

‘Doppelgänger’: the pattern of Russia’s anti-Western influence operation

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On 4 September, while explaining its latest sanctions against Russia over that country’s attempts to disrupt the upcoming US presidential election, the US Department of Justice exposed the organisational patterns behind Russian influence operations in the West. The actions it uncovered had been ongoing since 2022, targeting the United States and its allies, including European countries such as France, Germany, and Poland, as previously reported by local organisations tracking Russian information threats and by European institutions. Due to the methods used, the operation has been dubbed ‘Doppelgänger’.

According to the materials collected by investigators, Russia has operated in the information sphere in a comprehensive manner: the Kremlin has coordinated and financed activities involving a variety of tools and actors – Russian or Russian-linked – with strictly defined objectives, rules of procedure, and performance evaluation. These efforts have primarily sought to undermine support for Ukraine, promote Russia-friendly policies, and stoke internal tensions within Western countries.

The actors involved in Operation ‘Doppelgänger’ in the US

According to US documents, notably an extensive testimony from an unidentified FBI agent who investigated Russian influence, since at least 2022 Russian technology companies have been using Internet domains to conduct harmful influence campaigns. Presidential Administration of Russia particularly its deputy head, Sergei Kiriyenko, has led this effort. The operation has involved the Social Design Agency (SDA, Agentsvo Sotsialnogo Proektirovania), the domestic technology company Structura (Company Group Structura, Gruppy Kompanii Struktura) and ANO Dialog (Avtonomnaya Nekommercheskaya Organizatsiya Dialog). The individuals coordinating the operation have been in regular contact with the Kremlin’s representatives, receiving instructions and reporting on progress.

Since 2022, the Kremlin-linked entrepreneurs Nikolai Tupikin and Ilya Gambashidze, the founders of Structura and SDA respectively, have allegedly set up a total of approximately 60 fake news websites, created fictitious social media accounts, and posted staged videos and memes. All of these have been produced as part of a single campaign, forming an extensive system of media channels to amplify content desired by Moscow. Following the disclosures, the US Attorney’s office brought criminal charges against two employees of the RT television channel (formerly Russia Today) – Kostiantyn Kalashnikov and Elena Afanasyeva. The indictment alleged that they had operated under false identities in coordination with the Kremlin and the aforementioned entities, transferring a total of \$10

million to a Tennessee-registered media company, which paid right-wing US influencers and commentators to disseminate content consistent with Russia's narrative. CNN has reported that the company in question was the well-known platform Tenet Media.

The Kremlin's methods

According to the information disclosed, Russian efforts as part of Operation 'Doppelgänger' have focused on several key areas. SDA and Structura set up websites that imitated legitimate, well-established media outlets to publish manipulated and biased content. In the US, their spoofed websites mimicked outlets such as The Washington Post and Fox News. The addresses of these 'doppelgängers' differed only slightly from the original websites while the layout and graphic design were confusingly similar. As part of this campaign, Russian operatives also set up large numbers of fake social media accounts, posing as Americans or citizens of other countries to conceal their links to Russia. They posted comments on social media platforms, mainly X and Meta, with links to domains imitating legitimate news sites that were set up earlier as part of the same operation.

In addition, Russian operatives scoured Western media outlets for content that advances Russian interests, promoting it through this network and disseminating out-of-context fragments to support Russian claims. Russian efforts in the US also involved RT-affiliated individuals who identified popular US influencers and commentators whose views aligned with the Kremlin's propaganda line, encouraging them to collaborate commercially with Tenet Media in return for substantial compensation. Their narratives became increasingly radicalised after such cooperation was established.

According to US Attorney General Merrick Garland, the recruited individuals (including right-wing figures such as Benny Johnson, Tim Pool, and Dave Rubin) were unaware that the money they were receiving came from the Russian government. Russian documents have also revealed that other important areas of activity included sentiment analysis, narrative selection, efforts to manipulate the societies of Ukraine and individual Western countries, as well as the analysis of the work of Western think tanks monitoring the war.

Russia's objective

Russia's overarching goal in its influence operations in the West is to weaken international assistance for Ukraine, particularly military support, and force the country to make peace on the Kremlin's terms, effectively amounting to capitulation. Other goals include promoting Russia-friendly policies and stoking internal tensions within Western societies to undermine their willingness to support Ukraine and their opposition to Russia. Therefore, the narratives promoted as part of Operation 'Doppelgänger' have targeted Ukraine and its government, provoked anti-Western, anti-EU, and anti-NATO sentiment (as well as anti-US attitudes outside the United States), exaggerated the scale of economic problems and social tensions in these countries, fuelled these tensions, and raised the spectre that the war would escalate.

Interestingly, such content has not explicitly justified, let alone glorified, Russia's actions – any direct references to Russia have been avoided to deceive the audience. The content disseminated abroad has also been used by Russian media at home to substantiate the Kremlin's claims in the eyes of its own population, as the state propaganda machine seeks to sustain public support for the government and the war. For this purpose, it has frequently

cited Western media reports.

The consequences of revealing Russian methods of influence

The Kremlin's conduct as part of Operation 'Doppelgänger' aligns with its broader influence operations targeting other countries. Identifying these mechanisms, exposing them, and punishing such actions may help weaken Russia's disinformation capabilities temporarily and force it to adapt its activities in this field, but it will not stop such efforts altogether. From the Russian perspective, hybrid tactics involving disinformation, propaganda, and influence are important, relatively inexpensive, and effective tool for waging war against the West and supporting its military invasion of Ukraine. However, uncovering these patterns can raise awareness among Western decision-makers and the public about the information threats emanating from Russia, enabling them to develop a more effective and comprehensive response. This should take into account the evolution of these tactics over time, recognising that the promoted content often avoids direct references to the Kremlin and is shaped by analyses of public sentiment and audience sensitivities.

The materials presented by the US indicate that, despite its military involvement in the full-scale invasion of Ukraine, Russia has simultaneously conducted wide-ranging influence operations, persistently pursued its long-term objectives, and continued refining its methods by adapting them to developments in the global information space.