Russian interference in democratic processes – lessons from history

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Abstract: *The analysis of Russian electoral interference from a historical perspective provides an essential framework for understanding the strategic continuity, tactical adaptability and limits of democratic responses in the face of recurrent hybrid threats. A chronological approach makes it possible to identify the patterns of action used by the USSR and, subsequently, the Russian Federation, as well as how these methods were reconfigured to exploit the vulnerabilities of the contemporary digital environment. At the same time, the evaluation of past experiences – including the documentation of active measures by US congressional committees in the 1980s – contributes to understanding the lessons learned (or ignored) by democratic states. This historical analysis helps to formulate more coherent and informed ways of responding, given that influence operations are not new phenomena, but the expression of a long-term geopolitical strategy, in which perception, not just territory, becomes the main stake of the conflict.*
The article aims to analyse the evolution of Russian interference in democratic processes, following its continuity and adaptability from the Soviet period to the present. The research is based on a mixed methodology: historical analysis, international security studies and documented case studies.
Keywords: *Russian disinformation, active measures, Russian interference, influence operation, hybrid war*

1. INTRODUCTION

The Russian Federation has distinguished itself through a coherent and long-lasting strategy of influencing electoral processes in Western democracies, with the aim of expanding its geopolitical influence and weakening the cohesion of democratic states, as part of an "information war" or a hybrid conflict, in which electoral interference serves as a political weapon of destabilization.[2]

Foreign electoral interference is understood in the literature as *"intentional, hidden or overt attempts by state or non-state actors to influence electoral processes or public perceptions in order to advantage or disadvantage electoral competitors in another sovereign country*".[3] The goal pursued may not only be regime change but also the erosion of trust in democratic mechanisms, the propagation of societal polarization and the instigation of disorder, being an insidious form of undermining democratic sovereignty in the contemporary era. Although the phenomenon is not new, the scale, frequency and level of sophistication of these interventions have increased considerably in recent decades, in particular as a result of technological progress and digital interconnectivity.[4]

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[2] Thomas Timothy, "Russia's Information Warfare Strategy: Can the Nation Cope in Future Conflicts?", *The Journal of Slavic Military Studies*, 27 (1), 2014, p. 104, DOI:10.1080/13518046.2014.874845 available at https://www.researchgate.net/publication/263194964_Russia's_Information_Warfare_Strategy_Can_the_Nation_Cope_in_Future_Conflicts;

[3] Vasu Mohan, Allan Wall, "Foreign Electoral Interference: Past, Present, and Future", *Georgetown Journal of International Affairs*, 20 (1), 2019, p.110, DOI:10.1353/gia.2019.0019, available at https://www.researchgate.net/publication/337484180_Foreign_Electoral_Interference_Past_Present_and_Future;

[4] Timothy Thomas, *op.cit*., p.102.

II. ACTIVE MEASURES AND STRATEGIC SUBVERSION: THE SOVIET ROOTS OF RUSSIAN INTERFERENCE IN DEMOCRATIC PROCESSES (1945–1991)

The tactic of interference in foreign democratic processes is not a recent instrument of Russian foreign policy, but has its roots in the Cold War period, when the Soviet Union, through the KGB, carried out systematic operations to influence public opinion and elections in Western states[5], suggestively called active measures.

The concept of "active measures" (*Aktivnye meropriyatiya)* reflects not only a specific technique of political subversion, but also a profound expression of Russia's strategic culture, anchored in the persistent perception of a hostile world, dominated by Western conspiracies and latent "Russophobia". As early as the 1950s, the Soviet Union systematized these practices into an operational framework that included organizing front structures, supporting friendly political movements, orchestrating internal unrest, and deliberately disseminating disinformation, all under the umbrella of plausible deniability[6].

Active measures have exploited pre-existing cracks in democratic societies to further polarize the West. Colonel Rolf Wagenbreth, head of active measures operations in the STASI, declares that "A strong adversary can only be defeated through sophisticated, methodical, careful and cunning efforts to exploit even the smallest 'cracks' among our enemies (...) and within their elites."[7]

The testimonies of Soviet defectors, specialized in active measures, who contributed substantially to revealing the architecture of the political war waged by the KGB against Western democracies, converge on the idea that Soviet interference in the internal politics of democratic states was not accidental or occasional, but part of a coherent, long-term strategy with clear geopolitical objectives.

Thus, Ladislav Bittman revealed that the active measures were not only aimed at manipulating public opinion, but also at directly influencing political decisions, being seen as sophisticated ideological weapons meant to undermine the democratic institutions from within, being planned for periods of 5-7 years.[8]

This perspective is reinforced by Yuri Bezmenov (aka Tomas Schuman), [9]a former KGB agent specializing in propaganda, who described in detail the process of "ideological subversion" in four stages: demoralization, destabilization, crisis, and normalization[10]. Bezmenov stated that during the period of demoralization, the KGB's goal was not only to weaken the institutions of a democratic society (media, education, religion, culture), but to do so in a profound and irreversible way, by influencing the mentality of the younger generations. The KGB did not need to convince all citizens, but only to influence the cultural elites (teachers, journalists, artists, clergy), who, in turn, educated

[5] Timothy Thomas, *op.cit.*, p.105.

[6] Mark Galeotti, "Active Measures: Russia's Covert Geopolitical Operations", *Marshall Center Security Insight*, no. 31, June 2019, https://www.marshallcenter.org/en/publications/security-insights/active-measures-russias-covert-geopolitical-operations-0;

[7] Statement of Thomas Rid, Professor, Department of War Studies, King's College London, U.S. Senate Select Committee on Intelligence, *Disinformation: A Primer in Russian Active Measures and Influence Campaigns,* Panel II, Hearing Before the Select Committee on Intelligence of the United States Senate, One Hundred Fifteenth Congress, First Session, March 30, 2017, U.S. Government Publishing Office, Serial no. 115-40, Washington, 2017, p.19 available at www.govinfo.gov/content/pkg/CHRG-115shrg25998/pdf/CHRG-115shrg25998.pdf;

[8] Ladislav Bittman, *The KGB and Soviet Disinformation: An Insider's View*, Pergamon Brassey's International Defense Publishers, Washington, 1985, pp. 45-46

[9]He worked from 1960 to 1970 as a journalist at the Novosti Press Agency, a state news agency that also served as a legend for KGB influence and disinformation officers. In 1970 he defected and settled in Canada, then in the USA under the name Tomas Schuman.

[10] Tomas Schuman, *Love Letter to America*, W.I.N. Almanac Panorama, 1984, pp.22, available at https://ia800209.us.archive.org/4/items/BezmenovLoveLetterToAmerica/YuriBezmenov-LoveLetterToAmerica.pdf.

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and formed public opinion. Thus, after 15–20 years, we reached an entire generation educated in the spirit of erroneous ideas about their own society, but who considered these ideas to be true, moral and modern[11].

Anatoliy Mikhaylovich Golitsyn also[12] stated that the entire strategy of apparent reform of the USSR in the 1980s was part of a broad plan to mislead the West, in which systemic disinformation and the KGB played a key role. He stressed that the influence operations were not undertaken in isolation, but were part of a strategic doctrine of "deception planning", approved at the highest levels of the Communist Party.[13]

Stanislav Levchenko[14], a former KGB agent active in Japan, revealed how agents were trained to co-opt journalists, intellectuals and left-wing activists to amplify pro-Moscow messages and discredit democratic institutions, and described in detail the role of "front organizations" in this mechanism of indirect but effective influence, including friendship societies and cultural councils, used to legitimize and channel Soviet propaganda.[15] In a 1982 testimony before the U.S. Congress, he argued[16] that one of the most effective long-term tactics is to create a group of media personalities—journalists, editors, academics—who could be counted on to introduce the narratives developed by the KGB into mainstream discussions and for their ability to influence the opinions of others without raising suspicions of an outside affiliation.

In a similar vein, Oleg Kalugin[17], a former KGB major general, described influence missions as "the essence of KGB activity in the West – not espionage, but subversion." He argued that the goal was to influence political elites, the media, and educational institutions to manipulate public opinion and create internal dissension in liberal democracies.[18]tag. In an interview with the Wilson Center, Kalugin stressed that "the goal was not military conquest, but influencing thinking: disinformation, manipulation, the promotion of dissension – that was our battlefield."[19]

The Soviet Union, through the KGB and the GRU, systematically carried out influence operations in Western Europe with the aim of manipulating public opinion and influencing the results of democratic elections. In Italy and France, local communist parties have benefited from clandestine

[11] Tomas Schuman, *op.cit.,* pp.24.

[12] He was a senior officer in the KGB between 1948 and 1961 in the First Directorate (external), specializing in coercion and disinformation operations, he was seconded (1958-1961) under diplomatic cover (vice-consul) to Finland from where he defected in 1961 requesting asylum from the US Embassy in Helsinki. (See Anatoliy Golitsyn, *New Lies for Old: The Communist Strategy of Deception and Disinformation*. Dodd, Mead & Company, New York, 1984, pp. xiii-xv; Andrew & Mitrokhin, op. cit., pp. 225-229).

[13]Anatoliy Golitsyn*, Perestroika Deception: Memoranda to the Central Intelligence Agency – The World's Slide Towards the Second October Revolution,* London: Edward Harle, 1995, pp. 12–14, 18, 27, 119–120, and 124.

[14] He was active in the KGB between 1971 and 1979 in the First Directorate (External). Between 1975 and 1979 he worked undercover as a journalist for the Soviet publication "Novosti" in Tokyo, Japan, but he served as a KGB liaison officer for influence and recruitment operations in the Japanese environment (press, universities, left-wing political circles). He defected in 1979 seeking political asylum in the United States.

[15] Herbert Romerstein, Stanislav Levchenko, *The KGB Against the "Main Enemy",* Lexington Books, 1989, pp.72-74.

[16] Statement quoted in *American Bar Association, Standing Committee on Law and National Security*, vol. 5, no. 1, January 1983 available at www.reaganlibrary.gov/public/digitallibrary/smof/nscintelligence/degraffenreid/r26/40-139-39149351-R26-060-2018.pdf.

[17] He served in the KGB from 1958 to 1990, from 1960 to 1967, under diplomatic cover at the USSR Embassy in Washington, D.C., with the official position of press secretary. In fact, he was a deputy resident officer of the KGB responsible for supervising contacts with political and academic elites, managing networks of influence, evaluating potential American collaborators. (For further details see Oleg Kalughin, *The First Directorate: My 32 Years in Intelligence and Espionage Against the West*. New York: St. Martin's Press, 1994, pp.48-71).

[18] Oleg Kalughin, *The First Directorate: My 32 Years in Intelligence and Espionage Against the West*, New York: St. Martin's Press, 1994, pp.48-71.

[19] Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars. (1995–2000). *Cold War Files – Interview: Oleg Kalugin*. Available at: https://digitalarchive.wilsoncenter.org.

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financial support directed by Moscow, through networks of intermediaries[20]. Between 1969 and 1972, the Italian Communist Party received more than $6 million for electoral and propaganda activities, funds designed to strengthen the party press and mobilize the left-wing electorate against American influence. In [21] West Germany, in the 1953 elections, the Soviets distributed fabricated documents to discredit the government of Konrad Adenauer, accusing it of Nazi complicity. An operation that directly targeted the perception of voters[22].

Disinformation campaigns were not limited to public opinion, but actively targeted academic, political and trade union elites. manipulating the media, organizing "spontaneous" protests and conducting kompromat campaigns against Western diplomats and politicians. In the 1970s, the KGB documented the personal lives of Western officials in Moscow, using sex traps and wiretaps to blackmail or compromise them.[23]

One of the most sophisticated tools of Soviet influence in Western democracies was the extensive network of front organizations, designed to disseminate pro-Moscow messages among peace movements, trade unions, youth, and intellectual elites. Organizations such as the World Peace Council, the World Federation of Democratic Youth, and the World Council of Trade Unions served not only as propaganda channels, but also as logistical infrastructure for financial transfers, the recruitment of agents of influence, and the promotion of Soviet narratives in Western media and academia[24]. These structures presented an appearance of pluralism and civic activism, but in reality, they were controlled by the KGB apparatus and functioned as platforms for identifying and co-opting cultural, academic or trade union influencers, who later became vectors of Soviet influence.

Moscow aimed to create an "echo effect" in the West, launching narratives that were then picked up, voluntarily or unconsciously, by the Western press and intellectual elites, validating them in the eyes of the public as products of genuine and pluralistic public opinion, without knowing their connection to Soviet propaganda. The information initially fabricated or manipulated in Moscow-affiliated publications (such as *The Patriot* or *the Peace Courier*) was later taken up by international news agencies, including TASS, which attributed it as a source to the original publication, thus concealing the Soviet origin of the material[25].

This process, the equivalent of what we now call "information *laundering*", reflects a sophisticated strategy of multiplying the message and infiltrating it into democratic information spaces, by exploiting the freedom of the press and the diversity of opinions in democratic societies in order to disseminate and legitimize narratives favourable to Soviet interests.

Unlike the post-Soviet period, Soviet interference was mainly carried out clandestinely, through human networks and physical logistical channels, in the absence of digital technological support. However, these actions were based on a solid ideological and operational foundation, in which the undermining of Western democracies was perceived as a legitimate tool of geopolitical confrontation.[26]

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[20] Andrew Christopher, Mitrokhin Vasili, *The Sword and the Shield: The Mitrokhin Archive and the Secret History of the KGB*, Basic Books, 2000, pp.724-725.
[21] Christopher Andrew, Vasili Mitrokhin, *op.cit.,* pp.741-743.
[22] *Ibid*., p. 1082.
[23] *Ibid*., pp. 1060, 1095, 1171.
[24] Herbert Romerstein, Stanislav Levchenko, *The KGB Against the "Main Enemy",* Lexington Books, 1989, pp.72-74.
[25] U.S. Department of State*, Active Measures: A Report on the Substance and Process of Anti-U.S. Disinformation and Propaganda Campaigns*, Washington, D.C.: United States Information Agency, 1986, pp.37-38, available at https://www.cia.gov/readingroom/docs/CIA-RDP89-01070R000100150001-2.pdf;
[26] Thomas Timothy., *op. cit*., p. 107.

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III. FROM THE USSR TO THE RUSSIAN FEDERATION. RECONFIGURING STRATEGIES (1990-2000)

The collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991 did not mean an interruption of foreign political influence practices, but rather a reconfiguration of them. Although the power structures have undergone significant mutations, a substantial part of the security apparatus has been taken over by the Russian Federation, in particular through the FSB (Federal Security Service) and the SVR (Foreign Intelligence Service), the direct heir of the PGU/KGB. These structures adapted traditional methods of influence to the new international context marked by economic instability and democratic transition in the former Soviet republics and in Central and Eastern Europe.

The period 1991–2000 was dominated by a strategy of "disguised withdrawal" and preservation of geopolitical influence, through indirect methods, especially in the post-Soviet space[27]. This approach is in line with the theory of "strategic continuity" formulated by Anatoliy Golitsyn, a former KGB officer, who argued that the liberalization of the USSR and the emergence of a new democratic Russia were part of a long-standing strategic disinformation plan aimed at disorienting the West and opening new avenues of infiltration.[28]

In support of this perspective come the data from the Mitrokhin Archive, which claim that in the 1990s there was an informal and semi-official reconfiguration of the former Soviet security apparatus, which survived and adapted, maintaining control over strategic channels of influence – media, religion, politics, culture. They show that the "democratic transition" was largely superficial, while opaque power structures were deeply perpetuated, loyal to the interests of the former KGB elites.[29]

Emerging oligarchic networks have played a decisive role in preserving and redirecting the influence of former security structures. Many of Russia's early oligarchs – such as Boris Berezovsky, Vladimir Gusinsky or Mikhail Khodorkovsky – amassed huge fortunes in the 1990s through controversial privatizations and privileged relationships with political elites and former KGB officers operating in the new FSB and SVR services. This symbiosis generated an informal ecosystem of power, where the boundaries between business, political influence, and intelligence activities became increasingly blurred. The oligarchs of the first wave were not only economic actors, but "unofficial instruments of external Russian influence", as they controlled media trusts, sponsored pro-Russian parties in the post-Soviet space and maintained lobbying networks in the West.[30]

Later, starting in the 2000s, this relationship underwent a radical change, by subordinating the oligarchs to the presidential power vertical, but in the 1990s, their partnership with the services contributed to the active maintenance of an unofficial infrastructure for the external projection of Russian interests.

IV. KGB UPGRADE – PUTIN ERA

With the accession to power of Vladimir Putin in 2000 – former KGB officer (1975-1991) and FSB director (1998-1999) – the tools of active measures were reconceptualized as a legitimate response to an alleged Western campaign of subversion, and active measures became an organic component of the regime's operational code, in which the offensive became the most effective defensive mechanism. The strategy thus formulated capitalizes on Russia's strengths – decision-making centralization, operational flexibility and narrative cohesion – to exploit the West's

[27] Edward Lucas, *The New Cold War: Putin's Russia and the Threat to the West*. Palgrave Macmillan, 2009, pp.62-65.
[28] Anatoliy Golitsyn, *Perestroika Deception: Memoranda to the Central Intelligence Agency – The World's Slide Towards the Second October Revolution,* London: Edward Harle, 1995, pp.17-19.
[29] Christopher Andrew, Vasili Mitrokhin, *op.cit.,* pp.1363-1364.
[30] Edward Lucas, *op.cit*., pp. 83–89.

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democratic weaknesses, such as freedom of expression, transparency and media pluralism. In this context, active measures must be understood not only as mere tactics, but as expressions of an antagonistic and enduring geopolitical paradigm, in which the destabilization of the democratic order is a strategic objective, not a side effect.[31] A defining element of the geopolitical strategy promoted by Vladimir Putin is the assumption and instrumentalization of the concept of *Russkiy mir* ("The Russian World"), transformed into an ideological and identity framework that justifies the actions of external influence of the Russian Federation.[32]

In his February 2007 speech at the Munich Security Conference, Vladimir Putin denounced the global hegemony of the US and NATO's expansion to the East and accused the West of undermining collective security and the international balance of power[33], thus marking a clear discursive break with the rhetoric of the 1990s, anticipating the intensification of the information conflict between Russia and the West.

Russia was entering a new doctrinal stage, characterized by the articulation of the concept of "information warfare" as an integral part of the national security strategy, which aimed not only at the information protection of the state, but also at the deliberate use of information as an offensive weapon against geopolitical adversaries, giving central importance to information warfare, describing modern conflicts as "determined more by control over information and public perception than by armed forces".[34]

Built around a KGB-specific security culture that perceives the outside world as a hostile space to be managed through control, infiltration, and manipulation, the Putin regime has also developed a complex architecture of malign influence, using both state and non-state resources, in a coordinated effort to undermine democratic institutions and expand geopolitical influence.

This network includes security services (FSB, SVR, GRU), state-controlled media outlets (Russia Today) and pseudo-journalistic agencies (Sputnik), online disinformation platforms, public and private companies, organized crime groups, think tanks, foundations, and religious or cultural organizations. (...) the Kremlin's propaganda is directly aimed at certain journalists, politicians (...)".[35]

The Kremlin has "militarized" four strategic areas: traditional and digital media, ideology and culture, corruption and organized crime, as well as the energy sector.[36]

After 2000, the Putin regime invested heavily in building a global propaganda infrastructure that would support the international projection of the Kremlin's official narratives and counter the influence of Western democratic values. Thus, the *Russia Today (RT) channel was launched* in 2005, followed by *Sputnik* in 2014, both being fully financed from the federal budget and having the declared mission of offering "an alternative perspective" on international realities. In fact, their goal was to flood the information space with so much disinformation that fact-based dialogue became

[31] Mark Galeotti, "Active Measures: Russia's Covert Geopolitical Operations," *Marshall Center Security Insight*, no. 31, June 2019, https://www.marshallcenter.org/en/publications/security-insights/active-measures-russias-covert-geopolitical-operations-0;

[32] Marlene Laruelle, *The "Russian World": Russia's Soft Power and Geopolitical Imagination*, Center on Global Interests, 2015 p.5 available at https://www.researchgate.net/publication/344222398_The_'Russian_World'_Russia's_Soft_Power_and_Geopolitical_Imagination_Center_for_Global_Interests_Papers_May;

[33] Vladimir Putin, *Speech and Discussions at the Munich Security Conference*, 10.02.2007, available at kremlin.ru available at http://kremlin.ru/events/president/transcripts/24034.

[34] NATO Strategic Communications Centre of Excellence, *Russia's Strategy in Cyberspace*. Riga, Latvia: NATO StratCom COE, pp.5-7, 11 available at https://stratcomcoe.org/publications/russias-strategy-in-cyberspace/210;

[35] European Parliament, *European Parliament resolution of 23 November 2016 on EU strategic communication to counteract propaganda against it by third parties (2016/2030(INI))*, p.4 available at https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/PDF/?uri=CELEX:52016IP0441;

[36] Mark Galeotti, *Controlling Chaos: How Russia Manages its Political War in Europe,* European Council on Foreign Relations, pp.5-6 available at https://ecfr.eu/wp-content/uploads/ECFR228_-_CONTROLLING_CHAOS1.pdf

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impossible, undermining not only information, but the very possibility of rational debate and destroying public trust – the foundation of democracy.[37]

In parallel, a number of soft power institutions have been established,[38] such as Rossotrudnicestvo (2008) – the federal agency responsible for coordinating foreign cultural relations and humanitarian cooperation – and Russkiy Mir (2007), a foundation with a central role in promoting the Russian language and culture abroad, the Russian International Affairs Council (2010), the Gorchakov Fund (2010), the Valdai Club (2004), the International Analytical Center "Rethinking Russia" (2015), Dialogue of Civilizations Research Institute (2016, Berlin), Institute of Democracy and Cooperation (2008, Paris) According to the analysis carried out by the Swedish Defense Institute (FOI), they function not only as instruments of cultural influence, but also as platforms for the discursive normalization of the Russian authoritarian regime in the Western space.[39]

V. INTERFERENCE IN EUROPEAN DEMOCRACIES

The Kremlin's efforts remain largely focused on Europe, where it is said to have been involved in 20 elections and seven referendums, in 16 European states of which 12 are members of the European Union and 13 are NATO members, using cyber means and online information operations.[40] The main forms of manifestation identified are financial incentives offered by malicious foreign state and non-state actors, information manipulation and cyber operations in elections.[41]

The Russian network of influence was directly correlated with the penetration of political, media and religious elites in Central and South-Eastern Europe, the link being strengthened especially in the period 2009–2015, when the economic crisis and internal tensions created a favourable context for Russian infiltration.

In Central and Eastern Europe, Russian influence has followed a clear but adaptable pattern: economic penetration into strategic sectors coupled with political support for local actors willing to advance the Kremlin's interests. This strategy generated a "vicious circle" of state capture, in which corruption became the main mechanism for expanding influence and against the background of the weakness of democratic institutions, Russia capitalized on the opportunities offered by the lack of transparency, lax legislation and poorly institutionalized control mechanisms and the result was the

[37] Statement by PETER POMERANTSEV, SENIOR FELLOW, THE LEGATUM INSTITUTE in front of the United States. Congress. House. Committee on Foreign Affairs, *Confronting Russia's Weaponization of Information: Hearing Before the Committee on Foreign Affairs*, House of Representatives, One Hundred Fourteenth Congress, First Session April 15, 2015. Washington: U.S., pp.6-7 vailable at www.govinfo.gov/content/pkg/CHRG-114hhrg94186/pdf/CHRG-114hhrg94186.pdf.

[38] Orysia Lutsevych, *Agents of the Russian World: Proxy Groups in the Contested Neighbourhood,* Chatham House, 2016, p.10 available at https://www.chathamhouse.org/sites/default/files/publications/research/2016-04-14-agents-russian-world-lutsevych.pdf.

[39] Carolina Pallin Vendil, Susanne Oxenstierna, *Russian Think Tanks and Soft Power*, FOI-R reports, Swedish Defence Research Institute (FOI), 2017, p. 4, 13, 27, 31, p. available at https://www.foi.se/rest-api/report/foi-r--4451--se;

[40] Sarah O'Connor, Fergus Hanson, Emilia Currey and Tracy Beattie, *Cyber-Enabled Foreign Interference in Elections and Referendums*, The Australian Strategic Policy Institute, October 2020, p.13 available at https://www.aspi.org.au/report/cyber-enabled-foreign-interference-elections-and-referendums;

[41] Authority for European Political Parties and European Political Foundations, *Foreign Electoral Interference Affecting EU Democratic Processes,* 2023, p.60 available at www.appf.europa.eu/cmsdata/277388/Foreign%20electoral%20interference%20affecting%20EU%20democratic%20processes.pdf;

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undermining of the decision-making sovereignty of states and the establishment of networks of economic and political loyalty, often disguised in seemingly democratic structures[42].

By infiltrating media networks, political parties and executive institutions (Delyan Peevski/Bulgaria[43]), supporting populist and anti-Western parties (Jobbik/Hungary[44] and SNS/Slovakia[45]), and using "sovereign democracy" as an alternative, the Kremlin aimed not only at influence in the former Soviet space, but also at redefining the European democratic order from within.

In EU and NATO member states with consolidated democracies, the Kremlin has sought to undermine support for sanctions imposed on Russia, influence elections through direct or indirect support for sympathetic parties, and spread disinformation. The dominant method has been to exploit existing political and social divisions, through online campaigns, ideological and financial support for populist and extremist parties (both right and left), but also by cultivating networks of "useful idiots" who propagate the Kremlin's messages without explicit links to the Moscow regime[46].

In France, the Kremlin has provided explicit financial support to the National Front (including a €9 million loan in 2014) and capitalized on ideological convergences on sovereignty, opposition to immigration and rejection of NATO[47], and in 2017 ran cyber operations and disinformation campaigns against Emanuel Macron, while Germany was targeted by attempts to influence the 2017 elections through subtle means, such as the sale of gold at undervalued prices to the AfD party, in order to finance the campaign[48]. In the UK, Russian influence has manifested itself through manipulation on social media and indirect support for the Brexit campaign, including possible opaque financial flows and the infiltration of pro-Moscow think-tanks and politicians.[49] In Italy, between 2014 and 2017, the 5-Star Movement (M5S) and Lega Nord positioned themselves as vehicles of Russian influence, supporting the lifting of EU sanctions and promoting messages favourable to Moscow; The Northern League signed a formal cooperation agreement with the United Russia party in 2017.[50]

In the Baltic space, Russian interference has manifested itself through a wide spectrum of hybrid instruments, reflecting both the geographical proximity and the geostrategic importance of the region in the Euro-Atlantic architecture. Russia has deployed a full set of active measures in Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania, including systematic disinformation, cultural-identity propaganda,

[42] Center for Strategic and International Studies & Center for the Study of Democracy, *The Kremlin Playbook: Understanding Russian Influence in Central and Eastern Europe*, p. 18 available at https://csis-website-prod.s3.amazonaws.com/s3fs-public/publication/1601017_Conley_KremlinPlaybook_Web.pdf;
[43] *Ibid*., pp. 19-20.
[44] *Ibid.*, pp. 6, 38.
[45] *Ibid*., p.55.
[46] Senate, Congress, *Putin's Asymmetric Assault on Democracy in Russia and Europe: Implications for U.S. National Security,* A Minority Staff Report prepared for the use of The Committee on Foreign Relations, United States Senate, One Hundred Fifteenth Congress, Second Session January 10, 2018, U.S. Government Publishing Office, Washington, 2019, p.99 available at https://www.govinfo.gov/content/pkg/CPRT-115SPRT28110/pdf/CPRT-115SPRT28110.pdf;
[47] Alina Polyakova, et al., *THE KREMLIN'S TROJAN HORSES: Russian Influence in France, Germany, and the United Kingdom*. Atlantic Council, 2016. pp.6-7, available at, http://www.jstor.org/stable/resrep03685;
[48] *Ibid.*, pp.18-20.
[49] Senate, Congress, *Putin's Asymmetric Assault on Democracy in Russia and Europe: Implications for U.S. National Security,* pp.50-51, available at https://www.govinfo.gov/content/pkg/CPRT-115SPRT28110/pdf/CPRT-115SPRT 28110.pdf;
[50] Alina Polyakova, et al. *THE KREMLIN'S TROJAN HORSES 2: Russian Influence in Greece, Italy, and Spain*. Atlantic Council, 2017, pp.3-4, available at http://www.jstor.org/stable/resrep16776;

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support for pro-Kremlin organizations, and recurrent cyberattacks, all aimed at eroding trust in democratic institutions and exploiting ethnic tensions. [51]

In the Western Balkans, Russia intervened in the 2016 parliamentary elections in Montenegro, through an attempted coup d'état involving the GRU[52] and the assassination of the prime minister, as well as in the constitutional referendum in Macedonia in 2018[53], where it combined disinformation with logistical support for protest movements and the infiltration of Orthodox religious structures, Russia thus aimed to block the accession of the two states to NATO and prevent the rapprochement with the European Union.[54]

A comparative analysis by the International Centre for Counter-Terrorism on how the Russian Federation interacted with the far right in ten European states[55] highlighted a flexible framework, combining recurring elements with contextual adaptations to national specificity, but after the Ukrainian crisis in 2014, Moscow adopted a clear line of support for conservative and nationalist forces in Europe, seen as allies in challenging the Western liberal order. [56] A common element identified in most cases is the exploitation of ideological convergences: opposition to the EU, NATO, multiculturalism, migration and cultural liberalism, amplified themes amplified by pro-Kremlin media rhetoric, joint conferences or cultural collaborations starting in the 2010s and intensified after 2014[57].

There have also been contextual adaptations to the national specificity, for example in France (especially after 2014), and Italy (in the period 2014–2019), the emphasis has been on formal political cooperation, especially with parties such as *Rassemblement National* and *Lega Nord*, including through media and ideological support. In contrast, in Slovakia (2015–2022) or Bulgaria (2010–2020), informal, paramilitary networks or alternative media platforms, which disseminated messages favourable to the Kremlin, were preferred. In Hungary, Russian influence has been consolidated since Fidesz's return to power (2010), but in a special way: the Orbán regime was not instrumentalized, but rather positioned itself as Russia's symbiotic ideological partner, within a common geopolitical vision, especially after 2014.[58]

VI. INFLUENCE OPERATIONS IN THE DIGITAL ENVIRONMENT

Russia successfully adapted the concept of "working through others" – characteristic of Soviet propaganda – to the decentralized logic of the Internet.

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[51] Senate, Congress, *Putin's Asymmetric Assault on Democracy in Russia and Europe: Implications for U.S. National Security,* pp.100-102, available at https://www.govinfo.gov/content/pkg/CPRT-115SPRT28110/pdf/CPRT-115SPRT28110.pdf;

[52] United States. Congress. House. Committee on Foreign Affairs. Subcommittee on Europe, Eurasia, Energy, and the Environment, *Undermining Democracy*: *Kremlin Tools of Malign Political Influence,* Hearing Before the Subcommittee on Europe, Eurasia, Energy, and the Environment of the Committee on Foreign Affairs House of Representatives, One Hundred Sixteenth Congress, First Session, May 29, 2019, Serial No. 116-41, U.S. Government Publishing Office, Washington, 2019, p.6, available at https://www.govinfo.gov/content/pkg/CHRG-116hhrg36426/pdf/CHRG-116hhrg36426.pdf;

[53] @DFRLab, '#ElectionWatch: Sputnik misleading in Macedonia', Medium, 23 September 2018, available at https://medium.com/dfrlab/electionwatch-sputnik-misleading-in-macedonia-bc8294aeebe2;

[54] Sarah O'Connor, Fergus Hanson, Emilia Currey and Tracy Beattie, *op.cit*, p.13, available at https://www.aspi.org.au/report/cyber-enabled-foreign-interference-elections-and-referendums

[55] Austria, Germany, Serbia, Hungary, Italy, France, Slovakia, Czech Republic, Sweden, Poland.

[56] International Centre for Counter-Terrorism, *Russia and the Far-Right: Insights from Ten European CountriesRussia and the Far-Right: Insights from Ten European Countries*, 2024, available at https://icct.nl/russia-and-far-right-insights-ten-european-countries

[57] *Ibid.,* pp. 335

[58] *Ibid.*, pp. 334-336

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Interference in the U.S. electoral process in 2016 prompted a global reassessment of the risks associated with foreign election interference and strengthened the international community's attention to the Russian Federation's hybrid tactics. The moment 2016 marked a stage of revival and revival of the American official interest in Russian interference, being for the first time in the digital age that such an operation was extensively documented in a formal legislative framework, by the *US Senate Special Committee on Intelligence* detailing a broad campaign of active measures carried out by Russia, which included cyberattacks, disinformation on social media, and the infiltration of American political discourse.[59]

Historian Thomas Rid, in a March 30, 2017, testimony before the U.S. Senate, argued that understanding current cyber operations requires a solid knowledge of Russian intelligence methods in the twentieth century. *Active measures* continue to follow the logic of exploiting the internal cracks of Western democracies, but benefit from technological tools that offer speed, responsiveness, anonymity and global coverage. He points out that the WikiLeaks platform, Twitter and journalists who aggressively promote political leaks without verifying their origin are used by Russian intelligence services similar to the "unwitting agents" (people who, without knowing it, become pawns of Russia's strategy) used in the Soviet period by KBG, quoting Czech defector Ladislau Bittman "The press should be more cautious with anonymous leaks. Anonymity is a signal that the Great Russian Bear could be involved." [60]

According to a study by Graphika, Russia carried out a long-term influence campaign in the digital environment between 2014 and 2020, on 300 platforms, especially blogs, which targeted countries in Europe and North America, covering 9 main themes, in order of importance of exposure: Ukraine as a failed state or an insecure partner; The United States and NATO are aggressive and interfering in other countries; Europe is divided and weakened; critics of the Russian government as morally corrupt, alcoholic, or mentally unstable; Muslims as aggressive invaders; The Russian government as a victim of Western hypocrisy or plots; Western elections as rigged, and candidates who criticized the Kremlin as ineligible; Turkey as an aggressive and destabilizing state; world sports bodies and competitions as unfair, unprofessional and Russophobic. The operation used fake accounts and falsified documents to create dissent between states and launched smear campaigns against Kremlin critics and by targeting presidential candidates in 2016 in the US, in 2017 in France, in Germany, Sweden.[61]

Recent (2022-2024) complex and persistent digital information manipulation campaigns by Russian-affiliated actors aimed at covering the Russian-Ukrainian conflict through the positive presentation of the "special military operation" and the denigration of Ukraine and its leaders, have been extensively documented by DisinfoLab, respectively by the Service for Vigilance and Protection against Foreign Digital Interference (VIGINIUM) of the French National Secretariat for Defense and Security. According to reports, the main techniques used were to impersonate European media sites (including 20 Minutes, Le Monde, Le Parisien et Le Figaro, Bild, Spigel, Ansa, The

[59] U.S. Senate Select Committee on Intelligence**,** *Report on Russian Active Measures Campaigns and Interference in the 2016 U.S. Election*, Volume 1. Washington, D.C.: United States Senate, 2019, p. III-IV, available at https://www.intelligence.senate.gov/sites/default/files/documents/Report_Volume1.pdf.

[60] U.S. Senate Select Committee on Intelligence, *Disinformation: A Primer in Russian Active Measures and Influence Campaigns,* Panel II, Hearing Before the Select Committee on Intelligence of the United States Senate, One Hundred Fifteenth Congress, First Session, March 30, 2017, U.S. Government Publishing Office, Serial no. 115-40, Washington, 2019, pp.19-20, available at www.govinfo.gov/content/pkg/CHRG-115shrg25998/pdf/CHRG-115shrg25998.pdf;

[61] Ben Nimmo, Camille François, C. Shawn Eib, Lea Ronzaud, Rodrigo Ferreira, Chris Hernon, and Tim Kostelancik. *Secondary Infektion,* Graphika 2020, pp.4-5, available at https://secondaryinfektion.org/downloads/secondary-infektion-report.pdf;

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Guardian or RBC Ukraine) but also government ones (the French Ministry of Foreign Affairs[62], the German Ministry of the Interior and NATO[63]), respectively, the creation of videos falsely attributed to legitimate media outlets and clever techniques such as redirects or geo-blocking users based on location[64].

In 2024, VIGINUM documented 224 digital "information portals" with similar characteristics, disseminating pro-Russian content and targeting all European countries except Malta and Luxembourg. These sites did not produce any original content, but massively retransmitted publications from three types of sources: social media accounts of Russian or pro-Russian actors, Russian news agencies, and official websites of local institutions or actors. ("PORTAL KOMBAT – SGDSN")65

An analysis by the European External Action Service on the presidential elections in Moldova (September 2024) reveals Russia's tendency to exploit key events in order to build opportunities to strengthen long-term interference strategies in regions of geostrategic importance and strengthen its digital infrastructure, thus ensuring an active presence in the Republic of Moldova beyond 2024 — especially in the run-up to the 2025 parliamentary elections.[66]

VII. CONCLUSIONS

The Russian Federation's electoral interference strategy is based on a clear set of elements of operational and ideological continuity, which transcend historical periods and political regimes. One of these is the use of information manipulation as a strategic weapon. During Soviet times, the KGB carried out so-called "active measures," including infiltrating the media, supporting radical Western movements, and disseminating disinformation to undermine trust in democratic institutions. In the post-Soviet era, these tactics have been reconfigured for the digital environment, but the goal has remained unchanged: to weaken the internal cohesion of Western states. Thus, social networks, alternative news platforms and microtargeting technologies have become the new channels for replicating the classic model of destabilization.

Another element of continuity is the centralization of strategic decision-making at the level of the political leadership. If in the Soviet period, "active measures" were integrated into the state apparatus and carried out by the KGB, the same logic can be found today in the close collaboration between the GRU, the FSB and the Russian presidential administration, which directly manages influence operations. The case studies show that Russia applies the same strategic model: the exploitation of social divisions, the delegitimization of democratic mechanisms by supporting political actors willing to challenge the Euro-Atlantic orientation, but also a strategic commitment of

[62] VIGINIUM, *NRN: A Complex and Persistent Digital Information Manipulation Campaign,* June 13, 2023, p. 1, available at https://www.sgdsn.gouv.fr/files/files/13062023_RRN_une%20campagne%20num%C3%A9rique%20de%20manipulation%20de%20l%27information%20complexe%20et%20persistante.pdf;

[63] Léa Ronzaud, Joseph A. Carter and Tyler Williams, *Summit Old, Summit New Russia-Linked Actors Leverage New and Old Tactics in Influence Operations Targeting Online Conversations About NATO Summit,* available at https://public-assets.graphika.com/reports/graphika_report_summit_old_summit_new.pdf.

[64] Alexandre Alaphilippe, Gary Machado, Raquel Miguel and Francesco Poldi, *Dopelganger.Media clones serving Russian* propaganda,27 September 2022, EU DisinfoLab, p.2, available at .www.disinfo.eu/wp-content/uploads/2022/09/Doppelganger-1.pdf.

[65] VIGINUM, *KOMBAT PORTAL Extension of the Pro-Russian Propaganda Network: New Domain Names*, pp.3, available at https://www.sgdsn.gouv.fr/files/files/Publications/20240428_NP_SGDSN_VIGINUM_RAPPORT-RESEAU-PORTAL-KOMBAT_NVX%20NDD_%28PARTIE3%29_VF.pdf.

[66] EU External Action Service, *The 3rd EEAS Report on Foreign Information Manipulation and Interference (FIMI) Threats*, march, 2025, available at https://euneighbourseast.eu/news/publications/third-eeas-report-on-foreign-information-manipulation-and-interference-threats/;

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the Russian Federation to use information and cyberspace to generate internal instability in Western states.

The Kremlin's actions to influence democratic processes remain part of a systematic and long-standing geopolitical strategy, aimed at the functional erosion of democracy as a universal model – characterized by political pluralism, the rule of law, the separation of powers within the state, free elections and respect for fundamental human rights – and the reconfiguration of power relations in favour of a multipolar system, in which Russia claims a status as a leader and alternative model of government.

The historical approach to these interferences allows them to be understood not as mere recent episodes, but as part of a coherent doctrinal and operational tradition, and by contextualizing current actions in relation to their Soviet predecessors, it becomes clear that Russia did not invent a new tool, but refined an old one, adapting it to the contemporary technological environment.

Building and strengthening a system resilient to democratic resilience cannot be fully achieved without learning from the historical past and capitalizing on the lessons learned.

In 1988, the former Russian defector Stanislav Levchenko recommended[67], as a means of combating Soviet interreferences, that Western societies develop their knowledge of Soviet disinformation and its nature in order to become aware of it and understand how it works, and the work (1981-1992) of the Active Measures Working Group[68] coordinated by the U.S. State Department and later the U.S. Information Agency has demonstrated the value of rapidly exposing and attributing state-sponsored false information, having a single entity coordinating responses, and close international cooperation in this regard.

Recent lessons show us that successful models approached by some states through a systemic, integrated and anticipatory approach can significantly reduce the effectiveness of external interference even if there is no single or universal response. If the purpose of Russian influence operations is to manipulate society's perception, then, in a digital environment characterized by post-truth, the informed citizen is as important as the digital infrastructure that must be protected.

Combating Russian disinformation through media literacy is one of the solutions identified in Finland, Estonia, Latvia and Sweden, countries that have developed an educational system centred on critical thinking and media literacy, using an integrated curriculum involving schools, parents and social platforms, through a whole-of-society approach. At the same time, assuming a unitary and coordinated political response (Finland, Sweden, Estonia) by adopting a policy of public exposure of the risks of interference and warning citizens increases the political cost of manipulation and strengthens citizens' trust in state institutions. Last but not least, state support for NGOs, independent media and universities, as internal vectors to counter Russian disinformation.

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[67] Calder Walton, "Spies, Election Meddling, and Disinformation: Past and Present", *The Brown Journal of World Affairs*, 26(1), 2019, pp. 121, available at https://www.jstor.org/stable/26954159;

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