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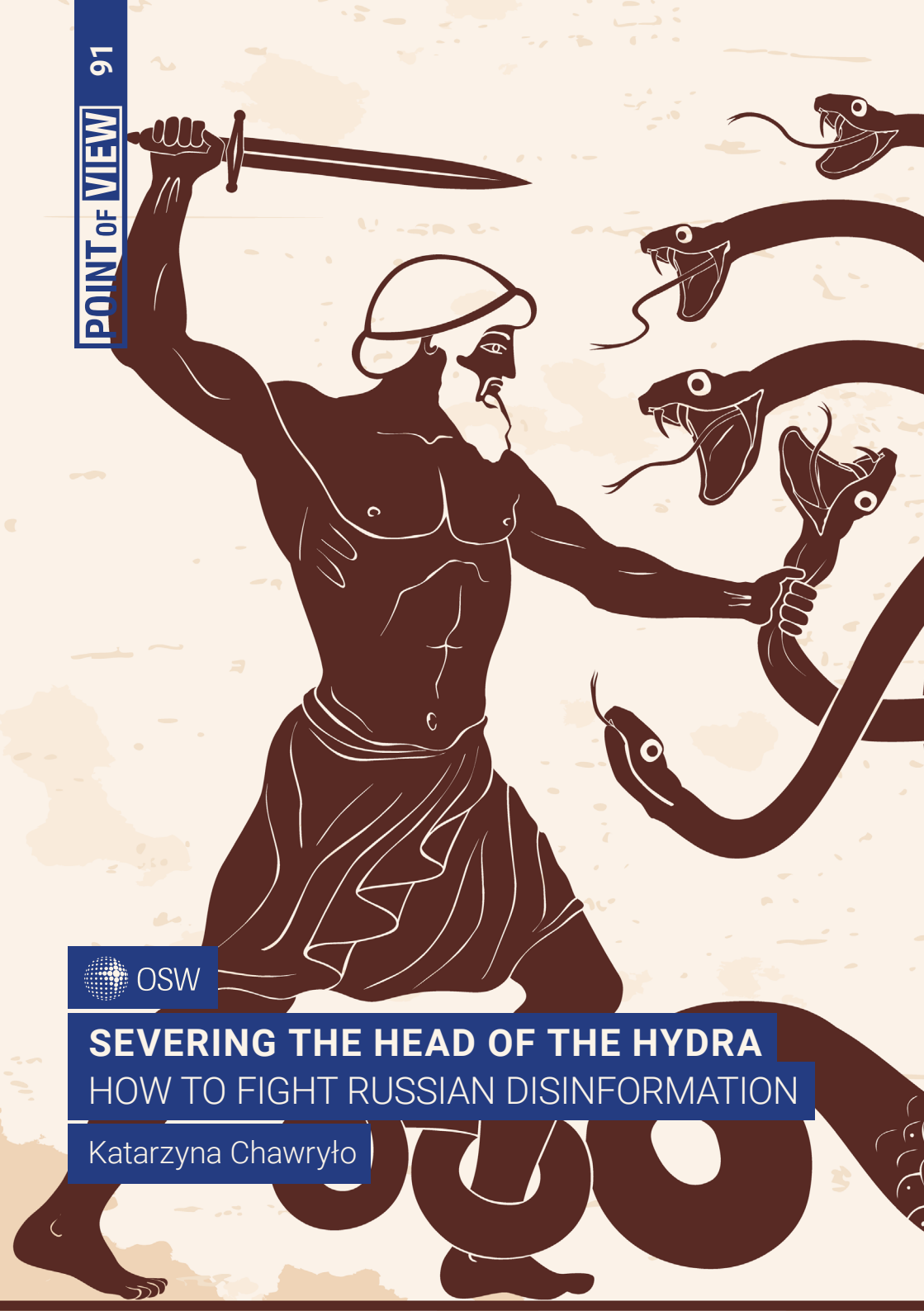

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SEVERING THE HEAD OF THE HYDRA

HOW TO FIGHT RUSSIAN DISINFORMATION

Katarzyna Chawryło

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Contents

MAIN POINTS

- The Russian invasion of Ukraine is accompanied by an information warfare in which the West is portrayed as the main adversary. Moscow uses propaganda and disinformation to strengthen the social mandate of those in power at home, which is essential for pursuing an aggressive foreign policy, and to influence the opponent. Russia is also seeking to persuade the international community that it should stop supporting Ukraine and revise Europe's security arrangements in a way that would strengthen the Kremlin's influence. Its information warfare measures are comprehensive, coordinated both domestically and abroad by various state institutions, security services, media outlets and organisations – including those linked to the diaspora, as well as culture and religion – and receive lavish state funding.

- To justify the invasion of its neighbour, the government has developed and continues to promote propaganda narratives portraying Russia not as an aggressor but as a victim of the West's aggressive and deceitful policies. Drawing on a distorted interpretation of history – in particular manipulated parallels with World War II – they tell their own population that the very existence of the state is under threat. Although at times inconsistent, these narratives create a worldview that can be persuasive for most Russians, as well as for sympathetic groups and states in the international arena. To influence sentiment and opinion in the West, the Kremlin has devised several more nuanced messages. It has tailored both these messages and their methods of delivery to different target audiences, making it harder to attribute and penalise these activities in democratic societies. It is essential to understand these mechanisms in order to develop a comprehensive Western response to Russian aggression.

- The propaganda machine is in full swing to help the government achieve its goals at home and abroad. Problems arise for Kremlin-controlled media when incidents occur that are both

unfavourable to Russia and unforeseen. In these cases, control over the narrative is lost, leaving gaps and inconsistencies. This has been clear in situations that require a rapid response to significant, unexpected events, when instructions from the Presidential Administration – which coordinates the messaging – have not yet arrived. Over the past two years, this has mainly concerned developments at the front that could adversely affect perceptions of the army, the Kremlin and Vladimir Putin himself, such as the Ukrainian incursion into Kursk Oblast, the loss of Kherson and Yevgeny Prigozhin's mutiny. These difficulties for propagandists highlight the weak points in the disinformation system, which can be exploited to reduce Russia's capacity to cause harm.

- Any effective response to Russia's disinformation efforts must be long-term, comprehensive and proportionate to the threats they pose. The defence of Western states should include immediate measures to expose falsifications, initiatives in strategic communication and public diplomacy, as well as long-term, systemic procedures aimed at consistently building societal resilience to dangers in the information sphere. At both the national and allied levels, these countries should operate according to coherent, coordinated strategies that treat information threats as part of Russia's broader hybrid and conventional aggression. A comprehensive approach of this kind is important not only in the context of the ongoing invasion but also as a universal requirement for the security of democratic states.

- The West – identified by the Kremlin as the adversary in the information war – has the right to active defence. Simply reacting to threats from Russia will not suffice to weaken it effectively and permanently to a degree that would ensure the security of democratic states. Immediate and long-term measures are needed to actively influence Russia within its own media space – in other words, to shift the front of information operations onto Russia's territory. Such measures should deprive Moscow of the initiative by imposing unfavourable

narratives, forcing it to devote more attention to domestic issues and thereby limiting its ability to cause harm abroad. Another goal should be to drastically increase the cost of its disinformation activities, both at home and abroad.

- It is also necessary to continue and strengthen existing measures that challenge Kremlin propaganda – military support for Ukraine, to impose new (economic, legal, sporting) sanctions on Russia and to improve the effectiveness of those already in place. It is advisable to further develop the West's military capabilities within a deterrence policy. Defeats at the front, socio-economic problems and any events that damage the image of the authorities are problematic for Russian propaganda, as they generate anxiety and dissatisfaction among citizens.

- Just as Russia seeks to reach Western societies with its messaging, the West should likewise make efforts to reach Russians, both at home and abroad. To capture their interest, the narratives aimed at them should address issues that are as close as possible to the specific social groups they target. They should highlight real problems and social tensions, economic hardships, as well as the abuses and weaknesses of the regime. The Kremlin-controlled media avoids criticising the government or exposing problems that could undermine their legitimacy, which excludes many issues of genuine concern to citizens from the public discourse. There is an existing demand among Russians for content of this kind. It does not need to focus directly on the war, which in Russia remains a sensitive topic – discussing it in ways that contradict censorship guidelines carries the risk of repression, effectively deterring part of the population from speaking about it or even reading about it.

- The active defence of Western states against Russia in the information domain should have realistic objectives. Raising Russians' awareness of the negative consequences of the Kremlin's course

and fuelling their critical attitude towards the government is a feasible outcome. Such measures should focus public attention on the many domestic problems for which those in power bear responsibility. By contrast, expectations that the Russian state will embark on a path towards democracy, or that Russians can be convinced of the West's good intentions towards their country, appear doomed to fail at present. Given the widespread anti-Western sentiment across all age groups, neither this type of rhetoric nor attempts to use the Western media as a communication channel are likely to succeed.

- To make the process of reaching audiences in Russia effective, target groups – even small ones – must be defined precisely, with messages tailored to each. These audiences should include both small and large communities whose interests the Kremlin disregards, or which may find themselves on a collision course with the government. Among potential recipients, women – especially mothers and wives of soldiers – merit attention as possible victims of escalating domestic and criminal violence in Russia, along with servicemen, veterans and their families. Discriminated ethnic minorities also form an important group, as do specific professional and social groups exploited by Moscow, such as migrant workers or pensioners growing poorer due to high inflation.

- The network of Russian-language independent media outlets and organisations engaged in online information activities is a natural channel for reaching audiences in Russia. Experience shows that ordinary citizens turn to these in times of crisis. In addition to larger, well-known outlets operating mainly in exile, smaller, local actors also have significant value in this field. These include small media outlets, civic movements, individual activists and social media channels using minority languages, all of which have trusted audiences within Russia. These sources merit systematic, yet cautious and flexible, Western support, adapted to the neo-totalitarian conditions prevailing in Russia.

- Raising awareness within Russian society of the negative effects of the Kremlin's policies will hinder the work of the disinformation and propaganda machine, whose main task is to maintain public support for the government. It may also trigger localised increases in chaos and discontent, as well as a loss of trust in the leadership – developments which the propaganda apparatus seeks to prevent. The more challenges and crises it faces at home, the more resources the Kremlin will have to devote to propaganda aimed at repainting reality. This could in turn limit Russia's capacity to conduct foreign disinformation operations. Growing domestic problems will also undermine Moscow's credibility in its dealings with the groups and states with which it seeks to maintain friendly relations.

INTRODUCTION

For years, Russia has pursued an aggressive information policy towards the West, which it regards as its greatest enemy. The war in Ukraine has provided fresh impetus to intensify these efforts, giving the Kremlin new objectives such as discrediting the West's defence efforts, undermining its solidarity with Kyiv and the transatlantic alliances, and engaging in nuclear blackmail. In Moscow's view – both in political declarations and doctrinal writings[1] – information operations are a natural domain of the war in Ukraine. Russia sees the ongoing armed conflict as having multiple dimensions or fronts, one of which is informational.

These operations are planned and centrally coordinated by the Russian Presidential Administration, and carried out in a comprehensive manner using so-called active measures.[2] Their aim is to confuse and intimidate Western societies and decision-makers, weaken their morale and ultimately push their opponents into making political decisions favourable to Moscow. For the West, it is not only Ukraine's freedom which is at stake in this confrontation, but also the current international order, which the Kremlin is seeking to dismantle, as well as the endurance of democratic values, which it sees as a threat to its own neo-totalitarian system. Alongside their outward-facing activities, the government also employs indoctrination and censorship against their own citizens, to prevent them from assessing the situation accurately and to persuade them to support the aggressive political course and take part directly in the war.

1 Foreign information threats are mentioned, for example, in the National Security Strategy of the Russian Federation of 2 July 2021 'Стратегия национальной безопасности Российской Федерации от 02 июля 2021 г.', and in the Foreign Policy Concept of the Russian Federation, approved by President Vladimir Putin on 31 March 2023 'Концепция внешней политики Российской Федерации (утверждена Президентом Российской Федерации В.В.Путиным 31 марта 2023 г.)', Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Russia, mid.ru.

2 A detailed and pioneering modern definition of this concept was presented by J. Darczewska and P. Żochowski in their study *Active measures. Russia's key export*, OSW, Warsaw 2017, osw.waw.pl.

The observations presented in this paper highlight the multidimensional nature and vast scale of Russia's disinformation efforts, both those targeted at its own population and the international community. It is also stresses that the West needs to implement a comprehensive, long-term response proportionate to the threats involved – at both the national and allied levels. This response should include proactive measures to deprive Russia of the initiative in the information sphere, forcing the Kremlin's disinformation apparatus out of its comfort zone. The rationale for, and methods of, implementing so-called active defence remain controversial in the European security debate and, at times, even a taboo subject. Some experts and politicians present it as lacking a legal basis under domestic law and as 'provocative' towards the Kremlin.

This text is divided into three parts. The first outlines Moscow's strategic and tactical approach to disinformation activities, with a particular focus on how they are conducted, their objectives, funding and the key propaganda narratives used to justify the launch of the full-scale invasion of Ukraine. It notes that these efforts target both Russian society and the West. The second part outlines possible ways of countering Kremlin disinformation and propaganda, taking both immediate and long-term measures into account. It emphasises the need for Western states to adopt more robust proactive measures and to apply active defence. The attempt to identify weak points in the Kremlin's information policy that should be exploited to effectively weaken Russia's capabilities in this sphere is an important element of this section. The third – and shortest – part describes the potential social and political impact the proposed measures could have on Russia.

I. DISINFORMATION AND PROPAGANDA IN RUSSIA – THEORETICAL BACKGROUND, ORGANISATION, FUNDING

1. The role of information operations in Kremlin policy

Putin's government continues the long Russian tradition of waging information warfare, which was particularly developed and refined during the Soviet era.[3] In the domestic security discourse, 'information warfare' is a core concept. Its very broad scope covers all intentional actions in the information sphere aimed at gaining an advantage over an opponent. The term was popularised by Igor Panarin, a leading theorist of the subject, professor at the Moscow State Institute of International Relations (MGIMO) and former FSB analyst. According to his definition, "information warfare (information confrontation) is a form of struggle between parties involving the use of special methods, means and tools – political, economic, diplomatic, military and other – to influence the information environment of the opposing side and to protect one's own, in order to achieve set objectives. The main areas of information and psychological warfare are political, diplomatic, financial-economic and military".[4]

As Jolanta Darczewska notes in her study *The anatomy of Russian information warfare. The Crimean operation, a case study*, "most Russian authors understand 'information warfare' as influencing the consciousness of the masses as part of the rivalry between the different civilisational systems adopted by different countries in the information space by using special means to control information resources as 'information weapons'. They thus mix the military and non-military order and the technological (cyberspace) and social order (information space) by definition, and

[3] The issue Russian disinformation has been comprehensively discussed by J. Darczewska in her publication. *Capturing minds and reshaping the world. Russia's strategy of subversion and disinformation*, OSW, Warsaw 2025, osw.waw.pl.

[4] I. Panarin, 'О Доктрине информационного противоборства России' [On the doctrine of Russia's information warfare], KM.RU, 17 July 2012.

make direct references to 'Cold War' and 'psychological warfare' between the East and the West".[5] Russia's strategic guidelines for information warfare are set out, among other places, in the 2016 Information Security Doctrine of the Russian Federation,[6] confirming the high status of these methods and the Kremlin's systemic approach to their use.

Moscow wages information warfare through **so-called active measures** – actions originally attributed to the Soviet Union's secret services. These practices have been carried over to their modern successors and expanded with new channels of influence, such as the Internet. The term is defined in the *Counterintelligence Dictionary* as "counterintelligence operations that make it possible to penetrate an opponent's plans, prevent undesirable steps in advance, mislead them, seize the initiative from them and thwart their subversive activities. Active measures, in contrast to defensive measures such as ensuring secrecy, safeguarding state and military secrets, are offensive in nature and make it possible to detect and halt hostile activity at the earliest stage of its development, force the enemy to reveal themselves, to impose one's will on them, compel them to act under unfavourable conditions and in a direction desired by the counterintelligence agencies. In the practical counterintelligence work of state security bodies, active measures include creating agent positions within the enemy camp and their environment, conducting operational games with the adversary, disinformation, compromising and disintegrating enemy forces, bringing persons of operational interest into the country to obtain intelligence, and so forth".[7]

[5] J. Darczewska, *The anatomy of Russian information warfare. The Crimean operation, a case study*, OSW, Warsaw 2014, p. 12, osw.waw.pl.

[6] 'Доктрина информационной безопасности Российской Федерации', Совет Безопасности Российской Федерации, 5 December 2016, scrf.gov.ru.

[7] 'Контрразведывательный словарь', Высшая краснознаменная школа Комитета Государственной Безопасности при Совете Министров СССР им. Ф. Э. Дзержинского, 1972, as cited in: counterintelligence.academic.ru (own translation).

Jolanta Darczewska and Piotr Żochowski have written in detail about Russia's present-day use of active measures in their publication *Active measures. Russia's key export.*[8] These activities primarily involve the security services, working in close cooperation with other state actors. Overall supervision rests with the Russian Presidential Administration, which serves as the central decision-making hub. It is worth noting that, even at the level of definition, Moscow's information warfare assumes that Russia holds the initiative and acts as the driving force, while the opponent is assigned a reactive role, always one step behind. Reversing these roles would create an unfavourable situation for the Kremlin, upending the logic of the game it is playing.

In 2021, in response to the growing threat of disinformation and hostile information influence, the European Union introduced into its related discourse the term FIMI – an acronym for Foreign Information Manipulation and Interference. The European External Action Service defines FIMI as a pattern of behaviour that threatens or may negatively affect values, procedures or political processes. Actions falling under FIMI are manipulative in nature and are carried out in a deliberate and coordinated manner. Such activity may be conducted by state or non-state actors, including their proxies both domestically and abroad.[9] FIMI encompasses not only disinformation and propaganda, but also attempts – through various methods – to interfere in a state's information space in order to influence its political processes.[10] In Western military terminology, the term 'cognitive warfare' is increasingly used. Its aim is to influence the beliefs and behaviour of individuals and entire societies without resorting to military action. The scope of this concept goes beyond disinformation or FIMI, coming close to the Russian

8 J. Darczewska, P. Żochowski, *Active measures. Russia's key export*, *op. cit.*

9 For more see *2021 Stratcom Activity Report*, European External Action Service, eeas.europa.eu.

10 For more on the EU's approach to FIMI see F. Bryjka, 'EU Adopts Approach to Counteracting Foreign Information Manipulation and Interference', *PISM Policy Paper*, no. 3, June 2024, pism.pl.

understanding of 'information warfare'. The term 'hybrid warfare' is defined even more broadly as the coordinated use or combination of conventional and unconventional military and subversive instruments to exploit an opponent's vulnerabilities and inflict maximum damage.[11] This term does not have a single, universally accepted definition, and its scope remains subject to debate. Nevertheless, it effectively reflects the broad spectrum of threats generated by Russia that Europe is currently facing.

The terminology developed in the West is not fully compatible with the realities of Russia, which is the source of most information threats. As noted above, Western debates on disinformation feature many concepts with overlapping meanings, but some only describe dangers in a fragmented way, without placing them in the broader wartime context. Harmonising terminology – with an approach that treats disinformation as one of many forms of hybrid action, in other words as a tool of warfare – would foster a better understanding of the scale of the threat, allow for more accurate classification and support the development of an effective response.

2. Organisation of disinformation and propaganda efforts

Russia's propaganda and disinformation efforts within its information warfare involve a wide range of interlinked actors that together form an integrated and efficient system. This system comprises the state administration bodies, secret services, public media, special institutions, educational, cultural and diplomatic establishments, state-linked governmental and non-governmental organisations (including religious ones, with the Russian Orthodox Church at the forefront), and also seemingly independent business entities. The fact that these actors operate under central planning and coordination means that the apparatus functions

[11] A. Bilal, 'Hybrid Warfare – New Threats, Complexity and 'Trust' as the Antidote', *NATO Review*, 30 November 2021, as cited in: web.archive.org.

internally in a total (all-encompassing) manner. Beyond Russia's borders, it operates on a global scale.

Within Russia, the system's effectiveness depends on censorship being imposed ever deeper into public life.[12] Abroad, in its actions against the West, the Kremlin exploits the democratic rights and freedoms enjoyed there – particularly freedom of speech and liberal legal frameworks – while it restricts them at home. It has also learned to use modern information technologies effectively, such as Western social media and artificial intelligence, to spread disinformation on a large scale via the internet. The Kremlin's operations against the West are varied and adapted to specific local conditions. Russia's toolkit includes conducting coordinated online influence operations using sympathetic opinion leaders, trolls and bots; supporting and exploiting individuals, groups and even organisations – including political parties – that are pro-Russian or anti-Western; applying psychological pressure; and fostering divisions within democratic societies. Depending on the objective, this interference may focus on the threat of the escalation of war and the rising costs of supporting Kyiv, economic difficulties, lack of trust in the government, or distrust towards the democratic system itself, etc.

According to information reported in the media, it is believed that the person who oversees the operation of Russia's disinformation apparatus is Deputy Head of the Presidential Administration Alexei Gromov, informally referred to as the 'Minister of Propaganda'.[13] He is believed to coordinate all activities in this field – both those directed domestically and those directed abroad. Documents disclosed by the US authorities on 4 September 2024, when sanctions were imposed on Russia for harmful actions in the information sphere, indicate that Sergei Kiriyenko holds

[12] For more, see K. Chawryło, 'Weapons of mass deception. Russian television propaganda in wartime', *OSW Commentary*, no. 443, 6 May 2022, osw.waw.pl.

[13] See, for example, М. Рубин, М. Жолобова, Р. Баданин, 'Повелитель кукол [Eng. Master of Puppets]. Портрет Алексея Громова, руководителя российской государственной пропаганды', Проект, 23 January 2019, proekt.media.

primary responsibility for operations targeting the West in this area, including management of operation 'Doppelgänger'.[14] In official terms, he serves as First Deputy Chief of Staff of the Presidential Administration. Unofficially, he acts as the Kremlin's administrator of the occupied territories in Ukraine and is one of Putin's closest associates. The independent media has also noted another distribution of responsibilities between these two officials: Gromov is reported to be overseeing the traditional media – including news agencies and television channels – while Kiriyenko supervises the growing sphere of online media and social networks.[15]

The main channel for spreading disinformation and propaganda domestically is public television, which remains the primary source of information about the world for most Russians. According to early 2024 polling by the FOM research centre, 56% of respondents named television as their main source of news, while 42% cited the internet (websites).[16] Although television's role has been steadily declining over the past decade, it still holds the leading position (in 2015 the figures were 88% and 33% respectively) and continues to exert a crucial influence on how public opinion is formed. A 2024 ranking by an organisation analysing media consumption in Russia shows that the most popular channels are Rossiya 1, NTV and Channel 5.[17] Their editorial staff receive direct instructions from the Kremlin, as has been repeatedly reported by local experts and in the independent media.[18]

[14] See K. Chawryło, 'Doppelgänger': the pattern of Russia's anti-Western influence operation', OSW, 13 September 2024, osw.waw.pl.

[15] See Н. Галимова, В. Дергачев, И. Рождественский, А. Кавашкин, 'Кириенко и Громов поделили сферы кураторства СМИ', РБК, 22 November 2016, rbc.ru.

[16] For more on the survey, see 'Новостная информация и телевидение', ФОМ, 27 February 2024, fom.ru.

[17] For more, see Д. Чупров, 'Определены самые популярные у телезрителей телеканалы в 2024 году', Телеспутник, 13 January 2025, telesputnik.ru.

[18] See, for example, Meduza's account 'Standing up for the oppressed' The Kremlin's newest propaganda guide suggests likening Russia's invasion of Ukraine to the First World War', 4 August 2022, meduza.io.

State news agencies are also an important instrument in the hands of the government, in particular Rossiya Segodnya and TASS, which operate on the domestic market, as well as the multilingual television channel RT (known as Russia Today until 2009, when it was rebranded to minimise associations with Russia). These outlets are led by the Kremlin's chief propagandists – Dmitry Kiselyov (Rossiya Segodnya), Andrei Kondrashov (TASS) and Margarita Simonyan (RT). Other pro-government media outlets should not be overlooked either, including radio stations, newspapers and, above all, the social media accounts of politicians, as well as pro-Kremlin commentators and bloggers. The functioning, effectiveness and mechanisms of Russia's media landscape are described in the study *Weapons of mass deception. Russian television propaganda in wartime.*[19]

Beyond Russia's borders, RT and the Sputnik editorial team – formally part of the Rossiya Segodnya agency – play leading roles in media influence. They disseminate news and opinions abroad that serve Moscow's interests. The network of correspondents from these outlets, and those associated with them, not only collects and processes information but also identifies and recruits local influencers and commentators whose views align with the Kremlin's propaganda line, offering them lucrative payments in exchange for cooperation. The system also includes diplomatic missions, government organisations (including those controlled by Rossotrudnichestvo)[20] and non-governmental structures, including groups linked to the Russian Orthodox Church, which promote the government's perspective on international affairs, often using culture, art or sport as vehicles to this end. The internet has become the main arena for external influence. The authorities use modern technologies with considerable skill, creating bot farms and deploying artificial intelligence. Advances in information technologies – including online networks – have

[19] K. Chawryło, 'Weapons of mass deception…', *op. cit.*

[20] Rossotrudnichestvo, the Federal Agency for the Commonwealth of Independent States Affairs, Compatriots Living Abroad and International Humanitarian Cooperation, is a specialised body reporting to the Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs.

made long-distance operations designed to disrupt Western societies far cheaper than using traditional channels such as the established media, agents of influence or, ultimately, open armed conflict. At the same time, due to the internet and social media, their reach is virtually unlimited.[21] These operations are also far harder to detect and punish, as attributing responsibility typically poses the greatest challengeRussia prepares its foreign influence operations in a meticulous and regular manner – monitoring and analysing the media space of individual countries, profiling audiences and assessing their vulnerabilities, selecting content and communication channels, engaging opinion leaders, retired politicians and sympathetic experts, using social networks and bot farms, even assessing the activities of local think tanks, and continuously evaluating its own actions. It uses similar methods as part of its information operations conducted across different Western countries to legitimise or disguise its sources – colloquially referred to as 'information laundering' or 'dirty information laundering' – as well as to legitimise individuals and entities. These practices have been described in detail in the testimony of an FBI agent investigating Russian activity in this area in the United States linked to operation 'Doppelgänger',[22] as well as in other materials released by the US government in connection with this scandal.[23]

3. Financing the propaganda machine

Detailed data on the amounts the Kremlin allocates to all activities connected with disinformation, propaganda and influence operations, both domestically and abroad, remain unavailable. The difficulty in obtaining these figures stems from the fact that, within the first months of the invasion of Ukraine, the authorities classified an unprecedented volume

[21] Jessikka Aro was one of the first to describe the mechanisms of Russia's operations on the internet and their specific features. She did so in her book *Putin's Trolls: On the Frontlines of Russia's Information War Against the World*, Ig Publishing 2022.

[22] 'Affidavit in support of seizure warrant', 4 September 2024, justice.gov.

[23] See K. Chawryło, "Doppelgänger': the pattern of Russia's anti-Western influence operation', *op. cit.*

of economic statistics and prevented the public access of information on parts of the federal budget's expenditure. Moreover, funding for information-related activities comes from a variety of sources. The Kremlin's propaganda apparatus consists not only of media outlets but also institutions, organisations and even business entities that receive payment for their work on behalf of the state, such as the Russian companies ANO Dialog, SDA and Structura, which have been involved in large-scale influence operations in the United States. These funds can be channelled in different ways (including via ministry or national project budgets, subsidies or grants), making them hard to trace.

After the launch of the full-scale invasion of Ukraine, Russian spending on disinformation increased. Overall funding for public media rose only slightly: in 2021, the allocation for this purpose was 114 billion roubles (around $1.3 billion), compared with 122.1 billion roubles (around $1.4 billion) two years later.[24] However, financing for certain media outlets which were deemed useful to the state rose sharply. This trend applies, for example, to RT: under the federal budget for 2022–2024 it was granted 82 billion roubles (almost $1 billion), a larger sum than that allocated to other media outlets in the country.[25] In 2024, RT – whose mission is to spread Kremlin narratives worldwide – spent a record 31.7 billion roubles (around $350 million), which was 4.2 billion roubles (around $46 million) more than the previous year.[26] Increased funds for 2024–2026 – 750 million roubles ($8.3 million) – were also allocated to the producer of the propaganda show *SolovievLive*.[27] There has also been a notable rise in funding for organisations engaged in promoting 'patriotic' attitudes

[24] See the 2023 document on the breakdown of Russian budget expenditure, *Основные направления бюджетной, налоговой и таможенно-тарифной политики на 2024 год и на плановый период 2025 и 2026 годов*, Ministry of Finance of the Russian Federation, September 2023, as cited in: web.archive.org.

[25] А. Слабиев, 'RT получит самое большое финансирование из бюджета', Секрет фирмы, 23 December 2021, secretmag.ru.

[26] 'Россия поставила рекорд по тратам на международную пропаганду', Русская служба The Moscow Times, 29 April 2025, moscowtimes.ru.

[27] 'Перед выборами власти увеличат расходы на Russia Today и производство «Соловьев Live»', Вёрстка, 29 September 2023, verstka.media.

within society. For example, the Internet Development Institute (IRI).[28] linked to the Presidential Administration, was reported in 2023 to have distributed a record 20 billion roubles (around $226 million) in grants to various entities for the creation of 'patriotic content'. In the same year, the Russian Cinema Fund received 12 billion roubles (around $113 million),[29] part of which supported productions aimed at reinforcing patriotism – a priority for the Russian government.

Funds to support information operations in the state budget may therefore be recorded under various headings, such as media, education, culture and cinematography, or internal security. Such operations are also carried out by the secret services and the military – for example, through the Zvezda television channel and other media linked to the Ministry of Defence, as well as through war correspondents and bloggers cooperating with the armed forces, who are also funded by the state. Moscow also allocates certain (hard-to-estimate) sums to specific information operations in other countries, such as interference in electoral processes. For instance, according to information obtained by Politico, Russia spent $100 million to disrupt the presidential election and the EU referendum in Moldova in 2024,[30] a figure that appears relatively modest.

At present, it is impossible to compile comprehensive data on the methods and scale of financing for all the actors and measures involved in the Kremlin's dissemination of disinformation and propaganda. It is also impossible to determine which expenditure was linked to domestic activities and which to operations abroad. This is partly because the various components of the propaganda apparatus form a single ecosystem, in which circulating information is mutually promoted and legitimised.

[28] Interesting fact: according to information on the IRI website, its current head, Alexei Goreslavsky, was previously the director general of ANO Dialog, a company subject to US sanctions.

[29] 'Власти РФ выделили 20 млрд рублей на «военную пропаганду» в 2023 году', Радио Свобода, 6 June 2023, svoboda.org.

[30] G. Gavin, 'Moldova accuses Russia of trying to rig its EU referendum', Politico, 27 September 2024, politico.eu.

4. Propaganda objectives in the context of the invasion of Ukraine

Since the start of the invasion of Ukraine in February 2022, Russia's propaganda apparatus has been operating at full capacity, using a wide range of instruments and tools to justify the war in the eyes of the public and to maintain strong support for Putin. These efforts aim to ensure domestic stability, which is the system's overriding objective. The authorities employ carefully crafted narratives to bolster citizens' self-esteem and morale. A central element in this is the invocation of victory over Nazism in World War II and the cultivation of hopes that that success must be repeated.

The primary reason Russia launched the war against Ukraine was its desire to control it and to suppress its aspirations for democratic development and integration with the West. Moscow, whose domestic politics display increasingly clear totalitarian traits, believes that the example of a successful democratic transformation in a neighbouring state, which used to be so close in cultural terms and had shared elements of history and borders with the aggressor, would set a dangerous precedent for Russia itself. The main goal of propaganda is therefore to discredit Kyiv's pro-Western ambitions and to blame the West (currently Europe) for instigating the war by allegedly carrying out an 'illegal coup' in 2014. Domestically, this message serves both to justify the invasion and to discourage the population from sympathising with the West or supporting potential political change in the country.

The Russian leadership consistently seeks to reduce support for Ukraine and to minimise the pressure exerted on Moscow by Western politicians. The Kremlin views any disagreement or conflict between the states which support Ukraine, or between Ukraine and its Western partners, as an opportunity to weaken its opponent. It therefore attempts to initiate and inflame any such disputes through information operations and psychological pressure, employing a variety of propaganda and disinformation techniques.

The broader aim of these efforts is a fundamental revision of Europe's political and security order and the creation of a crisis in transatlantic relations, which would strengthen Russia's position while weakening the West, particularly the status of the United States. To this end, Russia primarily seeks to undermine Western societies' trust in their governments, public institutions and political processes such as elections. It does not shy away from discrediting any authority or body of scientific knowledge – whether related to diseases and vaccinations, nutrition, climate change or other issues.

Russia uses these measures to fuel anti-government sentiment in Western states to provoke protests, changes of government or even anarchy, by appealing to specific, locally significant social issues such as rising unemployment, declining living standards or a sense of insecurity. Its efforts also involve discrediting democratic institutions and democracy itself – a system that the Kremlin's authoritarian model sees as its main threat – as well as fuelling anti-EU and anti-NATO attitudes. Spreading fear and generating divisions among both decision-makers and ordinary citizens in the West is intended to make them easier to influence. The goal is to weaken their opponent and gain an advantage by confusing and intimidating them. Propaganda measures directed against the West are also designed simply to divert public attention away from the war and to make national governments become absorbed by their domestic problems. In parallel, the Kremlin seeks to reach groups abroad that are either sympathetic or neutral towards Russia's policies, with the aim of securing their support or at least their passive acceptance of its aggressive actions.

5. Propaganda framework for the war against Ukraine and the West

To justify its attack on its neighbour and the escalation of tensions with the West, the Russian government has crafted several narratives based on lies, manipulation and misinformation, which are presented both to

the Russian public and to the international community using tools such as propaganda and disinformation. As already noted, when operating abroad, the Kremlin tailors specific narratives, and the intensity of their delivery varies across audiences, taking into account the geographical, cultural and social characteristics of each region or country. This selection process is preceded by an assessment of which views within a given environment are likely to be persuasive and what objectives can be achieved by promoting them. For example, in the Global South, Russia draws on themes of colonial history and Western oppression, stoking resentment towards Europe and the United States and fuelling the hostility towards them. In Western Europe, it focuses on setting local elites against their societies, fostering suspicion and distrust among the latter, amplifying dissatisfaction with the economic situation and fear of the war escalating to a nuclear conflict. It also promotes conspiracy theories and incites people to rebel or engage in anarchist behaviour.

As regards the ongoing invasion, the Kremlin manipulates the concept of pacifism, and in countries with large Ukrainian migrant populations, it seeks to portray them as a threat and to spark ethnic tensions. In Poland, for instance, it depicts refugees as 'Banderites',[31] claims they take jobs from locals, enjoy special privileges, spread diseases, and so on. The evolution of Russia's foreign-directed messaging involves detaching it from the situation inside Russia and focusing instead on aspects of a target country's socio-political reality, in order to interfere in the country's domestic processes. These operations are harder to detect, it is difficult to attribute them to their true source and, consequently, also to punish them.

The main Russian propaganda narratives – or meta-narratives – about the war in Ukraine revolve around several sensitive topics and are aimed simultaneously at multiple audiences: Russians, the West, Kyiv, the Global

[31] Banderites (Banderovtsy) – the term associated with the supporters or followers of Stepan Bandera and the radical Ukrainian nationalist movement, often used in political and propaganda discourse.

South and other countries. The central claim is that **Russia is not the aggressor but the victim of aggression** – that it has neither attacked its neighbour nor is engaged in an armed conflict with it, but is merely on Ukrainian territory to defend itself against the West, which is waging a proxy war through manipulated Ukrainians. Since February 2022, Moscow has maintained that what is happening in Ukraine is a 'special military operation' of limited scope. Its stated objectives are to protect the Russian-speaking population, who are allegedly persecuted by Kyiv, and to 'recover' territories belonging to 'historic Russia'. The propaganda portrays Russia as a country that 'has never attacked anyone'. For more than three years, this narrative has remained unchanged and continues to underpin the wartime messaging.

A key element of this narrative – and a major area of international disinformation – is **history**, especially that covering World War II, but also earlier periods, such as the formation of Orthodox Church structures in Eastern Europe. The Kremlin constructs false parallels between the Soviet Union's fight against Nazi Germany from 1941 to 1945 (referred to in Russia as the Great Patriotic War) and the current invasion. Ukraine is consistently depicted as a state ruled by Nazi or neo-Nazi elites that have resumed armed conflict against Russia.

Over the course of the invasion, this narrative has expanded to apply the 'Nazi' label to every country supporting Kyiv. Ideologues have even accused Israel and Jews of aiding 'Ukrainian Nazism', while portraying Russians as the victims of a 'new Holocaust'.[32] The Russian authorities claim that Moscow's historic mission is to combat Nazism. Propaganda draws on state mythology linked to the 'great victory' over Germany in 1945, emphasising that the Soviets defeated the enemy single-handedly, thereby downplaying or ignoring the role of assistance from other members of the anti-Hitler coalition. This fosters a false public perception

[32] 'Новый Холокост: Запад пытается запретить русским быть русскими', Военное обозрение, 17 September 2022, topwar.ru.

that the fight against Nazism is still ongoing and that only national unity around the government, coupled with a united struggle against the enemy, will secure the promised second victory. However, since the start of the invasion, this victory has never been clearly defined, granting the propaganda wide latitude to adjust its messaging to the situation on the front without having to account for setbacks. If necessary, the apparatus can present any outcome short of a severe defeat as a triumph.

Another key component of the propaganda narrative – and a major subject of disinformation – concerns the role and intentions of the West in the war in Ukraine and, more broadly, towards Russia. According to the messaging, the **collective West** is a mortal enemy, seeking to weaken, exploit and defeat Russia. Since February 2025 there has been a notable change in this area: following the resumption of contacts with the US administration after Donald Trump assumed the presidency, the propaganda has increasingly spoken warmly of the United States, shifting the main focus of its hostility towards Western Europe. The hostile West narrative is aimed primarily at Russians but also at states and groups in the international arena that view Moscow positively or neutrally, such as countries in the Global South, as well as China and India. According to the Kremlin, it was the West that started the war in Ukraine in order to destroy Russia. The propaganda repeats false claims that the West harbours hostile intentions towards Moscow: that it refused to admit Russia to NATO despite Moscow's efforts; provoked it by undermining its position in the former USSR – which Russia considers its own indivisible sphere of influence; and, finally, that for decades it had secretly prepared aggression against it, for instance by building military bases and biological weapons laboratories in Ukraine. These assertions have been propagated by the country's top leadership, including by Putin himself.

According to this rhetoric, Western foreign policy has traditionally been based on exploitation and violence, which Moscow claims to be resisting. Furthermore, the West is said to have abandoned its Christian roots and embraced Satanism, whereas Russia seeks to uphold conservative values

and acts as the guardian of traditional morality and faith.[33] Within this paradigm, the war in Ukraine is framed as the ultimate clash between good and evil – a holy war in defence of faith and of all humanity. It is clear from the Russian government's actions that the potential for developing this narrative is considerable. The propaganda machine can now claim that the West is responsible for any unfavourable event – whether the terrorist attack at Crocus City Hall,[34] or the Ukrainian strike in Russia's Kursk Oblast in August 2024.[35] This narrative resonates strongly within a society marked by deep-seated distrust of the West, which it regards as Russia's greatest enemy.

The meta-narrative claims that **Ukraine is not, and never has been, a sovereign state**, but merely an artificial construct forcibly separated from its motherland, Russia. Putin has repeatedly advanced this thesis – for example, in his February 2024 interview with US journalist Tucker Carlson, in which he used a manipulated and selective view of history to directly deny the distinct identity of the Ukrainian nation, portraying it as an integral part of the Russian people and undeserving of a sovereign state.[36] According to the false version of history promoted by Putin, Ukraine was invented either by the Poles and the Habsburgs – who allegedly convinced the Polonised population on the fringes of the Russian Empire that it has its own ethnic distinctiveness – or by Lenin, who during the Soviet era unjustifiably granted Ukrainians their own republic and awakened their national aspirations. The government's messaging

33 W. Rodkiewicz, J. Rogoża, *Potemkin conservatism. An ideological tool of the Kremlin*, OSW, Warsaw 2015, osw.waw.pl.

34 See M. Menkiszak, P. Żochowski, 'Islamists and the 'Ukrainian trace'. The Moscow concert hall terrorist attack', OSW, 23 March 2024, osw.waw.pl.

35 OSW's Russian Department, 'The Kremlin's Kursk problem: the first consequences of the Ukrainian attack on Russia', OSW, 12 August 2024, osw.waw.pl.

36 Earlier, Putin undermined Ukrainian statehood, for example, in his speech at the NATO summit in Bucharest (2008), during the annexation of Crimea (2014), and in an article published in 2021 '«Об историческом единстве русских и украинцев»' [In English: On the historical unity of Russians and Ukrainians], kremlin.ru. See also M. Domańska, P. Żochowski, 'Putin's article 'On the historical unity of Russians and Ukrainians'', OSW, 13 July 2021, osw.waw.pl.

here is essentially identical to Putin's state ideology, which justifies the Kremlin's aggressive foreign policy. In this view, Ukraine is a natural part of Russia's sphere of influence, belonging to the so-called 'Russian World', and Moscow therefore has the right to dominate and govern it. The narrative now brought to the forefront asserts that the country currently has no legitimate government, as President Volodymyr Zelensky's mandate has expired.

In statements by government representatives and commentators, there is a recurring theme of **threatening the possible escalation** of the war in Ukraine to the level of a nuclear conflict with the West. The primary intended audience for these messages is the West itself – particularly those societies sensitive to Russian threats and fearful of a nuclear Armageddon. These threats are used to exert psychological pressure and to push the West into making concessions over Ukraine. For Russian citizens, the same messaging is meant to have a calming effect, portraying their country as a strong 'nuclear power' capable of responding to its enemies. It omits the risk that, in any such exchange, Russia itself could become the target of weapons of mass destruction. The fearmongering is therefore entirely one-sided.

There is a clear pattern to the operation of the Kremlin media: the worse the situation for Russia becomes at the front, the more frequent the threats in propaganda. These threats and taunts directed at the West are usually accompanied by detailed presentations of Russia's nuclear arsenal – especially its latest technological achievements – and by explanations of the legal norms that supposedly justify Russia's right to use nuclear weapons for its own 'defence'. This is often paired with the setting of so-called red lines: developments deemed unfavourable to the Kremlin that, if they occur, would trigger a drastic response, such as a nuclear strike on a European city. In practice, however, most threats – particularly the most extreme – go unfulfilled, confirming that they are primarily a form of psychological pressure aimed at softening the opponent's resolve.

The propaganda targets individual Western countries by presenting repetitive narratives about them to the domestic audience. **Poland**, for example, **is typically portrayed as aggressive and imperialistic**. On the one hand, it is accused of having brutally Polonised Ukrainians during the era of the First Polish Republic and repressed them – especially in the so-called Eastern Borderlands during the Second Polish Republic. On the other hand, it is alleged to have fuelled Ukrainian national identity and drawn Ukrainians away from Russia. The propaganda insists that Poles have not abandoned their expansionist ambitions towards Ukraine, and that their assistance to the country stems from their plans to subjugate and annex part of its territory. In some cases, the narrative goes further, claiming that Warsaw also seeks to enslave Russia itself, citing as 'evidence' the Polish occupation of the Kremlin in 1610–1612. This framing reveals that the Kremlin sees Poland as a direct competitor in the struggle for influence over Ukraine, while also attributing to Warsaw the same revisionist aims which Russia itself pursues. The propaganda further claims that large numbers of Western mercenaries are taking part in the war, with Poles allegedly forming the majority. According to televised accounts, they are being killed in large numbers, with their bodies secretly buried in Polish military cemeteries. Poles are also said to have taken part in the attack on Russia's Kursk Oblast, and Polish is reportedly the language most often heard in intercepted frontline radio communications. All these lies are intended to damage Poland's international image. They also serve as a warning – painting Poland as an aggressive, swaggering state with dubious intentions (such as annexing western Ukraine), which should not be trusted, not only by Kyiv but also by its allies.

6. Problems with the narrative

When it comes to details, the Kremlin propaganda narratives often contain several contradictory versions of the same event. The aim of this tactic is to undermine the notion of objective truth and to confuse the target audience. Nevertheless, the meta-narratives outlined above consistently

build a structured interpretive framework and a relatively coherent worldview into which any new element can ultimately be fitted with ease. However, these efforts do not always produce a convincing effect. A closer look at Russian television propaganda[37] – which plays a key role in shaping the dominant message aligned with the authorities – reveals that the emergence of inconvenient facts (see below) has at times made it difficult for the apparatus to perform its functions effectively.

When inconvenient events caught the Kremlin off guard, the propaganda lost the initiative; instead of continuing along the predetermined and useful line, it was forced to react and shift the topic. Given the authorities' tight control over the message, reporting on such situations requires particular caution from commentators and politicians. In moments of surprise, when instructions from the Presidential Administration failed to arrive in time, the media adopted a wait-and-see approach. This exposed their lack of flexibility in shaping content – they reacted with delay, omitted inconvenient events and data, and altered initial reports, at times losing control over the narrative. These steps resulted in errors, gaps and inconsistencies in the messaging, revealing the propagandists' frustration and nervousness. Even greater confusion and impatience could be observed when multiple adverse incidents occurred in close succession.

Unfavourable developments at the front have proved particularly problematic. Examples include the Ukrainian counteroffensive in Kharkiv Oblast and their recapture of Kherson in autumn 2022, as well as their incursion into Russian territory – Kursk Oblast– in August 2024, which exposed the weakness of the Russian army and undermined the propaganda's consistent claims of an imminent final victory. Propaganda also struggled in July 2023 when the enemy damaged the Crimean Bridge – whose construction had symbolised the peninsula's annexation – or during drone attacks on Moscow in the same period. Initially, these

[37] See K. Chawryło, 'Weapons of mass deception...', *op. cit.*

incidents were ignored, with the topic addressed only after the strikes were repeated and it became impossible to conceal them.

Sudden shifts in narrative could also be observed in the coverage of Wagner Group leader Yevgeny Prigozhin[38] following his failed coup attempt. At the start of the war, the media portrayed him as a hero. During the rebellion in June 2023, they reported that he was a traitor who would be severely punished. In the days after the mutiny, they downplayed the significance of the event and announced that its instigator would avoid prison, before eventually ceasing to mention him at all – until his death, which they sought to comment on only briefly.

One notable example of situations that have challenged both propagandists and the Kremlin, is the need to announce the so-called partial mobilisation in September 2022, as well as the chaotic manner in which it was conducted. On one hand, it exposed the fact that the attack on Ukraine was not a mere 'operation' but an outright war, which would also have consequences for Russian citizens. On the other, the lack of preparedness for the draft and the frequent violations of the rights of the mobilised triggered a wave of public criticism of the army, which propaganda had to work to neutralise. Likely due to these problems, the possibility of implementing another mobilisation wave has become a taboo topic, swiftly shut down by politicians and commentators.

The propaganda also consistently ignores individual, spontaneous accounts from the front in which soldiers complain about mistreatment by their commanders, torture, the lack of proper equipment and pay, as well as stories from the families of the fallen who never received the promised state assistance. To limit the dissemination of this material on social media, in August 2024 the State Duma passed regulations prohibiting the use of private phones on the front for purposes unrelated to

[38] OSW's Russian Department, *The calm after the storm. Russia following Prigozhin's mutiny*, OSW, Warsaw 2023, osw.waw.pl.

combat operations. The issue of the mistreatment of soldiers and the violation of their rights is widely discussed on social media, as it is a topic that ordinary citizens find both compelling and disturbing. On television, however, only carefully staged statements from servicemen are shown, presenting the desired opinions – praising the professionalism and solidarity of their comrades in the units or expressing patriotic views.

There have also been attacks on propagandists and war correspondents, whom the apparatus has turned into symbols of the 'operation' and national heroes. The death or injury of a recognisable figure who regularly reports on the frontline situation to viewers – such as frequent propaganda programme guest Zakhar Prilepin or correspondent Yevgeny Poddubny – signals to the public that, contrary to official assurances, the war is taking a heavy toll on Russians as well. Incidents of this kind cause visible nervousness among regime insiders, as they highlight the risks linked to being a 'face' of the system.

The apparatus is exceptionally cautious about topics that relate to the perception of the government – both domestically and abroad. Situations that undermine Putin's image or authority are particularly uncomfortable, as the main task of propaganda is to create a favourable image of the leader and ensure his legitimacy. The public media leaves no room for any criticism of the president. One consistent pattern is that while Putin and his circle attack the West, they also seek recognition from it. Formal acceptance, or even fear, from the international community is used by the leader to confirm his strong position in the eyes of Russians. For this reason, the International Criminal Court's (ICC) decision in March 2023 to issue an arrest warrant for Putin – branding him a criminal and forcing partial isolation – posed a significant challenge for the propaganda.

As a result, preparing the media coverage of international events from which the leader withdrew due to the risk of arrest also posed difficulties. The arrest warrant itself was mentioned only sparingly in the most popular programmes – and, when it was, the references were quite brief.

Instead, threats were issued towards states that might detain the president. The fact that the risk of arrest had a tangible impact on Putin's activities – reducing the number of his trips even to countries described by Russian diplomacy as allies – was omitted entirely. For example, he abandoned his planned visit to the BRICS summit in South Africa in August 2023, which the Kremlin media explained as being due to urgent duties at home.

As regards propaganda operations in Russia, the suppression of awkward events and facts, delayed responses and the adjustment of narratives – the main methods used in unforeseen circumstances – have widened the gap between the media's constructed image of the war and international relations, and the reality. This has led to growing frustration among domestic audiences. This was laid bare after the Ukrainian army entered Russian territory in August 2024. Some residents of Kursk Oblast, driven by a sense of personal danger, desperately sought reliable information. After encountering the propaganda machine, they openly accused it of lying.[39] These situations, when the apparatus is confronted with inconvenient events, give viewers and readers an opportunity to realise the extent of manipulation and falsehood. For the West, any problems that surface in Russian media messaging serve as signposts indicating the sensitive points of the Kremlin's propaganda and disinformation apparatus – points that should be targeted in efforts to weaken it.

7. Effectiveness of the Kremlin's propaganda narratives in the West

It is extremely difficult, and at times virtually impossible, to determine the impact of Moscow's information operations on the international situation or on individual Western states, due to the absence of objective criteria and measurement tools. On the one hand, actions within

[39] OSW's Russian Department, 'The Kremlin's Kursk problem: the first consequences of the Ukrainian attack on Russia', *op. cit.*

the framework of information warfare are systematic and continuous. On the other, they consist of a series of large and small 'operations' that are hard to isolate. Given the long-term and covert nature of these activities, it is challenging to separate their components or identify their assumptions, executors and objectives. Crucially, these objectives may be fluid and incremental depending on the circumstances, yet they are never publicly defined by the Kremlin. As such, they can only be reconstructed and analysed after the fact – a process prone to error due to the fragmentary or absent nature of the information available.

Often the regime does not aim for a specific, measurable political outcome (such as securing the election of a particular politician, discrediting a given individual, or toppling a government), but rather to exacerbate problems in states it considers hostile – undermining public trust in democratic institutions, triggering chaos or panic, and so forth. Frequently, the actions, narratives or even the goals attributed to Moscow appear to have no obvious connection to its interests, which complicates both attribution and any attempt at eradication.

Establishing a cause-and-effect link between Russian activity and a political event or phenomenon is challenging, particularly in the case of complex, multi-causal processes with strong domestic drivers. In many cases, Russia merely stokes to an already tense situation – as in the UK during the Brexit campaign, or in the observed rise of anti-immigrant and anti-Ukrainian sentiment in European countries. There is also the risk of misattributing certain events. In the West, the hasty attribution to the Kremlin of responsibility for unfavourable developments or public moods has become an easy, convenient and hard-to-disprove tool in domestic political rivalry. The recent Romanian presidential election is a case in point.[40]

[40] See K. Całus, 'Romania: Constitutional Court annuls the presidential election', OSW, 9 December 2024, osw.waw.pl.

These factors make a comprehensive assessment of Russia's actions in the information war against the West an enormous challenge. No such analysis can be complete and is subject to a high risk of error. In some countries – such as those in Central Europe, Scandinavia, Finland or the United Kingdom – a relatively high level of informed scepticism about Russia and its policies among both elites and the public, combined with entrenched negative historical experiences in relations with it, allows for the cautious conclusion that the effectiveness of Russian operations – understood as their ability to directly influence government decisions – is limited. Nevertheless, Kremlin propaganda narratives can break into the Western political debate with dramatic effect when favourable conditions arise. A striking example is the unexpected adoption by Donald Trump and his associates, from around 19 February 2025, of the Kremlin's narrative questioning President Zelensky's legitimacy – a move that could affect the level of US support for Ukraine. The regime's consistent and patient propaganda efforts can therefore yield results in the longer term, which is the time horizon on which Russia operates.

II. HOW TO COUNTER KREMLIN DISINFORMATION AND PROPAGANDA

1. Western defence against disinformation

It has become one of the priorities of Europe's two key security institutions – the North Atlantic Alliance and the European Union – to strengthen their resilience to information threats. A turning point was Russia's annexation of Crimea in 2014, which was accompanied by massive Kremlin information operations.[41] Other alarming developments were the COVID-19 pandemic and Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine that began in February 2022.

Within NATO, the 2016 adoption of seven baseline requirements for civil preparedness was one of the most important measures. A pivotal coordinating role is assigned to the NATO Public Diplomacy Division. In the EU, the key objectives are set out in the 2022 Strategic Compass, which envisages the development of tools to respond to hybrid actions – including FIMI (the EU Hybrid Toolbox) – and the creation in 2024 of the EU Hybrid Rapid Response Team.[42] Brussels plans further steps to strengthen resilience, as reflected in the 30 October 2024 publication of the report commissioned by the European Commission called *Safer Together: Strengthening Europe's Civil and Military Crisis Preparedness*, prepared under the direction of former Finnish President Sauli Niinistö. Discussions are also under way on expanding the EU's competences in the defence of democracy and – according to unofficial reports – on adopting a strategy towards Russia as a generator of hybrid threats, a move that would be fully justified.

41 See, for example, M. Marek, *Operacja Ukraina. Kampanie dezinformacyjne, narracje, sposoby działania rosyjskich ośrodków propagandowych przeciwko państwu ukraińskiemu w okresie 2013–2019*, Difin, 2020.

42 Ł. Maślanka and P. Szymański provide a detailed analysis of the programme assumptions and the state of EU and NATO activities in their study 'The resilience of the European Union and NATO in an era of multiple crises', *OSW Commentary*, no. 646, 28 February 2025, osw.waw.pl.

Different European countries respond to foreign information interference in different ways. This is due to the fact that individual states are affected by these threats to varying degrees, and competences in this field lie primarily at the national level. France and Finland, for example, have adopted different but noteworthy strategies in this area. In recent years, the French administration has created a centralised system for responding to hostile information activities, characterised by a high degree of coordination between domestic institutions. As early as 2021, it established VIGINUM – a specialised agency for combating such threats – as a unit within the General Secretariat for Defence and National Security. It reports to the prime minister. It is responsible for internal security policy, coordinating the work of various ministries in this field, and works closely with the president (who chairs government meetings). VIGINUM's mandate, strictly regulated by law, is to detect hostile information activities undertaken by external actors which could harm the interests of the state and its citizens. In addition, France has an extensive fact-checking network, has launched numerous media education initiatives, and keeps its legal framework up to date with emerging threats in this domain.

In Finland, on the other hand, the education system is the pillar of response to foreign information threats. Through it, the state systematically builds citizens' resilience to disinformation – from an early age, residents of Finland learn how to use the media and critically assess content. Here, society and its attitudes form the core of resilience. Skills are developed not only through a dedicated media literacy programme introduced in 2016 (after the US presidential elections demonstrated that disinformation can affect electoral processes) but also through regular school subjects – for example, in mathematics, pupils learn that statistics can be manipulated and how this is done. As a result, Finland has for years ranked among the leaders in the European Media Literacy Index,[43] which measures potential vulnerability to disinformation

[43] 'Finland Tops the New Media Literacy Index 2023, Countries Close to the War in Ukraine Remain Among the Most Vulnerable to Disinformation', Open Society Institute – Sofia, 24 June 2023, osis.bg.

across Europe, and its education system is widely recognised as one of the best in Europe.[44] Moreover, Finns are characterised by mutual trust and high confidence in institutions such as the police, courts, media, and both local and central government – as indicated by OECD data.[45] This is of prime importance in terms of resistance to manipulation and the fomenting of disputes and divisions, which have long been the pillars of Russia's disinformation system. Furthermore, the Finnish government works with private companies and the media to build societal resilience and prepare the population for crisis events. Alongside this, several independent organisations in the country expose false information and promote digital education (such as Faktabaari/Factbar). Easy access to expert knowledge is also a result of the fact that the European Centre of Excellence for Countering Hybrid Threats (Hybrid CoE) – bringing together 36 countries – is based in the Finnish capital and cooperates closely with the EU and NATO.

2. Key lines of defence – how to strengthen them

Russia has adopted a centralised and systemic approach to its disinformation operations. If the fight against it is to be effective, it should also be comprehensive in nature and involve multiple actors, both domestically and within alliances. Two main lines can be seen in the actions currently undertaken by the West: the ongoing neutralisation of threats from Russia and other countries that resort to disinformation and propaganda – through debunking false claims with fact-checking, analysing hostile narratives, public attribution, and strategic communication – and building up the resilience of states and societies – via institutional reforms, education, training, and proactive public diplomacy. In other words, both are long-term processes. These measures are essentially a reaction to the adversary's moves – they are *reactive*. To effectively protect political

[44] See the results of the survey 'PISA Scores by Country 2025', World Population Review, worldpopulationreview.com.

[45] 'Drivers of Trust in Public Institutions in Finland', OECD, Paris 2021, oecd.org.

systems and citizens, however, it is necessary to adapt responses more closely to the dangers by adopting an active defence. Active defence means actively weakening the opponent's potential, depriving them of the initiative, and forcing them to react. In the Kremlin's case, this involves the creation of situations in which its apparatus must defend the authorities against unfavourable informational events. As indicated earlier (in Chapter I.1 *The role of information operations in Kremlin policy*), this undermines the core assumptions of Moscow's approach, as it compels it to take a defensive stance.

According to the concept of a 'just war theory', the West, as the attacked side in the information domain, has the right to active defence. However, it must ensure that its actions remain within the boundaries of its own legal norms and do not pose a threat to democracy. At the same time, it is precisely Western democracy that the Kremlin sees as its greatest threat, meaning its defence should be the paramount goal and the focus of the West's special mobilisation.

In the event of a Russian threat, the West should aim to make it as difficult as possible for Russia to wage an information war and to neutralise its ability both to manipulate its own population and to influence the international community. The outcome of these measures should be to increase the operating costs of the Russian disinformation apparatus, which is already consuming significant budgetary resources. In the context of the war, the key to weakening Russia in this domain is to inflict the greatest possible losses on the battlefield (see below), as this could undermine the morale of both its army and society. The effectiveness of propaganda can also be reduced by actions aimed at raising public awareness about facts unfavourable to the Russian authorities, internal problems, and the social costs of the war. Any growing dissatisfaction among the population in various regions of the country could become a problem requiring the Russian government to allocate resources and focus its attention on those areas – potentially distracting the Kremlin from its aggressive moves against Ukraine and the West, since the war is currently a top priority for the leadership.

2.1. Immediate actions – fact-checking and strategic communication

The most obvious and widespread methods of countering disinformation and propaganda are the immediate clarification and correction of false content based on verified sources, and exposing lies, myths and false beliefs – fact-checking and debunking. This tactic for confronting the challenges posed by Russia is developing rapidly in the West, both at the national and international level. Many institutions and organisations are actively engaged in debunking Moscow's deceptions and manipulations. It is also a good idea to combine fact-checking and debunking with prebunking, which aims to prepare audiences in advance for predictable disinformation actions (for example, those tied to specific events or historical anniversaries). These efforts can take the form of broader campaigns. If this more proactive defence method is based on the prior analysis of the opponent's activity and effective strategic communication, it can help inoculate citizens against harmful narratives.

For example, in Poland, deconstructing Kremlin disinformation about the war or about Poland itself, as well as preparing the public for information incidents, is undertaken by both independent and state actors. These include non-governmental fact-checking organisations (such as the Demagog Association)[46], state agencies (such as the Polish Press Agency and the National Research Institute NASK), and ministries (such as the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and the Ministry of Digital Affairs). At the supranational level, similar functions are performed by non-profit organisations such as EU DisinfoLab[47] or EU vs Disinfo – a project of the East StratCom Task Force.[48] However, these two methods alone are insufficient to neutralise the negative effects of disinformation on populations and states that are subjected to it. Research on the effectiveness of fact-checking has shown that verifying facts can increase the factual

[46] Website: demagog.org.pl.

[47] It became known, among other things, for being the first to identify the Russian 'Doppelgänger' operation. The organisation's website address is disinfo.eu.

[48] Website: euvsdisinfo.eu.

accuracy of audiences' knowledge, but has only a limited impact on their beliefs and actions. This was demonstrated, for example, by a study conducted by a team of researchers in Paris, who examined how fact-checking could correct some of the false information spread during the French presidential election in 2017.[49] Therefore, the response to threats in the information sphere cannot be limited to exposing the lies and manipulations of the opponent – it should be much more comprehensive and active, to match the scale of the threats posed by Moscow.

The invasion of Ukraine brought modern Russian disinformation and propaganda practices into sharper focus within the international community. They began to be seen not only as a backdrop to Russia's war, but as a separate front of the conflict, equal in importance to the kinetic battlefield. This has created a demand for more systematic and in-depth monitoring and analysis of Russia's activities in this sphere, as well as for raising awareness among decision-makers and the public about the socio-political realities of today's aggressive Russia. This knowledge should form the foundation for a targeted response by any state under attack. It can serve as the basis for planning strategic communication – a key tool for protecting the state and its citizens against the dangers of disinformation. Strategic communication is especially crucial during crises that require swift action. In these situations, the authorities must deliver clear messages to the public, promptly debunk false content, and point to reliable sources of information. In these moments, state institutions (the government, ministries, and other bodies under official authority) and the most trusted media outlets play a primary role in shaping the response.

[49] O. Barrera, S. Guriev, E. Henry, E. Zhuravskaya, 'Facts, alternative facts, and fact checking in times of post-truth politics', *Journal of Public Economics*, vol. 182, February 2020, as cited in: sciencedirect.com.

2.2. Examples of long-term actions – public diplomacy and education

Public diplomacy is used to promote a country's objectives over the long term and to shape its positive image abroad. Its goals include promoting the government's point of view on international issues and explaining its position in the external environment, while also trying, through various channels, to reach specific groups within the foreign audience. In addition to a country's diplomatic and cultural institutions, this activity should involve diasporas and their organisations, friendly foreign institutions, and journalists covering the relevant region (both as part of routine cooperation and in ad hoc initiatives – for example, during study visits).

In order to reach other countries' societies with its own narratives through channels other than diplomacy, it is worth, for instance, establishing a centralised programme for maintaining contacts with foreign graduates and recipients of scholarships to universities and research organisations who have previously had the opportunity to study and work in the given country and who know its language and culture. An initiative of this kind could include creating a registry of graduates and maintaining friendly, informal relationships with them. These kinds of individual contacts can also serve as a strategic asset for a country as a tool for supporting its positive reputation worldwide, and they may have tactical significance – serving as an instrument of direct foreign communication in crisis situations. A similar mechanism, on a smaller scale, is used by some prestigious Western universities (alumni clubs) and scholarship programmes (such as the Fulbright Program). A similar system is also cynically used by Russia, which not only maintains contacts with foreign graduates of Russian universities but also of Soviet universities, many of whom now belong to the elites in various developing countries and influence public opinion and government policy, often openly promoting Moscow's interests.

Building societies' systemic resilience to threats related to disinformation and propaganda is a key task, though it is one which requires time

and the coordination of activities by many actors at both the national and international levels. A wide range of actors should be involved in this effort – from state institutions and security services, through independent organisations and the media, to academic and expert communities. An approach of this kind, consistent with the 'whole-of-government, whole-of-society approach', is the recommended method of addressing informational threats at the EU institutional level.[50]

These processes are, above all, long-term in nature when it comes to education. Priority areas should include digital education and critical thinking, and, more specifically, understanding the mechanisms of disinformation. Education should cover children from the earliest years, as well as various strategically important social and professional groups (see below). At an early stage, it is worthwhile to teach the safe use of information technologies and to develop an awareness of online threats. One of the reasons the propaganda is able to thrive in Russia is because of the low quality of education and even the deliberate suppression of critical thinking. It has been achieved through a state-controlled, ideologically driven education system, as well as numerous militaristic institutions for children and young people. Notable examples include the pro-Kremlin Yunarmiya (All-Russian Military Patriotic and Social Movement 'Young Army', Russian: *Юнармия*) and the Movement of the First (Russian: *Движение Первых*). To avoid this situation in democratic countries, children should be taught how to critically assess sources of information and media content, and how to use the internet while avoiding becoming addicted to it.

The most important role in building public awareness and citizens' competence in the information sphere is played by parents, teachers, educators and experts, as well as local authorities. Representatives of these

[50] See the recommendations compiled in: M. Wigell, H. Mikkola, T. Juntunen, *Best Practices in the whole-of-society approach in countering hybrid threats*, Policy Department, Directorate-General for External Policies, European Parliament, May 2021, europarl.europa.eu.

groups should be encouraged to participate regularly in specialised training on countering disinformation, which is already taking place in some cases (in Poland, these courses are organised by various NGOs and by the NASK). Adapting the education system to the threats posed by hybrid warfare requires initiative from the authorities. Civil society institutions should become partners for government ministries in this field, helping to prevent the politicisation of educational measures. In the conditions of information warfare – but also within the normal political competition inherent in democracy – there may be a temptation to label every critical voice as disinformation and to turn the fight against it into a political weapon. However, politicising efforts against disinformation only benefits the aggressor.

A natural course of action is to promote reliable journalism. A lack of competence in this profession, violations of freedom of speech, and censorship all facilitate the spread of propaganda and disinformation (as seen in Russia). An important element of the long-term investment in citizens' resilience should therefore be expert-led training for journalists on verifying information in the context of information warfare. The 'race for sensationalism' in the media often harms the substantive and linguistic quality of published materials, with the sole aim frequently being to boost viewership. In the long term, media outlets that manipulate content and exaggerate headlines may lose the trust of their audience. In moments of crisis and direct threat, people turn to the media for reliable information (even in Russia). A general rule should be that more specialised and complex topics are handled by journalists with expertise in the relevant area or by subject-matter experts. This kind of professional approach distinguishes serious editorial teams from so-called 'media workers', where contributors often lack the necessary qualifications. In these cases, people may unintentionally mislead readers or viewers by speaking without the proper preparation.

3. More proactive measures on Russia

The West employs various proactive measures in its fight against Moscow's disinformation and propaganda. These measures are not just a reaction to an immediate threat but are also aimed at seizing the initiative – among these, two seem to be the most obvious. The first is creating situations that make it difficult for the Kremlin to build a coherent propaganda message or that completely disrupt its narrative lines. The second is identifying weaknesses in Russia's socio-political system and exposing them not only in the domestic but also in the global information space, which the governments there carefully study and try to exploit.

Russia's failures on the battlefield have the most visible direct and negative impact on the work of its propaganda apparatus. When Ukraine achieves successes, the pressure on the invader's information machine grows, and the challenges it faces multiply. Both military defeats and a lack of progress create problems for Russia when it forms its propaganda messages and steers public moods and expectations (pushing back the prospect of the promised quick victory). Reporting on the front-line situation requires a great deal of creativity and careful word choice. Dissatisfied with the openness of some war correspondents and bloggers, the Kremlin has already disciplined this group several times, demanding restraint in describing difficulties. These problems cause visible nervousness among propagandists and, consequently, impatience and disappointment among citizens. For this reason, Western military, financial, and political support that improves the situation of the Ukrainian forces against Russia should be maximised.[51] Intensifying military aid to Kyiv is a step towards depriving Russians of the hope of the desired and promised victory. The absence of triumphs in battle may also temporarily affect their willingness to enlist in the army.

[51] For more arguments – see M. Menkiszak, *Winning the war with Russia (is still possible). The West's counter-strategy towards Moscow*, OSW, Warsaw 2024, osw.waw.pl.

Successful missile and drone strikes on Russian territory, as well as acts of Ukrainian sabotage deep inside the country or in the occupied territories are a sensitive topic for the propaganda. Events such as the damage to the Kerch Bridge, the bombardment of Crimea, and attacks on key energy and military infrastructure in Russia – especially the offensive in Kursk Oblast – have caused turmoil in the media narrative. These incidents damage Moscow's image by showing that the Russian army cannot defend land it claims as its own, and that citizens cannot feel safe or count on the authorities for protection. In these situations, the disinformation apparatus declares that it is NATO states, not Ukraine, attacking Russia. So far, however, these accusations – an attempt to justify the government's helplessness – have not led to any response beyond boastful rhetoric. Similarly, repeatedly issued precise threats against the West (such as nuclear strikes on Western capitals) for crossing so-called red lines (which include attacks on Russian territory) have so far not been carried through on. They are further undermining trust in propaganda statements.

Continuing – and especially increasing – military, economic, and political support for Kyiv will not only raise the likelihood of events on the front unfavourable for the Kremlin, but will also undermine the narrative pushed by the Russian government within the international community concerning Ukraine's isolation and the collapse of Western unity in the face of confrontation with Russia. Propagandists and officials claim that Western states have turned away from Kyiv due to disappointment with its 'sense of entitlement' and the defenders' poor performance on the battlefield. Russian coverage of President Zelensky's visit to the United States in September 2024 sought to prove this point by portraying Ukraine in a demeaning light.[52] The information apparatus also commented, with barely concealed resentment, on the US Congress's April 2024 approval – after earlier difficulties – of a $61 billion aid package for Kyiv.

[52] See K. Nieczypor, A. Kohut, T. Iwański, 'Zelensky visits the US: a diplomatic failure rather than a 'victory plan'', OSW, 27 September 2024, osw.waw.pl.

Sanctions targeting the Russian elite and state help in combating Russian disinformation and propaganda. These restrictions should be strengthened and expanded horizontally – to cover additional entities and individuals – and information about them should be widely publicised. As already mentioned, the ICC's issuance of an international arrest warrant for Putin and Children's Rights Commissioner Maria Lvova-Belova for organising the deportation of Ukrainian children deep into Russia dealt a severe reputational blow to the Kremlin and was a particularly problematic fact for the media. Similar steps could be taken against propagandists who call for genocide against Ukrainians – evidence for this is not hard to collect by monitoring Russian newspapers and television. The establishment of an international tribunal, similar to the International Military Tribunal in Nuremberg, to judge the regime's aggression and crimes would be a major challenge for the information machine, and this is something the Ukrainian side has been advocating since the beginning of the invasion.[53] It is worth having Western and Russian-language media critical of the Kremlin, as well as Western diplomats on various platforms, publicise the legal consequences of the invasion and the sanctions, as well as their possible effects, thereby forcing Russian propaganda to address this inconvenient topic and respond.

When it comes to restrictions, every available legal tool should be used to condemn the actions of the individual members of the Russian elite on the international stage and to engage international institutions to prosecute those responsible for the invasion. Personal sanctions should be imposed on judges and investigators involved in the trials of Ukrainian prisoners of war and civilians held and tried in Russia in violation of fundamental rights (no lawyer, no contact with their family, a ban on receiving parcels, exposure to torture) which have been highlighted by both Ukrainian and Russian human rights defenders. Numerous organisations

[53] For more, see M. Jędrysiak, 'Putting Russia on trial. Ukrainian efforts to establish a tribunal for crimes of aggression', *OSW Commentary*, no. 560, 12 December 2023, osw.waw.pl.

collect and archive information on the justice officials involved in this process and demand that Western restrictions be imposed on them and their data publicised on a broader scale. This step could strip these perpetrators of anonymity and the sense of impunity (the belief that their actions will go unnoticed or be forgotten), which, in the best-case scenario, might deter other state officials from participating in the systemic repression of Ukrainian prisoners.

It would be reasonable to maintain and expand sanctions against Russia as a participant of sports events at least until the end of the invasion. Judging by the reactions, ordinary citizens and elites in Russia strongly felt the exclusion of the Russian Federation's national team from the XXXIII Summer Olympic Games in Paris in 2024 and the admission of athletes from that country only under a neutral flag. Russians are very passionate about sport and international competitions, and it is a popular pastime to support athletes. Furthermore, at the state level, sports competitions are treated as an opportunity to strengthen Russia's international standing, to foster national pride, and to challenge claims of isolation. In this sense, sports and politics are inseparably linked. The removal of the national team from such an important championship deprived the Kremlin of the opportunity to conduct propaganda activities on the world stage and made many citizens realise that the war brings unexpected costs. Exclusion from competitions held in the West, and where possible with its participation, should apply both to the Russian national team as a state entity and to all individual athletes engaged in supporting the war (which happens often, since the Kremlin expects and pressures them to take these positions). It would be particularly painful to deny participation in those sporting competitions which are popular among the Russian public, such as football, gymnastics, martial arts and chess. The lifting of sanctions already imposed in this area would be portrayed by Moscow's propaganda as a victory and as proof of its claim that it was being discriminated against.

The accounts of leading Russian propagandists on Western social media networks (both official and personal) – especially on platforms whose access is restricted in Russia – should be blocked.[54] For example, RT's head and editor of the Rossiya Segodnya agency, Margarita Simonyan, still runs accounts on Facebook and X, spreading Kremlin narratives on those platforms. On YouTube, which is also blocked in Russia, full broadcasts of Russian shows can still be viewed (creators set up accounts on the platform, seemingly unrelated to propaganda, to publish them). After the arrest and trial for espionage of *The Wall Street Journal* journalist Evan Gershkovich,[55] it became clear that employees of Western media organisations cannot operate freely in Russia – they must observe censorship, are under constant surveillance by the security services, and can become hostages of the regime at any time. As a result, most media outlets relocated part of their local staff, while the rest operate under great pressure due to security risks and the threat of provocations. In response, the West should limit the operating space for the so-called Russian state media on its territory and, in line with the nature of their activities, stop recognising them as the 'regular' mass media. The work of these entities is not actually journalism or media activity (as their representatives claim, citing freedom of speech) but rather **disinformation, often involving espionage, in the service of a foreign state, targeting the security of the given country**. In light of this, Russian 'correspondents' posted to the West – whose biased and provocative messages regularly appear in major domestic shows – should not be granted access to official briefings, political ceremonies, etc. Their activities in the host countries should be closely monitored or completely halted (including through expulsion). This is already happening in some cases – for example, RT was forced to close its office in France as a result of sanctions.[56]

[54] See 'Russia's justice ministry adds Meta to 'extremist' list – Kommersant', Reuters, 25 November 2022, reuters.com.

[55] M. Domańska, P. Żochowski, W. Rodkiewicz *et al.*, 'Major East-West prisoner exchange', OSW, 2 August 2024, osw.waw.pl.

[56] 'La chaîne d'information russe RT France annonce sa « fermeture »', Le Monde, 21 January 2023, lemonde.fr.

It will also be necessary to amend legislation to allow for the punishment of entities and individuals spreading disinformation and propaganda, which is currently impossible in many Western countries due to the lack of relevant definitions and provisions. For example, Polish law strictly links disinformation to work for a foreign intelligence service and allows it to be penalised in that context. The key challenge is to codify the fight against this phenomenon at the regulatory level in a way that does not conflict with democratic principles in the state (especially with the freedom of speech). A method used so far by some countries to curb the spread of disinformation or influence operations has been to find possibilities within existing law to impose penalties. The actions of the US government set a precedent in this respect; as part of the sanctions introduced in September 2024, brought criminal charges against two individuals cooperating with the RT station[57] – accusing them not of spreading disinformation but of engaging in illegal financial transactions (specifically, money laundering), violating the sanctions regime by cooperating with sanctioned entities and, finally, breaking domestic legislation on 'foreign agents' – acting on behalf of another state without proper registration. The United States thus demonstrated that if there is a justified security interest and the political will, it is possible to find a legal option to penalise harmful activities – even without the need to amend legislation. The American measures forced RT to respond and – most likely – to restructure its influence operations abroad to account for the new risks. This may be indicated by Simonyan's statement on Vladimir Solovyov's propaganda show, in which she thanked the director of the Information and Press Department of the Russian Foreign Ministry, Maria Zakharova, for her assistance in the immediate evacuation of the station's staff from the US right after the announcement of the sanctions.

[57] 'Two RT Employees Indicted for Covertly Funding and Directing U.S. Company that Published Thousands of Videos in Furtherance of Russian Interests', US Department of Justice, 4 September 2024, justice.gov.

Strengthening and tightening the economic sanctions imposed on the Russian economy and its citizens also has a negative impact on the Kremlin's disinformation apparatus. While waging war, the country is increasingly passing the costs onto society, which is affected by the rising cost of living caused by the invasion and related restrictions. So far, the authorities have carefully ensured that groups important to the regime's stability (residents of large cities) and essential for waging war (soldiers and defence industry workers) do not pay the price for the invasion or even profit from it. However, the rest of the population strongly feels its economic consequences (especially inflation), and by limiting social transfers, the state is gradually leaving them to fend for themselves. Sentiments among this group will deteriorate, and the propaganda will have to counteract this. Furthermore, if sanctions hit the economy harder, the government will face the need to cut spending. Budget cuts could then affect the funding for the information apparatus, which has been greatly expanded during the war (if necessary, funds for foreign-directed activities would likely be reduced first, as internal security and stability will probably remain the priority). Moreover, if the sanctions are to hit Russia and Russians harder – which should be the West's main goal – they must be implemented consistently by communities of states, not individual states. Solidarity in the face of aggression undermines the claim of the end of Western unity and the disintegration of its institutions.

4. Active defence. Reaching Russian-speaking communities

4.1. Russians at home and abroad as targets of narratives

An analysis of Russia's actions reveals that it carefully tailors its disinformation messages to the groups it has identified: its own citizens, Russian-speaking communities abroad, Western societies perceived as hostile, and the populations of countries viewed as neutral or friendly. To achieve the desired effect, countermeasures should follow a similar pattern.

One of the important groups targeted by Kremlin narratives through Russian or Russian-language media (these are not the same – for example, RT broadcasts in many languages) are Russian-speaking communities across Europe. It is worth noting that they include not only Russians, but also Ukrainians, Belarusians, Moldovans and citizens of other states where Russian is or was widely used. Living abroad, they are the audiences and readers of television, press and online outlets in that language. In Poland, for example, Russians are a minority in this group, with Ukrainians and Belarusians forming the majority. Some of them may be vulnerable to Moscow's influence – as illustrated by cases of their involvement in hybrid actions against Poland (sabotage).[58] Susceptibility to Kremlin manipulation increases as war fatigue and disappointment with the West grow among Russian-speaking migrants. As regards protection against Russian influence in the information sphere, it is crucial to thoroughly examine diasporas in the individual Western countries (where their members come from, which media organisations they follow, which views they sympathise with) and to identify their vulnerabilities. The next step should be to direct carefully tailored narratives to them through the local mass media and strategic communication, in order to undermine false claims, build awareness of the situation, and strengthen the trust of immigrants in the host state – and vice versa.

Another potential target group for efforts aimed at countering Moscow's information machinery are Russian diasporas[59] in third countries where the Russian language remains popular and pro-Russian views are widely accepted. On the other hand, due to their distance from the homeland and – in most cases – the absence of censorship, members of these communities may be more ready to adopt a critical stance towards the war and the Kremlin. Beyond Western states, the largest influx of Russians

[58] See, for example, 'Planował podpalenie ważnych obiektów we Wrocławiu. Ukrainiec zatrzymany przez ABW', TVP Info, 15 February 2024, tvp.info.

[59] Given the language they use, this group also includes some immigrants and refugees from Belarus and Ukraine, some of whom consume Russian media and are exposed to disinformation.

has been recorded in Central Asia, the Caucasus, Turkey and Israel. People moved there for a variety of reasons – economic, ideological (such as pacifism), or security-related, with some fleeing mobilisation. It is worth examining what views these people hold and what sources of information they use, in order to reach them with content critical of the Kremlin, adapted to their circumstances. Any change in these communities' attitude towards the regime would be highly desirable. Emigrants could also indirectly influence the outlook of their relatives still living in Russia, providing them with reliable data and critical opinions.

The most difficult task – given censorship and the specific mentality of this group – is reaching Russians inside Russia and engaging them with messages that expose the Kremlin's aggressive policies. It is precisely the spread of independent information about the domestic situation and the truth about the war that the propaganda apparatus currently seeks above all to prevent. These efforts are unlikely to yield spectacular results, but they could raise Russians' awareness of the harmful decisions taken by their government, make them realise the growing costs of the war, and encourage more critical attitudes towards government policy and Putin himself. If frustration generated by access to the truth were to become widespread and visible in the public space, the regime would be forced to focus on calming emotions. The fact that the authorities fear noticeable public discontent and regard it as a domestic threat is demonstrated by the ban on street protests in Russia, with penalties for participation in anti-government rallies.[60] The extent of the Russian leadership's paranoia is shown by the fact that even previously legal one-person pickets (which did not require registration) or acts of remembrance (such as laying flowers at monuments) are now stigmatised.

Since topics inconvenient for the government and the propaganda machine have piled up, the narratives of the pro-state media aimed at

[60] For more see M. Domańska, 'Putin's neo-totalitarian project: the current political situation in Russia', *OSW Commentary*, no. 489, 17 February 2023, osw.waw.pl.

Russian citizens are becoming increasingly incomplete and inconsistent, requiring ever greater intervention and censorship. This in turn motivates Russians to seek information elsewhere. The problem inside the country is therefore not so much a lack of access to information or censorship of content, but rather the lack of readiness and determination among the Russian public to make the effort to find information. However, despite widespread apathy and a withdrawal from socio-political life, Russians are pragmatic – they can be drawn in and mobilised by issues directly related to their own security and wellbeing. When people feel threatened, their demand for reliable reporting grows. This was clear after the announcement of the so-called partial mobilisation in September 2022. At that time, a public eager for comprehensive information about the process, especially on how to avoid being drafted, turned to the opposition media. Those interested knew they would not find such information in regime-controlled outlets. The Russian liberal media even prepared special guides and handbooks for those at risk of conscription, which steadily expanded their reach.[61] This situation created an opportunity for independent media outlets – both professional and smaller ones operating on social networks – to broaden their audience and reach more compatriots with truth-based content. It seems reasonable to assume that if the number of crises in Russia increases, so too will the demand for information from independent sources.

4.2. The Russian media as a communication channel

Governments of neo-totalitarian states, such as Russia,[62] maintain an information monopoly and do not allow news from unauthorised sources to reach society. In the internet age, however, censorship faces greater challenges – despite tighter media controls and harsher penalties for speaking the truth, it is still possible to read independent content in

[61] Representatives of media outlets opposing the regime admitted this in conversations with the author in Vilnius in May and June 2023.

[62] See, for example, M. Domańska, 'Putin's neo-totalitarian project: the current political situation in Russia', *op. cit.*

Russia, including materials produced abroad. A useful tool in this regard is the widely available anonymisation software such as VPNs (virtual private networks). Today, most independent Russian media outlets operate via social networks – especially on Telegram (which is highly popular in Russia) and YouTube. On a smaller scale, communication takes place through thematic and local social media groups, as well as via the Tor browser and darknet platforms. Traditional forms of information distribution are also re-emerging in Russia, such as printed newsletters and leaflets, used for example by certain anti-war movements. Since the war in Ukraine began, Russian publishers operating in exile have assumed the role of civic and political activists, blurring the line between journalism and activism. Politically engaged investigative journalism has been expanding rapidly, exposing government abuses. Examples of comprehensive media-political activity include structures continuing the work of Alexei Navalny and their associated channels – Populyarnaya Politika, Navalny Live, Alexei Navalny – as well as outlets connected to former oligarch Mikhail Khodorkovsky, such as MBK Media, Open Media, the Dossier Center, and the Open Russia website. High-quality investigations are also conducted by The Insider. The declared goals of these outlets are to inform Russians about the domestic situation and government corruption, and to push for an end to the war. Some are explicit in their calls for regime change. For foreign audiences, investigative media organisations provide valuable insights into developments within Russia.

Since Russians (living in Russia) distrust the foreign media – including Russian-language outlets run by non-Russians – the best chance of reaching deep into the country lies with media created by Russian citizens themselves.[63] Disillusionment with the West, and at times outright

[63] Ellen Mickiewicz wrote about this, among other things, in her book *No Illusions: The Voices of Russia's Future Leaders*, which discusses the attitudes of young Russians. According to surveys conducted by local polling centres in September 2023, as many as 59% of respondents had a negative opinion of the EU, 61% of the USA, while as many as 85% declared a positive attitude toward China. See 'Великие страны, отношение к США, ЕС, Китаю и Украине, гражданам этих стран', Levada Center, 12 September 2023, levada.ru.

anti-Western attitudes, can be found across all social groups, including among the younger generations. This is primarily the result of the state's propaganda machine, which spreads claims portraying the West in hostile terms (for example, that Western Europe seeks war with Russia and aims to dismantle the country). These claims fall on receptive ground. Western media outlets – for both the ideological reasons mentioned above, as well as due to language barriers and an insufficient knowledge of the situation on the ground in Russia – are therefore not the most effective channel for reaching a Russian audience.

Supporting the Russian independent media and civic organisations in delivering reliable content to society is therefore an important aspect of the fight against propaganda and disinformation. These entities are in a difficult position – the introduction of censorship, as well as the forced departure of many of their activists from the country, has left them struggling with numerous problems. These include the technical challenges related to overcoming the information blockade imposed by the authorities. The main difficulty concerns maintaining an audience – due to Kremlin restrictions, broadcasting channels must be frequently changed. Another significant challenge stems from the gradual restriction of access to YouTube, which – as journalists themselves admit – serves as a search engine for many users.[64] A further problem is securing stable funding in exile that would allow these outlets to focus on substantive work instead of ad hoc fundraising. Added to this are organisational issues – relocating editorial offices, the necessity of operating under a different legal framework, and adapting to new socio-political situations. Another challenge lies in establishing safe and effective methods of cooperation with journalists and activists who remain in ussia. The opposition media also reports that their staff suffer

[64] The Google search engine is blocked in Russia, and Google itself is discriminated against by the authorities, which impose fines on it. The search engine Yandex, popular in Russia, presents biased results adjusted to fit propaganda. See 'Что выдают «Яндекс» и Google по запросу «Буча»? В одной картинке', Meduza, 4 April 2022, meduza.io.

from professional burnout, stress and fatigue caused by separation from loved ones and an uncertain future.

Russian opposition media and civic organisations that criticise the Kremlin and condemn the state's aggressive and imperial policies should receive Western support in the areas mentioned above. In many respects, the messaging of these entities overlaps with the views of the Western world, although there are certain nuances. It is therefore essential to ensure that the West provides the much-needed financial assistance under clear, pre-defined conditions that do not conflict with the values and security interests of either side (both the donor – which may be a state, organisation or business – and the grantees).

Essential support in overcoming technological barriers could be provided by companies from that sector. The key is to ensure the independent media have access to neutral algorithms – sets of rules and processes – for searching and distributing content, without restricting their reach, which some outlets report as a problem. It is in the platforms' own interest to exclude Kremlin bots from open debate, as entire bot farms participate in massive information campaigns on Western social media, disrupting natural content exchange. The need to block a significant portion of Russian propaganda outlets stems from sanctions imposed on Russia by various states and structures – the US, the UK, Canada and the EU – right after the invasion and later on.[65] More effective efforts against disinformation on social media in the EU are expected from the Digital Services Act (DSA), which has been in force since 17 February 2024 (though it is still in the implementation phase). This regulation includes liability for online content, its moderation, and removal. The future effectiveness of cooperation with platforms, however, remains uncertain.[66]

[65] See, for example 'Russia's war of aggression against Ukraine: Council bans broadcasting activities in the European Union of four more Russia-associated media outlets', Council of the European Union, 17 May 2024, consilium.europa.eu.

[66] 'Digital Services Act', European Union, eur-lex.europa.eu.

Professional, systemic psychological assistance – or simply covering the costs of it – will also help in the longer term in mitigating the consequences of burnout among journalists and activists, and to sustain the engagement of people with experience working in Russia.

The Russian opposition media and their editorial teams possess unique knowledge about domestic social and political processes, making them a valuable source of information on what is happening in the country. Through networks of correspondents – often working unofficially – who continue their activities inside Russia, they maintain contact with ordinary citizens. For reporting on the situation in the homeland, these sources must therefore be considered irreplaceable. Moreover, knowing the local situation, mentality, and language, they can identify issues of public interest that state propaganda either distorts or ignores far more easily than foreign correspondents and outlets. As demonstrated by the public's reaction to important events directly affecting them – such as the so-called partial mobilisation or the Ukrainian forces' attack in Kursk Oblast – in circumstances threatening citizens' particular interests, the Russian opposition media becomes a sought-after and crucial provider of knowledge. Regular support will ensure that in the future, in similar moments – critical for the regime – they respond effectively and remain ready to act in the interest of the population.

Smaller media outlets and organisations operating online within limited areas are a less obvious channel for influencing local communities. Some of them use local languages and reach very narrow audiences. They may be run by people from the same professional group (such as healthcare workers, miners) or from one geographic area (mothers of soldiers from Ulan-Ude), or by non-Russian indigenous communities. The atomisation of society and the lack of trust in interpersonal relations often make discussion groups on social media (especially Telegram) the most credible source of information, as they gather people interested in specific topics. Given their diverse social characteristics, small reach, lack of formal structure, and linguistic differences, these outlets are harder for

the Kremlin censors to control. Importantly, they sometimes reach specific audiences – those not directly interested in politics and not seeking information from more recognisable publishers (for example, due to fear of government repression).

More widely known, larger opposition media organisations in Russia have a relatively stable audience size. Their main challenge is expanding this group and breaking out of their information bubbles. Cooperation with smaller outlets could involve exchanging knowledge about what issues and interests are currently relevant to local communities. This would help the larger dissident media to create better-targeted content, while smaller outlets could improve their skills through collaboration.

Such small editorial teams struggle to compete for foreign support with larger, better-known outlets. However, their needs are also smaller. However, Western administrations are excessively bureaucratised, which creates obstacles for groups lacking formal structures and the expertise to apply for funding. Helping them therefore requires a more flexible approach from donors. Recommendations should include simplifying procedures, using open methods of evaluating their work, encouraging the federalisation of smaller media organisations, or creating umbrella structures.

Since at least 2013, the Kremlin has been running professional bot farms in Russia, tasked with spreading manipulated opinions on social media both domestically and abroad, supporting those in power, criticising the opposition and the West, justifying the war, and above all, organising coordinated disinformation campaigns targeting Western elites and democracy.[67] According to some reports, citizens living in exile have responded by setting up similar initiatives aimed at countering pro-Kremlin narratives in Russian-language online networks. These groups likely used a similar methodology, but instead of fabrications,

[67] This issue has been raised among others by J. Aro in her book *Putin's Trolls...*, *op. cit.*

they employed real content and information which has been concealed by the authorities in order to debunk Kremlin messaging and raise awareness about the country's situation. These groups are referred to as elves. Supporting these grassroots projects by the West is a good way to fight propaganda inside Russia. Elves counter the core claims directly at the source – by engaging in discussions with real people online. Opponents of this idea argue that supporting these 'farms' is extremely labour-intensive and, moreover, morally questionable (since they are, after all, a tool of influence on the population). Another objection raised is that it constitutes offensive – rather than defensive – action, which requires special consideration in democratic systems. However, given the strict censorship in Russia, these efforts may be extremely effective in delivering important and sensitive – and above all true – information to citizens, to which they are rightfully entitled.

4.3. Identifying audience groups in Russia and tailoring narratives

Russian society is not a monolith but consists of many different groups that can become the target of media narratives competing with those of the Kremlin. These groups differ in their demographic indicators and culture: religion, language, traditions, etc. They inhabit a vast and diverse territory, which further deepens the differences. In many cases they have little in common, apart from the fact that they live in the same state. In the context of the war, it is important to remember that different groups have been affected by its consequences to varying degrees and therefore may hold different attitudes toward it. For some, it is a tragedy, as their loved ones were forced to go to the front against their will; for others, it is an opportunity to earn money, improve their family's financial situation, or even find a purpose in their life. As a result of the war, an entire class of beneficiaries has emerged in Russia. Since the conflict has become a source of financial profits for them, they actively support the war.

For this reason, the key issue is selecting topics and crafting messages worth delivering to specific groups in order to reveal the truth about

the war and raise awareness of the Kremlin's harmful actions among the population. To capture the attention of different audiences, the message should contain content tailored to their circumstances. It is therefore essential to correctly identify the groups and then, based on knowledge, choose the communication appropriate to their needs. A universal principle for selecting these messages is that they must be as close as possible to the recipients and their everyday lives. As already mentioned, Russians are pragmatic – they tend to use more reliable sources of information when they see a clear personal interest in doing so. Highlighting objective socio-economic problems in the country, especially exposing the causal links between the actions of authorities at different levels and people's hardships, can contribute to increasing public dissatisfaction with government policies and to growing social unrest. At present, these are realistic goals of Western information efforts toward Russia. By contrast, attempts to improve the perception of the West among Russians or to persuade them to adopt a democratic system currently appear doomed to failure. There is no broad demand for these views among them. Because of deeply rooted prejudices against the West and imperial resentments, pro-Western and pro-democratic messages will not be perceived as credible and will remain ineffective.

It is worth directing specific messages to social groups whose interests are at odds with Moscow's actions. In this context, women represent an important target group, as they pay a high cost of the war – sending their loved ones to the front lines. When their husbands, sons, fathers and brothers are killed, they often do not know exactly what happened to them (information about soldiers' fates is routinely withheld). Since the beginning of the full-scale invasion of Ukraine, sociologists – drawing on the experience of the wars in Afghanistan and Chechnya – predicted that women would be the first to oppose the armed conflict. Women's organisations active since 1989 (especially the Soldiers' Mothers Committee) were once able to exert pressure on the government to respect soldiers' rights. However, since the invasion of Ukraine began, Russian mothers and wives have not managed to unite and revolt against the government's

decisions. This is partly the result of the Kremlin's shrewd tactics: on the one hand, it represses NGOs and intimidates women – for example, members of the country's most important association active in this area, *Путь домой* (Way Back Home) – while on the other, it buys their compliance and silence through large payments to soldiers and their families and through social support.

Reports coming from Russia indicate that even mothers who lost sons in combat and never recovered their bodies, or who were cheated by the state when it failed to pay the promised compensation, are unable to collectively fight for their rights. Nevertheless, resentment in this group is growing and will only intensify as the war continues – after all, the number of dead and wounded keeps rising, losses from 'cannon fodder assaults'[68] are accumulating, corruption abuses are becoming more widespread, and the system of rotating troops at the front is practically non-existent. This frustration will be exacerbated by mounting economic problems, which could lead to reductions in the high payments for soldiers and their families. This development is becoming increasingly likely, given the expansion and tightening of economic sanctions.

The theme of women is already being skilfully exploited by the opposition media, which explains to society that the female part of the population bears particularly severe consequences of the war. For example, independent online media outlets such as *Важные истории* (Important Stories) or *Медиазона* (Mediazona) regularly publish materials showing the tragedies of women whose loved ones were sent to the front and either died or went missing. In doing so, these outlets make audiences aware that the Kremlin is cynically sacrificing the lives of their fellow citizens. According to the BBC and Mediazona project, at least 110,000 people fighting on Russia's side have died in the war (confirmed by

[68] 'Cannon fodder' or 'meat' assaults is a colloquial term for mass attacks by Russian infantry on enemy positions that result in very high casualties.

name).[69] Data from the sociological project *Хроники* (Chronicles) shows that approximately 30% of Russians admit that someone in their family is participating in the war in Ukraine (as of September 2024).[70] Thus, the number of victims and active combatants – and consequently the number of families painfully affected by the war – is currently very large.

Another pressing issue for most citizens is the rise in criminal crime, which is partly a result of the state's engagement in the full-scale war. This problem primarily affects women, since the victims of violence – especially domestic violence – are predominantly women and children. The spread of pathological phenomena has become one of the most visible costs the Russian public is paying for the invasion. In 2023, the number of serious and particularly serious crimes increased by 10% compared to 2022, reaching its highest level in 12 years. This trend continued into 2024 – between January and August of that year, another record number of such incidents was registered, the highest in the past 13 years. The increase has been felt most strongly in some southern and western regions of the country, including in Moscow Oblast.[71]

According to calculations by the opposition outlet Verstka, during the the full-scale invasion, more than 200 people experienced violence at the hands of veterans returning from the front – over 100 were killed, and the rest were seriously injured.[72] Crimes are also committed by former prisoners recruited in penal colonies, who regained their freedom after completing military service. Fear in local communities grows each time another brutal incident occurs, shocking residents and attracting the attention of the local media. At the end of September 2024, one issue that sparked particularly strong emotions on social media was the return

69 'Russian losses in the war with Ukraine', Медиазона, zona.media/casualties.

70 'Три года войны: что мы знаем о потерях России? | Би-би-си объясняет', BBC News – Русская служба, 22 February 2025, youtube.com.

71 'В России в 2024 году зарегистрировали рекордное за 13 лет количество тяжких и особо тяжких преступлений', Вёрстка, 11 September 2024, verstka.media.

72 'Сопутствующие жертвы. Как участники войны в Украине, вернувшись в Россию, продолжают убивать и калечить', Вёрстка, 25 April 2024, verstka.media.

of a dangerous criminal – who had previously been convicted of cannibalism, among other crimes – to his hometown in Volgograd Oblast after serving in the army. The fear and outrage of the population are accompanied by a sense of helplessness – the state propaganda completely ignores the issue of crimes commited by veterans, presenting them only as heroes, while law enforcement and the justice system fail to prevent or punish offenders, leaving citizens almost without protection. The deterioration of security is a direct result of the war and Kremlin policy, and the Russian public should be informed about this. Women and children are especially vulnerable, as the state does not provide them with adequate protection. This is demonstrated by the liberalisation of domestic violence laws in 2017, introduced under the pretext of protecting conservative values. For this reason, messages addressing the scale and consequences of this phenomenon should be targeted primarily at women. Furthermore, organisations collecting data on violence against women and providing support to victims in Russia must receive systemic support, since they not only defend human rights but also – contrary to censorship – inform and educate society, effectively promoting democratic values.

Soldiers and veterans are another sensitive group, which should be reached with materials exposing the poor treatment of subordinates by their commanding officers, the lack of care for their lives on the part of their superiors and the state, and the inadequate preparation and equipment of those fighting on the front lines. Social networks are full of content showing repression against soldiers by other soldiers or commanders, giving rise to outrage and concern among the families of conscripts and the broader population (even those who support the invasion). Much was said especially about the participation of conscripts in combat operations during the first months of the war. The sensitivity of this issue is proven by the fact that Putin himself repeatedly promised that these young, inexperienced men would not be sent to the 'operation' zone. The topic resurfaced in the domestic media after Ukraine's attack on Kursk Oblast in the summer of 2024, when a group of conscripts was

taken prisoner. Likely out of concern for public sentiment, the Kremlin quickly arranged a prisoner exchange. Russians are clearly willing to accept voluntary participation in the war for financial motives but oppose forcing young men to kill and risk their lives. Therefore, such incidents and examples of gross violations of soldiers' rights should be highlighted as part of efforts to counter propaganda.

Messages about the negative consequences of the Russian government's actions should also be targeted at parents. Today, Moscow subjects children to systemic indoctrination – for example, forcing them to attend lessons with veterans, some of whom are simply criminals who have been 'rehabilitated' through military service. Reports from Russia suggest that some parents oppose these practices and do not want their children to be 'dragged into politics'. Another issue worth addressing in communication with them is the poor state of public services – including healthcare and education – which are visibly deteriorating as state spending is shifted from the social sphere to defence, that is, to waging a war of aggression.[73] The Russian public is particularly outraged by shortages of medicines for chronically and terminally ill patients. This is a result not so much of sanctions as of self-imposed restrictions on imports – something that the independent media should also shed light on.

Frustration among the Russian public is further deepened by the lack of clear successes at the front lines. This translates into a decline in the prestige of the army and the government in the eyes of the public and lowers morale in a society craving victory, especially among pro-war activists and bloggers known as 'turbo-patriots'. In the past, they were disappointed by the elimination of Prigozhin, who voiced their views, and the arrest of Igor Girkin, also known as Strelkov, a former FSB officer who supported the invasion. Messages targeting this group

[73] For more, see M. Bartosiewicz, 'The crisis affecting Russia's public services: healthcare, education, and the postal service', *OSW Commentary*, no. 608, 27 June 2024, osw.waw.pl.

should aim to fuel criticism of the Russian Ministry of Defence – for example, by exposing corruption, mismanagement of the army, lies about the battlefield situation, concealment of casualty numbers, the failure to achieve the goals of the 'operation', or contradictory declarations about pursuing peace. The list of their shortcomings that can be exposed is long. It is particularly important to highlight **cause-and-effect links** – for instance, between the incompetence and corruption of ministry officials and the resulting personnel losses or the painfully slow pace of progress at the front. This group is characterised by fanaticism, militarisation, and a readiness to act, which is why the Kremlin perceives it as dangerous – especially in contrast to the rest of society, which is marked by withdrawal and passivity.

The target audiences of narratives highlighting problems and abuses should include ethnic minorities and local communities. Messages directed at them can focus on the widespread cases of everyday xenophobia in Russia. In some ethnic regions, the memory of the brutal colonisation by Moscow and repression is an important element of local identity, and one which the current propaganda tries to suppress. Independent media and activists should remind people of regional history and encourage its revision. At present, systemic discrimination against national minorities involves education – due to the inability to learn one's native language – and economic exploitation by the central government, which generates resentment in these communities. In many regions with a significant share of non-Russian populations, mobilisation practices are a particularly sensitive and painful issue. Negative emotions are fuelled by the high casualty rate, difficulties in obtaining compensation for death or injury, and ethnic discrimination during conscription. These feelings are justified by the fact that in ethnic republics more men were recruited than in 'Russian' areas – and far more than in Moscow or St. Petersburg.

In regions dominated by ethnic Russians, discontent is driven by the large presence of culturally different labour migrants, and tensions

linked to mass immigration are on the rise. There is a widespread belief among native residents that newcomers have been granted too many rights and pose a security threat, while the central government is blamed for allowing this to happen. In recent months, these frictions have escalated – a consequence of the terrorist attack near Moscow in spring 2024 and of restrictions imposed on migrants, which the Russian public interpreted as official approval for stigmatising foreigners.[74] Since then, anti-immigrant demonstrations and localised pogroms have occurred more frequently in Russia. This poses a risk to internal stability, given the fact that Russia is a multiethnic state and one heavily dependent on migrant labour.

In some territories, the conflicts between regional and central elites and local communities concern environmental disasters caused by abuses of power by officials or businesses (including water pollution, illegal landfills, land contamination and the destruction of nature reserves), which in the past have triggered protests. Due to the determination and mobilisation of residents, many such grassroots initiatives forced responses from the local authorities and, in some cases, even compelled Moscow to react. These incidents pose a threat to those in power, because the factors that generate them (the greed of elites and business interests and the violation of people's rights) are problems which all Russians share.

In areas near the border with Ukraine which are regularly shelled, it is particularly important to highlight issues that affect people's everyday lives: the ineffectiveness of the local authorities, the lack of air defence, and Moscow's indifference to the difficult situation of citizens. The first spontaneous reaction of residents of Kursk Oblast to the Ukrainian incursion in August 2024 was enormous frustration stemming from the absence of assistance from the government and the emergency services,

[74] See K. Chawryło, 'Short-term stability and long-term problems. The demographic situation in Russia', *OSW Commentary*, no. 610, 3 July 2024, osw.waw.pl.

as well as the propaganda distorting reality. This anger immediately spilled over onto the internet.

The above-mentioned examples of tensions and conflicting interests between the government and society should be highlighted. These issues should then be presented to the Russian public through Russian-language media, based on reliable information. Making them aware of the personal costs and damage they bear may motivate them to publicly express dissatisfaction and, in extreme cases, even to take concrete action in defence of their rights. In the context of the ongoing war, these steps will contribute to **shifting the information front** toward the Russian-language sphere, which the Kremlin is trying to keep under strict control.

III. PROSPECTS

To guarantee Europe's security and stability, it is necessary to weaken Russia, including in the information warfare domain. **If the West wants to effectively combat the Kremlin's disinformation apparatus and limit its capacity to cause harm – which should be set as a clearly defined goal – it must employ methods that are comprehensive, long-term, and involve many actors, just as Moscow does.** The West has been defined by Moscow as its main enemy in this war and is under constant attack, so it has the right not only to defend itself but also to take active measures to reduce its adversary's capacity on its own territory – steps it has so far not openly undertaken. Until recently, even discussing active defence was considered controversial in the West. From Europe's perspective, the informational (or even hybrid) confrontation with Russia is a just war. Its natural weapon is the truth, which must be revealed to different groups of audiences inside Russia in order to make it harder for the regime to manage the country and conduct its war.

Observation of the Kremlin's disinformation and propaganda machine shows that it has **weak points that can be targeted** – through various methods and communication channels directed at carefully chosen audience groups. The aim should be to disrupt Russia's operating patterns, disorientate it, and increase the costs of keeping the system running. Protection for Western societies can be ensured by combining immediate responses to information threats with the long-term investment in developing strategic communication and building resilience through education. Another goal should be to reach the audiences of Russian narratives not only in Western countries but also inside Russia. The best results, specifically those maximally weakening Moscow's influence and forcing it to focus on its own internal problems, will be achieved by applying the effect of scale and combining as many of the actions described in this text as possible.

So far, the problems faced by propagandists (as well as social tensions) have stemmed primarily from the defeats of the Russian army at the

front lines and from all the negative aspects of the war and mobilisation which affect citizens. For this reason, expanding military assistance to Ukraine and maintaining (ideally, increasing) the political and economic pressure on Russia from the West – especially from the United States, from which Moscow currently expects openness to peace talks and recognition of its claims toward Kyiv – will generate new challenges not only for its army but also for the propaganda apparatus tied to it.

When it comes to reaching Russians with truthful messages about the conflict, raising public awareness of the negative consequences of the prolonged invasion and of the harmful decisions made by the authorities (particularly lower-level administration and the army) should be the realistic goal of this process. This can be achieved by **taking advantage of crisis situations**, which have recently been occurring in Russia on a regular basis and have driven people to seek independent information and to question the Kremlin's narrative. If crises multiply and intensify, the Kremlin – already heavily engaged in the war – will not be able to respond efficiently or effectively. This will place additional pressure on the propaganda apparatus. This development may lead to a growing **demobilisation among the population (for example, a decline in the willingness to go to the front) and to the decomposition of sociopolitical life, making it harder for the authorities to govern the country.** Internal turmoil could also divert their attention and resources away from waging a war of aggression – including the information war – against Ukraine and the West.

At this stage, one **should not expect a grassroots uprising or revolution in Russia**. Dissatisfaction – for which Russian citizens have many reasons today – has so far not translated into mass activity but rather into an even greater withdrawal from public life and a growing tolerance for injustice and violence. However, observation of Russian reactions to events unfavourable to the Kremlin shows that this reluctance to participate in state affairs is becoming problematic even for the authorities, since it also applies to situations where social engagement would

be desirable (as seen, for example, in the lack of readiness to defend the regime and the country during Prigozhin's mutiny or during Ukraine's incursion into Russian territory). The decline in citizens' motivation to take part in the war is clearly demonstrated by the need to significantly increase payouts for soldiers sent to the front – something Putin decided on in late July 2024. This trend has been reinforced by regions competing with each other for recruits, offering ever higher wages and increasingly generous benefit packages.

Efforts to reach the Russian public inside the country with truthful messages about the invasion and the government are also an investment in that part of society which still cares about democratic values. Although this group has diminished since 24 February 2022 (especially due to emigration), it continues to exist. Maintaining contact with it and supporting it – even if only through information – is an important act of solidarity on the part of the West. It is also significant for Russia's future, since this circle may become a foothold for fostering civil liberties once the neo-totalitarian regime weakens.