research also found evidence of coordinated inauthentic activity on the Twitter (now X) platform driven by automated "bot" accounts including a "network of accounts duplicating Russian propaganda." The report found that this at-scale republishing was able to rapidly create trends, including popularization of the #StopUkrainizacjiPolski hashtag. While "anti-Ukrainian hate speech and disinformation were present in Polish social media even before the Russian aggression," the research found that "its scale increased significantly after February 24, 2022." The research indicated "content hostile to Ukrainians is contained in tens of thousands of posts" and "identif[ied] 90,019 posts potentially containing hate narratives against Ukrainians" (Tymińska, Korpal, & Sek, 2023).

[22] Ultimately, a relative underperformance by both Confederation (garnering approximately 10 percent of the vote to only expand their parliamentary presence from eleven to eighteen seats) and PiS (35.38 percent) allowed for Donald Tusk's liberal Civic Platform (30.7 percent) to form a ruling coalition with smaller partners Third Way and the Left party, ending eight

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campaign saw the Confederation and PiS candidates competing to be the loudest "defenders of Polish sovereignty," with slogans of "no more welfare for Ukrainians" and that "the needs of Polish citizens need to come first." The year 2023 also saw the emergence of the *Polski Ruch Antywojenny* (Polish Anti-War Movement) or PRA, which led a march in Warsaw in May 2023 and popularized the hashtag/slogan "#niemojawojna" (Not My War).[23] Poland has also seen several waves of mass protests by farmers, angered by the competition created by the import of inexpensive Ukrainian grain. The apparent role of the Confederation party in orchestrating these protests as well as some pro-Russia displays suggest potential growing alignment between the galvanized farming communities and Russian narratives.[24]

Equally important to the targeting of key countries to Ukraine's support, Russia's campaigns appear to also target key relationships between countries, cohesion of and trust in multinational organizations, and mechanisms of cooperation playing critical roles in the support processes. These have included efforts, for example, to sow discord in bi- and multilateral relations between parts within Europe, to diminish trust and cooperation in the transatlantic relationship between Europe and the United States, to weaken the cohesion and amplify distrust in the EU and NATO, and to reduce the confidence of supporters in Ukrainian leadership and capability. Such campaigns often make use of multiple coordinated operations across different countries, stressing parallel themes of discord, leveraging transnational networks, and laundering disinformation through fringe media and social media ecosystems across different languages.

We see this, for example, in the Kremlin's efforts to amplify rifts between Eastern-Central and Western Europe. Already by July 2022, Recorded Futures had tracked RT stories "repeatedly stressing extreme political divisions between Poland and Germany or insoluble disagreements between Poland and the Baltics versus Germany, France, and Turkey, suggesting radically different stakes or positions in

years of PiS's increasingly illiberal rule (Chiappa, 2023; Faiola & Chapman, 2023; Koper & Wlodarczak-Semczuk, 2023).

[23] The PRA and a related new political party *Bezpieczna Polska* (Secure Poland) are both led by political scientist Leszek Sykulski. Sykulski, who has posted pictures on social media showing himself with the Russian ambassador to Poland Sergei Andreyev and the Russian nationalist philosopher Alexander Dugin, has over 105,000 subscribers for his YouTube channel. He endorses a "multi-vector" approach to foreign policy, including a closer embrace of Russia and a possible future "Polexit" from European and transatlantic institutions. Polish journalist and expert on Russian disinformation Anna Mierzynska has drawn attention to the alignment between these efforts' rhetoric and Kremlin disinformation as well as to the potential of more direct connections through Sykulski and associates (Harper, 2023; Mierzyńska, 2023).

[24] In April 2023, Poland's PiS party agriculture minister resigned in protest following a European Commission decision requiring the extension of "duty free imports" on Ukrainian grain until June of 2024. Though farming communities are a traditional PiS constituency, the protests appear to have closer connections to the Confederation and the rhetoric has grown increasingly hostile to Ukraine. In further protests in February 2024, in which farmers blocked roads and railroad tracks, there have been incidents of Soviet flags and pro-Russia banners displayed on tractors (Alan-Lee, 2013; Harper, 2024; Reuters, 2023a; NFP, 2024).

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relation to the war."[25] Also noteworthy are attempts to undermine European trust for the United States and its motives in rallying transatlantic support for Ukraine. An incident in September 2022 involving efforts to publicize a fake RAND Corporation report shows the lengths that Russian operations have gone to in order to launder disinformation and help it to gain traction in relevant echo chambers across countries and language barriers. The inauthentic report was a document supposedly prepared at the behest of the US government and laid out a plan for using the pretext of a US-provoked war between Russia and Ukraine as a mechanism to weaken Germany and the EU, while strengthening the United States. The report and stories about it were publicized by fringe outlets in Germany and then Sweden, discussed in connected YouTube videos, and then written about by RT and promoted by social media of the Russian Embassy in Sweden.[26]

Equally complex Russian disinformation and influence campaigns have sought to disrupt NATO and EU processes and cohesion. Sweden's and Finland's 2022 decisions to apply for NATO membership and the subsequent accession processes became targets of opportunity for such campaigns. Russian disinformation narratives tracked in Finland have, for example, "argue[d] that Finland has been pressured by the United States to apply to the alliance and that the majority of Finns oppose the NATO membership."[27] The campaigns to slow or undermine Sweden's NATO bid appear to have been particularly complex, spanning several languages and countries,

[25] While the upsurge in anti-German rhetoric in the lead-up to the fall 2023 elections has not been directly tied to Russian disinformation, this resonated with and drew on core themes of threats to Polish sovereignty and distrust of European institutions, which Kremlin messaging campaigns have amplified (Insikt Group, 2022; Kerr, 2023; Minder & Pitel, 2023; Strzelecki, Siebold, & Koper, 2023).

[26] On September 6, 2022, the multilingual mis- and disinformation outlet *Weltexpress* published a German-language article describing the supposedly leaked report. On September 8, it published a copy of the fake report with further discussion. Subsequent YouTube videos continued discussion of the topic, gaining over 16,000 views. (The PDF of the fake report contained basic errors of grammar, spelling, and fact.) On September 13, a fringe Swedish outlet, *Nya Dagbladet* ("The New Daily Post"), picked up coverage of the false report, declaring in their Swedish-language headline "Shocking document: How the US planned the war and energy crisis in Europe" ("*Chockerande dokumentet: Så planerade USA kriget och energikrisen i Europa*"). This was followed on September 15 by an English-language translation of the story by the same outlet, and on September 16 by an RT story about the *Nya Dagbladet* article. On September 17, Russia's Embassy in Sweden posted to Twitter (now X) about the story. After RAND Corporation itself published a September 14 statement refuting the report as a fake, *Nya Dagbladet* continued to argue that this dismissiveness further suggested the report's veracity. The outlet *Nya Dagbladet* was founded in 2012 by members of an extreme right-wing nationalist party and has become known for being a bridge between "conspiratorial" and "far-right milieu[s]," playing a major role in the spread of anti-lockdown and anti-vaccine content during the pandemic. It also is known for consistently espousing pro-Kremlin views (Haag, 2022; NYA Dagbladet, 2022; RAND Corporation, 2022).

[27] The EU Disinfo Lab also reported on "multiple Russian-linked media outlets falsely report[ing] that Finland is moving its tanks to the Eastern border" in an apparent effort to bolster accusations by far-right parties blaming the "Finnish government and mainstream media" for "war-mongering" and "inciting hysteria" (Moilanen, Hautala, & Saari, 2023).

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and plausibly involving covert encouragement of Koran burnings and other protest actions in Sweden as well as online campaigns. In July 2023, the Swedish government announced that Sweden had been targeted by "Russia-backed actors [...] amplifying incorrect statements such as that the Swedish state is behind the desecration of holy scriptures."[28] Sweden's Psychological Defence Agency drew attention to the fact that RT and Sputnik had published numerous articles in Arabic about the Koran burnings, and that their agency had tracked millions of social media posts in Arabic and other languages, apparently part of a campaign to portray Sweden as an "Islamophobic" country that supports Koran burning, to create tensions with domestic minorities and backlash in Muslim-majority countries (protesters stormed and vandalized the Swedish Embassy in Baghdad). Most significantly, these campaigns amplified a pretext for continued Turkish (and to a lesser extent Hungarian) resistance to Sweden's NATO accession bid.[29]

CONCLUSION: DEFENSIVE PROGRESS AND CHALLENGES

In February 2024, when the French government issued an announcement about its discovery of a vast network of sites disseminating disinformation about the war in Ukraine in multiple languages across Europe, it did not do so alone. Instead, the "Portal Kombat" discovery was revealed in a joint press conference of the French, Polish, and German foreign ministers. In this collaborative "Weimar Triangle" format, the three countries – each key actors in support for Ukraine – also announced the launch of a joint alert mechanism to enable intelligence sharing and coordination around "unacceptable interference," such as Russian disinformation campaigns. The countries also agreed to each do more to "pressure online platforms to counter these influence operations." "We are in a period of vulnerability with the European elections," noted the French Foreign Minister Stephane Sejourne, drawing attention to the June vote for the European Parliament (Irish, 2024; Le Temps, 2024). While this recent move is certainly not the first effort by Western democracies to find common cause in fighting transnational flows of

[28] These statements followed a spate of highly divisive protest demonstrations in Stockholm in January through June 2023. These included the hanging in effigy of Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan from a lamppost and burning of a Koran outside of the Turkish embassy in January, which prompted Turkey to cancel a state visit by Sweden's Defense Minister, Pal Jonson, as well as a subsequent summer Koran burning after which Turkey's government stated that their decision on the NATO accession ratification might be further delayed "if these attacks on the things we hold sacred continue." Investigations by open-source analysts and journalists have further pointed to plausible connections between individuals involved in staging the Koran burnings and the Kremlin (AftonBladet, 2023; Armstrong, 2023; Braw, 2023; Bryant, 2023; Haag, 2022; Henley, 2023; Reuters, 2023b; Robert Lansing Institute, 2023).

[29] These campaigns also demonstrate apparent Russian orchestration across several countries, utilizing disinformation and influence campaigns in combination with leveraging of countries with which they have closer political ties or alignment as spoilers within EU and NATO processes.

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foreign disinformation, much more such coordination will be necessary to succeed in mitigating the threat.

Western threat perceptions around cyber-enabled disinformation have developed gradually since at least 2016, prompting various forms of experimentation to address the problem. Following initial surprise, states were relatively quick to recognize the strategic nature of the threat with its potential to undermine democratic elections and decision processes. But much of the initial focus fell on developing the necessary capabilities and collaborative relationships to enable tracking and, where possible, disrupting particular operations on single or multiple platforms. This included developing research centers focused on identification and tracking, building mechanisms for multistakeholder and whole-of-society engagement, ironing out relevant areas of law many of which differ across jurisdictions, and, in some cases, creating government entities tasked with oversight on the issue.

While a full review of these developments is beyond the scope of this chapter, we see examples of the significant headway that has been made in addressing the disinformation challenge in the various governmental and nongovernmental institutions, private sector reports, open-source intelligence trackers, and other data sources cited. We are no longer operating in the dark with regard to many of the ongoing operations and campaigns. The number of trustworthy organizations engaged in researching and publicizing information concerning cyber-enabled disinformation operations has skyrocketed in Europe and the United States over the past eight years. This includes programs dedicated to tracking, exposing, and counteracting foreign disinformation campaigns, from think tank and university centers to investigative media outlets and civil society organizations, and from private sector entities to government bodies. Several countries have dedicated government bodies focused on addressing the issue at home or abroad.

But we also see here some of the gaps that have developed in Western efforts to address the problem. At first by necessity, much of this work has happened at a highly granular and forensic level – concerned with tracking particular identified operations. Also, because of the early focus on known operations targeting either domestic elections or destabilizing areas of domestic politics, the lion's share of attention has examined these national-level dynamics as end-goal targets of the cyber-enabled influence campaigns tracked. This has been challenging enough, furthermore, with national government responses often hamstrung to some degree by the phenomenon's intersection with thorny areas of domestic politics and the entanglement of foreign disinformation campaigns with domestic actors and their freedoms of expression and organizing. In other words, identifying and attempting to mitigate national and subnational operational and tactical dimensions of disinformation campaigns have posed sufficient challenges. So, the strategic orchestration of campaigns across multiple national jurisdictions – including to impact long-term interactive outcomes beyond the particular countries targeted – was, at first at least, an underappreciated dimension of the threat.

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Democratic countries have thus made substantial progress in building innovative institutions and mechanisms to address the problem of foreign disinformation – including innovative defensive measures by governments, the private sector, and civil society. But these efforts still face many significant difficulties even at the national level. At the same time, evident transnational dimensions of disinformation campaigns around the COVID-19 pandemic and the war in Ukraine have drawn growing attention to the criticality of coordination on this issue across democracies in order to protect common interests, relationships, and capacity to successfully collaborate to achieve shared strategic goals.

It is not too late to better protect these objectives vis-à-vis Ukraine, but the timing is urgent. Finding adequate collaborative solutions to protect Ukraine's support coalition from adversarial disinformation will also prove broadly applicable and critical in the next phases of global strategic competition that will shape the future success of the international rule-based order and democracy.

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